The Closest Thing We Have To Magic

by EllenOfOz, TrenchcoatBaby

Summary

Dean Winchester is a graduate student at Stanford University’s School of the Occult. A naturally-talented mage but a lazy professor and student, he figures he’ll coast through his final year the way he always has: with charisma, charm, and a natural aptitude for magic. All that changes when his thesis advisor, Dr. Castiel Novak, turns out to be the strictest and most challenging educator on-campus. Unfortunately for Dean, the uptight professor is nearly his age and infuriatingly gorgeous.

But Castiel is keeping a secret, a powerful talent that’s more a curse than a blessing when he’s targeted by seditious parts of magical society. Can Dean and Cas put aside their animosity—and undeniable chemistry—long enough to instill real change in the magical community? Or will sinister plots and hidden agendas keep them apart?
EllenOfOz: Welcome to The Closest Thing We Have To Magic! We've been working on this little (epic) project for so long now, we cannot wait to finally share it with you!

TrenchcoatBaby: Ahhhh, okay, so this has been a passion project for Ellen and I for FOREVER. It’s our current obsession and we’re so glad to share it with you. We’re hoping for this story to be immersive and romantic and fun and adventurous. Also, who would’ve thought writing magic boyfriend porn would involve an in-depth review of worldwide academic systems?? Not us. But here we are and loving it.

Ellen: Also can totally recommend co-writing magical boyfriend porn with your bestie! We've been editing each other's stuff for ages now but it's so much fun to world-build together. Only thing that's no good is being eight time zones apart.

TCbaby: Nope, that is not recommended. But thanks to the wonderful powers of the internet, we make it work! Well enough to coauthor a super ambitious fic together, which will hopefully be updating on Mondays (or, ya know, Tuesdays for Ellen. She literally lives in my future, y'all!). That’s what we’re aiming for, anyways.

Ellen: See our gorgeous banner below? That's the work of the amazing Supernatastic! Check out her stuff on tumblr and give her all the love for her amazing talent! Thanks so much for putting our boys together for us <3

TCbaby: Yes, is this art not GORGEOUS?! I keep telling everyone that I’m obsessed, but honest to chuck…I’m obsessed. Haha. Anyways, enjoy the first chapter!! We cannot wait to hear your thoughts!

Ellen: We'll have a short glossary at the end of each chapter to explain some of our concepts. Please let us know if we need to add anything. And last but certainly not least, a huge shoutout to our beta team/cheer squad, who are almost as excited for this story as we are. WaywardJenn, Lorelei2005, CBFirestarter, and WaywardAF67, love you girls.
Dean Winchester saunters down the cobblestone path, hands tucked in the pockets of his leather jacket. He whistles cheerily, taking a deep breath and inhaling the cool autumn air. Today starts the fall semester of his final year of graduate school, and even though some of his friends are feeling all freakin’ sentimental about their last “first day,” Dean feels almost…chipper. School has never been his forte, so the sooner he can hightail it outta here and back into the real world—where you can’t wave your magic hands around and get whatever the hell you want—the better off he’ll be.

Still, there’s a familiarity to this place, an excitability and sense of adventure. During his walk he admires the green vines growing against the buildings’ brick siding, the overcast day making every weeping willow appear more melancholy than usual. Years ago, when he first arrived at Stanford University’s School of the Occult, the campus seemed plucked straight from some Edgar Allen Poe-induced nightmare. Stepping through the portal from sunny, beachside Silicon Valley to cloudy, gothic hills had been a real…adjustment.

He still has a good stretch of ground to cover when he passes a redhead, her green eyes stunning and flirty and wide, and she tucks a curl behind her ear. She’s leaning against a table in the middle of the quad, nursing a cup of coffee from the Witch’s Brew and looking at a campus map with obvious confusion. Before he passes her, she smiles up at him and says, “You wouldn’t know how
to get to Euripides Hall…would you?”

Dean debates his options. He’s already running late to his thesis meeting, but his appointed advisor is a total newbie. Dean hasn’t met him yet, but he’s willing to bet anything that Dr. Novak is a nervous little pushover. First-year adjuncts usually are. Dean isn’t the best student around, but he’s apparently got enough natural talent that most of the professors seem to like him, and he’s willing to bet the new guy will be no different. If anything, he’s sorta…popular on-campus, considering he’s tried his hand at most disciplines and has met a fuckload of people. It’s not the life he would’ve expected for himself—he wasn’t winning any congeniality contests back in Lawrence—but he’s apparently hit his stride here.

“I sure do,” Dean says with a smile, turning on the full-charm for this unsuspecting first year. “And, whaddya know? I was headed that way myself.”

It’s not really the truth, but it’s not technically a lie, ‘cause if he cuts across the south courtyard and takes the basement shortcut in Euripides Hall, he’ll make it to his advisor’s office only… reasonable late. What’s five, ten, fifteen minutes in the grand scheme of things? They begin to walk together, slow to match each other’s pace, and their small talk wanders onto the topic of what there is to do around here.

“Nothing,” Dean snorts, but then pauses thoughtfully, reconsidering his answer. Thanks to his group of friends and the enchanted, refilling whiskey tumblers at Ellen’s bar—not to mention the constant practice and presence of magic—he’s really warmed up to the place. Still, he’s always felt on the outside somehow, like he’s never fully fit in. It’s still weird to him that he’ll graduate a classically trained mage when he’s always had the attitude and mindset of a lay magician—someone home-taught, usually refused entrance into an accredited magic school for some bullshit reason.

He eventually leaves the flirty first-year outside the steps of Euripides Hall, but only after she takes out a pen and writes her number long and slow into his palm. Dean wonders why she didn’t just put her contact info into his phone like a normal person, when he sees she used one of those fancy charmed pens. Her long, swoopy handwriting keeps rewriting itself onto his skin, perpetually on a loop like a gif, and he’ll be forced to wash it off later with spelled, antiseptic soap. Huh. Kinda adorable, kinda excessive. He doubts he’ll text her, but it depends on how bored he gets tonight. The first week of the semester is usually pretty light on homework.

He takes the steps two at a time, hanging left around a gray gargoyle statue where smokers tend to loiter, and throws open the heavy oak entrance door. He spends most active school hours here, in Mechanikos Hall, since his speciality in spell mechanics was declared in the spring of his first year. He doesn’t usually talk about his major ‘cause it’s one of the hardest disciplines to be accepted into, and he’s still trying to figure out how his barely-above-average GPA and lazy-ass spellcasting got him in.

He took a year off between his bachelor’s degree and his master’s, hoping to rejoin the workforce…but thanks to his indecision and lack of clear options, he eventually made his way back to Stanford. He still argues with Sam, his genius little brother who’s also a junior here, about how academia is a totally corrupt system. Like most of society’s issues, though, magic has just made it ten times worse. He’s aware it’s sort of an ironic stance, considering he teaches two sections of freshman Intro to Spellcasting over at Theoris Hall and receives a semi-decent stipend from it…but honestly, being a professor is just a job to him. Dean has never dreamed of becoming Professor Winchester full-time, no matter how reverently the eighteen-year-old students might call his name in class.
He heads straight to the center of the second floor, where most of the professors’ offices are, when he remembers he didn’t check to see what room Dr. Novak is in. Dammit. He’s too new to be listed in the main directory, so Dean meanders back down to the first floor and asks the student worker in the main office. Not only does she know Novak’s office number, but she’s a total knockout brunette, a second-year named Lisa who Dean decides he’ll have to acquaint himself with later. Maybe his last year at school will be the year he finally achieves his goal of dating his way through campus. Hell, after his brief friend-with-benefits situation this summer with Benny, maybe it can be a coed conquest…

He follows Lisa’s instructions down the spiral staircase, back to the hallway filled with faculty offices, and takes a winding route to the very back. Finally, after what feels like such a goddamn maze that he considers casting a direction spell, he spots office number 41 tucked in an alcove on the left. He checks the time on his phone and winces—okay, so, twenty-five minutes late. Even for him, that’s not great. Should he fabricate a false emergency or exaggerate how difficult it was to find the professor’s office? One’s an obvious lie, and the other makes him sound a doofus, so he takes a deep breath and decides on option three.

He’ll just charm the fuck out of this guy.

He knocks softly on the dark mahogany door, cracked and left slightly ajar, and hears an impossibly deep voice say, “Come in.” He swings the door open, and his immediate impression is…well, compared to the offices of his other professors, this one is pretty damn bare. The white walls are left undecorated, there are no curtains or plants or any hints of a personality; in fact, apart a desk with a computer, books, and some odd magical trinkets here and there, Dean would believe this space is still vacant. That’s obviously not true, though, ‘cause sitting in an office chair with a leg crossed across his kneecap, wearing a wrinkled suit jacket, and catching sight of Dean and blatantly glaring, is…

Well. Probably the hottest man Dean has ever seen.

Even under the layers of stuffy clothes—not only is he wearing a baggy, full-on suit, but there’s a freaking trench coat folded over a worn-out leather briefcase—Dean can tell the guy is lean and muscular. His skin seems naturally tan, his chin and cheeks peppered with light and well-suited stubble, and his lips are such a gorgeous shade of pink that Dean has trouble tearing his eyes away. Speaking of eyes…the professor’s are a vibrant, impossible blue, a much brighter shade than the navy tie hanging backwards on his neck. His hair is dark brown and messy, and Dean thinks he can’t be older than mid- to late-twenties, fresh out of grad school…barely older than Dean.

All the random girls he’s met this morning fly immediately out of his brain, ‘cause yeah, there’s a casual greek god on-campus and he happens to be Dean’s new thesis advisor.

Jesus Christ.

“Can I help you?” the professor asks, seeming uninterested in Dean’s answer. Dean just hovers in the doorway, awkwardly unsure if he should sit or stand.

“Yeah, uh…I’m Dean. Dean Winchester.” He reaches his hand forward, expecting a handshake, but Castiel just eyes him with indifference. “We have an appointment?”

“Dean Winchester,” Castiel repeats, and feeling like a total idiot, Dean lowers his hand. He’s never shaken a professor’s hand before…why the hell would he start now? Castiel opens what appears to be an appointment book, the frown he’s wearing apparently a permanent fixture on his face. “I have you down for two o’clock.”
“Yeah, sorry about that…” Without invitation, Dean makes a decision and takes the open seat next to his professor’s desk. “You know how it is, first day back, getting into the swing of things.” He leans his elbow onto the desk and smiles, gleaming and white, and Castiel regards him without blinking. His scowl only increases the wider Dean grins, so he tries to dial back the charm a little and push the focus off of him. “How are things going for you? Teaching anything good this year?”

Castiel closes his planner curtly, leaning back into his chair and speaking with a cool sort of nonchalance. “I’m a first-semester adjunct professor, so naturally, they’ve given me all the most challenging and fascinating upper level classes.”

“Really?” Dean asks, eyebrows raised.

“No, not really.” Castiel’s tone is so deadpan that Dean’s face burns with embarrassment. Hands itching with nerves, he can feel the buzz of several small, ongoing spells reverberating inside the office walls. This is partly why he even has this discipline—he can feel magic in waves, pulsing like the base of a stereo, a physical manifestation that’s supposed to be very rare. There’s one spell in the room that’s nagging at him—a simple rotation charm, but it’s arranged in a pattern he’s never seen—and the radius mechanism is off. The oblong spinning top on Castiel’s desk keeps lagging to the left on every third turn, rather than flowing smoothly. Hands down at his sides and tucked out of view, Dean makes a tender twist of his wrist while the left hand is pinched at forefinger and thumb. He waits a beat, shuffling his fingers just so as he alters the spell, and then…

On the third spin it glides effortlessly, and he exhales.

It’s fixed.

“All four of my classes this semester have ‘101’ or ‘introduction to’ in the title. The only reason I was given a third-year thesis candidate to advise is because, I’m told, you waited too late to fill out the paperwork with the registrar’s office.” Castiel lifts an eyebrow in Dean’s direction, contempt evident on his face. “Is that a habit of yours, Dean? Being late?”

Suddenly the collar of Dean’s flannel is feeling entirely too warm. He’s never really been called out like this before, even his brother uses jokes and jabs to make criticisms a little easier to swallow, and he’s not sure if he respects this guy or wants to punch him.

“It’s not one of my finer qualities,” Dean says, deflecting with humor, and Castiel hums quietly to himself.

“And tell me—” The professor sorts through a stack of papers on his desk, before pulling out a manilla folder and opening it wide. “What are your finer qualities?”

“I, uh…” Dean swallows, scrambling to think of something more impressive than I can drink a fifth of whiskey without getting a hangover the next day.

“It’s not your GPA,” Castiel says flatly, filling the tense silence.

“Hey,” Dean mumbles, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He’s starting to think this guy is seriously an asshole. “I do okay in class.”

“Exactly…‘okay’ is not what I’d expect from someone specializing in Mechanical Engineering with a concentration in Spell Deconstruction.” Castiel plants both feet back on the floor, leaning closer to Dean. “The mechanics of magic are—methodical. Precise. Infinitely complicated.”

Dean can’t help it…he sighs. He’s heard this same ol’ speech from every one of his upper-level professors, all these academics who seem so intent on making a intuitive concept something that’s
intimidating and ugly. His shift in attitude is noticed, though, because Castiel straightens up in his chair, looking amused.

“You disagree?”

“You could say that.” Dean pauses, waiting for Castiel to react, but he’s just gazing at Dean with a sense of smug superiority, like he’s watching a toddler try to solve a Rubik's cube. “All of you—”

Castiel’s eyes narrow. “Who?”


Castiel smiles, though Dean can’t quite decipher the intention behind it. Either the professor thinks Dean just said something profound, or he’s reduced Dean down to another cocky third-year blowing smoke up his own ass. Honestly, Dean’s not sure which one he is at the moment.

“Enlighten me.” Castiel regards him with full interest now. The flirty side of Dean—who’s obviously hot-for-teacher—is thriving under the attention. But the insecure student in him is squirming away, wishing he had kept his dumb mouth shut.

“It’s stupid,” he mutters, looking down at his feet.

“Dean,” Castiel says, voice low and firm, “knowing how you interpret your own discipline is vital for me in deciding if I decide to advise you on your thesis project.”

Dean wrinkles his forehead, his embarrassment momentarily forgotten. “‘Decide to advise’? I thought that was, uh, already a done deal.”

“This is just an introductory meeting to determine if I’m a good fit for you,” Castiel corrects, and his voice is so matter-of-fact that Dean has no clue which way the professor is leaning. “All of the associate professors have a full load of thesis candidates this year. Though in the staff meeting this morning, Doctor Adler said he could make an exception for you—”

“Please, no,” Dean interrupts vehemently, and Castiel can’t seem to hide his surprise. His eyes are trained on Dean curiously as he says, “All my colleagues spoke quite highly of you, Dean, including Doctor Adler.”

Dean snorts, shaking his head and saying nothing. He’s already on Castiel’s bad side, and there’s no reason to add fuel to the flames by bad-mouthing another teacher…even if the guy is a big bag of dicks.

“I’d rather make things work with you,” Dean says instead, hoping he sounds less like a kiss-up and more like someone who’s trying to avoid a professor he freaking hates. Though, if Castiel likes kiss-ups, Dean can think of a few better ways to approach that option…

“Then please,” Castiel opens his hands wide, face expectant, “tell me why everyone but you is wrong about the mechanics of magic.”

Dean fights back a wince. Fuck, is that really how he worded it?

“Well…” He clears his throat, eyes reaching up to the ceiling, trying to figure out how to get the notion floating around in his head translated into coherent words. “I, uh…I guess to me, magic is like a car, and the mechanics of a spell are like an engine. Identifying what’s wrong with a spell
means knowing what a spell feels like when it’s working properly, when it’s firing on all cylinders. You can know everything about it logically, can separate the parts of an engine or the physics of a spell, but at the end of the day, knowing how magic works is different from why magic works. It’s less about science and more about…”

“Magnetism,” Castiel supplies, and Dean nods enthusiastically.

“Exactly. We can hypothesize and philosophize all day long, but the essence of magic can’t be measured. It has to be felt.” Dean twiddles his thumbs, anxiously waiting for Castiel to tell him he’s full of shit. But the professor is leaned towards him with rapt attention, seeming bemused and surprised, maybe even a smidge impressed…though Dean doesn’t wanna get his hopes up just yet. He has a feeling it’s gonna take a lot more than a car metaphor to impress this guy, but part of him hopes he gets the chance to prove himself. They’re staring at each other openly now, intensely, in a stretch of time that feels less professional and more significant…and Dean wants nothing more than to figure this guy out.

Is he just another arrogant, pencil-pushing academic? Or will he be opened-minded enough to see things in a new way?

“Do you teach your freshman students your interpretation of magical theory?” Castiel asks, sounding bemused and curious and a little concerned, but Dean shakes his head.

“Nah. I haven’t actually taught yet, but if my lesson plans are right, we’ll hardly get past simple charms in Intro.”

“Understandably,” Castiel replies, and it sounds almost as if he’s commiserating with him.

“What was your specialization?” Dean asks suddenly, the question practically tripping out of his mouth. “In grad school, I mean.”

His palms are open, flat and exposed, and when he looks up Castiel is staring at the redhead’s phone number written there with interest. Dean blushes and entwines his hands together, fidgeting.

“I studied the Anthropology of Magic at Babbage Magical Academy in Oxford,” Castiel says quietly, the answer turning him somewhat somber. “Particularly, I’m fascinated by the societal divide between classically trained mages and the outcasting of lay magicians.”

“Uh…wow.” Dean’s eyes are wide and he nods, entirely impressed. There are only five magic colleges worldwide, and acceptance rates are incredibly low, so the number of lay magicians living in secret drastically outnumber the mages. Unfortunately in the States, being a lay magician can be indescribably dangerous, since Stanford has a total monopoly on the well of elemental magic. The administration is highly selective about who has access to it, the allotment of magic offered always correlating with your level of higher education. It’s classist bullshit in Dean’s opinion, forcing uneducated lay magicians to use magic that draws from their own energy, making their spells more innovative and imaginative but at a terrible price. Lay magic is not only draining and physically difficult…but life-threatening in large doses. Dr. Novak might be standoffish, but he’s also…what? A justice warrior with a secret heart of gold, who’s really fucking easy on the eyes? “Bet that doesn’t win you any brownie points at the faculty potluck.”

It takes Castiel a moment to realize Dean is joking, but when he does, he breaks into the most sincere chuckle Dean’s ever heard. Jesus, this guy is something else. Hot and cold and something in-between.

“That’s an understatement,” Castiel says, with a hint of uneasiness. “But you can say I do have a…
personal interest in the mechanics of spellcasting.” He shrugs, as if it’s nothing worth noting, but Dean knows this subject is considered difficult and dense. What kind of mage explores a secondary subject matter just for…fun? Before he can prod further, though, Castiel is tilting his head and looking questioningly at his watch.

“Unfortunately, I have a meeting and have to run.” He stands up abruptly, reaching for his briefcase, and Dean follows his lead. He’s disappointed by the hasty dismissal, but they could’ve had a full hour to discuss things if he hadn’t been so late. Castiel moves past him and through the doorway, and Dean follows immediately on his heels.

“So, uh…” Dean feels clumsy and uncertain, the opposite of how he was feeling thirty minutes ago, before meeting Dr. Novak. “Think you’ll take me on? As a thesis student or…whatever?”

Castiel closes the door, then hovers over the doorknob, forefinger circling in such a quick motion that Dean nearly misses it. He’s cast a quick locking spell, and Dean blinks at how easy it looks for him, how effortless.

“We’ll see,” Castiel says briskly. “I’ll let you know by the end of the week.” He’s already marching down the hallway in fast, hurried steps before Dean can further plea his case. When the professor rounds the corner, Dean is left gaping and staring down the empty hallway.

Departmental meetings are never fun, but today's—Castiel muses as he watches raindrops run down the windowpane—is an hour and a half of his life he'll never get back. Dr. Adler has been monologuing on the importance of teaching Pythagorean cipher construction to first years for at least fifteen minutes now, even though Castiel is fairly sure everyone in the room agrees with his stance.

He flicks his gaze over to the rest of the classroom where the meeting is being held, accidentally catching Hannah's eye from where she sits. She gives a dramatic eye roll when Zachariah’s back is turned, and Castiel has to turn his snort of laughter into a cough.

So far, most of the staff here at Stanford have been pleasant enough, but Hannah has been the only one to actually ask him how he's doing since he moved here, two weeks ago. He'd been warned, and indeed fully expected to be given the classes and tasks that no one else wanted to do, being the newest professor, and a young one, at that. What he hadn't expected was to be essentially forced to take on the thesis students who were late to register. Despite what he told Dean earlier, he really doesn't have much choice in taking him on for the year.

Dean Winchester—isn't he an enigma wrapped in a bratty grad student wrapped in denim and leather? He'd had someone’s phone number written on his hand—Castiel’s fairly sure Dean’s one of those students who enjoys the weekend life on campus more than learning anything about magic. He has to admit, he isn't sure why Dean is even this far into a master’s, given his grades.

For now, Cas will just have to put up with him. Hopefully his irritating tardiness and insouciance will be made up for by the fact that he's effortlessly easy on the eyes. Tall, slim, sandy hair, a smile that had done strange things to Castiel's insides, and—

“Doctor Novak? Are you with us?”

Castiel blinks and glances back to the front of the room to see Dr. Adler smiling politely, edged
with a brittle annoyance.

“Did you have anything to share with us about your first day?” Dr. Adler asks, still smiling.

Castiel gathers his thoughts and manages to get out, “Um, no. It…it went well.” He mentally curses himself for sounding like a distracted freshman. He’s trying to put forward a good impression here.

“Good!” Adler booms, turning back to the rest of the department. “Very well then, that’s all for today.” He constructs a small pull spell and shoots it towards a pen on a desk in front of him. The pen stills in its scribbled note-taking, then both pen and notebook fly precisely through the air and into Adler's hand. “Enjoy the rest of your week, people.” As the staff start to stand and shuffle out, he adds, “Don't forget the welcome dinner on Friday night!”

Castiel shuffles out with the others, trying to catch up to Hannah, but he’s stopped by a hand on his elbow before he can make his escape.

“Castiel? Might I have a word?” Missouri says, grabbing his elbow and pulling him to the side of the corridor.

He turns to her with a genuine smile, but it drops somewhat as he sees Adler walk up behind her. “Doctor Moseley, how can I help you?”

Missouri smiles at him, her always-calm presence soothing him. He’s only known her a few weeks, but he’s never seen her with anything other than a warm smile. “I just wanted to see how your meeting with Dean went.” She gazes at him with such intent, he has a feeling it won’t matter what he says in reply, she’s reading the real answer right off his soul.

“It, uh, it happened, yes. He was a little late so we didn’t get to talk long.” He glances up at Zachariah to see him peering with a less-friendly, but no less interested, look. He looks back to Missouri, trying to gather his professionalism. “Doctor Moseley—”

“Missouri, please,” she interrupts, with a small smile.

He nods, continuing, “Missouri, Dean doesn’t seem to have submitted a project proposal. He does have some interesting ideas on magical theory, but I…” He trails off. What’s he trying to say here? He hadn’t been expecting to have to take on any thesis students, and after speaking to Dean today, he’s dreading having to coax him through a project. The guy might be distractingly beautiful, but Castiel suspects he’s one of those students who coasts through, barely passing if at all, and going on after college to work in some mediocre magic store. He isn’t sure if he has the patience to go through that with Dean, especially since, after hearing him describe magic as something to be perceived, he's fairly sure that Dean has the potential to become a great mage.

Castiel is startled out of his thoughts by Dr. Adler speaking up. “Honestly, Missouri, I told you Doctor Novak here wouldn’t want him. The boy’s a slacker. Let me take him—I’m happy to take the hard line, get him working harder.”

“No.” Castiel surprises himself by speaking out of turn. He remembers the look of horror in Dean’s eye when he had suggested Dr. Adler earlier. And Castiel doesn’t take well to the term, slacker. “I don’t mind taking him on. I just wanted to confirm with Doctor Moseley that she was sure Dean was keen to take on a project. He's already teaching introductory classes, isn't he?”

Missouri eyes Adler briefly before turning back to Castiel. “Yes, we had a few grad students wanting to join the teaching program this year. Dean hasn’t always quite fit the system here, but
trust me—he’s got what it takes. I’m sure you can help him decide on a topic.”

With a sinking feeling, Castiel nods. “Very well. I’ll set a planning session with him for next week. Thanks, Missouri.” He nods again to Dr. Adler before turning away up the corridor.

Up on the second floor near the department offices, the halls are quiet. Castiel paces down the polished hardwood floors, eyeing faded portraits hanging on oak-panelled walls. Dim sunlight filters through the window, dulled by the rainclouds.

The magical part of Stanford is far away from its sunny Californian half—the school, plus its student accommodation and a handful of other buildings, are kept separate from the non-magical world by complex wards and a completely secret location.

Castiel had been surprised by the translocator spells when he'd arrived at Stanford—at Oxford, the School of Physical Magic is right there on Parks Road, plain for all to see. But then again, Oxford is more magical than most places on earth. In any case, the spell had transported him here, wherever “here” is, and as he looks out the next window he passes, the warding is barely visible in the distance above the trees as a shimmering curtain.

Castiel enters his office and has just shut the door behind him when his phone vibrates in his pocket. He fishes it out of his coat, trying to ignore the odd lurch in his stomach when he sees that it’s Meg. Isn't it the middle of the night over there?

“Hello, Meg,” he answers, crossing the small room and sinking into his chair just as she replies.

“Clarence! How’re you doing?” Meg sounds the same as she always does, smiling to cover up the thorny pain beneath. He had told himself he wouldn't miss her, but he does.

“I’m okay. Just finishing up before I head home. What time is it there? Midnight?” He frowns at his watch, thinking he'll have to create a spell to make timezone calculations for him.

“One? ’M just on m’way home.”

Castiel narrows his eyes. “Are you drunk?”

“No! Well...just a little.”

Rolling his eyes, Castiel says as gently as he can manage, “Please just get home safely. It’s dangerous out there.”

Meg scoffs. “I ain't afraid of no serial killer.”

Castiel knows that’s probably true—Meg is Oxford's Combat Magic professor, after all—but there have been two murders already, all magical college staff. Yes, security is everywhere around the school this week, but it doesn’t stop him from worrying.

He hears a thump and a click on the other end of the line. “Meg?”

“Jus’ got home. Clarence?”

“Mn?” He opens his laptop and flicks through windows until he finds the lesson plan he'd been working on when Dean arrived earlier.

Meg’s voice drops to something quiet and sultry. “Give a girl a hand, here. What're you wearing? Take it off.”
Castiel blinks, then says flatly, “I'm at work.”

“Suuure, but you're in your office, right?”

He hears rustling, and he imagines she might be adjusting her clothing. There's a tightness behind his sternum, but also a traitorous twitch of interest in his trousers.

No. He can't do this.

“Meg, you were the one who said this wouldn't work long-distance, remember?”

“Aw, come on. Just send me that spell that—”

“No,” Castiel interrupts. “I...I can't. I'll speak to you later.”

He hangs up before he can change his mind, then puts his phone down on the desk, willing his heart to slow down. His eyes land on the perpetual motion trinket on his desk, spinning, spinning gently.

He'd been so overjoyed to be awarded this position, and he has Meg to thank for it. She's still the only one in his life who knows the full extent of his magical gifts, although he's fairly sure she might have let it slip to Missouri when Meg was convincing her to take him on.

Universities generally look the other way when it comes to Thaumatechnology, even though the ability to design and build new spells is discouraged in polite magical society. But when one of his spells had gone slightly wrong and got out of control, and someone outside Oxford had taken notice...well, it's the whole reason he's now here, and not still in ol’ Blighty. He lived there for the nine years of his degrees, and he misses it, and Meg, more than he ever did his family’s home in Illinois.

He and Meg had been best friends ever since the first week at Oxford, and it had only turned into something more in the last year or so, but when he'd decided to take the job and move back to the States, she'd elected to stay behind in Oxford. Her life was there, she said. Castiel had tried to pretend it didn’t hurt, but...here he is, still hurting.

As he lets the gentle, smooth spinning of the disk soothe him, his thoughts turn back to the green-eyed terror to be his charge for the year. His Thaumatech skills will come in handy for helping Dean to develop his own mechanical ones, but how is he going to keep his own abilities a secret? Missouri may know, but he can't let it slip to anyone like Adler.

His eyes narrow as he focuses on the trinket. Has it always spun so smoothly? He remembers being frustrated that the spell was slightly off-kilter when he'd cast it, but hadn't been able to correct it. He supposes it must have settled over time.

Shaking his head, he turns back to the laptop and fires off a meeting request to Dean.

A low mist swirls along the sidewalk, eddies curling away from the demon's boots as he strides along. Noises in an alley make him flinch as he passes the dark opening, but he senses the small energy of a cat behind a dumpster, the signature dampened by the iron.

He approaches the building via the side door covered with invisible sigils—alarms, mostly. Real
protective warding is high-cost elemental magic—forbidden for the likes of them. He draws a thread of magic and forms it into the counterspell, flinging it towards the door, holding it tethered to himself until he's inside. The faintly glowing symbols fade back into invisibility as he draws the spell back, panting slightly at the effort.

Inside, the tenement is dark. Deathly quiet. The bottom stair creaks as he places his boot on it, but when nothing stirs he continues, creaking onwards up to the first floor.

A voice sounds from above, “Get up here, you idiot.” His boss sounds more annoyed than usual, so he hurries up another two flights to the apartment at the top.

The boss stands there, leaning against the closed door, a glass of red wine in one hand and the other in his trousers pocket. He looks up at the demon, one brow raised, and says, “Well?”

The demon steels his resolve, wondering if his protective amulet will stand up to an attack after all. “It’s a no-go, sir. He never showed up.”

“Damn. Very well. Next time, perhaps.”

A low sound filters through the apartment door—a moaning, a man in pain.

The demon swallows, his eyes flicking to the door. “How’s the, uh, interview going?”

One eyebrow raised, the boss stands up from his lean and pauses, hand on the doorknob. “See for yourself,” he says with a cocky half-grin, and opens the door.

Inside, the groaning is louder. An ordinary, though shabby apartment, peeling wallpaper and harsh fluorescent light. A man lies on his back on a dining table, arms and legs tied down with sturdy rope. A selection of sharp implements are arranged on the table beside him, and there is blood… everywhere. On the man, the table, a pool of it on the floor. He looks like a gang has been beating on him, not just one man.

He swallows again, trying to keep his dinner where it belongs. He stays very still as the boss crosses the space, placing his wine glass carefully on the kitchen counter.

“Now, Professor,” the boss says, turning back to the table, earning him a flinch from his captive.

There are deep slices all over the man's arms and legs. There's also a deeper wound somewhere under his shirt, hence all the blood. He breathes in short gasps, looking around the room with panicked eyes.

The boss paces towards the table, as though he's strolling the sidewalk. “Let me ask you again for, oh…perhaps the fiftieth time now—”

He walks into the prone man's line of sight and leans closer, making the professor try to pull away, his left wrist straining against the bonds.

The demon inches back towards the door, not sure if he's allowed to leave.

The boss speaks quietly into the professor's ear, “How is the school warded?” He brings his left hand up to hover over the professor's chest, making him gasp and shake his head.

“No,” he grits out, his voice harsh, raw. He seems to steel himself, sounding firmer as he continues, “No, Crowley. I don't know anything about the wards, and even if I did, I'm sworn to—ahhh!” He throws his head back in a scream as the boss clenches his hand into a fist, a deep scowl on his face.
After a few seconds, he releases it, and the professor slumps back down, long, gulping sobs wracking his frame.

“Shame,” the boss says conversationally. “I’ve heard your young daughter has just started there this year, actually. It would be a pity if something were to happen while she was off-campus…”

“No, no no no, you can't. She's only eighteen!” the professor thrashes frantically.

The boss’ face darkens and the demon nearly jumps out of his skin at the commanding tone. “Then tell me how to get in there!”

“No, please leave her alone. I don't know! I don't—"

The boss clenches his fist again and the professor once again screams, convulsing. As he makes no move to stop, the demon begins to edge towards the door again, but the screams die out to a gurgling cough and the professor slumps to the table, blood trickling out his nose and mouth.

“Oh, the boss says dispassionately and turns away from the still-twitching corpse, clicking his tongue at the blood now on his hand. He murmurs as he draws up a spell, then the blood on his hand crackles, and falls to the floor in a rain of red dust.

Nodding towards the corpse, he mutters, “Get rid of that, would you, Rosco?” He picks up his glass and drains the last of his wine, dumping the crystal on the counter with a sharp crack. He sweeps out of the room without another word.

The demon turns back to the slumped corpse, wincing as he takes in the drip, drip of blood from the table onto the floor. Sometimes he really hates this job. The sooner they get the info out of one of these mooks, the faster they can get into the real magic, and then the clean up can happen with a snap of his fingers.

He can’t wait.

Chapter End Notes

Thaumatechnology [noun]: The ability to design and create new, unsanctioned spells. Usually criticized by the magical council/government and most academics.

Thank you so much for reading! Drop your thoughts and reactions in the comments below!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

And we're back! Thanks everyone for your warm reception for chapter one! Sit back and have a chapter that's considerable less stressful than most of our shows this week, but with a lot more sexual tension instead.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So,” Dean announces, clapping his hands together, “let’s discuss chapters one and two on Monday, keepin’ a close eye on the list of possible disciplines on page twenty-five. And…?”

He pauses considerably, waiting to see which students have been most attentive, and the enchanted chalk behind him hovers in the air, waiting for his next instruction. His handwriting is atrocious, and he likes talking with his hands free, so the idea of spelling the chalk to do all the legwork seemed like an awesome idea. Unfortunately, it’s been distracting to his freshman students who are still new to magical instruction. The whole class period, about half of the class has been watching the details of their first week’s homework assignment be magically transcribed with a sense of awe, not comprehending a word he’s saying, and Dean has observed their faces with a sense of amusement.

“Anyone?” He slides his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, waiting. He could’ve dressed up for his first day teaching, but really, what would be the point? Slapping a fancy blazer on or carting ‘round a briefcase won’t make him look any older. He’s twenty-five and in his final year of grad school, so most days, he feels like he relates more to the professors than the undergrads. The only reason he can even get through a conversation with them is because his brother is just a junior himself.

“Make a list of the top three disciplines you’re considering specializing in, and why,” someone finally answers, a girl with tight blonde curls and a genuine smile.

“Yes.” He looks at the holographic name floating above the surface of the student’s desk, charmed to reveal the preferred first and last name of whoever fills the seat, though only to the spellcaster. It’s a trick he learned from Pam, aka Dr. Barnes. Most new students assume she’s psychic because she learns their names so quickly, but she shared her secret with Dean last year after a departmental reading.

“Thanks for taking notes, Jess.” The freshman looks pleased with herself for answering correctly, and Dean smiles at her encouragingly. He puts just enough tension in his voice to imply to the rest of his students—especially a surly looking brunette named Ruby who’s rolling her eyes and sighing—that he doesn’t intend to put up with any shenanigans this semester. Which is ironic, considering he gives his professors nothing but pleas for paper extensions and lazy responses in class. He wonders if that’s why Missouri asked him to teach, despite the fact that his GPA is subpar. Is she giving him a taste of his own medicine?

He looks at the clock, wondering what to do next. It’s not quite noon and there’s still ten minutes remaining, but it’s the first class of the semester and they’ve finished up early. Only the strictest
professors keep the students the full duration on syllabus day.

“Get outta here,” he finally says nonchalantly, holding his palm up as the chalk floats into his hand. “Have a good weekend, make good choices, blah blah…”

Some of his students chuckle good-naturedly, waving goodbye to him or saying “see ya Monday, Professor Winchester” as they shuffle out of the room. He wonders how many of these kids he’ll end up spotting when he stops by the dorms to visit Sam. Moving him into his new setup last weekend had been a breeze thanks to the hover charm Dean cast on the boxes, particularly the crates full of books that he’s pretty sure no human person could lift without magic. Sammy’s ridiculously smart, and even as an undergraduate, the professors are beyond impressed with him.

The only remaining stragglers in Dean’s classroom are three guys complaining about how their weekend is gonna be spent reading six chapters on the history of colonized magic in America for Dr. Novak. Dean wants to laugh and wince simultaneously—one hand, freshmen complaining about their workload is nothing new, and pretty eye-roll inducing. But Castiel really is something else, and after their strained first meeting a few days ago, Dean knows it firsthand. Somehow the professor has agreed to take Dean on as a thesis candidate anyways, which he suspects has less to do with Castiel’s personal preference and more to do with Missouri’s direct orders. But whatever. As long as he can avoid being saddled with Dr. Adler, who gave him the evil eye this morning in the office when he stopped by to make copies of his syllabus, Dean can breathe easy.

Well, easier. But sure as hell not easy. ‘Cause his Hottie McHot thesis advisor has been present in his mind way more often than he should. And unless he has a good reason for skipping, Castiel will definitely be attending the faculty potluck Dr. MacLeod is hosting at her huge ass manison tonight. The welcome-back party is sorta legendary, considering the free-flowing booze and a dozen or so professors who like to let loose. Graduate student teachers usually fall into a weird social limbo, where they’re not totally beneath their professors but they’re not equals yet either. This is the first year Dean has been invited, along with his best friend Charlie and a few other student teachers. Dean’s been looking forward to it all summer, hoping to connect with his professors as people rather than just as his superiors, but now…

Now he has to somehow navigate the fickle waters of Castiel Novak. A guy who’s basically a Katy Perry song—hot and cold and annoyingly sexy and won’t get out of his freaking head.

He packs up his messenger bag and flicks off the light switch, closing and locking the classroom door behind him. Looking up and down the corridor, he expects to see Sam waiting for him since they have lunch plans. He frowns in confusion, then walks down to the main lobby, adjusting the strap of his bag to sit more comfortably. Eventually he spots his brother by the water fountain—this one has become especially popular since someone spelled it last year to spout out a variety of sodas—and he’s about to wave Sam over when he spots a short brunette, grinning up at Sam with a wicked glint in her eye.

You’ve gotta be kidding me.

“Hey Ruby,” Dean says lightly, taking large steps and inserting himself into their conversation. “You showin’ my brother here how to use the water fountain without getting his hair wet? If it grows out any longer, he’ll have to pull it in a ponytail.”

Sam looks a mixture of irritated and mortified, but Ruby seems nonplussed by the development that she’s currently scamming on her professor’s brother. She reaches a hand up and boldly fluffs the ends of Sam’s too-long locks.

“I like it,” she declares playfully, and Sam seems to flush bright red under her gaze. She winks and
whispers, “See you later, Sam,” before sauntering off and out of the lobby, not giving Dean a second glance. Sam is staring at the floor so intently, Dean sarcastically wonders if there are ancient hieroglyphics there he’s trying to decode.

“Seriously?” He crosses his arms, waiting to hear the full story. “My student?”

“I didn’t know she was your student,” Sam replies, finally glancing up. “And, I dunno…” He shrugs nonchalantly. “She’s cute.”

“She’s a troublemaker,” Dean corrects grumpily. “What’d she do? Trap you at the water fountain and bombard you with pick-up lines?”

“Uh…” Sam’s pause tells him everything he needs to know, and Dean narrows his eyes. “Hey, like you have any room to talk. You’re always dating a new girl like, every weekend.”

Dean rolls his eyes, not letting his brother’s aversion tactics rattle him.

Except…

Well, except he doesn’t have a date this weekend. There are tons of options, but he’s been too obsessed about this party tonight to really think of much else. “Your point is?”

Sam sighs, as if Dean is the one being unreasonable.

“Look,” Dean begins, “y’know I’m all for you dating around and gettin’ your jollies whenever you can get ‘em. I don’t even care that she’s my student as much as—” He stops, trying to word his caution carefully. “This chick just seems like bad news.”

“Yeah, well…” Sam starts walking towards the exit and Dean has no choice but to follow.

“Thanks, but if it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll see where this leads.”

Dean scowls but says nothing else, and they naturally head in the direction of their favorite lunch spot. The Dionysus is also Dean’s preferred bar to get hammered, but he usually saves that for the twenty-one and up crowd. It’s a little bit of a walk, and the clouds are gray and threatening with rain, but the fresh air helps Dean reflect on how his first day teaching went. By the time they reach the divy spot and take their usual booth, ordering a club sandwich (Dean) and a cobb salad (Sam) he’s finally ready to swap first-week-back stories. His little brother has an ambitious schedule this semester, with over eighteen hours of coursework. In order to graduate on time with a double major in History of Magic and Magical Law, he’ll pretty much have to keep his nose in a book between now and Christmas.

“Happy first week back,” Jo chirps a few minutes later, sliding their respective entrées to either side of the table. Dean grins up at her, chomping on a french fry, but it burns the roof of his mouth and he ends up grimacing.

“Smooth,” Jo laughs, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. Eons ago, in the fall of his freshman year, Dean and Jo had nearly hooked up a time or two. But after so many years at Stanford, her and Ellen have become like family to him.

“Yeah, well, what’s it to you?” he grumbles, feigning annoyance as he wraps both hands around his sandwich.

“Nothing,” she says breezily, “just waiting for this weekend, to see which new girl you’ll be bringing ’round for happy hour.”
“Ash and I have a bet it’ll be a redhead,” Sam supplies, spearing lettuce onto his fork. “You didn’t hook-up with one at all this summer, so you’re clearly overdue.”

“Enough already,” Dean complains, no longer faking his irritation. “Why is everyone so obsessed with my freakin’ sex life? Obviously none of y’all got laid this summer.”

“Shots fired!” Ash shouts from behind the bar, and everyone laughs a little, even Dean. Jo leaves a moment later to go fetch the water pitcher, and Dean pointedly changes the subject, asking Sam how he likes his new roommate Brady. Sam rattles on about how he likes the guy but he seems a little smarmy, but Dean’s tuning his brother out a little. He keeps picturing him and Castiel grabbing drinks in this booth, having heated thesis meetings, one drink turning to five until their knees brush…

*Keep it in your pants, Winchester.* He can’t even let himself daydream about that happening, not even for a second. There are a million reasons why someone like Castiel would have zero interest in him, and he can name three right off the top of his head. One, he seems annoyed by Dean’s very presence, so uh, beyond hate sex, he can’t see them going down that road. Two, even though there aren’t any rules against it, he doubts someone like Dr. Novak would cross the student/teacher line, no matter how fucking gray they are with Dean being a professor, too. Three, dude’s got his PhD in Oxford and studies Dean’s specialization in his off-time *for fun.* No way somebody like that has any interest in a bonehead like him.

“There’s the look,” Sam says, interrupting Dean’s train of thought, and he blinks back into awareness.

“What look?” he asks, glancing away from the table and hoping to catch Jo’s eye. He needs a freaking beer.

“The, imagining-how-you’re-going-to-seal-the-deal-with-this-latest-conquest look.” Dean just squints his eyes—his brother had been talking too damn fast for any of that to make a shred of sense—and Sam rolls his eyes. “I’m saying you have a crush.”

“No I don’t,” Dean snaps, and Sam just points at him victoriously, grinning, and takes another bite of his salad.

Castiel walks across the lawn, careful to avoid the soggy puddles from the rain earlier in the day. The gothic hulk of the MacLeod residence looms ahead in the dim twilight, but the lights on the porch are so bright that he has trouble making out any of the details past gabled roofs.

He does notice the silhouettes of two security mages standing just in the shadows beside the porch, though. The third disappearance earlier in the week has rattled the college community again, after they’d let their guard down in the months since the others. Castiel isn’t sure how they’re going to get anyone to replace Professor Moore, if the wards aren’t enough to keep the faculty safe.
But he feels safe enough at the moment. This party has been weighing heavily on his mind, but he knows it’s his best chance to get to know some of the other teaching staff. He has already met Rowena MacLeod, the current president of the university, just last week before classes began. She'd seemed pleasant enough for a petite, Scottish dynamo—perhaps a little too interested in his life in Oxford—but she was happy enough to welcome him with a one-year adjuncting contract, and that suits his purposes for now. He only hopes he can live up to everyone's expectations of him now.

He goes to adjust his tie for perhaps the fifth time, only to remember again that Pamela had told him not to wear one, so he hadn't. Feeling dreadfully underdressed, he grips his plate of PB&J bars and steps up to the porch. He senses the spell on the door before he reaches it, and admires the simple detection component and the mechanical construct, designed to open the door at his approach.

Inside the entry the house appears empty, but he can hear voices from down the hallway. As he approaches what must be the kitchen doorway, he's nearly decapitated by a cork projectile, the loud pop giving him only a split second to duck.

‘Whoopsie!’ Rowena MacLeod stands in the middle of the room, dressed in a low-cut red dress and holding the offending bottle of champagne in one hand. She spies Castiel and her eyes light up. ‘Oh, goodness. Hello, Castiel.’

She adds what Castiel can only describe as an eyelash-flutter and a coy smirk, and he shuffles with discomfort, murmuring, ‘Hello.’

She looks away to pour a glass from the fizzing bottle, waving her spare hand around the kitchen as she speaks. ‘Help yourself to a drink, sweetie. Just leave your food there with the rest.’

He moves over to the table, nearly dropping his plate when Balthazar greets him with a heavy slap on the back. Castiel smiles weakly at the Magical History professor. They’d met a few years ago in Oxford, when Balthazar was visiting his alma mater. Castiel had found him intimidating then as a student, and as a colleague, his opinion hasn't changed much.

Balthazar picks up a bottle of wine and pours himself a generous glass, followed by a second without even asking Castiel. ‘What’ve you got here, Cassie?’ he asks, eyeing off the plate Castiel has just placed on the table, next to a flat platter of butterfly cakes with fluttering wings, and a large tureen of soup that bubbles away, despite not being anywhere near a heat source. Castiel can sense the spell low inside the pot, though—he wonders if it's a new one of Ree Drummond’s. The Pioneer Woman is a genius, even if she must know someone on the inside at the Council to get her spells sanctioned so quickly.

Castiel looks back to his sad little plate of slices. ‘Oh, I’m not much of a baker, but this is an old family recipe.’ He can't recall ever sharing something he's cooked with anyone apart from Meg, and she hardly ever let him when they lived together. He knows these will never be as good as Gabriel used to make for him. Hopefully no one gets violently ill.

‘I'll make sure to leave room to try them later,’ Balthazar says with an exaggerated wink. He hands Castiel the full glass of wine and inclines his head towards the door. ‘Shall we?’ he asks with a grin.

As Castiel leaves the house, he can't help but draw a breath at the scene in the garden. Neatly-trimmed hedges frame a large space, hung over with trees with candles twinkling in the branches. People mill around a large firepit in the center of the lawn, chatting and laughing, and over it all, pleasant classical music plays.
Castiel descends to the path running across the lawn, wondering if anyone from his department has arrived yet. He's about to head over to under one of the trees, when another English accent says nearby, “Lovely evening, isn't it?”

Castiel turns to see a short, bearded man wearing a sharp suit and a smirk. The man continues, “Doctor Novak, I presume? Pleased to make your acquaintance. Fergus Crowley—although most just call me ‘Crowley’.” He presents his hand and Castiel takes it, surprised to feel a complete lack of magical energy surrounding him.

Castiel nods and smiles politely, replying with, “Of course. Nice to meet you.”

Alarm bells ring somewhere in the back of his mind. The name has sparked his memory—this man is a well-known lawyer, dealing with cases relating to offenses by lay magicians. Castiel had always assumed he was a mage, but it seems that's not the case—especially surprising, since Castiel was sure Fergus Crowley was the son of their very own university president.

“I believe I've read some of your papers on lay magic and society,” Crowley says, then takes a sip from the wine glass in his hand.

Castiel is taken aback for a moment. The people who have ever said they read his work…well, he can count them on one hand. He gives what he hopes looks like a pleased smile to Crowley, and replies, “Thank you. I'll admit, I've also followed quite a few of your cases. I found the one—maybe your most recent one?—where the lay magician was fighting for her inheritance? It was fascinating.”

Crowley closes his eyes and inclines his head in a sort of half-bow. “I do what I can. The people I represent are just that—people who work hard for their living. Why should they have to be specially chosen to practice their art?” Crowley stops, giving an apologetic grin. “My apologies, I'm forgetting your credentials on the subject. Are you working with the lay community in this area now?”

“No, I only just moved here a few weeks ago, at the start of the academic year.”


Castiel is momentarily unable to breathe. The Academy had told him that witnesses had had their memory altered—a difficult undertaking for so many students and faculty, but easily within the abilities of Babbage's ruling council.

No one was supposed to remember it. But Crowley does. How?

Crowley takes in Castiel's face for only a few seconds and then continues, “Oh don't worry, I'm not going to tell anyone about it. But I have a little side project running with some local magicians that might interest you, and we could certainly use someone with your…skill set.”

Castiel recovers his voice long enough to mutter, “I'm sorry, I'm really not sure what you're referring to. If you'll excuse me, I need to speak with my colleague over there. Have a good evening.”

“Very well, I'll play,” Crowley smirks as Castiel turns away. “But I'll be in touch. Just think about it.”

Castiel hurries away, taking a large gulp of his wine as he goes. Finally, he spies Hannah standing near the trunk of one of the great trees, and it's only as he's near her side that he sees many of the
rest of the Mechanikos faculty standing there as well.

He greets everyone distractedly then turns to Hannah, drawing her aside. She gives him a concerned look. “Castiel, are you well? You look like you've seen a ghost!”

Castiel spies a tuxedo-clad waiter wandering nearby with a bottle of red wine, so he drains the last of his glass and lets the man refill it for him. He waits until the waiter is out of earshot before he says, “Hannah, how much do you know about Fergus Crowley?”

Hannah’s eyebrows raise as she sips at her own drink, something involving mint and lime in a tall glass. “Not a lot. He's Rowena’s son, but he didn't come to Stanford.” When Castiel didn't say anything in reply, she continued, “You were just speaking with him, weren't you? Have you met before? He's a lawyer, isn't he?”

Castiel stared at the thin grass around the base of the tree, flickering lights from the candles giving the appearance of an unsteady surface. “Yes, he's a lawyer, mainly dealing in cases defending lay magicians. He's just asked me to help him with something, but…I'm not sure I trust him. I'm sorry, that sounds bad, but I—”

“No,” Hannah interrupts, a hand on his arm. “If it doesn't feel right to you, just refuse!” She frowns. “What does he want help with, anyway?”

“I—” Castiel glances over at the rest of the circle, and his mouth goes dry as he sees a new arrival to the group—Dean Winchester. He's chatting to Missouri as though they're old friends—perhaps they are. But with the glass of something in his hand and a smile on his face, he looks so carefree and unfairly beautiful under the flickering candle light, and Castiel realizes he's been staring only after Hannah says his name for the second time. He drags his eyes away, knowing that this is Dean's chance to get to know the faculty better, to schmooze the professors if he wants to. It'll be better if Castiel stays out of his way tonight, as much as he might be drawn to his side.

“I heard you'd ended up with Dean this year,” Hannah murmurs, trying to surreptitiously look at Dean without actually looking at him.

“Yes, he's studying spell deconstruction.” He tries to keep his voice even, but he's not sure he's convincing Hannah.

She smiles at Castiel indulgently. “I didn't know you were into guys.”

Castiel blinks, then laughs awkwardly. “No, I’m not!”

“You sure? Because you kinda looked like you wanted to eat him.”

“Hannah! Come on, I’ve gotta get through a whole year of working with the guy!” Castiel says, mock serious but ending with a grin.

Hannah laughs, but mercifully asks, “So are your other students as distracting as Dean?”

As he tells Hannah about his workload for the year, he puts her comments out of his mind. He can’t be actually attracted to Dean, can he? Not like that. Not at all. The guy’s obviously a ladies’ man, a player.

He can’t get rid of a lingering spread of heat across his skin, though.
Earlier in the evening, Dean strolls down the cobblestone path on his way to the party, heading for the mansion’s front steps. His fellow third year, Charlie Bradbury, hair long and bangs cut straight across, is wearing a graphic t-shirt and a zip-up hoodie. Dean’s opted for his best pair of jeans (otherwise known as, the pair with the least amount of holes) and a simple red flannel. It’s one of his casual date night outfits, which he doesn’t wanna read into, ‘cause he’s totally just here to schmooze his professors. All of them. Not singling any of them out.

“Dude,” Charlie grouses, elbowing him in the side, “you’ve barely let out a peep the whole walk over.”

“Uh, sorry.” He’s holding a home-baked apple pie in one hand, and with the other, he scratches absently at his face. “The dough didn’t set right.”

“Your crust is always ah-maz-ing,” Charlie says reassuringly. Dean just grumbles in reply, too nervous to take a compliment right now. Night is just on the horizon, and MacLeod Manor looks aggressively gaudy as always. Situated only a few hundred yards off-campus, it’s been a part of the university for centuries—the MacLeods being a foundational family in the creation of the school. Rowena has been the university president for longer than anyone can remember, and the rest of her family is full of provosts and beneficiaries and private business owners. They have deep ass pockets, to put it simply, and this level of wealth makes Dean uncomfortable. He’s lived paycheck to paycheck for his entire life, and is only affording school for him and Sammy thanks to scholarships and Bobby’s generosity.

He takes the steps to the front porch gingerly, not wanting to disrupt the solidity of his pie, and Charlie just holds her grocery sack of store-bought chips and dip with an amused expression. When he finally joins her, she goes to knock on the heavy oak door, but it flies open on its own. Dean can feel the gears of a spell in the air, and uses his free hand to grasp it lightly—it’s an open and close charm, though it’s arranged like an alarm system, only activated by the proximity of human footsteps. They stroll through the doorway together, Dean immediately struck by the shiny, gleaming hardwood, the grand marble staircase in the center. He’s never been inside the manor before and he’s trying really hard not to stare, but there are freaking pillars and fireplaces and trinkets that look more expensive than six months of his rent. He swallows, wondering how the hell he’s supposed to engage in banter and chitchat in a place like this…

But then Dr. Barnes rounds the corner, holding a large glass of red wine, and Dean sighs in relief. 

“Oh yeah. Alcohol.

“This isn’t the famous pie?” Pamela gasps, draping a shawl casually over her shoulder.

Before Dean can answer, Charlie confirms, “Hell yeah it is.”

The both chuckle but Dean just squirms away uncomfortably. He doesn’t handle genuine praise all that well. “You sharin’ that wine?”

“Eager beaver, huh?” Pam waves them through a long hallway, the grad students trailing after her. She leads them to a kitchen with the biggest island Dean has ever seen, and he drools a little, imagining all the kickass dishes he could make if he wasn’t confined to his small oven. Every available surface is covered in casserole dishes and party-sized bowls, and Pamela says, “Just put your stuff down anywhere, then join us on the patio for a drink.” She takes a long sip of her wine
and saunters through the sliding glass door. Charlie drops off her meager offering, then excuses herself to the restroom. Dean waits for her in the kitchen, not big on the idea of walking outside alone. He busies himself by examining all the potluck offerings, his stomach rumbling, and he snacks offhandedly to push through the boredom. One platter is filled with peanut butter and jelly bars, and he bites into one with enthusiasm just to discover that the baker used too much baking powder and not enough salted peanuts. His hands are moving quickly before he even registers what he’s doing, but really, what’s a simple component realignment when it’s all in the name of dessert? He makes his left palm flat, his right hand drawing out each ingredient, and then, he makes a few heavy-handed tweaks. He fixes the baking powder and the peanuts, but then adds in an extra quarter-cup of jelly and a teaspoon of vanilla. Then he bundles up his fingers tightly, releasing it back into his open palm, and feels the spell cast like a waft of perfume in the air. He sighs contentedly, settling back into his heels, and takes a nibble of the new and improved dessert.

Delicious.

“Ready?” Charlie rounds the corner, still shaking water from her recently washed hands, and Dean nods. He’s forgotten how much magic soothes him, makes him feel in-control and grounded, and he feels better already. The backyard is massive, and they head to the bar situated on the left. There’s even a bartender taking drink orders, holy shit, and Dean orders a double whiskey without a second thought. There’s an ornate firepit in the middle of the space with decorative plants strategically placed, the soft glow of candles floating in the trees. There’s a shit ton of seating scattered everywhere, but most people seem to be milling around and standing, plates of potluck fare and cocktails in their hands. There must be sixty people in attendance, and Dean logically knows there are a ton of departments on-campus, but some of these people he’s never even seen. They sip their drinks and scan the crowd. Dean is thinking very deliberately about not seeking out Castiel, when the host herself sweeps right up to them.

“Oh, welcome, welcome,” the petite redhead greets, wearing a cascading red dress and fiercely dark makeup. “You both look much too young to be professors.”

“We’re graduate students who teach,” Charlie explains, taking a long sip of her rum and coke, and introduces herself. “Charlie Bradbury, third year. I’m specializing in Magical Mediation and Information Technology.”

“Oh, a rapidly growing field, I hear,” Rowena says conversationally, her accent thick. Her eyes wander over to Dean, looking at him appraisingly. “How about you, dearie?”

“I’m Dean Winchester.” He outstretches his hand and they shake pleasantly, though he can feel a buzzing undercurrent of magic on her skin. Rowena is a legendary mage, perhaps one of the strongest in the world, and he can feel power radiating off of her like an electrical charge.

“Mechanical Engineering with a concentration in Spell Deconstruction.”

Her eyebrows raise and their handshake lingers. “Are ya now?” Dean doesn’t know if she’s responding to his name or his specialization, but he just smiles tightly and nods. “Well, Mister Winchester, I am most impressed. I’ll have to keep an eye on you.”

She bops him playfully on the nose and swings her glass of champagne around, and Dean can’t believe the host and owner of this mansion is already half-sloshed by eight o’clock. They all laugh together anyways, and Dean finds that he likes Rowena, though he gets the feeling she’s harboring a fair number of secrets. Before he has too long to ponder the possibilities, Pam and Dr. Moseley are calling them over. Their department has created a loose semi-circle in the grass, and with a drop in his stomach Dean spots Dr. Adler leaned against a tree, sneering at him as he approaches. He reciprocates the attitude with a false, over-zealous grin and the professor narrows his eyes and
wanders away, mumbling to Missouri about fetching more food.

Dean also notices someone else’s presence, a blue-eyed professor he’s been desperate to see…and desperate to avoid. Dean flicks his gaze over to Castiel, admiring him for the shyest of seconds. His hair is less messy than before, and he’s thankfully ditched the trenchcoat and is now sporting a blue button-up and a tight pair of jeans. He’s having a whispered, private conversation with another professor, a soft-spoken brunette that Dean knows is Dr. Hannah Milton, though he’s never taken any of her classes. Castiel is so good-looking and they’re speaking so secretively that it makes Dean’s stomach hurt, not to mention the fact that he apparently hasn’t even noticed Dean’s arrival. Being ignored like this makes him feel…pouty.

Damn. I’m pathetic.

He tilts the remaining whiskey between his parted lips, emptying the lowball glass without blinking. Charlie shoots him a quizzical look but says nothing, gossiping with Pamela about who had the audacity to microwave fish in the faculty kitchen earlier. Dean sets off to the bar and drinks his second whiskey, coming back to Charlie’s side holding his third, and is finally feeling properly warmed up and buzzed. Screw Castiel for not even saying hi, or looking in his direction, or acknowledging him at all. Who the hell cares?

Dean sure doesn’t.

He turns on the charm to everyone around him, asking Missouri how her granddaughter is doing. He listens with rapt attention as she explains how eighteen-year-old Patience is having difficulty during her senior year of high school, thanks largely to her psychic abilities, and Dean can’t necessarily empathize—his powers took a lot of coaxing to actively appear—but he offers a sympathetic ear all the same. They eventually transition into a group conversation with Pamela and Charlie, with Castiel and Hannah maintaining their seclusion outside the group…but whatever. Dean’s holding it down just fine on his own. An hour later and on his fourth drink, he starts wandering around, becoming easy acquaintances with a few professors he’s seen in Theoris Hall. He overhears them commenting on the perfection of the apple pie, and that pretty much seals the deal on their new friendship. After a long conversation he ends up doing shots with one of them, a slender and colorful man named Balthazar, and he’s almost forgotten all about snobby ol’ Castiel and his apparent lack of interest in Dean when he turns around and sees…

Castiel.

Staring at him.

Balthazar has a hand clapped on Dean’s shoulder, and from their vantage point on the patio Dean spots blue eyes practically burning a hole through him. He turns his back quickly, not sure what even possessed him to check in Castiel’s direction, but now his cheeks are blushing from more than just the whiskey. A waiter in a tux comes his way, and he drops the empty shot glass onto the man’s tray with a sigh.

This is gonna be a long night.

Dean’s time at the party continues in a similar haze of drinks and idle chit chat, and he has stubbornly decided that he’s going to charm the pants off of everyone at this party except Castiel. Why is someone this smart playing a game this stupid? Who doesn’t just come up and say hi?

His plan to make Castiel jealous of all the fun he’s having works a little too well with one of the potions professors, Amara, who eyes Dean like a snack she wants to tuck inside her grocery cart. It’s nearly eleven o’clock now and the party is starting to wind down, a wave of responsible party
goers beginning to take their exit, and Dean thinks he should probably switch to water soon when he takes a hard turn from the firepit and collides with...

Dr. Adler. The balding man regards him with open disdain at being bumped into, but when he realizes it’s Dean, he plasters on a patronizing grin.

“Have one too many there, Mister Winchester?” His tone is icy and Dean takes a step back.

“Nope,” he answers flippantly, “just wasn’t watchin’ where I was going.”

Adler smiles without a trace of humor. “You have a tendency to leap before you look. I hope you don’t bring that attitude with you into the classroom…you know we have professor evaluations at midterms. I’d hate for you to lose funding because you couldn’t maintain a professional demeanor.”

Dean’s heart is thumping angrily in his chest. Did this big bag of dicks masquerading as a professor really just threaten his job? He takes a large step forward, emboldened by the alcohol and the injustice of it all. “You know what I think, Doctor Adler?”

He says the word sarcastically, as if he can’t quite believe someone this goddamn horrible actually went to college for ten years just to bully his students around.

“What’s that?” Adler is smirking now, and there’s some definite “cat who caught the canary” vibes going on. Maybe he thinks Dean will regret telling him off, maybe he’ll get to fire Dean or kick him out of the program, but right now both of those consequences seem worth it.

“I think you’re—”

He feels a tug on his shoulder, a strong hand pulling him backwards, and a flash of blue eyes.

“Excuse us,” Castiel mutters, looking at Adler with an expression that Dean can tell is feigned apology, “I need to speak with my thesis student for a moment.”

His hand is still on Dean’s shoulder, and Dean feels frozen, some of the outrage bubbling under the surface beginning to fade. Because Castiel…he’s here, talking to Dean, saving him from saying something that’s potentially idiotic, and his hand is still pressing into the thin material of Dean’s shirt.

“Of course,” Adler replies tightly, his glare sweeping over them both, and then he turns and stomps away, heading back inside the manor. Dean lets out a breath the moment he’s out of view, turning around to face Castiel properly. After deliberately avoiding him all night, hoping to hide just how much he was dying to talk to him, it feels surreal to finally be alone together. Standing close. Just…Staring.

“Uh, thanks,” he mumbles, not sure how much information to divulge. “Interrupting when you did, you probably just saved my ass.”

“Yes, well…” Castiel looks at him, his expression self-deprecating and droll. “It seems I have a habit of doing that.”

Dean knows he means taking him on as an eleventh-hour thesis student, so really, it’s sorta an insult…but he’s a pervert, and he can’t help but think that Castiel is talking about his ass. It might be in a highly metaphoric sense, but fuck, he’ll take what he can get.
“Yeah,” Dean says, sounding nervous, and Jesus, he’s screwing this up all over again. How come he can wine and dine fifty strangers, but can’t string two coherent words together around this particular guy? “So…you havin’ a good time?”

Castiel eyes him carefully, as if deciding how truthfully he’ll answer. “I’ve been to worse,” he says noncommittally.

“Ouch,” Dean mumbles. “Those Oxford parties must’ve been good. I’m imagining a mahogany fireplace, some centuries-old scotch, and a bunch of smart dudes getting totally wasted and debating philosophy.”

He worries for a split second that he might’ve offended Castiel, but he breaks into a grin, the action looking as though he fought tooth and nail to cover up.

“Don’t you mean, ‘sloshed.’ ‘Pissed.’ ‘Off your trolley?’” Dean squints at him in confusion, so Castiel clarifies, “That’s what Meg would call it, being drunk. She’s adapted very well to British slang.”

A few thoughts occur to Dean. One, who the fuck is Meg? Two, is Castiel a little “sloshed” himself? He doesn’t seem like the kind of guy to offer up details about his personal life so readily. He wants to ask both of these questions, but he doesn’t wanna scare his advisor away or make things awkward, so he asks vaguely, “You, uh, left a lot of people behind when you moved?”

“No,” Castiel replies honestly, but doesn’t elaborate. Dean wants to ask who the hell this Meg lady is, then, but for some reason navigating a conversation with Castiel feels like a freaking war zone. “What about you?”

“What about me?” They’re standing closer to the fire now, and Dean rolls the sleeves of his flannel, feeling immensely warm.

“Are you having a good time?”

Having his question repeated back to him makes Dean feel weirdly…fluttery. “Not bad,” he says, shrugging. “Made a few friends.”

“I see that.” There’s a slight edge to Castiel’s voice that Dean doesn’t understand. “Balthazar is an interesting man, but even I know that he has a—reputation.”

“Reputation,” Dean repeats blankly.

“Yes.” Castiel’s eyes bore into his openly, without a trace of discomfort. It’s such an intense gaze that Dean forces himself to look away.

“What does that mean?” He rolls up his sleeves even higher, actually sweating now, and Castiel watches the fabric being rolled up, up, up…

“He sleeps with his students,” Castiel reveals, his voice faint now. Dean shuffles closer to him, under the guise of not hearing him fully, but when their boots brush against each other he’s overwhelmed by a rush of adrenaline.

“Oh,” Dean responds lamely, too distracted by the lure of Castiel to think of a better response. He wishes the professor would put his hand back on his shoulder, would brush his elbow with his fingertips, would whisper something mischievous into his ear. “And that’s…” He swallows, and can’t help himself. He glances down at Castiel’s lips, all pink and plump and shiny, and he aches to close the space between them. “Bad.”
“Exactly.” The word comes out as a huff, and he may be dreaming it, but Castiel seems just as bothered by this conversation as Dean is.

“Glad we agree.” Dean’s voice is a dry rumble, and he’s no doctor, but he’s pretty sure his heart is beating at eight thousand beats per second. There’s tension between them, that much is fucking clear, but Dean can’t decide is if it’s the flirty, sexual variety. Maybe he’s just projecting his own fascination with the irritatingly gorgeous professor onto their interaction? Maybe Castiel really just thinks he’s a two-bit charmer who’s gonna let Balthazar go to town on him?

“Us agreeing is a first,” Castiel quips, and Dean chuckles. He opens his mouth again, not quite sure what the hell he’s gonna say next, but then his phone is vibrating violently in his back pocket. He reaches for it and frowns.

“One sec,” he tells Castiel, though he half-expects the professor to float away and leave, he doesn’t. But Dean is focused on Sam now, who’s slurring his words. Apparently he met “that chick from the water fountain” at a party and they’re both super wasted. Dean curses into the receiver, gets their street address, tells his brother to stay put. He’s only twenty, and Dean isn’t gonna risk Sammy getting arrested for public intoxication.

“Gotta go,” he says briskly, and Castiel tilts his head, almost looking worried. It’s a freaking adorable look and Dean hates that it has an immediate effect on him. “See ya Monday.”

He walks away in search of Charlie, saying a quick round of goodbyes to the rest of the professors, and tries not to think about what a long ass weekend this will ultimately prove to be.

Chapter End Notes

We'd love you to leave a comment and tell us your thoughts, and don't forget to subscribe for next week's update.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Ellen: Welcome back! Thanks for all your enthusiasm for this story so far <3 Y'know, TCBaby, we've had a lot of world building so far. I feel like we might be missing something.

TCBaby: Totally. This is an explicit story after all, and everyone knows I LOVE some good smut, so...time for some dick?

Ellen: How do you always read my mind?!

TCBaby: We are crazy in sync coauthors, THAT'S how. Enjoy this, lovely readers! Hope it makes your Monday a million times better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel hangs his trench coat on the back of his chair, then sits and pulls the chair forward. He opens his laptop, fiddling with his wireless mouse as he waits for it to start up, a fluttering in his stomach. Ever since his oddly charged interaction with Dean at the welcome dinner on Friday night, he’s been anxious about this meeting—his tipsy brain had been drawn to Dean that night, enough to actually rescue him from Adler, only for him leave immediately after his mysterious phone call. Had he said something wrong? He isn’t always the best at social interactions—his “people skills” are rusty, according to Meg—but he hadn’t thought he’d done anything to chase Dean away.

In any case, the rest of the party had passed in a slightly drunken haze, broken up by people coming to tell him how delicious his peanut butter and jelly bars were. He had been completely baffled by the praise, but ultimately left with a warm, fuzzy feeling of belonging.

His stomach and head hadn’t agreed with him on Saturday morning, sadly.

Monday is a new day though. And now that he’s taught his morning classes he just has to get through this meeting with Dean, and he can go home and relax.

If Dean even shows up, that is. He drums his fingers lightly on the desktop, jitters his knee underneath. Drawing in a breath first, he pulls up a basic Euclidean structure from the air above the desk, pressing his fingertips together to channel the magic more carefully. He loves the feeling of magic here at Stanford, clean and pure, strong and safe. He could create big things with it. Grand things.

But elemental magic is so structured and cold. There are things that the elements can’t do, that can only be created with a touch of lay magic from the heart, from the imagination. Such as...

He purses his lips and blows a gentle stream of warm air into the structure. Where the air crosses the magical boundary, it bursts into blue-white color, a fluttering mass of moth wings, contained within the sharp geometric shape.

Castiel smiles as his nerves dissipate in the pale, magical light. The moths take on colors, bright
jewel blue, purple, green—they flutter in place, pulling at their magical tether, enticing him to release more of his worries. The pull to use lay magic is strong, addictive to the weak-willed, drawing magicians to use too much of their own energy and life force. It would be better for him to stick with the safe, controlled streams of elemental magic available to mages, and those students in training at the school. The use of lay magic in educational environments is frowned on—why use dangerous lay magic when there’s plenty of powerful, safer and more efficient elemental magic to spare?

But Castiel isn’t worried about what the university thinks. Breathing in deeply, he’s about to expand the spell to let the fluttering magic have a larger space to move when there’s a knock at the office door. Glancing up, it takes him a precious moment to realize who it is, before the door handle starts to turn.

He quickly waves his hand into the structure in front of him, dispersing the magic and drawing the whole magical charge back into himself, closing his eyes as the fizzing electrical load rushes through his nervous system. He opens his eyes again to see Dean poking his head in the door.

“Doctor Novak? Can I come in?” Dean looks concerned, so Castiel quickly stands and nods to him.

“Please, come in, Dean.”

He shuffles inside, closing the door behind him.

Castiel eyes Dean over the desk, taking in his slightly flushed cheeks, his barely contained quickened breathing. Has Dean run up here? Castiel pushes aside his happiness in seeing him again, and glances quickly at the clock. Huh, Dean’s only a few minutes late this time. “Welcome back, Dean. Let’s get to it—we’ve got a lot to cover.”

Dean moves forward. “Okay, uh, I’m sorry I’m late, Doctor Novak. I just...I was chatting with Lisa down there at the desk and lost track of the time.” Dean grimaces apologetically and Castiel is momentarily disarmed, but then frowns when he remembers Lisa—the pretty brunette who runs the Mechanikos reception.

“Please, no need to be so formal. Call me Castiel.” He pauses, realizing that he should probably try to stay professional. “And I’d appreciate if you kept your socializing to non-business hours, at least when you’re working on your project. Speaking of which”—he gestures at the chair in front of his desk as he sits back down behind it—“take a seat. We’ve got some planning to do.”

Once Dean is seated, Castiel takes him through the timeline for the master’s thesis, while Dean sits through it looking like he’d rather be anywhere else. Castiel is used to that look from the few years of teaching he’s already done as a graduate student in Oxford. He’s reasonably sure that Dean is actually interested in what he’s got to say, even if he appears ambivalent.

“So,” Castiel says, opening a new document on his screen and typing Dean Winchester - Thesis notes at the top of the page, “we’ve got six weeks to decide on a project and write a proposal so it can be sent in for approval. Then you’ll work on the project until your first draft is due before the Christmas break.”

Dean nods. “Okay. What’s the project?”

Castiel levels a look at him. “That’s your choice.”

“Oh.” Dean gives him half a cheeky kind of smirk. “I thought you’d just assign me one.”

“No.” Castiel raises one eyebrow, trying hard not to be charmed. “My job is to advise you. To keep
you on track, help you if you require it. But your project should be related to a topic of your interest. This project will launch you into a career after you graduate. So think carefully.”

Castiel waits expectantly for Dean to answer, but he just sits there, staring at Castiel in apparent confusion. Castiel mentally regroups.

“Did you have any project in mind?” he asks, trying to coax Dean to join him in the conversation.

“Uh, no.”

Castiel takes a deep breath, trying to contain the for fuck’s sake that is threatening to burst out of him. “Okay. Let’s try something different. Tell me about your magic. You said last week that you believe magic can be felt and manipulated instinctually, rather than dealt with methodically. We can explore that concept later, but I’d like you to tell me how you found out you were gifted? What is it that you most enjoy about magic? Perhaps if we brainstorm a bit, we can narrow down on a topic of study.”

Dean looks down, fidgeting with something in his hands. The movement attracts Castiel’s gaze momentarily—he’s running his thumb along a bracelet he wears around one wrist, made up of mostly black beads of some sort. Castiel looks back up to Dean’s face to meet his eyes, clear green in the afternoon light from the window.

“My brother… He decided I was magical before we even knew what it was. My dad—he used to move us around a lot for work, and I had to look after Sam a lot. He comes here now, too—just started his junior year. Looks like Sasquatch. You might have seen him around Theoris hall.”

Cas nods thoughtfully. He hasn’t met Sam Winchester yet, but Dean certainly seems proud of him. He wonders suddenly if Anna would be proud, if she knew he’d gone to Oxford, if she knew he was teaching here. She may know, wherever she is—it’s been so long since he’d last spoken to his sister.

“Anyway when my old man…he also passed away and we came to live with our uncle here in Palo Alto. Owns a magic store out near the coast. One night Sammy told him that I could make lights with my hands and bam, Bobby made sure I tried my hardest to get in here as soon as I could.”

“Your uncle is a mage?” Castiel asks, curious.

“He’s not actually my uncle. Just a good friend of my dad, I guess.” Dean goes back to fiddling with his beads.

Castiel would love to know more about Dean’s family, but Dean seems uncomfortable. He had seemed keen to talk about the nature of magic in their first meeting—perhaps Castiel can coax something out of him that way.

“Okay, what about your magic? Can you tell me what you most enjoy about using elemental magic? What comes naturally to you?”

Dean looks up, one shoulder in a dismissive shrug. “I take spells apart. That’s what I’m here for, in the spell mechanics department, right?”

Castiel narrows his eyes at the insolent tone. “Dean, I’m trying to help you work out what you want to do for the rest of your life. I am doing this for you. Work with me here.”

Dean raises his hands, palms out. “Okay, okay! I guess...I like figuring out what makes a spell work. Feeling around the edges of it, the components, the interior. Then putting it back together.”
Now they’re getting somewhere. Not far—he feels like he’s trying to squeeze blood from a stone, here—but at least Dean’s talking. “Okay. That’s good! That’s something.” Castiel stands up, walking over to his bookshelves. Earlier that day he’d brought up a box of books and shelved them—but now he takes a couple of different volumes down, bringing them back to place them on the desk and push them over to Dean. Time to force him into thinking like a mage. “I’d like you to do some reading before our next meeting. Let’s go back to the basics.” Dean glances up at him as he taps his forefinger on the book on top. “Euclidean geometry, Isaac Newton’s magical laws. There are a few other non-standard books here.” He can’t help but grin slightly at the horrified look on Dean’s face. “Just read, and see if anything appeals to your curiosity. Perhaps we can work out where your passions lie.”

Dean stares at him in disbelief. “You know I read most of this stuff like, five years ago, right?”

“And you could probably do with a refresh. Just see if anything gets you thinking, that’s all I ask.”

Dean lets out a dramatic sigh and stands up, pulling the pile of books into his arms. “Thanks, Doctor Novak,” he mutters, turning to trudge to the door.

“See you next Monday,” Castiel calls as Dean leaves his office. He sighs, sitting down again to type a few notes into the new document, then closes the laptop with a snap. Time to head home.

That hadn’t gone badly, he supposes. As he packs up and heads down the hallways, he congratulates himself on at least being able to maintain some kind of professionalism when faced with the attractive grad student after last Friday. It’s just a shame he seems to reluctant to be involved in the whole thesis process—Castiel might have enjoyed their sessions together more if Dean were more academically minded.

Downstairs, he passes reception and waves to Lisa as he passes the window in the wall. It’s not until he walks a few more steps that he notices Dean standing there near her inside the office area, his arms still full of Castiel’s magical texts.

“Bye, Professor!” Lisa calls with a sunny grin.

Of course Dean is welcome to be friends with whoever he wants. It’s none of Castiel’s business.

An odd sour taste crawls up Castiel’s throat, and he hurries out the front doors into the cool evening.

For the first time in a long time, Dean spends every available moment with his nose buried in a book. Because he’s in his final year, teaching two sections of an intro course, and thankfully, had been bored enough to take some summer courses last year, the infamous grad student Dean Winchester is technically not a student anymore. Well, except in one glaring, super exasperating, frustrating way.

His thesis.

He has no freaking clue what he’ll study and present on. He hates the research Castiel assigned him to read, loathes it, a fact Sam is practically giddy to remind him of anytime he spots Dean carrying his stack of hardcover tomes around.
“Dude,” Sam says, when they meet up in Theoris Hall on Wednesday to walk over for their usual lunch at Ellen’s, “I’ve never even seen you carry that many books, let alone read them.”

He reaches for the first one on the pile—Pythagoras and Magic: More Than Just a Theorem—but Dean slaps his hand away grumpily.

“Yeah, well…” He shuffles his outrageous load of texts around and they begin to walk outside. They pass Ruby in an cobblestone alleyway, hanging off a gargoyle and smoking. She shoots Sam a long and frisky wink, and Dean gives his brother a glare. “Maybe you should spend time reading this semester, and less time doing…” He scoffs in Ruby’s direction. “Whatever else you’re doing.”

They continue walking, though he can practically feel the eye-roll-and-bitch-face combo Sam is giving him. “Are you serious?” Sam asks, sounding exasperated. “This again?”

Dean shrugs noncommittally. He hasn’t quit making jabs since last Friday, when he had been forced to abandon a particularly interesting conversation he was having at the faculty potluck with Cas, to go rescue his drunk-as-a-skunk brother from Ruby. He doesn’t wanna admit that he’s probably extra bitter about the situation because Sammy’s drunken pleas had interrupted what Dean could only interpret as some pretty obvious flirting between him and his professor. But now that they’re both sober and in the light of day, it feels like Castiel has pulled back a little, acting nice enough but stiff and professional in their meeting two days ago. Looking back, Dean had preferred when the mysterious, dark-haired Greek god had been outwardly antagonistic towards him. At least that gave him an indication that he was memorable to Castiel somehow, and he wouldn’t be immediately forgotten as soon as the office door closed.

He doesn’t wanna admit it, but that’s why he’s working so hard on this reading list…he wants to make an impression on Dr. Novak.

He wants to get noticed.

“Aren’t you always the one telling me not to ‘drive or spellcast drunk’?” Sam points out, and Dean just clears his throat, disgruntled in his response. What Sam is saying is true, especially after Ash had tried a teleportation spell last summer when he was a half-pint of whiskey in. He’d been aiming to transport himself to some downtown bars; instead, he had overshot the casting of his hands by a few inches and ended up in the middle of a swamp in southern Florida. He was too scared to spellcast himself back home, so he’d been forced to purchase an expensive plane ticket back to Palo Alto, arriving horribly sunburnt and still slightly hungover.

“Besides,” Sam reasons, “how many times have I walked you back to your apartment after you had just ‘one too many’?”

“But the point,” Dean mumbles in a rush. “Point is…that’s me, and Ash, and Jo—that whole crowd. Not you. You spend your weekends reading boring books and eating salads, whatever the hell else you find fun. Not getting sloshed at fraternity row with a bunch of douchebags.”

Dean had only lived in the underclassmen dormitories known as “fraternity row” for one semester. They aren’t technically part of a fraternity—Stanford doesn’t have those—but they have been known for years as being more rowdy than the others so the nickname had stuck. Dean had found the party scene there was too exhausting, even for him, and he certainly wasn’t happy about Sam spending time there.

He knows he’s pushing his luck, that Sammy is basically a grown man and can dive into the party scene with Ruby if that’s what he really wants. But he’s been taking care of his little brother since he was fifteen, when their dad had essentially drunk himself into an early grave. Even after Bobby
took them in as an unofficial uncle, Sam had always been Dean’s responsibility as far as he’s concerned. That’s not gonna change just ‘cause some brunette bats her eyelashes and binge-drinks on the weekends. Still, a beat of awkward silence passes between them, but eventually they approach safer topics, like whether or not Dr. Barnes is the hottest person in the room whenever she puts on low-rise jeans (the answer—yes). Thanks to that distraction, they manage to postpone their imminent argument about Sam’s new “friendship” with Ruby. At least for another day.

The rest of the week is strangely quiet. Most of Dean’s off-campus hours find him camped out at home, situated comfortably at his kitchen table, drinking mugs and mugs of black coffee and grading quizzes for his intro courses or wading through the dense reading Castiel assigned him. The days when he’s not teaching, the only real company he gets is Bobby, and that’s just ‘cause Dean lives in a small apartment right above the magic shop. Still, he hasn’t seen the old kook for more than five minutes since the semester started, and he’d seemed kinda agitated the other day when Dean went downstairs to “borrow” fermented arachnid pincers. He had been attempting to concoct a speed tonic that would help him get through this reading material more quickly. Unfortunately, those kind of shortcuts are frowned upon by the university, and since he’s a professor now Dean figures he oughta do things the long, and completely freaking tedious, way. It was lucky that he had a change of heart, ‘cause Bobby hadn’t exactly been accommodating.

The baseball-cap-and-plaid-wearing grump had been leaned against the counter, whispering with a thin and pale redhead woman. Dean thought she must be fairly pretty, perhaps slightly older than him, though he never saw her face and she never spotted him. Bobby hadn’t let him wander downstairs far enough for any of that, and in fact, had essentially thrust Dean back upstairs without any explanation. Dean wasn’t sure who exactly Bobby was trying to keep secret, though to be fair, his behavior might’ve had more to do with Dean’s tab of unpaid potion ingredients. Still, he can’t help but wonder what the hell’s been up with Bobby lately.

By Sunday afternoon, he’s feeling stir crazy as hell. He’s been prepping like a madman for his meeting tomorrow with Castiel, and despite the hundreds upon hundreds of pages he’s read and reread, he feels no more prepared to produce a thesis topic than he did last week. Discouraged, he shuts a hardcover book about spellcasting hand gestures—that he practically knows by heart by now—with a hefty thump. He looks around his apartment for a distraction, and ignores his crumble-covered countertops and hamper of dirty laundry, grabs his laptop and pulls up the internet. Lying horizontal in bed, he scrolls through social media aimlessly, feeling bored and a tad pathetic. After about ten minutes, he begins to search a name. He doesn’t quite mean to, but he’s already halfway doing it before he’s fully aware, typing in Castiel Novak and eagerly waiting for the search results. Dean’s stomach does a flip when he sees him, the first and only profile, and clicks eagerly without a second thought. It’s been years since he’s had a crush bad enough to freaking Facebook stalk them, but here he is, shamefully falling down the rabbit hole.

In Castiel’s profile picture he’s wearing a graduation cap, gown black and billowy, a scarlet velvet hood on his back signifying the completion of his doctorate. He’s smiling and looking gorgeous, as-freaking-always, but Dean can’t shake the feeling that the expression on his face isn’t quite genuine. He’s only seen his professor’s gummy-smile a time or two, but he’s already slightly addicted to the sight, always wondering how he can make it reappear. Dean scrolls right in the photo album and scowls at the next image—Castiel looks significantly happier in this picture, leaning against a brownstone exterior with a short brunette tucked beneath his arm. Dean has a suspicion and he checks the profile tag…sure enough, it’s Meg Masters, someone Castiel apparent left behind at Oxford. Probably an ex, he thinks dimly. Dean clicks out of the photo display and checks his “about” page, but things like relationship status and sexual orientation are hidden because they’re not friends yet. Damn it all to hell.

Despite his limited access, Dean spends a good half-hour creeping Castiel’s profile until he feels
good and stalkery. He learns that Castiel is a new member of the group Beekeepers of the East Coast, which makes Dean snort at how dorky and adorable that is. He flicks through the main page and sees a video the professor shared six months ago, raising awareness for a new spellcasting device that allows mages without full function of their hands to cast simple charms, and Dean watches it, transfixed by the technology. He should really send this to Charlie, it'd be right up her alley.

Next, from eight months ago, there’s an article Castiel published with *Mage Today: A Modern Magic Magazine*. It’s title “UK vs US: The Cultural Treatment of Lay Magicians.” Curious, Dean clicks and reads an excerpt:

“Americans who are aware of their magic have long desired to know how to use it.” Henry David Thoreau wrote those words during his well-documented stay at Walden, contemplating transcendentalist values and how the role of magic changes our overall understanding of the world. I don’t subscribe to the philosophical leanings of Thoreau, but I do know a good quote when I see one, and the inscrutable curiosity of Americans is something I am even more familiar with.

I was born and raised in Illinois, and in fact, it wasn't until I pursued higher education at Babbage Magical Academy in Oxford that I realized there might be a different way of structuring our management of magic. In the States, it’s largely been accepted that the concept of aristocracy was dismissed long ago, and with it, antiquated notions of a classist society. But most anthropologists agree—that’s simply not true. While in the United Kingdom, lay magicians have formed their own collectives, run their underground markets—the largest of which is to be found in Oxford—and teach each other in unofficial colleges that are not authorized or overseen in any capacity by the British Magical Education Council, things are different in America.

Darker, some might say.

In the United States, lay magicians have formed groups and societies of their own, but resentment towards the Magical Education system seems to run at a more tense level. As access to the elemental well is only granted on admission to a college, American minors are limited to lay magic in their early exploration. Training of gifted children in the US is kept to a minimum, to discourage irresponsible use of lay magic. Adolescent lay magic is usually inefficient and weak in nature, and excess casting will usually lead no further than the point of exhaustion or unconsciousness. There are very few cases where an underage, untrained magician has managed to cast a natural feedback loop leading to permanent damage or death.

But where does this leave adults who wish to study magic on their own, but haven’t met the vague requirements laid out by the Council that measures magical aptitude in a standardized entrance exam?

Very few options, I’m afraid.

Dean reads on, amazed by the details present in the article, the straightforward but highly intelligent way Castiel relays information. It’s clear that he’s a natural educator, something Dean knows is lacking in his own academic life. The more he reads, the more he learns about the grand struggles lay magicians face, everyday and year-round, and it makes him wonder if Castiel could point him in the direction of an advocacy group or…something. He just wants to have a hand in helping these people. Dean doesn’t consider himself smart enough to be a politician or anything, but when he sees injustices happening in his own country or state or city, he can’t help but feel
compelled to offer a leg-up to people who weren’t lucky enough to have the same opportunities as him.

Castiel Novak…model-good looks, heart of freaking gold, smart as a damn whip. Oh, and sometimes he does such inventive magic that his eyes glow blue. What the absolute hell? Dean had walked in on him finishing up a spell before their last meeting, and basically had to pick his jaw up off the damn floor.

It’s slightly embarrassing, but it’s been a while since Dean’s been on a date or taken care of himself, and he’s been stalking Castiel online for the better part of an hour. He can’t seem to get the professor out of his head, no matter how much he tries to distract himself. He attempts to keep himself preoccupied—watching TV, reading some Vonnegut just for fun. But as the evening settles in, his thoughts return to the handsome professor, the impulse beyond his control. It starts off with just a kiss, chaste and quick, but before long, many of his thoughts are overtly erotic. He pictures himself on his knees, the heaviness of Castiel’s cock slick and hard against his tongue. Or maybe the professor pinning Dean down from behind, trapping him against Castiel’s desk, and fucking him senseless. The more his mind wanders, the more Dean feels himself grow hard against the denim confines of his jeans, and he rubs his palm against the bulge, moaning softly and closing his eyes. He needs to stop freaking out about it and just rub one out already. Maybe that’ll fix everything.

He goes to his apartment door and locks it, just in case Bobby or Sam feel like an unannounced visit, then shuts the blinds on his second-story window. In his nightstand drawer, he retrieves the lube and tissues, and finds his favorite downloaded porno video. Hey, if you’re gonna do it, might as well do it right. He strips off his jeans, then returns to his bed, lounging on top of the comforter and stroking himself aimlessly from the outside of his boxers. He starts up the Busty Asian Beauty video, the one where two girls are going to fucking town on each other, and while it’s seriously hot, it’s not quite doing it for him today. Sighing, he admits to himself what he’d been trying to ignore.

What he actually wants right now involves two dicks, and specifically, a video that’ll allow him to live in the absurd dream of there being a naked Castiel in his bed right now. This whole thing will sure as hell make their meeting tomorrow extra awkward, but Dean is beyond caring at this point, he’s so turned on and pent up and sexually frustrated. It’s been almost two weeks since he’s gotten laid, thirteen days and counting since he met the blue-eyed professor he can’t stop obsessing over, and he decides to just embrace the fantasy. At least for the moment. Carpe diem or whatever.

He finds a video that’s nearly perfect. The man topping is tall and broad-chested, a little more muscular than Castiel, though Dean would have to get a more intimate look at his professor to truly know what he’s hiding underneath all those layers. But his hair is dark and messy, just like Dr. Novak’s, his cock pink and impressively hard, and it’s almost enough for Dean to imagine the sandy-haired twink he’s about to pound into is…well, him. Dean’s not a tiny man—in fact, he’s got a few inches on Castiel—but details like that don’t matter because this a fantasy, a fictional scenario, a space to get lost in. “You like that, don’t you,” the toppy porno guy groans, sinking his cock into the other man’s mouth and fucking his face—hard. Dean groans and nods, finally snaking a hand into his boxers and pumping his dick slowly. He’s barely even gotten started and the sensations are amazing…his skin feels warm, his neck sweaty, and he wonders if he’s been dying to do this since the day he met Castiel.

The video continues, but it’s only when the guy spreads the ass cheeks of the bottom, burying his face there and licking a flat, wet tongue against his hole, that Dean finally succumbs to lube. He wants to last the whole duration of the video, but at this rate, he’ll be blowing his load any second. Palm slick, he takes himself in hand and strokes leisurely, thumb swirling around the tip, panting
and closing his eyes as he listens to the moans and slick sounds of sex coming from his laptop. When they change positions Dean cracks an eye open, seeing the top has shoved the bottom against a piece of furniture, a flat table, and is rutting against him frantically before finally breaching him from behind.

“Fuck,” Dean moans, chest rising and falling. He returns to his daydream from earlier—Castiel’s desk, the zipper of his trousers trailing down, the feeling of his lips on Dean’s exposed neck. While the video plays, his assemblies his own patchwork porn, putting his and Castiel’s face on the two men as they writhe and curse and moan. His hand is moving more quickly now, and he finally lifts his hips to shimmy off his boxers, not wanting to dirty up his underwear when the laundromat is a whole block away. Finally seeing how hard his own cock is, flush and pink and shiny with lube, makes him realize that this…is really happening. He’s jacking off to the thought of his professor doing lewd sex acts, but there’s zero stopping it at this point, all he can do is hope his poker face is fucking good tomorrow, ‘cause…

_Castiel licks his lips, opens his mouth, and takes Dean’s cock into his mouth. The man’s eyes shut close and he moans, right hand pumping the base, left hand caressing Dean’s balls in the perfect way as he sucks. “Jesus,” Dean mutters, eyes open but glued to the ceiling as the daydream overtakes him, trying hard to breathe as his hand moves. He’s getting so close, and he’s torn between wanting this feeling to last forever and yearning to finally fall over the edge, but when his eyes wander back down to the laptop and the dark-haired man grumbles, “That’s it, gorgeous, make me come,” and pulls out, stroking himself for only a moment while the bottom flips over, brings his face to the man’s cock, and let’s his face be smeared in ropes of white come—

“Oh, oh, oh,” he breathes, feeling his own orgasm building, “fuck, ah…” _Castiel_. He thinks the name but he doesn’t say it, and he comes almost instantly, wishing it was Cas’ pretty lips he was spilling over…not his own hand. He sighs, momentarily sated, and leans against his mattress, shutting his computer and listening to the newfound quiet. Slowly, his satisfaction turns to dread.

What the hell is he doing…trying to make Castiel drop him as a thesis student ‘cause he’s a pervert who can’t keep it in his freaking pants?

It’s fitting, of course, that he gets an email notification at that exact moment. He reaches his free hand out, come still slightly warm on his palm and belly, and his heart races when he sees _Castiel Novak_ pop up in his inbox. The subject line is brief: “Saw this and thought of you.” Good fucking lord. If only Castiel knew what Dean thought of _him_…

There’s only a link inside and Dean clicks it. It takes him to one of those oversaturated, trendy news sites, and the title of the listicle is “10 Signs You Have No Idea What the Hell to Write for Your Graduate Thesis.” Dean snorts and inserts the iconic gif of Judge Judy giving someone an absurd eye-roll into his reply. But before he hits send he hesitates for a moment, wondering if he’s being too casual with Castiel, if he’s about to get reprimanded for being cavalier. But Castiel is the one who sent him the article, right? He’s the one who saw it and thought of Dean.

He hits send before he can think about it too much, then immediately begins refreshing his inbox, seeing if Castiel has emailed him back. _Having a crush is freaking exhausting_, he thinks grumpily.

He is so totally fucked.

Chapter End Notes
Magical references:

Euclidean structure: Euclidean geometry was first developed by the Ancient Greek mathematician and early thaumaturgist, Euclid. His geometric theorems allow the creation of structures to contain small-scale elemental magic.

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), English scientist, mathematician and alchemist, Chief Mage of the Babbage Magical Academy of Oxford University for most of his lifetime, despite living and working in Cambridge. He remains one of the most influential scientists and mages to ever live.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) - American philosopher, transcendentalist and mage, in 1845 he lived for two years in a hut near Walden Pond as an experiment in simple living.

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Don't forget to let us know what you think in a comment!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Welcome back! Ellen here, to let you know what while things might seem a little rocky sometimes, don't despair...

A quick note for those who are not fans of Megstiel: While Cas had a past romance with Meg, she broke his heart. In this chapter, she's keen to rekindle things in a casual way, but Cas is only thinking of one person (and it's not her). If you really don't like Megstiel, feel free to skip Cas' POV in this chapter. It's just this one time, and very brief.

Enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day, Dean walks through the heavy oak doors of Mechanikos Hall shaking raindrops off his temples. It’s a stormy day, which isn’t unusual—it’s rumored that the School of the Occult is spelled to exhibit the exact opposite weather patterns as the city. Since Dean lives a few blocks off-campus, he can all but confirm this, since he left his apartment this morning with clear skies and crossed into the university property suddenly drenched and soggy. He had been tempted to cast himself an umbrella, but he’s not great at manifestation spells. Obviously he can call objects to him that he already owns, that’s easy enough, but creating something out of thin air always makes things go haywire. Last year, he had hosted a party for his friends and they’d run out of beer, so he tried producing some of his own. The twelve pack of El Sol he’d constructed not only tasted like tepid bath water, but some of the bottles were also enchanted. It took Charlie and Jo nearly an hour to coax one out of his A/C vent, since it kept rolling around and dodging their spells.

So, yeah, with Dean’s luck he would turn his hand into an umbrella or some shit. He plays it safe and enters the lobby shivering and wet, slinging his messenger bag on a nearby bench. He might not be great at manifesting, but drying is an entry level spell he could do in his sleep. He makes his left hand the shape of a C, while the thumb and forefinger of his right hand reaches into the center, and he drags it through the opened space. Instantly his clothes, his skin, even his hair, are intensely dry. He wonders if he might’ve overshot it, even, reaching a hand up to wade through his hair—full of frizz and static.

“Great,” he mumbles, but he’s not about to do a freaking cosmetic spell right here in the front entry of the lobby. It’s the middle of the afternoon and students are rushing to their three o’clock classes, but Dean still has plenty of time until his meeting with Castiel at 3:15. He’s gone from most careless student to a student who cares too much. Thankfully, his thoughts on that are disrupted when he feels someone looking at him and giggling.

Lisa, the second-year grad student who works the front desk, is standing nearby. She has a flirty hand combing through her own luscious strands, and she’s batting her eyelashes at Dean, smiling at him in amusement as he fusses over his hair.

“Let me,” she says, and steps close to him, reaching her hands up towards the crown of his head. “I know a great anti-frizz charm. I lived in an all-girls dorm for four years…we know all the tricks.”
Dean can’t argue with that, and besides, he sorta likes Lisa. Not in the crazy, consuming way he feels with Dr. Novak, a crush so hardcore he wonders if it’s gonna swallow him up whole, but Lisa is pretty and soft-spoken and kind. They’ve been texting on and off for about a week, and she’s probably wondering why Dean hasn’t asked her out yet, but he can’t seem to maintain interest long enough to try and seal the deal.

He watches her hand motions as she casts the charm—she makes two circles on either hand, connecting thumb and ring finger, and rotates them twice at a ninety degree angle. Once it’s cast, she runs a hand through his hair slowly.

“See,” she whispers, her gaze flickering from his eyes to his lips, “you look great.”

“Thanks,” Dean exhales. His eyes wander over to check the oversized clock on the wall, and sees his meeting starts in five minutes. “Gotta run…but I’ll be sure to remember that one.”

“Dean,” she calls, when he’s already put a foot of space between them, heading towards the spiral staircase. “I…I was wondering…” She smiles endearingly, as if she’s not quite sure how to do this. “If you’re free tonight?”

“Uh…” Truthfully, Dean’s not doing a damn thing tonight. He’s busy brainstorming on his thesis, sure, but deep-down he knows he’s avoiding dating anyone because he’s holding out hope that Castiel will see him as more than just a student. It’s really not that far-fetched, he thinks—he’s twenty-five, Dr. Novak is twenty-eight. He’s almost earned his master’s, Castiel just received his doctorate. Maybe one day, his professor will look up and notice Dean properly, will flirt with him again like he did at the faculty potluck, will send him suggestive texts instead of friendly emails. It’s a hope he’s gasping with everything he’s got. “Pretty sure I’m busy, but can I text you?”

Lisa looks a little crestfallen, obviously expecting him to respond more positively to her advances, but nods and smiles at him anyways. Dean turns around abruptly before things can get any more awkward. Jesus. He needs to figure his shit out.

He knocks on Castiel’s office door right on time, for once, his heart racing with nervous energy. The bag full of borrowed books is heavy on his shoulder, and he’s not sure if he’s heard Dr. Novak say “Come in,” or if the books just brushed against the door too heavily. Either way, he opens the office door automatically, plastering on a smile. But Castiel is hunched over his desk, cell phone to his ear, an anxious expression on his face.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” he mumbles into the receiver quietly. “Yes, I’ll consider your offer.”

Dean just stands awkwardly in the threshold, realizing now that Castiel hadn’t called him in yet, but closing the door at this point would only draw more attention to himself. He’s frozen, not quite sure what to do, when Dr. Novak’s stunning blue eyes finally flicker in his direction. Dean can’t read his expression, but he looks slightly irritated at Dean, and he whispers frantically into the phone, “I have to go,” before ending the call abruptly. He slides his cell face-down onto his desk, crossing his forearms and looking pointedly at Dean. His button-up shirt is wrinkled, cuffs rolled to the elbow, and his hair looks tousled and messy…as if he’s spent the last hour wringing his hands through it. It’s so close to the wrecked appearance Castiel had in his daydream yesterday, that Dean flushes in embarrassment and has to look away.

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“Sorry,” he says loudly. “I, uh, thought I heard you say ‘come in’ but clearly, um, you hadn’t. Hope I didn’t interrupt anything important.”

Castiel leans into his chair with a sigh, crossing his ankles in a way that draws Dean to the sliver of
bared skin. “It’s fine. Just a telemarketer.”

Dean nods sympathetically, but knows without a doubt that that conversation did not involve a telemarketer. It might’ve been a pushy sales pitch, though, just based off of Castiel’s body language.

“Please, have a seat.” Dr. Novak’s voice is flat and hurried, as if his mind is somewhere else, and Dean feels a pang of disgruntlement at the thought. Whatever the professor is going through, Dean intends to charm him back into a good mood.

“Thanks,” he grins, sitting in his usual chair on the edge of the desk, but scooting it closer soon. He’s closed the distance between them minutely, and it’s a small shift but he wonders if Castiel notices.

“So…” Castiel looks straight-ahead, as if trying to gather himself up again. “How did you get on with the reading?”

“Uh, not bad,” Dean says lightly, not mentioning that the reading had been a total slog. “Most everything I’d read before, though that stuff about Zeno of Elea’s magical dialect was pretty interesting.”

“Indeed,” Castiel hums in agreement. “His work on incantations was revolutionary at the time.”

“Yeah, he was like, one step from inventing Thaumatechnology,” Dean comments, though he notices Castiel’s shoulders stiffen at the term. Dean’s mind races, figuring Castiel is a pretty no-nonsense guy, so no way he’d be down for something that’s discouraged in their society. The ability to invent new spells is fascinating to Dean, especially as someone whose specialization is literally analyzing what makes a spell function, but academics usually look down on people who practice it. They claim it’s too “new wave” and disrespectful to the Greeks who established magic centuries ago, but Dean thinks it’s just another way the administration is trying to control them.

He can’t share any of these thoughts with Dr. Novak, though, so he blurts out, “Not that I’m okay with that. I mean, creating new spells is dangerous stuff. Reckless, y’know?”

Castiel looks at him blankly, giving very little away, but Dean gets the distinct feeling that the professor is pissed off and trying to hide it.

“I’m not sure I agree with that assessment,” Castiel says coolly, as if every word is a struggle to keep calm and measured. “Not only can some people not help possessing an aptitude for this skill, but lay magicians often construct their own spells due to lack of access to proper instruction.”

“Yeah,” Dean says lamely, feeling like he’s royally fucking up this conversation. Maybe if the professor wasn’t such a damn mystery to him, he could figure out how to talk to him. A thought occurs to him then, and his mouth is moving before he’s had time to consider if it’s a good idea or not. “I read some of your articles on lay magicians yesterday and learned a bunch of new stuff like that.”

Castiel peers at him, evidently taken off-guard. “Is that so?”

Dean nods. “I, uh, just came across them online.” He swallows, knowing the likelihood of him coming across Dr. Novak’s published works accidentally is slim to none. He better keep talking if he doesn’t want to come off like a grade-A creeper. “Speaking of, why are you so interested in lay magic?”

Castiel flushes, shifting in his seat. “I…”
“Sorry, that was nosy,” Dean interrupts, and feels like he’s starting to sweat. “It’s just—I read your work comparing the British system with ours, and you seemed to like it much better over there. Why didn’t you get a job teaching at Oxford instead?”

“Still being nosy,” Dr. Novak says, and there’s an edge to his voice now that Dean’s never heard. “Let’s refocus back on your thesis.”

“Yeah.” Dean swallows, feeling every bit as chastised and clueless as one of his freshman students. But then he thinks about it—all his favorite professors, like Dr. Moseley and Dr. Barnes, are personable and friendly and Dean’s learned more from them because they’re easy to talk to. Maybe if he just breaks down Castiel’s walls and reveals that he’s genuinely interested, they could actually be friends. “It’s just, I don’t know anything about you—”

“Why would you need to?” Castiel snaps, the detached indifference on his face melting away into something…defensive and angry. “You’re my student, Dean. That’s it.”

The words are like a punch to the stomach and Dean looks down. He takes a deep breath and gathers his strength, staring Castiel down, noticing the rise of his professor’s chest and the slight shake of his hand.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly. “You seem…upset today.”

“The only thing that’s upsetting me is that my thesis student is more interested in me than in writing his thesis.” The words are cold and punishing, made all the worse because they’re entirely spot-on. Still, the harshness of it makes Dean feels breathless and dizzy. This is the last thing he expected when he came here today, so full of hope and expectation, and now Castiel is essentially slamming a metaphorical door in his face.

“Yeah, well, you’re not the only one who’s upset,” Dean retorts, his embarrassment turning to indignation and he sits up straighter his chair. “My thesis advisor is distant and detached and…sometimes, flat out rude. So not exactly the most welcoming space to share ideas.”

Castiel looks at him with incredulity. “What ideas? You have no ideas! You’re the only third-year student I’ve ever met who has no clue what he wants to do or study or be.”

Dean chuckles without a shred of humor. “Y’know, if I wanted someone to tell me what a piece of crap I am, I could’ve just called up Doctor Adler.”

“You know I don’t think that,” Castiel says in a rush. “But because you can’t charm us, like you have everyone else around here, we’re instantly the enemy…right?” Castiel is leaned up close to his face, elbows on his knees and practically touching Dean, his face twisted by anger.

“No, you’re ‘the enemy’ because you both like act dicks,” Dean says furiously. “I tried being your friend, but you’re so closed off, it’s like talking to a freaking brick wall!”

Castiel jumps to his feet and Dean follows, his bag of books tumbling to the floor. Their shoes are touching and Dr. Novak is standing so close to him, he can feel the erratic rhythm of his breathing, can see the glint of fury in his gorgeous blue eyes as he stares at Dean decisively.

“So you think I owe you something, simply because you ask for it?” His voice is low and unyielding. “I won’t be swayed by a pretty face, Dean.” He bites his lip and scowls, full of frustration, but doesn’t glance away. “You should show me some respect.”

“Yeah, well…” Dean swallows, still maintaining eye contact, though totally unsure how to take Castiel’s comment. That “pretty face” thing was a backhanded compliment if there ever was one.
He licks his lips and notices Castiel’s eyes following the movement, and if he wasn’t two seconds from punching the guy, he’d seriously think about kissing him instead. The energy between them is charged, and Dean is full of such powerful rage and lust, he’s not sure which one is more dominant at this point. “You should earn it, Professor.”

They’re both silent, fuming and staring and standing much too close, and it’s Castiel who pulls back first.

“Enough,” he says coldly, separating their bodies with a firm step backwards. “Either you do things my way, or this can’t continue.”

Dean isn’t sure how to interpret the vague this, considering that interaction they just shared went way beyond professional on several levels, but he’s already made up his mind. No matter how attractive Castiel is, how smart and perceptive, or how intriguing Dean finds him, this isn’t worth the stress. He opens his bag with a jerky gesture and slams all six hardback books onto the professor’s desk.

“Thanks for all your help, Doctor Novak,” he spits out, infusing his voice with every ounce of sarcasm possible, and the professor is looking at him with an expression of shock. But Dean doesn’t care—he’s tired of being jerked around, of playing the hot and cold game. He’ll find another advisor, or stay an extra semester, or maybe just fucking drop out at this point. Who the hell cares? Castiel’s right—Dean has no idea what or who he wants to be. He’s such a joke, and finally someone’s called him on it.

He stalks down the hallway with rushed steps, body still shaking, shoulders immeasurably tight. He takes the stairs two at a time and reenters the lobby, spotting the opened door of the office and makes another hasty decision. He saunters through the doorway and sees Lisa, head down and reading a book, and he says, “You, me. Dinner tonight. You interested?”

She looks up, surprised but already smiling. “Sounds fun,” she says sweetly. “Glad to see your schedule opened up.”

“Oh yeah,” Dean replies, closing his empty bag where all of Castiel’s books had been, “I’m free as a bird.”

Castiel stares at his closed door for a few moments after Dean storms out. What the hell just happened? He sits heavily in his chair, hands rubbing at his temples.

What has he done? He allowed himself to get riled up, then let it all out at the nearest person—Dean.

But Dean is so…infuriating! Why did he have to ask so many questions? And about lay magic, of all things?

He shakes out his hands, startled when sparks flick off his fingertips. His energy is all over the place—he can feel it building up on his skin like prickly heat.

Bringing his palms together so they’re facing each other but not touching, he releases fizzing plasma to arc between them. Too much charge—time to cool down before he shorts out his computer. He draws a small stream of magic from the elemental well to help him condense water
from the air, then pool it into a rough, fist-sized sphere. He allows his palms to move around the sphere, constructing a Delambre container with extra elemental energy to hold it in place.

He lifts the sphere to eye level, watching his own reflection in the undulating surface.

What the hell was Dean playing at, thinking they could be friends as well as colleagues, as well as teacher and student?

His frown deepens as he remembers the call Dean had walked in on. How much had he heard? It's bad enough that Crowley now has his direct number, but for Dean to start asking about lay magic is too far. Crowley had been asking questions that worried him, and he doesn't want Dean to get mixed up with the lawyer as well. If that means burning bridges, so be it. Especially now, in his final year, when any rule-breaking could cost Dean his qualification, or even his career. Castiel won't be responsible for that.

In a way, he’s excited by the fact that Dean read some of his published work. He wishes Dean had mentioned it under better circumstances so they could have a discussion about it, but given the subject matter, it’s probably better that they won’t get a chance to do that.

A memory flashes to the front of his mind, a teenage Anna squaring up to their mother, distress clear in her face as Naomi looms over her. He recalls ducking back around a corner as they started shouting at each other. Anna had been caught using lay magic to heal a deep cut on Castiel's leg from a fall from his bike. Naomi always drilled into them that lay magic was weak, dangerous to use, not acceptable for mage families like theirs.

She’d had similar opinions about his talent for thaumatechnology, and had expressed them frequently when she’d caught him creating new, unsanctioned spells, in much the same way Dean had just expressed his own, in fact. He hopes Dean is just repeating closed-minded opinions of people around him rather than actually believing any of it, but who knows?

 Thinking of his mother brings the lay magic to the surface, along with a tight resentment in his chest. It entices him to let his buzzing emotions out—he needs to be careful doing this, but it's quiet up here this afternoon, and he’s not expecting any more meetings today. Relaxing his guard slightly, he lets his frustration, his horror at the events of the day loose. He presses his thumb and two fingers together on his left hand, and as he rotates his wrist to inscribe a simple rune in the air, tiny ice crystals form inside the water globe like snowflakes. It's not easy to get the buzzing lay magic inside the elemental construct, but he's got a lot better at this with practice over the last few years so it doesn't tax him too much.

He watches the snowflakes spin gently around, and sighs. This whole afternoon has been inappropriate on so many levels. Not only did he insult a student—a grave offense from any teacher, in his opinion—but he drove him away with a cold shoulder. But Dean had made him so uncomfortable with his questioning, hitting all of his buttons one after another. He had no choice but to try to put distance between them.

As if that wasn't bad enough, he certainly can no longer deny the spark, the magnetism between them. He's attracted to Dean in a raw, profound way. And the idea terrifies him.

It's not because Dean's a guy. Castiel has found men attractive before, but has only ever had relationships with women.

No, the main reason Dean terrifies him is because he's a student, and he will not—cannot—be that teacher who gets romantically involved with his students. Even if the student is obviously interested enough in him to look him up in the academic catalog.
Even if Dean is still interested—which he seriously doubts after this afternoon—he can never allow himself to have...anything with Dean. The realization sends a cold bolt of sadness through him and out into the magical construct, turning the ball of water into solid ice with a crackling snap.

Startled at the sudden drain of his own energy, he drops the ball, and it smashes into tiny shards on the wooden floor.

He stands above the mess, his heart thundering and slightly out of breath, then he looks up at a sharp knock at the door.

Taking a deep breath to calm his racing heart, then clears his throat and calls out, "Yes?" Could it be Dean, come back for round two?

It's not a sandy head, but Missouri's dark curls that peer around the door.

"Castiel? Is everything alright? I heard a crash." She steps into the room and looks down as ice crunches under her shoe.

Castiel looks around his feet at the rapidly melting ice chips. "Sorry, yes, I'm fine. I was just testing a Kelvin's ice sphere for one of my classes."

Missouri eyes him like she doesn't believe a word, but nods anyway. "Uh huh. Might like to use a stronger Delambre next time."

Castiel winces, his face heating. He should know that.

Missouri continues, "Well, I'm heading home. See you tomorrow." She turns to go back through the door, but Castiel speaks up, his gut sinking at what he knows he needs to tell her.

"Missouri, I don't think I can work with Dean."

She turns back to face him, her eyes wide. She shuts the door behind her and steps into the room, avoiding the rapidly-spreading puddle. "I'm sorry to hear that. Did something happen?"

Castiel swallows his mortification and disappointment, and tries for as close to the truth as he willing to venture. "Well, yes. We, um, we disagree on...on a number of things, but he'll likely come see you about changing advisors. I just thought I should warn you in advance."

He doesn't seem to be able to meet her eyes while he speaks, and he's sure his face must be flaming.

Missouri sighs, raising her hands so that her palms face the floor, thumbs touching. She breathes in again and pulls elemental energy into the room, then twists her fingers into the configuration for Kelvin's Evaporator, her gold rings flashing. As her spell casts, the puddles on the floor lift and disperse back into the air, and Castiel realizes his mouth is dry as ash.

Missouri looks back up at him. "Are you sure you can't give him a second chance? I really thought your skills were very complimentary."

Castiel frowns at her. "Spell mechanics is hardly compatible with anthropology."

She gives him a flat look, leaving him with the distinct impression that he's missing something important. "Castiel, the only other professor with space to take on a thesis student is Doctor Adler. I'll ask him if he's willing to take Dean on."
"No, wait. Are you sure? What about Hannah, or Balthazar…?" He stops, the idea of Dean working with the flirty Englishman nearly making him shudder.

"There's no one else. Dean registered late, as you know."

Castiel can't bear the thought of someone as inquisitive as Dean under Adler's thumb. He knows Dean just needs a guiding hand to bring out his potential, and Adler will certainly not be doing that.

He looks at his shoes. "No. It's okay. I'll apologize to him and see if he'll still work with me."

He hears the smile in Missouri's voice. "Thanks, Castiel. If he comes to see me, I'll encourage him to give you another chance, just as I hope you'll do the same. Just do a bit of practical study together—I'm sure it'll help."

"Practical?" he asked, not really sure what she was suggesting.

"Yeah, cast a few spells, break a few ice cubes!" She grins. "Now I really must be going. Good night, Castiel."

Castiel murmurs his goodnight as she closes the door behind her. He walks around his desk and packs up his laptop, trying not to think about what just happened and failing miserably. He's messed this up, he really has. How is he going to apologize to Dean? He considers just not saying anything as he rolls down his sleeves and puts on his suit jacket—let Dean do the work in looking for a new advisor. The embarrassment burns his throat, but he squares his shoulders and leaves his office, his trench coat draped over his arm. He's going to try to make this work.

God, he needs a drink.

Downstairs, Lisa is humming cheerfully to herself as she packs her things, ready to leave for the day. Castiel tries to plaster on a smile as she looks up to meet his eye.

"Are you on your way out, Doctor Novak? See you tomorrow!"

"Have a good evening, Lisa," he replies, wondering why she's so perky on a Monday.

She beams at him like she's just won the lottery. "Oh, I will. I've got a date!"

Castiel murmurs, "Enjoy that," then heads for the door with a sinking feeling in his gut. It has to be Dean. He's seen them together a few times. He frowns, and hopes they'll be happy. He really needs to not think about Dean for a little while.

The Mechanikos office door opens into the main foyer of the building—a cavernous space with tall columns along each side. As Castiel walks across the space towards the front entrance, he hears a scuffling sound off to one side. Peering into the shadows, he sees two students making out furiously against the stone wall. He sighs inwardly. Enforcing rules is an annoying part of his job, but he's fairly sure there's a no loitering order on this area. Why they'd want to be intimate in such a cold, empty space, he has no idea.

He speaks up, "Excuse me, you two? I'm afraid you can't hang around in here. Could you come out here please?"

A tall, gangly kid with floppy brown hair and a much shorter girl with long, dark brown hair and the longest eyelashes Castiel has ever seen emerge from the shadows between the columns. The girl bats her lashes at him slowly, like that's going to charm him. Nice try.
"Alright, on your way. There's are plenty of other places for that sort of thing."

The boy looks down at his feet, muttering, "Sorry, sir," while the girl merely glares.

Castiel walks off before they've moved, his irritation prickling all over his skin. Why is everyone getting some action around here except for him? It’s incredibly frustrating.

When he steps through the translocation barrier and finds himself back in California, the sun is dropping low and the air is about ten degrees warmer. He heads towards the apartment block where many of the staff live, nodding to the security guard as he approaches the door.

He wonders if Crowley knows where he lives. The lawyer hadn't outright threatened him in their phone call earlier, but he made it clear that it would be to Castiel’s great advantage if he accepted the invitation to meet with his friends.

He stombs up the stairs and unlocks the door with a flick of earth energy. Dumping his computer on the coffee table in the living room, he hangs up his trench coat and casts the protection charms over the door and each window in the living room, then in the kitchen. He leans on the edge of the counter as he drinks two glasses of water, exhausted and jittery as hell.

A society of lay magicians, here in Palo Alto. A secret society, even. And Crowley had invited him to meet with them.

He doesn't like it. It feels dangerous. Sure, he'd been involved with lay societies in England. He'd even tutored at a local college for a while during his master's. But here in the states…lay magic is unacceptable for someone like him, at least in society's eyes.

Crowley had been abruptly businesslike, as Castiel expected from a high-profile lawyer. He’d asked Castiel to come and be a guest lecturer at a meeting of his society, offering him a hefty stipend for his troubles. Crowley had been insistent: *Come on, Doctor Novak, I know how much you love to help the less fortunate. These people need you to realize their gifts!*

Castiel doesn’t really need the extra money, or the attention. It feels like a trap, and he still feels the walls closing in—while at the same time, he’s worried about the lay magicians that would be drawn to join a society like this so close to Stanford. He’s curious, he can’t deny that. But for now, he can’t think about this. He’s got to unwind, to do something to take his mind off Crowley and his grand plans, whatever they might be.

The apartment here near the university is small and functional, but his favorite part of it is the built-in bookshelves across one wall of the living room. He has quite a library that he shipped over from England, but they still sit in boxes on the carpet. Must be time to fix that.

Leftover pizza from last night will have to do for dinner, and he heats it up with a mild fire matrix, then digs a bottle of Pinot Noir out of one of the boxes. He dumps it all on the coffee table along with a tall wine glass. Thinking he really ought to go out and buy a TV one of these weekends, he removes his tie and unbuttons his cuffs, rolling his shirt sleeves up to the elbow. The wine keeps him company as he opens a box of books, taking each out by hand rather than levitating the whole lot of them and shelving them carefully. Textbooks like Newton’s *Guide to the Elements* go on one shelf, while Alan Titchmarsh’s *Blooming Beds: A Complete Guide to Magical Gardening* (Castiel has never owned a garden larger than a shoebox but he can always dream) sits alongside his well-loved collection of Terry Pratchett books on another.

Three hours later, he's almost finished the bottle of wine and the shelves are full. One more box remains with a few trinkets and photos, and he opens it and catches his breath when he pulls out a
photo in a black frame. He and Meg sit at a table in the Eagle and Child, one of Oxford's most famous pubs. Castiel's arm is around her, and she's leaning her head on his shoulder, smiling. He can't even remember who took it or what the occasion was, but he suddenly misses her. She’s always been his rock when things get rocky in his life.

He could call her. The unpacking has helped calm him a little, and the wine a little more, but he’s still annoyed, and, if he’s honest, he's craving company.

He finds his phone where he’d thrown it on the couch and sits down, trying to do the time zone calculation in his head. He’s fairly sure it should be late enough in the morning now that he’ll be able to talk to her before she has to leave for work.

He runs his fingertips over the rough fabric on the side of the couch while he waits for her to pick up. When she does answer, she sounds sleepy.

“Hey, Clarence. How’re you doing?”

Castiel’s throat closes over for a moment at the sound of her voice. “Meg, I’m sorry to call so early. I hope I didn’t wake you?”

“No, I was awake. Need to get up anyway.” She yawns, the sound muffled by a hand. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s up.” Castiel’s sure she isn’t buying his denial. Of course something’s going to be wrong if he’s calling at this time of night. Sure enough, she waits on the other end of the line waiting for him to come clean.

“It’s just...work stuff. I had a rough day.” He leans against the couch, resting his head back on the cushion.

Meg shifts, possibly rolling over. “Mm-hm. Are the other teachers being jerks? Do I need to come over with my pretty knife?”

Castiel huffs a short laugh. “No, no. It’s not the teachers. You remember I told you about the thesis student I got assigned?”

“The hot one?”

Castiel rolls his eyes. He had barely told her anything about Dean—not even his name—but trust her to remember that one detail. “Yes. I kind of...had an argument with him.”

Meg pauses, then asks, “An argument? With a student? Like, an academic argument, or...?”

“Like a toe-to-toe shouting argument.” Castiel sighs. He’s still terribly embarrassed that it happened at all. Why did he decide to tell Meg this, again?

“Wow. Okay.”

“Look, he was being all rude and snarky, and I might have...actually lost him as a student.” And any chance of being a friend, his unhelpful mind adds. He frowns.

“What can you do about it? Do you want to teach him?” Meg asks, unexpectedly diplomatic.

Castiel hesitates for a few moments. “I...I’m not sure. I think I do.”

“You’re stressing out about this, aren’t you? You know what you need? You need to get laid. Too
much stress in your life—you need to let the frustration out.”

“Yes, well, there’s one problem with that, isn’t there?” Castiel tries not to sound resentful as he holds his phone to his ear with his shoulder so he can open the bottle and pour the last of the wine into the glass.

Meg is quiet a moment, then just as he takes a sip from his glass, she says, “Well, I could help you with that.”

Castiel manages to swallow his mouthful without spitting any of it out, then croaks out, "What? How?"

“You’re not at work this time, right?”

Castiel looks around his living room, realizing what she’s talking about. She really wants to try the phone sex thing again? He’d told himself he couldn’t do this—he had to make a clean break from her if they weren’t going to be together any more.

He begins, “Well, no, but—”

"God, Clarence, I've missed how fucking awkward you are sometimes. Okay. I can get you off but then I gotta go to work, ‘kay?"

Castiel covers his face with the hand not holding his phone. He rubs at his right eye, wondering how he’s going to get the hell out of this one. He can’t just hang up on her. But he does actually kinda need some relief—the students he’d run into this afternoon had reminded him that it’s been weeks since he’s even so much as touched himself in that way, let alone actually slept with anyone. Since before the night that Meg said she wasn’t coming back to the States with him, in fact.

He won’t be able to imagine Meg helping him with this. The wounds are still too fresh. But what if he imagines someone else? Someone...male? Green-eyed, tall, broad-shouldered?

No, that is the worst possible breach of professionalism and trust. He can’t possibly do that.

But no one has to know, a tiny voice insists from somewhere in his downstairs brain.

He hasn’t even allowed himself to think about it until now, but this afternoon, for a fraction of a second, when he and Dean were toe to toe, eyes blazing and electricity fizzing across Dean’s skin…Castiel had been very close to closing the distance and kissing him.

“Well? Can I help you? Are you undressed?” Meg’s voice drops to a sultry murmur—a tone she only ever uses in the bedroom, or when they had been on their way there.

He stands up abruptly and unbuckles his belt, fumbling with one hand.

“Put your phone on speaker so you’ve got your hands free, sweetheart.”

“Oh, right,” he mutters, pressing the speaker button and placing the phone on top of the empty pizza box on the coffee table. He drops his trousers and only then realizes he should probably have taken his shoes off first. Making short work of shoes and socks, and eventually boxers, he sits back down on the front edge of the couch in only his shirt, undoing the buttons but not removing it. He’s already slightly chubbed up just from the anticipation of doing something so naughty as phone sex, even though it’s not the first time he and Meg have played this game.

“Okay, I’m ready,” he says, not really sure if that’s the case.
Meg says, “Me too. Is your chest bare?” At his “mm-hm” she continues, “Run your fingers down your chest, over a nipple. Go slowly. That’s me, touching you.”

Castiel closes his eyes, conjuring up a mental image of Dean standing close like they’d been this afternoon. Dean reaches out and runs the fingers of one large hand down Castiel’s chest, where he’s touching his own skin. He gasps as he finds a nipple, shocks rippling over his skin.

Meg’s voice brought him back to his own living room for a moment. “I’m moving lower now, down over one of those beautiful hip bones of yours. Follow me, Clarence.”

He trails his fingers lower, across one hip, Dean doing the same as he drops to his knees behind Castiel’s eyelids. He doesn’t think he’s gotten rock hard this fast in years, and he hasn’t even touched himself yet—just the thought of being this close to Dean is driving him wild. He pushes the thought that this is wrong, wrong, wrong to the back of his mind.

“Are you hard for me? Come on, tell me I can run my fingers along your thick, gorgeous cock.”

Castiel drags his fingers lightly along his shaft, gasping a little again at the sensation on his smooth skin.

“Come on, Clarence, I need you to talk to me here. How does that feel?”

Castiel opens his eyes briefly. “It’s…it’s good,” he says, a little breathlessly. He closes his eyes to bring the fantasy back.

“Good. Okay, now imagine for me that it’s my tongue running along the length, warm, wet, from the base to the tip,” she purrs, voice husky with arousal. “And now, I’m gonna open up and take the whole thing down my throat.” She lets out a tiny gasp herself—she must be touching herself too.

But Castiel isn’t interested in what she’s up to anymore. He takes his cock in a firm fist, stroking along the length with a regular rhythm. Imagines Dean on his knees before him. Dean’s face, that gorgeous mouth wrapped around his cock, taking it all in. Dean’s green eyes gazing up at Castiel through long lashes, dark with lust. He pulls back until only the head is between his lips, then he gives Cas that cocky half-grin, his eyes sparkling.

Castiel loses it, thrusting forward suddenly, then over and over into his fist like he’s fucking Dean’s face. He squeezes to make it tighter, letting out a rough moan as he feels his climax approaching.

He’s dimly aware of Meg speaking, then he distinctly hears her say, commanding, “Come for me. Now.”

Colored sparks explode behind his eyes, and waves of heat explode from his core, crackling down his limbs. He comes with a gasping cry, throwing ropes of sticky white over his coffee table.

As he comes to his senses, Meg’s murmuring starts to make sense again. “Good, that’s my boy. There you are. Do you feel better now? That was hot as fuck.”

“It was…it was.” He clears his throat roughly, an uncomfortable shame starting to creep up on him.

“We should definitely do that again sometime,” Meg says, a smile in her voice, “although I’ve got a feeling you’re not going to want to. Clarence, who’s Dean?”
Horror blooms in his gut, and he tastes stale wine in the back of his throat. Had he—had he said Dean’s name? A tense panic takes over, and he hurriedly hangs up the phone, mortified. He stares at the mess on the coffee table, wondering if he’s about to throw up. Not only has he just jerked off while having an explicit fantasy about his student, but now Meg knows about it. It won’t take long for her to connect the dots. He’s never living this one down.

He groans and puts his hands to his face, only to recoil in horror as he realizes his right hand is covered in sticky mess.

On the table, his phone buzzes. He ignores it, and gets up to find something to clean up with.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary and Magical Personae:

**Delambre**: Jean Baptiste Joseph Delambre (1749-1822), French mage and astronomer. A member of the French Academy of Sciences, he was responsible for an expedition to measure the meridian arc between Dunkirk and Barcelona to determine the value of the new measuring standard, the metre. During his astronomical studies, he developed theories and ideas in spherical trigonometry and designed the spherical construct used in elemental spells today.

**Kelvin**: William Thompson, 1st Baron Kelvin, (1824-1907) a Scots-Irish physicist and mage, who developed the mathematical and elemental basis for the first and second laws of thermodynamics as well as many fundamental spells relating to energy transfer.

**Alan Titchmarsh**: (1949-) British celebrity gardener, author and mage. What, you didn't think he was magical?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday, folks! TrenchcoatBaby here, while Ellen is off traveling and doing other glamorous things, heh. You all responded so wonderfully to our last chapter, so we can’t wait to get your thoughts on this one! Happy reading. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean’s week passes in a blur. Maybe it’s drinking into the late hours of the night, or sleeping all day long, or spending his evenings in the company of his latest fling. Whatever it is, Dean hasn’t kept crazy hours like this in…years. He feels like an irresponsible undergraduate again, as careless and unpredictable as his freshman students. He’s heard gossip that some of them have been attempting to order drinks in Ellen’s bar even though they’re underage, and not only that, it sounds like the decades-old tradition of searching for the seal of elemental magic secured in the caverns of the library is something this latest class has also adopted. Dean thinks he oughta give his students a lecture about good behavior or some shit, tell them that he’s heard rumors and they should spend less time goofing off and more time studying, but he would feel like a damn hypocrite for even suggesting it. After all…isn’t he the one who ruined his whole future by developing a crush on his professor?

And there it is again—the real reason he’s spent all week tossing back whiskey and eating junk food and making out with Lisa outside Mechanikos Hall. Castiel fucking Novak. A gorgeous and unapproachable asshole of a thesis advisor perpetually wrapped in a dingy trench coat, being way too attractive and intelligent and interesting for his own good. The harder Dean tries to expunge the memory of their argument from his mind, the more concretely the image of Castiel’s wraithful expression and hard chest pressed against him is seared into his brain.

He had wanted Castiel to manhandle him against that desk, to kiss him senseless, to overwhelm him completely until they both moaned breathlessly.

He had also wanted to knock the pompous dick flat on his ass.

His emotions are all over the damn place—he’s pissed off and rueful, sad and tense—but mostly he’s embarrassed by his own eagerness, his obvious infatuation with Dr. Novak and the subsequent dismissal he was given. The professor surely thinks Dean is a big freaking joke, and he burns with shame and humiliation when he imagines Castiel recounting the incident to his snooty professor friends. Can you believe one of my grad students had a crush on me? It’s adorable, really, but he’s not nearly good enough of a student for me to waste my time on… Castiel probably called up his ex-girlfriend all the way from Oxford just to laugh at Dean’s expense.

But at the same time, there are aspects of their interactions that keep Dean up at night—or, lately, all day, since he sleeps until the afternoon. Things like that friendly email Dr. Novak had sent him just last Sunday. Or that whole, I won’t be swayed by a pretty face, Dean. What the hell had that meant? Had he landed the bi-guy lottery and Castiel was actually into guys, but Dean’s big ol’ mouth had ruined any chance of the older man ever seeing him as anything more than a nuisance?

At this point in his internal monologue Dean usually searches for a distraction, a way to ignore the drop in his belly or the nervous energy making his hands shake. At some point he’ll stop obsessing
over the blue-eyed professor, because deep in his bones, Dean wants to be done with Castiel forever—as a professor and a potential friend and definitely as a crush. The whole thing had been dumb to begin with, and he’s officially buried any hope of reconciliation in a six-foot grave marked *Here Lies Dean and Castiel, The Worst Combo of All Time*. He’s avoiding Castiel like the damn plague, refusing to make copies or grab coffee in the Mechanikos office, even though Lisa eyes him curiously as he shuffles to and from Theoris Hall. He tells her the lines are shorter over there, which isn’t remotely true, since Balthazar arranges printouts of the required reading for *every* damn student so they’re not forced to purchase an expensive textbook. He ends up having a few interesting conversations with the guy, but when the professor asks Dean how “Cassie” is doing, he clams up tightly, muttering, “Don’t know, don’t care,” before shuffling back to his classroom.

The thing is, the more Dean tries to avoid Castiel, the more the professor seems to be *everywhere*. At the water fountain, in the hallway, outside the men’s restroom. Each time, he averts his eyes but plasters on a neutral smile, sauntering away slowly, as if Castiel’s presence doesn’t affect him at all.

Sadly, that’s not remotely true.

He’s been hanging out with Lisa pretty consistently since their first date, and one day, they’re sitting under a nearby tree with their faces leaned close, a breath away from kissing, when the flap of an unbuttoned trench coat passes in Dean’s peripheral vision. He’s not even sure it’s Castiel, not completely, but he cups Lisa’s chin and dives into a heated kiss, knocking her slightly off balance before she sighs pleasantly, sinking against him. It’s a good kiss, but Dean knows he’s only making it good because he thinks he has an audience, and the realization makes him feel guilty enough that he considers breaking things off with Lisa.

That’s what he’s doing tonight, in fact. It’s Friday and he’s seated at a stool in the bar, spinning back and forth a couple inches, fidgeting anxiously as he waits for his next drink.

“Y’know, we don’t have one of those cutesy little reward programs,” Ellen quips, sliding the shot of Old Crow across the bar and making Dean winces. Fuck, that’s some cheap ass whiskey…it’s gonna burn like hell. “You don’t earn a gold star everytime you sit at my bar and drink yourself into oblivion.”

“How about I give you a gold star if you stock better whiskey?” he jabs, though he takes the shot anyways and suppresses a wince. Lisa is meeting him here any second, and he needs some liquid courage before he tells her he’s too fucked up to date anyone right now. “Evan Williams? Four Roses? Fighting Cock?”

“You drank me dry of the first two, and that last one I refuse to stock again until you’re long graduated.” Dean’s chuckle turns into a snort, ‘cause yeah, he’s been known to make the occasional dick joke or two. Sue him.

“You’ll be waiting a long time,” he mumbles, pulling at the sleeves of his cargo jacket. He left his leather one at home, but the temperature suddenly dropped tonight, and now he’s missing the warmth of it. He’ll be fine…what else is whiskey for?

“Huh.” Ellen peers at him curiously. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dean tries to pacify her with a shrug, but when he’s just met with an impatient glare, he rubs a hand through his hair and sighs. “Means I’m not exactly on the A-honor roll ‘round here.” He casts a pointed glance at the whiskey bottle, and she rolls her eyes but relents, pouring him another. “Gotta do this dumb thesis to graduate, but I have no project idea and no advisor, so…” He takes
the shot, and this time it burns a little less. “Maybe I’ll be the first fourth-year grad student hangin’ around this place.” Or maybe I’ll just quit, he thinks but doesn’t say. He knows it would be a rash decision, but fuck it, he’s never fit into the academic mold to begin with. This whole mess with Dr. Novak all but confirms it.

“But just last week, you were on the straight and narrow,” Ellen comments, and Dean looks away, staring down at his hands. “You were carryin’ enough books to set up your own library.”

He thinks almost wistfully about how he felt just a week ago—so full of hope, of expectation, confident that he could win Castiel over somehow if he had just been smart enough, interesting enough, a general sense of enough.

“Yeah, well,” he swallows, a lump in his throat, “turns out, that ain’t me.”

Ellen plants her elbows on the bar, leaning over and dropping her voice quietly. “You start feeling like life’s too much handle, or need someone to help screw your head on straight, you call me, alright?” Dean’s heart warms at the concern in her voice, and he hums softly in acknowledgment. “Better put me on speed dial, kid.”

“Yes ma’am,” he answers somberly, feeling more loved and supported than he has all week. He hasn’t told anyone what happened with Castiel—his buddies figure he’s just blowing off steam this week, Charlie thinks he’s freaking out about teacher observations that are coming up. Sam, who normally would’ve made his brother have a heart-to-heart days ago, has been too preoccupied with his new girlfriend to notice much else. He doesn’t blame the kid for being busy—Bobby’s busy too, apparently. Confiding in Ellen might be just what he needs right now, and he opens his mouth intending to spill his damn guts, when he sees Lisa walk through the door. She’s in a dark peacoat, her hair long and in curls, and she smiles at Dean like he’s as radiant as the freaking sun. Jesus, he really needs to end this now before he breaks this girl’s heart.

They grab a corner booth. Jo takes their dinner order—two chicken tender baskets, an eight-ounce glass of Moscato for Lisa, a cold bottle of El Sol for Dean. They chit-chat about their class schedules, ordering a second round of drinks, but once the food’s eaten and their glasses are bordering on empty, Dean knows it’s time.

“Uh, so Lis…” She smiles at the nickname, though she obviously doesn’t know Dean tends to give everyone nicknames. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

“Ooh,” she teases lightly. “Mysterious.”

He gives her a tight and awkward smile. “Yeah, um… It’s just that, you’re a great girl, honestly, a thousand times better than what I deserve. But I’m not exactly boyfriend material.”

He expects his words to produce a wave of disappointment on her face. But she doesn’t look crestfallen—if anything, she blinks at him openly, as if she doesn’t understand why they’re having this conversation.

“Dean,” she starts carefully, pausing long enough for Dean to take his final swig of beer, “you wanna have sex with me, right?”

He sputters and coughs, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand as Lisa looks at him in amusement. “Uh…”

“Because I’d like that,” she says evenly, and the tone is almost too straightforward and practical, as if they’re discussing a business deal. “With you. No strings attached.”
Despite his earlier attempts to get drunk, he’s way too sober for this shit. He has no clue what to say, which he thinks is understandable given the circumstances. It’s not everyday you go on a handful of dates, try to break it off, but the girl seduces you instead. Well, if you could even call Lisa’s approach seductive. They do have chemistry, and she teaches yoga three times a week at an off-campus studio, so he imagines she’s amazing in bed. But there’s not really a palpable spark between them, no heat, no passion…

Not even a tenth of the dynamic he has with Castiel.

*Had.* That shit’s in the past.

She must be able to feel him hesitating, because she slips from her side of the booth and into his, sitting closely until their elbows graze. When she brushes their lips together it’s pleasant enough, and he thinks—why the hell not? The last time he’s gotten off was almost a week ago, under some pretty dubious circumstances, and maybe all he needs is someone new to clear his head.

“Let’s go back to my place,” Lisa breathes, sweet-wine breath ghosting over his skin, and he nods. He drops fifty bucks down on the table—enough to cover their tab and leave Jo a generous tip—and they’re out the door in five minutes flat. Dean drives them in his Impala, even though it’s less than a mile away, he just feels better having his Baby nearby. Lisa has a hand on his knee as she gives him directions, and really, it’s pretty damn sexy that she’s taking charge like this. He’s looking forward to a good, solid fuck. Something to finally take the edge off.

She lives on the third floor, so they shuffle up about a million steps before she creaks her front door open. She takes Dean’s hand and leads him straight to the bedroom, which he takes as a very good sign, but after only a few lazy kisses she excuses herself and heads into the bathroom. Dean slips his shoes off and makes himself comfortable on her bedspread, looking around the room for a spark of entertainment but only spotting books and yoga mats and a messy pile of makeup. Feeling slightly bored, he slips his cellphone from his pocket for the first time in a few hours. Feeling slightly bored, he slips his cellphone from his pocket for the first time in a few hours.

And then he forgets how to breathe.

He swipes at the notification on his screen, practically counting the seconds until his inbox fully downloads. And then, he reads:

*Email – Unread – cnovak@stanford.edu*

*Subject: Re: Thesis planning*

*Good evening, Dean.*

*I hope your week has been a productive one.*

*I have spoken with Dr. Moseley in regards to finding you a different thesis advisor. The only other available option is Dr. Adler.*

*I admit I’ve been over our conversation last Monday many times, and I regret my harsh words in that meeting. If you’d be willing to come to see me next Monday afternoon at our usual time, perhaps we could discuss your future in the thesis program.*

*I hope to see you then.*
Something stirs deep inside Dean’s chest, a combination of relief and anxiety and confusion. Hadn’t Castiel essentially given him an ultimatum last time they spoke—some bullshit version of “my way or the highway”? And what’s up with his half-assed apology? Too superior to come right out and say “I’m sorry”?

Dean scoffs aloud and looks away, but then gazes back down at his phone, reading the email again. And again. I admit I’ve been over our conversation last Monday many times… Is there a hidden meaning there? Has the professor been torturing himself all week, freaking out about the fight and the mounting tension between them? Each time Dean had spotted him on-campus, his mop of brown hair looked increasingly more messy, his shirts more wrinkled, bags developing under his eyes. Okay, so…maybe Castiel had been affected by their argument. But it was probably in the, I-can’t-believe-I-was-so-unprofessional-that-I-went-toe-to-toe-with-a-student type of way. It’s not as though Dr. Novak feels any sort of connection between them or is attracted to Dean. His stupid crush is still one hundred percent unrequited. *Fuck*. He doesn’t have a crush anymore. He’s over Castiel. Yep.

But if that’s true, then why the hell does Dean have butterflies in his stomach just from reading a freaking *email*?

“Dean?”

Jolted out of his thoughts, he glances up to see Lisa lounging in the doorway of her bedroom. She’s still wearing the same outfit from earlier, but she’s kicked off her shoes and slipped off her sweater, and is wearing just a tight undershirt and jeans. Dean would normally be appreciating her tiny waist and full breasts, but he can’t focus on a damn thing right now, and he doesn’t want this email to send him into a tailspin. He’s not quite sure what to do next. Does he respond? Does he ignore it? What the fuck is he gonna do?

Lisa sinks onto the bed, crawling slowly towards Dean, the front of her shirt hanging down and flashing a lacy white bra. “Whatcha doing?”

Fumbling, Dean swings his phone around nervously to show her the screen. “Uh, nothing, checking email.”

It’s not the answer she’s expecting, but she smiles anyways, peering towards the screen until she reads the subject line and name of the sender. “Thesis stuff?” Dean only nods, pretending his heart isn’t pounding in a way that has little to do with the hot brunette sinking into his lap. “Can I tell you a secret?”

Dean doesn’t respond, head buzzing, way too freaking overwhelmed to respond to such a loaded question, but Lisa just continues. “I think your advisor, Doctor Novak, is *totally* hot.”

Dante had it wrong, Dean thinks pitifully, the poem fresh on his mind since Castiel had made him read excerpts of *Inferno* last week. Listening to the girl you’re trying to hook up with casually mention that the guy you’ve been fixated on for weeks now is “totally hot”?

*That* is the ninth circle of hell.

“You don’t say,” he mumbles noncommittally, though he’s pretty damn sure he’s blushing, and he wants to dissolve into the mattress before he says anything incriminating. He doesn’t even have time to unpack his complicated feelings about what the hell is happening right now.
“Don’t be jealous,” Lisa purrs, straddling him, and Dean’s on the verge of informing her that is definitely not the case whenever she kisses him. The phone is still in his hand, the screen lit up with the email, and Dean can’t get out of his own head long enough to kiss her back properly. She pulls away, seeming undeterred by his lack of enthusiasm, and litters his neck with wet, sloppy kisses. She’s shifting her body intentionally over the front of his jeans, and Dean thinks the friction of their bodies and the feeling of her lips will eventually make him hard, but after ten minutes of making out…

“Everything okay?” Lisa whispers, pulling away and breathing heavily, which seems weird to Dean because he’s barely been paying attention. He’s so preoccupied by deciphering Castiel’s email, wondering if he’s really sorry or if he’s just trying to save face in front of Dr. Moseley. Worst of all, despite Lisa’s best efforts, he still doesn’t have an erection.

“Uh, yeah, sorry.” He runs a nervous hand through his hair, pulling at the strands, before landing a tentative hand on her hips. “Just a little distracted.”

“Well, let me help you concentrate…” All subtlety dropped, she palms the front of his jeans and grins, trying to inspire a certain something to rise. When that doesn’t help, she begins to pull at the edge of her shirt. Following her train of thought, Dean lifts his hands to help and throws it off the side of the bed. Now he has a face full of cleavage, and he leans forward to kiss her neck and collarbones, trying to imagine himself unfastening her bra and sucking her rosy nipple into his mouth. But just as he’s about to make his move, a flash of another image comes to the forefront of his mind: gorgeous blue eyes, a light dusting of stubble, a flat stomach, thick thighs, and an aching, hard cock…

“Fuck,” he swears, once he realizes where his mind has drifted off to, or rather, to who. He throws his head back so quickly that he accidentally thumps it against the wall. The pain is searing and sharp and he winces, Lisa cradling his head and asking if he’s okay. He mutters, “Yeah, yeah, ‘m fine,” attempting to pacify her into giving him some space. He’s two seconds away from admitting to himself that he’s not into this, giving up and going home, when his phone starts to vibrate softly on the bed. He runs a hand through the top of the comforter, searching for it, and Lisa leans back and looks a little miffed when he answers it.

“Charlie?” he says into the receiver, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice. It’s after ten o’clock on a Friday night, and they didn’t have plans to hang out, so he can’t imagine why she’d be calling.

“Dean,” she hisses, her voice low, “Dean, I…I think you should get here.”

Panic settles into his stomach. “Where’s ‘here’?” he asks impatiently, and then adds, “What’s wrong?”

“The library. And it’s Sam.” Dean is standing up and off the bed before she’s even finished her sentence. “He’s okay, but he’s with some girl…and I think he’s in trouble.”

Dean doesn’t have time to think, to stop, to wonder. What is Charlie doing at the library this late at night? Why is Sam there? Is he with Ruby? What kind of trouble is his brother in? Is this the life or death variety, or some little administrative slap on the wrist?

“Don’t let him out of your sight,” he instructs, in a voice that brokers no argument. Lisa looks at him in bewilderment, and he figures that he owes her at least an explanation, so he mouths my brother. “I’m on my way.”

“Oh, someone just got here,” she says, and there’s a tone of recognition in her voice. “It’s—”


Her phone cuts out suddenly and Dean redials her three times, Sam five times, all before he even makes it out of Lisa’s apartment. Lisa looks concerned and a little exasperated, and Dean knows he should stop and tell her what’s happening, but his instincts are on overdrive right now. Maybe he’ll apologize later, if there is a later, because yeah—if Sammy’s in real trouble, he’s gonna lose his damn mind. He’s beyond frustrated that no one’s picking up as he races towards campus in the Impala, driving nearly twenty miles over the speed limit, the email from Castiel momentarily on the back burner as he worries about Sam and Charlie. In a strange way, though, he wishes that Castiel was here with him…the professor always seems to know what to do.

Castiel stomps down the stairs in his apartment building, pulling his trench coat over his shoulders as he goes. He had been in his pajamas half an hour ago, just settled in with a glass of scotch to watch some Netflix on his brand new TV, when Missouri had called him to tell him about the alarms in the library going off.

It had taken him a few moments to realize what she was talking about, but then he recalled the directives he'd briefly run through on the first day of his employment at Stanford. Special wards are in place in the library to protect the restricted spaces, and if compromised, only a member of staff can deal with them—he remembers that much.

Most of the faculty is at yet another party somewhere or other that Castiel hadn’t felt energetic enough to attend, and Missouri is visiting family out of town. That means that as the only professor not currently trashed, he is obliged to go and see what all the fuss is about.

He heads out in the cool October evening, wishing he was back in his warm living room. This week has been a complete write off. He’s barely slept, alternating memories of his fight with Dean and the call with Meg warring in his mind. She’d kept calling him all week until he’d been forced to explain to her about Dean and their disagreement, and although he did feel better after unburdening himself to her, she had seemed to think he should just go for it, pursue Dean. As if he would ever do that.

What must his students must think of him, all distracted and irritable in classes? And now, there's this library drama to top it all off. Marching down to the library at nine o’clock is not the way he wants to spend his Friday night.

The translocation spell dumps him on a wet, significantly chillier campus, and he hurriedly puts up the umbrella he’d been carrying tucked under his arm. He can see the lights on in Theoris Hall, but everything seems peaceful from out here. Just inside the entrance, he quickly forms a half-circle with thumb and forefinger and draws a glyph to dry his umbrella, then repeats the process over his soggy shoes. The halls are deserted at this time on a Friday only a few weeks into the semester.

The library, however, is not quiet. A whining, more a high-pitched sensation than a sound, makes Castiel wince. He hears raised voices somewhere beyond the stacks on the far side of the expansive room. Normally, Castiel loves this space. He’d been awed by the tall, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves the first time he’d visited, filled with every kind of magical and non-magical book, collections of journals, grimoires and cursed spellbooks.

He knows there are extensive collections of other texts in the vaults under the library as well, many of which are hundreds of years old. But the main level holds all of the currently studied magical texts, and it's towards these that he now heads, wondering what on earth is making that awful
noise. There’s a buzzing in the air, too—an almost greasy feeling that’s caused by a major expenditure of elemental magic in an enclosed space, and it’s getting thicker the closer he gets to the back of the library. His curiosity climbs to new heights as he rounds the final stack and takes in the scene before him.

The back wall is nondescript and blank off-white, with several desks set up along the back of the stacks. But in the center of the wall, looking oddly out of place, is a large wooden door, peeling red paint and rusty hinges giving it an ancient appearance. Castiel was told on his first-day tour of the university that behind this door lies the Seal—the means by which access to the Elemental Well is restricted. The area is out of bounds for both students and teachers, except under the strictest of extraordinary conditions, and attempted breaches are met with firm repercussions.

Hence, the two students, currently pinned against the wall by their wrists. The shorter girl has her back to the stone, her hands held to the wall next to her ears by strong, glowing elemental bonds. As Castiel eyes the taller guy, he realizes these are the two students he’d caught making out in the Mechanikos foyer earlier in the week. The guy’s wrists are in front of him as he stands on the left side of the door, but he’s looking over his shoulder at Castiel, flushed with embarrassment as he peers through his long hair.

Another student stands to one side, looking flustered as she talks on the phone. Actually, he knows her—it’s Charlie, another grad student and a friend of Dean’s he met at the faculty potluck. He moves forward to speak with her first—she should be able to give him an explanation of what happened here before he tries talking to the culprits.

“Evening, Charlie,” he says, giving her a small smile as she tucks her phone away in her pocket.

“Doctor Novak! Hi,” she says, giving a nervous half-wave.

“I don’t suppose you know what’s going on here?” He tilts his head towards the restless students, the girl now giving him a dagger-eyed glare.

“Uh, sure,” she begins, throwing the pair an apologetic glance. “I wasn’t here when it actually happened, but I came over when the alarms started and I heard shouting. They tried to get through the door.”

Castiel had a feeling that might be the case, but it’s good to have his suspicion confirmed. He’d been well-versed on the nature of the warding as well as what might happen if it was threatened. He hadn’t really expected the reaction to an attempted breach to be quite so… physical, though.

He nodded, thoughtfully. “Thanks, Charlie. You can go, if you like.”

“Oh no, sir. I might stay, if that’s okay. I know Sam. Or at least, I know his brother,” Charlie added, grimacing again.

His brother…? Castiel looks back at the young man—Sam. “Very well,” he says to Charlie, then walks over to where Sam still stands, hunched at an awkward angle. As a professor, even an adjunct, he’s been given the clearance to unbind this warding. He hasn’t imagined ever having to actually use the privilege, but there’s starting to be a lot about doing this job he hasn’t expected to ever actually do.

He raises his hands, and draws an Euclidean structure big enough to hold the unlocking construct. Drawing earth and fire energy into it, relishing the strength of the elements so close to the source, he shapes it roughly into a key. Sam flinches as the raw magic comes close to his ear, surprising Castiel with his sensitivity to it. Most students wouldn't even register such a small spell when they
were being held by magic as strong as the warding.

As the construct reaches the binding around Sam's wrists, it falls away with a crackling hiss. Sam lets out an explosive breath and steps back, rubbing at his skin.

"Sam, is it?" Castiel asks quietly. When Sam nods, he continues, "Just wait here a moment, please."

Sam slumps to the floor, sitting with his back to the wall as Castiel carries the construct over to the girl. He unlocks her wrists while she glares at the floor through long eyelashes. When the bonds dissolve away she hurries over to join Sam on the carpet, and he pulls her to him, pushing her hair out of her face and murmuring something.

Struck by the affectionate way they huddle together, Castiel hesitates for barely a moment before someone new comes skidding around the corner of the stacks.

"Sammy?" the person says, and Castiel blinks to make sure what he's seeing is real. He's been thinking about him all week, surely he couldn't have just turned up here...

"Dean?" Sam turns to look at him. "What're you doing here?"

"I came as soon as I heard," Dean gasps, out of breath. "What's going on? I tried calling back, but it wouldn't go through."

Sam turns accusing eyes on Charlie, who has retreated to a desk in the corner. She flinches, then shrugs, saying, "The cell reception is bad near the Seal."

Sam looks back to Dean, who Castiel finally realizes must be his older brother. "I don't need you to jump in to rescue me every time, okay?" he hisses. "I can take care of myself."

Dean's gaze flicks around the space, taking in Ruby, the door, finally lingering on Castiel. He turns a frustrated look back to Sam. "Really, Sam? Because from here it doesn't look like it."

Castiel steps forward to break things up. "Dean, Sam, please. By all means, continue this discussion later, but for now, could I ask you to step aside, Dean?" He inclines his head towards the desk where Charlie sits. "I need to talk to your brother and his friend."

Dean doesn't look willing to back down, standing, scowling and red-faced, next to where Sam and the girl are sitting. "What are you gonna do to them?"

Castiel squints in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"Their punishment. How serious is this? Because I'm, like, ninety-nine percent sure that Ruby put him up to this—"

"Dean!" Sam protests, while the girl—Ruby—chimes in with a "Hey! It was totally his idea—"

"—and Sam's doing great so far, he really doesn't need any black marks on his record—"

Sam and Ruby start shouting over the top of Dean, accusing each other this time, until Castiel has to hold up his hands and say loudly, "Stop, please! The punishment has already been dealt. It's out of my hands!"

Sam and Ruby stop shouting and turn to look at him, then back at each other.

Dean starts with a "But—"
"Dean!" Castiel cuts him off and Dean shuts his mouth, still glaring daggers. Castiel continues, quieter.

"Please, let me finish. The wardings are set up to protect the well, no exceptions. Consider this your first warning." He squats down next to Ruby, holding out his hand to her, and she looks up at him like he's insane. "Hand, please?" he asks, trying to appear calm, even though internally, he's hating this.

She holds out her hand and he turns it over, palm up. He runs his finger lightly over a red, jagged mark on her wrist, and she flinches. "This mark will fade in a few days, but the mark against your name remains."

Sam lifted his arm to check the mark was on his wrist as well, Dean peering over his shoulder to see it.

"No!" Dean says, aghast. "Don't give it to Sam. Let me take it. Give the mark to me."

Castiel stares at him as he gets back to his feet. It's an uncommonly noble thing, to want to take on a punishment for his brother—Castiel has to admire Dean for that, but unfortunately, it won't help.

Sam looks at Dean, then back to Castiel, his cheeks tinged pink. "Dean, you don't need to—"

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that," Castiel interrupts, then continues, trying to sound apologetic. "If you attempt to breach the wards again, you'll be expelled from the university."

Gasps and denials came from all four of the onlookers, but Castiel continues. He needs one more thing from them before he can get out of here. Being this close to Dean again is like standing too close to an open furnace. He knows Dean is still upset with him about Monday, and he's uncomfortable as hell after...well, the events of that evening are still fresh enough to make him feel warm all over. He shoves those thoughts down and focuses on the task at hand.

"If you tell me what you were doing when you breached the wards, I might be able to speak to Doctor McLeod on your behalf. Provided you weren't actually trying to breach the wards. You weren't, were you?"

Sam and Ruby share a glance, then both look at their feet.

Sam mutters, "We were practicing for Ruby's Basic Elementals class. She suggested we try getting access to more power."

Castiel looks to Ruby, raising one eyebrow.

She grins. "I just wanted to see if he could do it, really. I wasn't expecting…" She trailed off, holding her wrist up to inspect the angry mark.

Castiel had been warned that students tried to get into the elemental well now and then, especially early in the school year. He might have expected better from Sam, since he wasn't a freshman, but it seemed he was trying to impress Ruby. He shook his head. "Well, now you know better. Please stay away from this area in future."

He holds out a hand to help Ruby up, but she almost immediately slumps down again. "I'm sorry, sir, I'm just...so tired."

Beside her, Sam yawns behind one huge hand.
Of course—the other effect of the warding, how could he forget? The victim's own energy is sapped to effectively incapacitate lay magicians.

Castiel releases a sigh. It's late, and he's really had enough of teaching for the week.

He closes his eyes, pulling up his own energy until he feels a concentration of it at the tips of his fingers. He opens his eyes and leans towards Sam, reaching out towards his forehead. Dean barely has time for a "wait, what're you—" before Castiel touches Sam's forehead. Sam's wide eyes glow blue for a moment, in much the same way Castiel knows his own must be. Castiel smiles, relishing the rush and tingle that lay magic sends through his limbs.

Dean's demanded "What did you do to him?" startles him out of the euphoria.

He blinks, looking up at Dean's horrified expression. "It's okay, Dean. Just reversing the exhaustion component. Like a...a double-shot energy hit."

He touches Ruby on the forehead as well, sensing the slightly tarnished feel of her personal magic as he does. He frowns slightly against the rush this time as she accepts the energy involuntarily, but he straightens up and steps back without saying anything.

Ruby and Sam help each other clamber to their feet. Ruby rubs her eyes, then stretches. "Thanks, Doc. I feel like I just slept for twelve hours."

Sam checks the mark on his arm, and frowns when it's still there. He looks up as Castiel and nods. "Thanks Doctor Novak. Can we go now?"

"Yes, you can go. Next time practice your spells outside, okay?"

The two undergrads turn to go back into the stacks, and Dean puts his hand on Sam's shoulder as he walks past. Castiel sees Sam shrug it off.

Castiel calls, "Dean?" When Dean turns around, he adds, "Will I see you on Monday?"

Dean eyes him coldly for a moment, then says, "I dunno, I guess we'll see." He turns back to where Charlie has joined him on his right.

She leans in close but Castiel can hear her say in the quiet of the library, "What's on Monday? You got a date or something?"

Dean snorts in reply, and says something like "hardly" as they head between the stacks, out of sight.

And why should that response surprise Castiel? After all, he's seen Dean canoodling with Lisa all week long. He's been telling himself all week that there's no way he could have a relationship with Dean, let alone that Dean would want to, but somehow the reality of it still hits like a fist to the gut.

As he follows the students back towards the front of the library, exhaustion from the casting of lay magic plus his sleepless week catches up with him, and he staggers a little against the shelves on his way out. He needs food, and bed.

He's sure that he sees Dean turn to glance at him again as they cross the foyer to the door. He can't help hoping that Dean will turn up on Monday, if only so he can share the spells he's been working on to help Dean focus in on a project. He'll need to decide on something soon, if he's going to do it.
The boss picks up the phone and barks, "Well?"

Rosco turns back to the TV. He's surprised the boss would even bother answering the phone while his favorite show was on, but then, this could be good news.

"What? Idiot. Didn't you think to do a little research first to find out what might happen? How did you get out of it?"

Rosco side-eyes the boss. The girl had been captured? He's been telling the boss all along that getting kids involved was a bad idea.

"Brilliant. Now I'm gonna have to get some other demon to get in there."

The boss listens for a little longer while Kim and Khloé squabble about something on the TV screen. "Is that so? Well, well, that is interesting."

Rosco pauses the stream and waits for the boss to be finished.

"Very well, your payment will be sent through in due course." He hangs up abruptly, his eyes back on the screen. "Novak and his lay magic, eh? In the library of all places." He shakes his head and clicks his tongue, then stops as he sees Rosco watching him. "What'd I miss?"

Chapter End Notes

The drama's really ramping up, and we're so excited to finally dive into some scenes that inspired us to write this story to begin with. It's gonna be so fun!

Comment below and let us know your thoughts and predictions…

P.S. It is now our head canon that Crowley would totally watch Keeping Up with the Kardashians, and nothing can change that now haha.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

TCBaby: Welcome back, and those of you in the States, Happy Memorial Day! Hope you’ve all had lovely three day weekend and are ready to dive into some magic!

Ellen: I’m just climbing out of the magical world of AHBL in Melbourne, myself! Ready to get these two back to being friendly again.

TCBaby: Ahh, yeah Ellen just saw J2 this weekend, and our Destiel hearts were dying with all the Cockles content happening at JIB con. Overall it’s been a good time to be in the fandom, y’all.

Ellen: And a great time to get stuck into chapter 6. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday comes entirely too quickly for Dean’s liking. The weekend had seemed extra short, considering he spent most of his free time trying to convince Sam to dump Ruby like a bad habit already. When that failed—if it wasn’t for her being such a shitty student, he would’ve wondered if she had cast some sort of love spell on his little brother—he switched over to worrying about the whole Castiel situation. After Ruby had essentially fled the scene and Dean had chewed Sam out enough for one night, the silence during the walk back to the Impala had been filled by Charlie, who would not shut up about “Doctor Novak’s awesome powers!” and “did you see his eyes glow blue?!”

Even Sam, in his grumpy and scolded state, was borderline fangirling over the professor’s casting ability. Dean had simply shrugged the whole thing off. So the professor-slash-mage knew how to do some flashy spells—was Dean supposed to be impressed? Castiel had still punished Sam, and even though he’d said the whole thing was out of his hands, Dean wondered if the professor could’ve let them go without such a harsh punishment. The crude, red mark on Sam’s wrist had finally begun to fade, but Dean still felt a resurgence of irritation and resentment every time he saw it. His brother was way too smart to do something so reckless, and Dean was officially at loss at how the hell to break Ruby’s grip on Sam.

In the end, Sam is the reason Dean trudges up the spiral staircase on Monday afternoon, heading for Castiel’s office. Sticking with Dr. Novak as his advisor is the only way to keep his thesis project on-track, ‘cause Dr. Adler is one big ol’ hell to the no, and if he postpones or drops out, what sort of example is that setting for Sam? He never thought he would be responsible for keeping his brother on the straight and narrow at school, of all places, which had basically always been Sam’s version of freaking Disney World. But he’d do anything to keep an eye on Sammy, and anyways, his crush on the professor is officially over. Now that he’s moved on, he should be able to clock in his weekly thesis hours no problem. Castiel had been right—Dean had been way more interested in the professor than he had been his own project, and it’s embarrassing how transparent his feelings were. He’s gonna do everything he can now to stay focused.

Unfortunately their meeting is already off to a strange start. Dr. Novak’s door is firmly closed and locked, and there’s a sticky note on the door: Dean, I sent you an email, but just in case you didn’t see it—please meet me at the library, top floor, practice room #4. Dean squints in confusion and
then rolls his eyes...the library is across campus, and being back there with Castiel only two days after the whole Seal drama has anger burning in the back of his throat.

Dean huffs, crumbling the note in his hand, and flies down the staircase in record time. From a few yards away he spots Lisa in the office, working the front desk, but he awkwardly shuffles out the front door before she can notice him. They had exchanged a few texts over the weekend, once she received the abridged version of the trouble Sam had found himself in, but since then Dean has been avoiding her like the freaking plague. Every once in a while he’ll get a mortifying flash of himself struggling to get it up while Lisa, a hot chick he definitely should want to have sex with, writhed around on his lap. He had never had that problem before, not once, and seeing her around campus now was just an awkward reminder of how strange his life has been since Dr. Novak had entered it.

Outside the campus is enjoying a rare, partially sunny day, though the air is still chilly and the wind strong and gusting. Dean walks down the hill, waving at classmates and professors and students as he passes, wondering if there’s anyone on this campus he hasn’t met by now. By the time he reaches the outer doors of the library he’s running late, though he figures Castiel will excuse him this time, since he changed the location last minute. And if not? Well, who cares. Dean sure doesn’t.

The library is one of the taller buildings on campus, coming in around ten stories high, so he takes the elevator up to the top floor. He whistles lowly as he searches for the right room, and when he finds number four he cracks the door open tentatively. He’s never used these practice rooms before, has never cast a spell that requires this much space, but it’s...huge, almost the size of a gymnasium. The floor is dark hardwood, maybe walnut, and there are rows of wide windows with the blinds pulled halfway up, the faintest hint of sunshine creating patterns on the floor. In the middle of it all is Castiel, in a tan jacket and red tie combo that shows off his broad shoulders, and it hits Dean all over again just how attractive the professor is. But no—none of that, he tells himself sternly. He clears his throat, slinging the messenger bag off his shoulder and leaving it on the floor, and Castiel turns to greet him.

“Hello, Dean.” Castiel is flexing his fingers back and forth, as if he’s stretching them.

“Uh, hey.” He crosses his arms against his chest, several yards of space still separating them.

“I’m glad you came,” Castiel mumbles, looking a bit doubtful. “You never responded to any of my emails, so I wasn’t sure...”

“I was a little busy,” Dean says sharply, definitely not intending to open a whole can of worms, but here they are. Castiel looks reproachful, taking a step closer to Dean and biting his lip anxiously.

“How’s your brother?” he asks tentatively.

“He’ll live,” Dean grumbles, looking down at the floor.

“And the mark?”

Dean sighs, annoyed by the unexpected game of twenty questions. “Fading.”

“Good. That’s good.” A beat of silence passes between them, uncomfortable and tense. Dean has an instinct to fill it, but resists, if only because it seems to be just as unpleasant for Castiel. A petty, immature part of him wants to punish the professor a little, wants to make him feel just as mixed up and conflicted as Dean’s felt since the first day they met. “Dean?”
His eyes snap up from their spot on the floor, seeing Castiel’s blue-eyed gaze fixated on him. The professor eyes are soft around the edges, his eyebrows lifted up questioningly, and it makes part of Dean’s resolve begin to slowly crumble. “I’m sorry for everything that’s transpired between us,” Castiel admits, voice low and rumbling. “You may not believe it, but I’m here to help you. I want to help you.”

“No offense, but…” Dean looks away again, chuckling without a shred of humor. “You got a funny way of showing it.”

“I know.” Castiel sighs, hands on his hips, staring down at his shoes. “Would it be possible for us to—” Waving a hand around, he searches for the right word. “Start over?”

It’s a tempting proposition, filing everything away as water under the bridge. But Dean still has a solid day or two of anger left simmering inside of him, so he just shrugs and mumbles noncommittally, “I guess we can try.”

Castiel smiles at him generously, way happier with Dean’s half-assed reply that he has any right to be, and Dean ignores the butterflies circling inside his stomach.

“Uh, anyways…” He wanders around the space and opens his hands out wide, indicating the immensity of the empty room. “What exactly are we doing here?”

“Oh, right.” Castiel flushes a little, as if he should’ve explained that already, and Dean eyes him curiously but doesn’t say anything. Is it possible that the professor’s main goal for today had been to makeup with Dean?

Either way, he claps his hands together now, seemingly ready to get down to business. “So, we’re still lacking a topic for your thesis, which is certainly the first step. And we’re running out of time.” Dean gulps, but nods—he’s pretty sure he has to have some sort of written draft finished by Christmas, which is only two months away. Jesus, he’s gonna be busy.

“So I started thinking about our first meeting, when we were discussing the way you view magic as such a physical entity. And I started thinking…” Castiel clasps his hands together nervously. “I have an unorthodox idea to try, something that you might find helpful. If you’re willing.” There’s a question at the end of his voice, a hesitation that Dean hasn’t noticed before, and it’s definitely intriguing, so he nods. “Excellent. To start—can you cast a simple charm? Just whatever comes to mind.”

The request surprises Dean, but he supposes this is what the practice rooms in the library are for—the opportunity to have the space and privacy to cast openly. He looks around for inspiration then settles on the blinds, feeling slightly self-conscious as Castiel observes him angle his palms up, drawing them up a few inches, and watching as the blinds raise, exposing more sunlight.

“Good,” Castiel murmurs, shaking his own hands as though they’re full of excess energy. “That was just a warmup. Now try something else a little more complicated. I’m going to cast too, and we have to start together. No matter what happens, don’t stop your spell, okay?”

Dean scrunches up his eyebrows in confusion, but agrees, wondering what sort of situation he’s about to find himself in. In-sync casting requires their eyes be locked together, watching for slight shifts in each other’s facial expressions as they ready their separate spells, and Dean wants to look away but he can’t. Castiel’s eyes are such a gorgeous shade of blue, his tongue wetting the dry surface of his lips, and it’s entirely too intimate for someone recovering from a stupid crush. But there’s no feasible way to excuse himself, no exit strategy that doesn’t make him look flaky as hell, so Dean just stares back and fights back a shiver.
He begins casting, trying to focus on the shift of magic as it flows through the air. His right hand is in a tight fist, his left palm flat, and he collides them together carefully. He feels the heat already gathering, and he begins stacking his fingers together, holding the spell in a steady pause while Castiel catches up. The professor is doing some of the most elaborate hand motions Dean’s ever seen, crossing his fingers in an unusual spread, and most of them Dean would swear aren’t in any textbook. Sensing that it’s time to resume his own spell, he forms a scooping motion with his hands and begins to move them back and forth, back and forth, raising the temperature of the room one degree with every turn. It’s easy to warm just one body up, but he’s trying to heat the whole room, and so he doubles down on his efforts. Environmental spells are known to be tricky, but he eventually feels damp and sweaty, though it’s not clear if it’s the exertion of the spell or the rising heat of the room. Castiel keeps casting with expert precision, and it’s distracting how confident and sure his long and slender fingers are. Dean is growing impatient though, not understanding what exactly is supposed to be happening, and he’s two seconds away from dropping his spell when—

A geometric shape appears between them, three overlapping squares in wisps of electric blue, and when Dean swipes his hand once more and raises the temperature, it glows red-orange, like fire. It’s the elemental magic operating inside his spell, Dean is sure of it, and the squares shift minutely as his hands begin to twitch.

“Holy shit,” Dean breathes, eyeing the apparatus and Castiel with equal incredulity. “Is…is that…”

“The physical manifestation of your spell?” Castiel is breathless, staring with wide eyes in amazement. “I believe so.”

“That’s impossible. You can’t just…I mean…the spell you’re casting doesn’t even exist!” He blinks, wondering where the hell Castiel got his hands on a spell like this, but he doesn’t want to ask and interrupt the literal magic that’s happening. “What happens if we stop? Will it hold?”

“Let’s find out.” Castiel lowers his hands slowly, returning them to his sides, and Dean follows suit. Unable to stop himself, he takes a step closer, running a hand through the wisps of energy and feeling an immediate buzz off the gathered magic. The imprint of the spell is still holding in the air, possibly because the room is still warm so the spell is still in effect, Dean has no freaking clue. He’s never done this before, never could have planned for something as incredible as this in a million years.

“It’s exactly how I imagined it—the shapes, the texture,” he whispers, and he feels Castiel’s eyes on him. He stares right back, the spell glowing between them in a moment that feels weighty with significance. After a few seconds the spell begins to fade, and they both breathe out heavily, shaky from the intensity of what they’ve just witnessed. Dean chuckles from nerves, feeling lightheaded.

“Have you…” He rakes his fingers through his hair and watches Castiel doubled over, hands on his knees. “Is that the first time you’ve done that spell?”


“That’s a freaking understatement.” Dean honestly can’t remember a time when he’s been this excited. “That was incredible, Cas!”

The professor looks up at him with a warm smile, maybe from the compliment or the nickname, or much more realistically, the residual high from the magic they just produced. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”
Dean can’t understand how the hell Castiel is keeping his cool right now. “Enjoyed it? That’s…” He swallows, trying to catch his breath. “Can we do it again?”

Castiel chuckles but nods, still panting. “Let’s take a quick break, and then go again.” He bends over his briefcase and comes back up with a slender water bottle, drinking his fill and looking out the window. Dean doesn’t know where else to look, wondering if he’s a creeper for watching Castiel, so he sits cross-legged on the hardwood floor and thinks.

As amazing as this whole thing is, none of it makes sense. There’s no known spell for manifesting magic…as a Mechanical Engineering major with a concentration in Spell Deconstruction, Dean would’ve heard about it by now, no matter how complicated it is to cast. What Castiel just did was inventive and creative, powerful and new, and everything begins sliding into place in Dean’s mind. Castiel’s defense of lay magicians because they’re different, misunderstood, judged. The argument they’d had, when Dean had said something about Thaumatechs being reckless, though he hadn’t meant a word of it. Castiel had seemed to take it personally, because…because…

“You wrote this spell.” It’s a statement of fact at this point, not a question, and Castiel freezes with his back to Dean, still staring out the window. “Didn’t you?”

Castiel’s whole body tenses as he looks out the window. Outside, the ever-present clouds are still leaving gaps large enough for watery sunlight to filter through, and the instinct to run away from this room and join the students he can see wandering the lawns is strong.

But he’d known going into today that if he showed Dean this spell, and if it worked, that there was a chance Dean would know it was unsanctioned—that he’d created it. He’s basically outing himself as a Thaumatech, and hoping that Dean is able to keep it quiet. He wants Dean to trust him, and he hopes he isn’t misplacing his trust in Dean.

He takes a breath and turns away from the window, taking in Dean sitting on the floor, his legs crossed. The lurch in his chest at seeing him sitting there has little to do with the spell he just cast, and a lot to do with the fact that he still can’t quite believe that Dean has actually both shown up and agreed to cast a spell with him. He was almost sure after the night at the library that Dean would not be willing to forgive him. But here he is.

“Well, yes,” he begins, wary. “But there wasn’t anything too complex there. I just took a few standard spells and...combined them.”

Dean shakes his head, wide-eyed. “I didn’t see anything I recognized there. I’ll watch closer this time.”

Castiel nods, smiling. He’s pleased that Dean’s so excited about casting with him. Hopefully they can come up with something for him to look into more closely for his thesis. Of course, there’s the other reason that casting with Dean is exciting, but he’s trying not to think about how prolonged eye contact with Dean warms him down to his toes. And that wasn’t just from the heating spell he performed.

Dean gets back to his feet and bounces in place on his toes, his eyes alight and fingers flexing.

Castiel’s heart rate has calmed somewhat, but he can still feel the fatigue from casting heavy in his limbs. Dean looks so expectant though, that he can’t delay any longer. He wipes the sheen of sweat
from his brow, then raises his hands. “Maybe try a different charm this time? It’s getting a little hot in here, don’t you think?”

Dean smirks. “Sure, Nelly. Ready to go again?”

Castiel nods, not sure what Dean’s talking about, but letting it slide. He locks eyes with Dean as he feels Dean’s draw on the elements. It’s a strong pull—he’s never seen Dean cast properly before, and he’s surprised by his strength as he calls forth first a Delambre container, similar to the one Castiel usually constructs, then condenses water from the air to form a sphere inside it. It’s just the same spell that Castiel cast in his office just last week, and he’s impressed by how precise each element is.

Castiel carefully moves his fingers in the sequence of gestures he devised for the manifestation spell. He’s been working on this spell for a long time with mixed results, but he’d never expected to be casting it with a second person until a few nights ago when he’d realized it might help Dean with his mechanics. Carefully pulling a stream of lay magic into his upturned palm, he releases his spell just as Dean has his watery sphere stable and floating in the air between them.

The air lights up with the structure of the Delambre, fine silvery lines forming a cage around the sphere, and a darker blue spherical shape an inch or so around the water itself—the manifestation of the condenser spell.

Dean’s eyes flick away from Castiel’s as the spells manifest, wide with awe. The white-blue light flickers across his face as he reaches out one hand to touch the wispy strands of the Delambre container.

Castiel is aware he’s breathing harder as the lay magic zings through him and around the magic in the air. The euphoric rush isn’t quite there—there’s a weakness in his spell that he’s been working on, but hasn’t been able to patch up just yet, and it means he’s burning through energy at an unsustainable rate.

Dean’s eyes are moving all over the spell, a tiny crease in his forehead. Castiel can’t help but smile—Dean’s in his element here, and it’s such a glorious sight.

Dean’s face clears suddenly and with a satisfied grin, he makes a few small finger gestures with his raised hand. Castiel gasps as the rush of lay magic intensifies and hits him full-force, making fireworks explode in his mind and his whole body electrify. He needs to stop, he can’t let this continue. The manifestation glows brighter and brighter, and Dean steps back slightly, agape at the sight of bright sparkling shapes moving around the cage, and arcing waves around the sphere around it.

Then Dean’s eyes drop back to Castiel’s and his eyes widen even further. He asks, “Cas?” and reaches out one hand to hover near his forearm.

Castiel can imagine what he must look like—glowing eyes at least, possibly some kind of lay magic aura. The times he’s cast with others in this way—they’ve been nothing compared to this. He feels the burnout approaching, and reluctantly pulls the lay magic back, leaving the wispy remains of the manifestation in the air.

I want to do that again, he thinks clearly, as blackness closes in at the edges of his vision and he collapses to the floor, senseless.
"Cas? Cas, you okay?"

Castiel opens his eyes to the fuzzy shape of Dean's face leaning over him. He frowns as he tries to move—every muscle aches and his mouth is parched. As his vision clears, he tries to moisten his lips with his tongue, and sees Dean following the movement with his eyes. Their eyes lock again for a charged moment, before Dean sits back on his heels, letting Castiel take his own weight on his elbows behind him. Dean had been…holding him?

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, trying to sit up, but doesn't get far before his head starts to spin. He winces, rubbing at a sharp pain behind his forehead, then remembers the chocolate he keeps stashed in his bag ever since his graduation day. "Bring my bag?"

Dean glances around, then gets up to grab the satchel from the side of the room. He kneels back beside Castiel, a worried frown on his face. "I've never seen anyone burn out like that. What happened?"

Castiel takes the bag from his hands and rifles through the front pocket, finding a slightly squashed Snickers bar. He opens it, fumbling with the wrapper with fatigued and slightly tingling fingers. He takes a bite before replying. "I've been working on that spell for a while, but that's the first time I've managed to close the loop completely. Just…too much of a load at once."

Dean looks horrified. "Uh, that might have been me, sorry."

Castiel narrows his eyes in confusion. "You...?"

"I tweaked your encasing structure. I should have asked first." Dean looks down at his hands as he rubs them together.

Castiel stares at him. He swallows the mouthful of candy, his mind already sharpening at the taste of the sugar. "You just saw this spell for the first time, and you managed to analyze the structure, find a problem with it and fix it, in the space of a few minutes?" Castiel beams at him, wondering how he ever underestimated Dean—he's clearly a gifted mage. "Dean, that's brilliant. Please don't apologize."

The flush high on Dean’s cheekbones makes Castiel’s stomach start to flutter again. "It was lay magic. Wasn’t it? That’s why you got hurt."

It’s Castiel’s turn to look away now, just back down at his chocolate bar for a few moments while he works out what he wants to reveal. While lay magic is frowned on by most elemental mages, Dean’s questions about his work on lay magic last week makes Castiel think he might have an open mind about it. He looks up again into Dean’s curious expression.

“Yes. I often fuse my spells with lay magic.” He rubs at his head again, then gestures upwards to where the spells had been hanging in the air. "It's what made the colors and the...wispy visuals."

As Castiel takes another bite of the chocolate, he glances at Dean to gauge his reaction. Dean still looks worried, but not obviously disgusted or horrified, so Castiel takes that as positive. Maybe he can explain a bit further.

"Have you ever cast with both lay and elemental?" he asks, crumpling the empty wrapper and
putting it back in his bag.

Dean shakes his head. "No. I mean, we all cast lay magic as kids, right? By accident, or whatever."

Castiel is abruptly reminded of his mother and her aversion to lay magic. He spares Anna a thought and wonders again if she's all right, wherever she is.

"That's basically what a lot of my research has been about. Lay magic can be used for beautiful and useful things—it's much safer for healing, for example. But it can be so dangerous for untrained casters if they draw too much."

Dean nods. "Hence your little fainting episode, there."

"That's right," Castiel continues. "Elemental magic is so much safer. Why should it be limited to qualified mages?" He stops to take a breath, taking in the open look on Dean's face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean for this to turn into a lecture."

Dean shrugs, grinning. "It's okay. You any better now?"

Castiel stretches out his arms to the sides, happy that the sugar rush has helped his fatigue, for now at least. He really needs to get home and sleep it off though. "Yes," he says, "I think so. That will have to be the end of our session for today, if that's okay."

When he pushes himself forward and tries to get to his feet, Dean jumps up and rushes to help him, pulling him up under one shoulder. When Castiel finds his feet, his face is mere inches from Dean's, and the intensity in those green eyes nearly makes his knees give way again. He murmurs, "Thank you."

Dean clears his throat slightly and steps back, bending down again to pick up Castiel's satchel from the floor. He holds it out, his cheeks flushed again. "No problem."

As Castiel turns towards the door, he stumbles slightly, and Dean leaps in to catch him by the shoulder again. "Whoa, you sure you're okay? I'm gonna help you home."

Castiel says hurriedly, "I'm fine, Dean. You don't need to do that—"

"Dude, I just watched you collapse. I'm not gonna let you go off on your own," Dean says firmly.

Castiel is sure his face is flaming as they leave the study room, Dean hovering nearby.

It takes them a good half hour to walk slowly across campus towards Castiel's apartment, but it's a pleasant stroll through the sunshine.

Halfway across the main lawn, Dean asks, "So, uh…gotta say, that was all pretty incredible back there. You think I could do something like that for my project? I mean, like, study the forms of some more spells or something?"

Castiel eyes Dean before looking back at the tall trees making the edge of campus. Dean sounds nervous, not like his usual confident self. He wonders if Dean had got some of the kickback from the lay magic casting that he liked. It wouldn't be the first time Castiel had inadvertently got someone hooked on the feeling, but at least he'd been there to help Meg control her casting until she got the hang of things. He'd have to keep an eye on Dean.

"Sure, we can put that down as a possibility, although it would have to be a pretty big spell to be used for a project. Maybe a group of spells?" he suggests, considering what might be acceptable.
The idea of spell analysis and improvement isn't new, but he's sure they can put some kind of spin on it.

He's about to suggest as much when Dean speaks up instead.

"What about…" He pauses for a moment, then continues. "You know the spell that protects the well? Like the one that makes it so that only mages can use elemental magic? Do you think that would be big enough?"

Castiel laughs, surprised. "That's probably the biggest spell there is! I'm not sure they'd let us anywhere near it."

Dean's face falls and he mutters, "Just an idea."

"It's a great idea, though," Castiel continues, not wanting to discourage him. "If we agreed to just observe the spell, and make suggestions on how it might be improved… Hmm. Let me talk to Doctor Moseley about it. Let's see what she says."

Dean looks over at him, hope in his eyes, and Castiel decides he would like to see that look on Dean's face every day.

In contrast to the sunny campus, Palo Alto is grey and cool when they step through the translocator. They hurry along as fast as Castiel can manage and duck into the apartment building before it starts to rain, and Dean helps Castiel up the stairs.

"So are you going to the Halloween Festival this weekend?" Dean asks as they're resting briefly on a landing.

Castiel glances at him as he recovers his breath. "The Samhain Faire? I haven't been before. I wasn't really planning to."

"Oh really? You should come along, it's a lot of fun. Me 'n Charlie can show you around… Y'know, if you want." Dean starts back up the stairs again, turning his face away.

Castiel isn't sure what's happening—not long ago they were actually fighting. Is this some kind of olive branch? He stops at the next landing and searches for his keys in his bag, saying, "When will you be going?"

"Saturday, in the afternoon probably."

Castiel smiles. It might be nice to spend a bit of time with Dean outside of meetings, especially if they're going to start over. "Thanks, Dean. I'd like that."

As Castiel unlocks the door and steps inside, panic floods into him as the sight of his lounge reminds him of talking to Meg, jerking off while imagining Dean kneeling in front of him.

He turns to Dean, embarrassed, before he can step through the door. "Thank you for your help, Dean. I'll be all right now."

Dean looks so concerned that Castiel nearly pulls him inside and kisses him right there.

"Are you sure? I mean, I could make you some coffee or something to—"

"No," Castiel interrupts, as the urge to accept nearly overwhelms him. "I'm fine, really. I'll be much better after I rest. Thank you." Dean still doesn't look quite sure, but Castiel continues, "I'll be in
touch about your idea. The thesis idea. And Saturday, I'd love to come and see the festival. Let me know where you want to meet."

"Okay. Guess I'll see you then. Bye, Cas."

Castiel closes the door as Dean turns away, then moves into his living space. He feels filthy at the sight of his coffee table, but slumps in his couch anyway, rubbing at his face. What would an American Samhain festival be like, anyway? His mom had never taken them to anything like that in Illinois, and the All Hallows festivals in Europe were a little different.

What a day it had been, though. It was embarrassing burning out in front of Dean like that, but he supposes it had been a good lesson in lay magic control.

But the way Dean had just fixed that spell, as though it were a simple charm? That was brilliant.

He's definitely going to have to chat with Missouri to get Dean's project sorted so they can cast together more often. Because that feeling of staring into Dean's eyes while casting had been incredible, and he wants more.

Chapter End Notes

Did anyone notice that in this chapter, we finally wrote in the gorgeous art posted way back in chapter one? If you don't remember, go check it out after dropping a comment below!! Supernatastic really captured the spirit of our story with that amazing piece of art. <3
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

We're back, bitches! ~said in our Charlie voice~

TCBaby here. Sorry about the delay on this chapter. Ellen has been killing it, writing all kinds of lovely canon things, which I will link at the end of this chapter because it's *so good.*

In the meantime, hope y'all are ready for some fluffy fall festival fun (#alliteration) because this chapter was so exciting to write.

Dean fidgets with the sleeve of his leather jacket, twirling a stray thread and trying to appear nonchalant. They're waiting outside of Mechanikos Hall, the clouds a dark shade of October gray, and Charlie is leaned against a nearby tree. Her arms are crossed and she's staring at Dean as he squirms, her expression incredulous.

“Would you chill, Winchester?” she asks, amusement in her voice as she takes a step forward, covering Dean’s twitching fingers with her steadier ones. “He said he’d meet you here, so…he’ll meet you here.”

“Us. Meet us,” Dean corrects, not wanting his nerves at hanging out with Castiel at today’s Halloween Festival to be misconstrued. But Charlie just snorts, pulling her plaid button-up closer to her graphic tee layered underneath, and it occurs to Dean that maybe he’s had a negative impact on her fashion choices. Then again, that’s probably just Charlie. If he remembers correctly she’d been wearing a screen-printed Star Wars tee on the day they met, over two years ago.

“Oh, come on,” she goads, emphasizing each word and flashing him a broad smile. “He’s barely said more than three words to me. Though, that’s all gonna change today. Because you, my idiot best friend, are in desperate need of a wing woman.”

“Huh?” Dean blinks, his expression flushed, nerves making him feel strangely energized. “No, none of—that. Whatever you’re thinking, it’s wronger than a three dollar bill, okay? Me’n Cas are just…”

He pauses, scratching absently at his neck as he ponders the accurate label. They’re not just colleagues, not just student and teacher, not just two guys who occasionally seem to yell at each other and then sometimes, maybe, almost kiss? But no…no, that last part isn’t right. The chemistry between them is just in Dean’s mind, residue from his stupid crush, resilient as a bitter root slime stain on carpet. Not that Dean made that mistake once while mixing a potion, especially not in Bobby’s magic shop, where a piece of nearby furniture served to cover up the indiscretion. Nope.

“Whatever we are, it’s complicated,” he decides finally, and his friend offers him a suggestive smirk in reply, so he adds, “But not like *that.* There’s no hanky panky going on.”

“Hanky panky?” asks a deep, unmistakable voice, and Dean feels his insides begin to do somersaults. He turns on his heels and Castiel is there, looking more casual than Dean has ever
seen him—sporting tight and dark denim, a maroon zip-up hoodie, hair tousled with a casual sort of sexiness.

“Uh, heya Cas,” he mumbles, trying to look anywhere but the professor’s eyes or lips or… Jesus, there are too many tempting options. At this rate, he might as well ask the guy to wear a bag over his head.

“Hello, Dean.” The greeting is simple enough, but just hearing his name come from that mouth is making Dean’s palms sweat.

“You, uh, remember Charlie.” He waves in the direction of his redhead friend, and the professor and grad student both nod and smile at each other.

“Of course,” Castiel says pleasantly. “Good to see you again.”

“Nice to see you again, too, Doctor Novak.” Charlie’s voice is extra chipper and it makes Dean suspicious as hell. It’s hard enough getting over this guy, but if Charlie spends the whole night teasing him, he just might implode.

“Please, call me Castiel. Or…Cas, as Dean prefers.” Castiel smiles in his direction, warm and charming, as if he finds Dean endearing. A blush is spreading so deeply on Dean’s cheeks that he clears his throat, glancing away.

“Uh, anywho…” He points in the direction of the hill, sloping downward. Campus should be quieter, since it’s the weekend, but the festival is due to begin soon and there’s an irregular amount of foot traffic. “Ready?”

Apart from Valentine’s Day (aka, Unattached Drifter Christmas) Halloween is Dean’s favorite holiday of the year. Not only does he have magic powers—which he sometimes can’t believe, ‘cause how freaking cool is that?—he’s also a big horror movie buff. He’s always been interested in things that go bump in the night, but even if he wasn’t into that kind of thing already, The Samhain Faire is just…fun. Sometimes he thinks it’s the best part of attending Stanford, because annoyingly, only those affiliated with the school or fully educated mages are allowed access beyond the school’s wards. Might as well hang a “no lay magicians allowed” sign outside this place, Dean thinks somewhat sullenly. He’s disappointed by the injustices in the magical community, and often wishes there was something he could do to make an impact. Still, it’s difficult for him to be sulky on today of all days, and as they take the concrete steps down to the meadow, he whistles appreciatively.

It seems they’ve outdone themselves this year. It’s only dusk, but there’s a cloudy layer of sparkling clouds hovering above their heads, casting everything in an otherworldly light. There are candles floating everywhere, some small tea lights and some thick, black candles, the flames spelled to perpetually burn without ever finishing the wax. The nearby trees are thick and full with foliage, the yellow and red leaves particularly appealing and cascading onto the grass. As expected, there are pumpkins and gourds in various shapes and colors scattered about. In the center of the field there are two rows of booths, where Dean knows merchants are selling all sorts of magic-related gifts and supplies. There are food trucks and stands, many advertising magically refilling pints of apple cider or hot chocolate, which he’s definitely ordering once the sun goes down.

“Wow,” Castiel mumbles softly, their elbows brushing in a way that Dean refuses to acknowledge. “This is…wow.”

“I know, right?” Charlie squeals, exhilaration evident in her voice. She looks down and across the field, scouting out their first stop, but Dean is watching Castiel’s reaction as if it’s the most
interesting thing in the world. Cas has an expression of surprise, of delight, broadcasted clearly on his face. Dean notices how happiness softens the man’s features, the sober and serious expression temporarily muted by the presence of joy. Dean’s officially staring, he knows that, but he can’t seem to look away. Castiel meets his eyes after a few seconds and offers him a small smile, as if he’s acknowledging how impressed he is with all this.

“All Hallows Eve in Oxford is not quite this…elaborate,” he explains, waving a hand around the unfolding busyness of the festival.

“Well, y’know how Americans are,” Dean says with a lopsided grin, “the bigger, the better.” Charlie laughs and nods while Castiel claps his hands together, asking, “So, where to first?”

“Spider dogs!” Charlie and Dean exclaim simultaneously, and Castiel’s expression slips into confusion.

“I…have a few questions,” he says carefully, and Dean just snorts, clapping him on the shoulder as they pass through the entrance. By a stroke of luck, they come across spider dogs at the first food truck they pass, and after ordering, Castiel frowns down at the food in his hand as if it might bite him. Which, to be fair, wouldn’t be unheard of at a festival like this. Still, a spider dog is just three hot dogs merged together, wrapped with dough in the center, grilled and seasoned, then finally, spelled and animated—like a large and peculiar, edible hotdog spider.

“This is absolutely absurd,” Castiel declares, holding his spider dog and trying to mask his amusement. It’s crawling around in his palm and heading towards his forearm. “How do I even…”?

“Trick is bitin’ fast,” Dean says, rather impolitely since his mouth is full.

“They’ve been known to escape the longer you wait,” Charlie says, taking a large bite herself.

In the end, Castiel does wait too long, seeming too distracted by the spelled creation to remember it’s also his dinner, and the spider dog ends up launching itself onto the ground and scurrying away, hiding behind a trash can. Dean laughs for a full five minutes before finally coming up for air. He offers to buy Castiel another even though the line is significantly longer now, but the professor brushes off the suggestion, saying he hadn’t been hungry yet anyways.

“Benny’s place won’t be this hokey,” Dean says to Charlie. Judging by the look on Castiel’s face as he glances between them, Dean owes him a full explanation. “Benny’s a friend of mine, he moved to Louisiana a few months back. He’s opening a restaurant with a magic-infused menu, and let me tell you, his food is amazing. The burgers alone…”

“I do love a good burger,” Castiel says agreeably. “That’s a great concept, too. Why Louisiana?”

“He’s got family down there,” Dean explains simply. There’s a slight pause in conversation, and he reflects on how much he misses Benny’s company. His friend is loyal and funny, and they always had a good time together, even before they started casually hooking up. Maybe Dean will invite him up for a visit soon.

“Did he take the Mysticism of the Culinary Arts course?” Castiel asks excitedly. “Hannah…er, Doctor Milton, said it’s absolutely fascinating. I’ve consider enrolling myself, though in the summer, since I’m teaching a full course load.”

“Uh, yeah, I’ve heard about that class too,” Dean says weakly. “But nah, he hasn’t. Benny didn’t actually get accepted into Stanford. He’s a…uh, lay magician, I guess. He visited the magic shop a
lot, and I live right above it, so our paths crossed.”

Castiel’s eyes open wide, as if he’s processing all the details Dean’s just shared. If he were anyone else Dean might worry Cas was judging him for being close friends with someone like Benny, but knowing the professor, it’s quite the opposite. Castiel looks intrigued, and he opens his mouth to ask more questions when Charlie waves them over to a nearby booth.

The conversation turns lighter as they’re quickly distracted by the opportunity to shop, each booth eclectic in its own way. They browse for nearly an hour, and Charlie ends up with a wind chime that plays the favorite song of whoever happens to pass by, which Dean figures would be cool for all of two seconds and then get intensely annoying. There are paintings that will transport you into the landscape scene, Mary Poppins style, though they’re way out of a grad student’s budget. He does end up buying something, though—an automotive protection charm for Baby, an amulet that’ll hang on his rearview mirror and ward off bad drivers. Castiel purchases a pair of reading glasses that recreates the phenomenon of having a photographic memory, a purchase he looks so damn giddy about that Dean considers buying a pair for Sammy, too. He frowns then, thinking of his brother and wondering where he is and what he might be up to.

“Everything okay?” Castiel asks quietly, noticing Dean’s sudden change in demeanor. Charlie is haggling with a vendor, trying to convince him to knock a few dollars off a holographic light that supposedly glows when someone’s thinking about you. Piece of junk, Dean figures, but might make an interesting lamp.

“Fine,” Dean mumbles, and there’s a beat of silence, a tension creeping up between them that hasn’t been there all evening. He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose, then looks Castiel in the eye. “Actually, no. My brother’s been dating this new girl who keeps gettin’ him into trouble. We’ve always been close, me’n Sammy, but this Ruby thing has been driving a wedge between us.”

Castiel tilts his head and frowns, looking genuinely sympathetic. “I’m so sorry, Dean.” He sticks his hands in his zip-up hoodie, looking at the ground. “Is that the…young lady who convinced him to try and break into the Seal?”

Dean lets out an unexpectedly chuckle. “‘Young lady’? How old are you again?” he teases, and Castiel rolls his eyes and smiles. “Uh, yeah, that’s her. She’s my student too, and not a good one.”

Castiel crosses his arms over his chest, looking thoughtful. “Well, I can’t offer you much in the way of sibling advice. I have a brother and a sister, but I’m not close with either of them.” Dean wants to ask questions, wants to pry a little and learn more about Cas’ family life, but the pause isn’t long enough to give him the chance. “But I could give you some advice, teacher to teacher? If you want.”

Dean opens his hands wide and shrugs. “Go for it.”

“Sometimes your most challenging students will end up being your most rewarding.” Dean’s ears begin to burn, this conversation hitting way too close to home, and he forces himself to glance away. “Perhaps you just need to meet her on her level.”

“Is that what you’re doing now?” The question stumbles out of Dean’s mouth before he even realizes he’s asking it. “With me, I mean.”

The professor is visibly taken aback by Dean’s directness, but seems to respect it just as much, considering his contemplative expression. Cas waits several seconds before answering.
“Yes and no… As your advisor, of course I want to reconcile our differences so we can work together and create a better project for you. I pride myself on my professionalism, which is why our rocky start was—surprising. And frustrating.” He takes a deep breath, finally sparing a glance in Dean’s direction, and their gaze is immediate and intense. “But it’s much more than that. I find you very interesting, Dean. I’ve enjoyed getting to know you better this evening.”

Dean’s heart is racing out of his chest, though he has no clue why. There’s nothing innately romantic or suggestive about what Cas is saying, especially since he’s talking so formally at the moment, like a nineteenth century Victorian lord or some shit. But Dean can’t help but read into everything, wondering if there’s subtext lurking beneath the surface.

“Likewise,” he whispers, his voice dropping a few octaves and sounding strangely husky, and he clears his throat but continues to return the professor’s stare, feeling vulnerable under Castiel’s thoughtful attention.

“Got it! Ten dollars off, bitches!” Charlie shouts, triumphantly holding up her shopping bag. She looks at Castiel sheepishly, as if she just made a bad impression. “Uh, sorry, professor. Not that you’re a bitch, I just meant…”

“Think nothing of it,” he chuckles goodnaturedly, then adds, “…bitch.”

“Oh!” Charlie all but yells with approval, throwing her hands up. “Dude, yes! You’re like, the coolest professor ever!”

The next few hours pass in an exciting, fun-filled haze. First they go bobbing for apples, which Dean finds easy but Charlie and Castiel can’t seem to master. Though watching the professor struggle and then come back up for air, streams of water rolling down his perfect, sculpted chin and soaking the collar of his shirt, would definitely be spank bank material for Dean…if, you know, his crush wasn’t so, totally over.

“Dunno why you’re both struggling,” he smirks, as they both cast him matching glares. “It’s all about focus.”

“Maybe you’re just used to focusing on having things in your mouth,” Charlie retorts suggestively, and Dean sputters and turns bright red, very pointedly not looking over in Cas’ direction. He leads them over to a pumpkin carving station, which is missing the usual supplies—sturdy knife, large scooping spoon—since these jack-o’-lanterns are crafted through magic. It takes an immensely steady hand for casting, since wavering even a half-centimeter does drastic things to the delicate flesh of the pumpkin, and Dean messes his up pretty early on.

“Are jack-o’-lanterns supposedly to have three eyes?” he snorts, throwing his hands down and giving up. To make himself feel better, he scans all the other “finished” pumpkins and finds his is only slightly worse than everyone else’s.

“I like yours,” Castiel offers kindly, still chipping away on his own pumpkin with expert precision. “Very avant garde.”

Cas ends up producing the textbook definition of a perfect jack-o’-lantern, down to the parallel triangle eyes, and Dean wonders if there’s anything the professor can’t do well. Charlie’s is imperfect but cool as hell, a carved version of Princess Leia with the twisted buns on either side, though they’re lopsided.

Afterwards they observe a Mummy Wrap, where teams of two compete to achieve the perfectly wrapped mummy—one person casting, another volunteering as the mummy. But since their group
currently has an odd number, they only observe for a few moments before moving on.

They end up ordering a few hot apple ciders, since the sun is long set and the chilly wind is setting in, and head to the horror film trivia game. It’s mostly just to appease Dean, since neither Charlie or Cas seem very keen on horror films, but they watch Dean with something like endearment as he carries their team to victory.

“In this horror film franchise, what is the original name of the slasher antagonist who wields a hatchet—”

“David Yaeger, aka Hatchet Man, All Saints Day,” he shouts, and the volunteer student reading the questions sighs and mumbles something resembling, “you could at least let me finish the question, dude.”

“Right, next.” The student casts Dean a glare. “Who was the doctor in which famous thriller franchise that said, ‘This can be quite a fun town if you have the right guide’?”

Another team converses excitedly, perhaps having the right answer finally, but Dean beats them to it. “Doctor Chilton, Hannibal.”

“Right…again,” the student mumbles faintly, shuffling the cards around in a way that suggests he’s trying to find harder questions, something that’ll actual stump the know-it-all in the crowd. The next twenty minutes is not Dean’s finest moment, as he single-handedly crushes every single competing team, and eventually Charlie drags him away and towards another booth, explaining that he oughta give someone else a chance to at least answer. Dean’s enthusiasm begins to wane into something like embarrassment, realizing he had gotten way too into that whole trivia thing, and hopes Cas doesn’t think he’s a dick for showing up a bunch of undergrads. Thankfully, Castiel only smiles, seeming pleasantly fascinated by Dean and his nerdy tendencies. It’s a look Dean could honestly get used to, and one he’s been getting from the professor all evening long.

Later Charlie decides to have her palm read, and after ten minutes of waiting Dean wanders off a little, heading towards a dark, abandoned basin. It’s a memorial for the dead, traditionally meant to send prayers to lost loved ones while tossing in a stone, inspired by ancient Samhain Faire traditions that focused on the spirits of those who have crossed over. He’s holding two stones, flat and smooth in his palm, when he feels Castiel’s warm presence beside him.

“For your parents?” he asks, quietly whispering, and Dean just nods and closes his eyes. He had almost forgotten he had confided in Cas about his family situation, nearly two months ago. He lets an image of Mary, young and blonde and carefree, and John, older and grimer with time, fill up his vision.

“Sometimes I barely remember Mom, since I was so young when the house fire…” He trails off and swallows, trying to keep his voice steady. “But it’s worse for Sammy, ’course. He was just a baby.”

“At least you had more time with your father, before moving to Palo Alto,” Castiel comments, voice still gentle.

“Yeah,” Dean agrees feebly. “I mean, after Mom he was never quite the same, and we moved around so much. But at least, we, uh, had a few good times.”

He drops both of the stones in the water, settling down side by side. Just like his parents would’ve wanted.
He wishes his brother was here, wishes they could talk about their family and their childhood, could work through whatever weird season Sammy’s in right now. But Sam hasn’t answered his last few texts, and that knowledge settles into Dean’s stomach and makes him feel forlorn. He realizes that Castiel is still standing there, though, so he wipes absently at the corners of his eyes and tries to pull himself together.

“Ever lost anyone?” he asks, trying to get the focus off of him for a minute. Castiel chews the question over as if it’s a difficult one, though it’s very black and white in Dean’s opinion.

“In a way,” Castiel says noncommittally, and Dean picks up on the vibe that he doesn’t want to discuss it further, so they just stare into the dark water of the basin in companionable silence.

“Hey,” Charlie calls out to them a few minutes later, disrupting the tranquility they’ve somehow found together in this crowded festival. She’s still holding her shopping bags and rubbing her hand, fresh from the palm reading. She’s strangely flushed, eyes darting back behind her. “Uh, would you both mind if I…go solo for a while?” Her voice is sheepish, and she casts her eyes in the direction of a pretty brunette who’s looking back at her, patiently waiting. “The palm reader said I would meet someone special soon, and then Dorothy was behind me in line, and we got to talking, and…”

Dean chuckles, his bout of somberness replaced with a broad and teasing smile. “Go get her, champ,” he says, elbowing Charlie in the rib as she rolls her eyes. It’s only after his best friend is walking away that Dean realizes now he’s alone with Castiel. He’s struck by an intense wave of nerves, wondering if the only reason they’ve had such a good time tonight is because they’ve had Charlie as a buffer.

“Uh, so…” Dean kicks absently at the dirt, hands in the back pockets of his jeans. “What now?”

“I…need to head to the restroom,” Castiel murmurs. “Can I meet back up with you?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, of course,” Dean rambles, wondering why he needs to say a thousand different ways to tell the guy it’s okay to hit the head. “I’ll just—be wandering around.”

They part ways somewhat awkwardly and Dean feels irritated at himself, wondering why all his common sense flies out the window the minute he’s alone with Castiel. He stops by a few smaller booths and checks his phone—no texts from Sam, though the group chat is blowing up, and it’s nearly ten o’clock. The festival will be ending soon, and Dean usually ends the night drinking with his friends at Ellen’s bar. Should Dean invite Castiel along? Would that be insane, crossing a major line, or a way to secure their newfound friend status?

He’s so lost in his thoughts, he doesn’t realize he’s in line for another activity until it’s already his turn. There’s no one around to explain why an ornate, floor-length mirror is situated in the middle of the field, but there’s a sign that reads: **Common lore of the late 1800s to early 1900s states that the unmarried can see the face of their future spouses on Halloween night by staring into a mirror. Who do you see?**

It’s cheesy as hell, but Dean’s already been waiting in line, so what’s the harm? He steps up, only spotting the dark reflection of the night sky, the occasional twinkling lights of candles distant in the trees. He peers at himself, straightening his shirt and looking at the scuffs on his boots. When he glances back up he sees the shining blue eyes and prominent cheekbones of—

_Castiel._

Reflected in the mirror.
He’s wearing his standard button-up shirt and blue tie, and Dean gasps, unable to look away.

“Holy fuck,” he breathes, heart hammering in his chest, and he spins around on his heels until their chests collide. It takes him a solid five seconds to realize this is the real Castiel, not a magical mirror version, and that’s probably all it ever was. Just Castiel standing behind him. But then again—Cas is wearing a maroon hoodie tonight, not his standard shirt and tie like he was in the mirror just now. What in the hell does that mean?

“I’m sorry if I startled you,” Castiel says in a rush, hand coming up and brushing Dean’s elbow as they walk away from the mirror.

“It’s, uh…” Dean’s heart is still racing and he can’t think straight. “All good. Guess I’m kinda jumpy tonight.”

Castiel tilts his head to the side, as if he’s trying hard to figure out something. “What was that, anyways?” He cranes his neck over Dean’s shoulder, trying to get a better angle to read the sign near the mirror, but Dean grabs a fistful of his hoodie and drags him forward.

“Just a stupid hoax,” he mumbles. He looks around wildly for a distraction, and sees some people arranging large cuts of tree branches in a teepee formation. “Wanna warm up at the bonfire?”

Castiel agrees easily enough and they head in that direction. About halfway there, though, they’re stalled by a sudden traffic jam. Impatient, Dean moves up a few spaces and stretches out on his tiptoes, trying to see what the holdup is. He finds out quickly that there’s commotion going on, and he pushes his way more insistently through the crowd, wondering if Cas is following him but not stopping long enough to look.

In the center there’s a large group of guys, older underclassmen by the looks of it. They’re giving off a definite fraternity bro vibe, all laughing and making off-color jokes, and it takes a moment for Dean to realize there’s a person lying flat on his back. He recognizes him as Garth, a short and mousy-looking guy who comes to the bar sometimes and chats with Jo. He’s only a senior, so Dean doesn’t know him that well, but the few times they’ve spoken he’s been nothing but nice and friendly. A flash of anger burns through him at the sight of Garth on his back, surrounded by idiots, his face slack and terrified.

“We got a problem here?” Dean grunts, eyes flickering over the faces of the bullies standing over Garth.

“Nope,” says one of them cockily, tall with light brown hair swooped to the side. “Just having a little fun with this guy. We’d love to know what it’s like, growing up with lays for parents.”

“Yeah,” agrees another, shorter and rounder, “did your mom teach you how to pull a rabbit out of a hat? Abra dabra or some shit?”

“I doubt she can even do that much,” the first guy says with a smirk. “Everyone knows ‘lay’ is just another word for ‘lame.’”

“Lays are only good enough to lay,” another laughs darkly.

“Don’t talk that way about my mother,” Garth protests, though his voice is quivering, and the boys break into raucous laughter again. Dean steps forward and offers his hand out to Garth, who looks at Dean gratefully and clings to his palm, letting himself be hauled to his feet. Dean pushes Garth behind him, his stance on-edge and protective. The thugs stop laughing at Garth, while the leader, the brown-haired guy, steps close to Dean and into his personal space.
“Now, why would you do that?” he leers, with a vicious grin. “We were just having a little fun.”

“You call that fun?” Dean growls, standing up straighter and not backing down. “Go be dumbass douchebags somewhere else.”

“Lookie here, we got ourselves a lay lover!” one of them yells. The group laughs obnoxiously and Dean feels himself on the cusp of losing it.

“I’d rather be that, than someone who’s so insecure he has to make everyone around him feel inferior. Got a big ol’ complex about something, huh?” Dean flashes his eyes down to the guy’s jeans and back up. “Or should I say, a small complex.”

“Fuck you,” the guy spits out, all sense of amusement gone, shoving Dean’s chest forcefully. Dean’s vision turns spotty then, overwhelmed by rage. Hands grasp him from behind, and he hears someone calling his name but he shakes them off.

He propels himself forward just as fists begin to fly.

Chapter End Notes

If you’re up to date on the show, be sure to read Ellen’s latest!

Also, calling all artists: if anyone feels inspired to, y’know, make some art of the mirror scene where Dean sees Cas’ reflection, I would SO NOT say no…hehe…
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Welcome back, everyone! Ellen here, with your weekly fluff update. Hmm, what else might a Halloween (or Samhain) festival need?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel only looks away for a few moments, but when he looks back, Dean is nowhere to be seen. It isn’t until he pushes his way further towards the front of the crowd that he hears one of the guys yell something about lay-lovers, and sees Dean squaring up to him.

Castiel tries to slip past more people but before he can get further, the guy in front of Dean shoves him hard. Dean launches forward, landing a solid hit on the guy’s jaw before he returns fire into Dean’s ribs, making him hunch over.

Castiel calls out, “Hey! Stop that!” as he shoves his way forward again. He reaches the front of the crowd, circling the brawl just as the guy beating on Dean pulls a handful of fireball into his fist and winds back to hit Dean with it. Castiel quickly twists his fingers to pull water out of the air to dump on the guy, extinguishing the flame around his hand. He stands, blinking in surprise through his suddenly wet hair for barely a second, before Dean casts with one palm to the back of his other hand and pushes the guy over with a concussive force. Dean looks back at Castiel with a grin, but before he can rejoin the fight, Dean disappears upwards. The skinny guy who’d just been on the ground, Dean, and three of their opponents are held in the air above the crowd, their feet dangling while their arms are held to their bodies. Castiel looks behind him to see security guards casting from the edges of the crowd. Magical security doesn’t really need to get involved, after all—being able to cast from a distance has its advantages.

The brawlers wriggle in place and shout to be let down with various levels of profanity, but when the laughing and pointing crowd disperses at security's insistence, they’re returned to the ground.

Castiel grabs Dean’s elbow as he touches ground again. “What the hell were you thinking, jumping in like that? Are you okay?” he demands, his face close to Dean’s, but Dean pulls back, wincing sharply.

“Careful, there,” he says, panting through his pain and glaring over at the few guys who were still being spoken to by security. “Think I’ve broken a rib or something.” He turns his back on the guys, and Castiel gives them his own dagger-glare. At least their friends have dispersed with the rest of the crowd.

“What happened here?” a security guard asks, scowling at the skinny guy.

Castiel ducks between the guard and the nervous student. “I’m a Professor—I’ll give you my account. I saw the whole thing.”

Once Castiel gives his version of events, they all get off with a warning not to brawl again. Castiel was just glad that no one was more seriously hurt, or he’d be pushing for some more serious punishment, but he’s still new here, so he can’t throw weight around like that yet.
“Come on,” he says, drawing Dean over to a small dining area near some food vans, where Dean slumps into a plastic chair.

The student who Dean had leaped in to defend hovers nearby, having taken none of the beating himself. "Hey, thanks for stepping in for me, man. I owe you one. If you ever need anything, just ask, okay?"

"You don't owe me anything, Garth. Those assholes—oof!" Dean grunts as Garth wraps his arms around him, patting his back awkwardly. “Seriously, it’s cool.”

Castiel steps in, pulling Garth away by one arm as he says protectively, “He’s injured, please give him some space.” When Garth steps back, Castiel takes Dean’s arm and starts moving it around as gently as he can. Dean looks up at him, confused. If Dean’s ribs are damaged, Castiel will have to take him to the infirmary—it’ll be too much for him to heal in one spell.

Garth still sounds nervous as he speaks, "Well, I think I'm done for tonight, anyway. Have a good night."

“Wait, Garth, is it?” Castiel straightens up from where he’d been leaning over Dean.

Garth turns to look at him.

“I’m Doctor Novak. If you have any trouble like that again, you can come to me, okay? I have lay family members, too. I know how…how things can be sometimes.”

Garth nods. “Thanks, sir, I will. Goodnight!”

They both bid Garth goodnight, as Castiel turns back to Dean and gently presses at his pectoral. Dean inhales sharply, shakily.

"Hold still," Castiel mutters, concentrating on starting a slow gathering of energy towards his hands. He can’t feel any fracture in Dean’s ribs—that doesn’t mean there isn’t one, but he can help with the pain for now. He closes his eyes, feeling the familiar tingle in his hands as he places them either side of Dean’s shoulder, front and back.

As Castiel releases the healing stream into Dean’s muscle, he opens his eyes. Dean's own eyes widen as their gazes meet, and the combination of the lay magic buzzing through his body and the usual electricity when he locks eyes with Dean makes his knees wobble slightly.

He sits down heavily into the chair beside Dean, a little out of breath in the afterglow.

Dean puts on hand on his chest, pressing slightly. “Did you just…”

“It’s just a little pain relief. You could still have a cracked rib or something—it’s worth a trip to the ER." As Castiel looks at Dean’s face, he realizes he hadn’t directed the healing spell to fix the split in Dean’s lip. “Oops, missed this…” He reaches up a hand to Dean’s face, hesitating a moment before gently grazing Dean’s soft bottom lip with his fingertips. The feather-light touch sends a shiver back up his arm, and he actually feels the sharp intake of Dean’s breath as his lip mends itself.

Castiel draws his hand back quickly, suddenly embarrassed, and a little shocked by the strength of the compulsion to touch that soft skin again, but with his own lips. He shifts back, as Dean lifts a hand to touch his mouth, his eyes wide again.

Castiel stands up. “So,” he says, mustering his composure. “Want to go to the ER now, or—?”
Dean clears his throat, like he's also diffusing tension. “No, I think I need a drink. Don’t you?” he asks, also standing and walking away toward the food vans.

They quickly find that the longest line in the place is, unsurprisingly, for the bar, so they join the end of the queue, standing awkwardly together. Where before they'd had an easy banter, enjoying each other's company, now there’s an almost palpable **something** in the air.

Castiel tries to push down the nerves fluttering up from his stomach. He’s told himself over and over it’s unprofessional to acknowledge this attraction to Dean as his student, but it seems his body has other ideas. Being so close to Dean is always a distraction, but those fleeting touches were like electricity, and his hands are itching for more.

The tension only winds tighter as they shuffle forward, when Dean turns suddenly and groans positively sinfully at a passing girl. She gives him a raised-eyebrow look much the same as Castiel gives him as she hurries away—did he just make a pass at that girl while Castiel had been daydreaming about touching him?

Dean turns to Castiel with a stricken look. "Did you see that pie? Cas, with all the fight and stuff, I forgot all about the pie competition!"

The outburst is so unexpected that Castiel lets out a laugh before he can help it. Had he really just gotten jealous of a slice of pie?

"Hey, don't laugh! It's my final year—I was supposed to be judging it," Dean retorts, frowning.

Castiel smiles in a more sympathetic way. "I'm sorry, Dean. I didn't realize pie was so important to you."

"Pie is life, Cas. Love me some pie. Especially at Samhain. And I can't believe I forgot. It runs out real quick after the comp finishes." He slaps his own forehead, groaning again.

Castiel looks around in the direction the girl had come from, but can't see any obvious pie sellers in the area. "We could go there now if you like? I can wait for alcohol."

Dean shakes his head. "No way. I can't show my face there after this! Missouri'll have my hide! Besides, we'd have to line up all over again."

Castiel grins again, then puts his hand on Dean's shoulder and says, "Okay, how about you stay in this line, get me a drink, and I'll go find the pie?"

Dean's eyes flick up from where they had been resting briefly on Cas' hand on his shoulder. The hopeful smile he lights up with warms Castiel to his toes and set the moths fluttering in his stomach all over again. "Would you do that? Thanks, Cas. It’ll be in the main tent over there."

*What am I doing here?* Castiel thinks, his heart hammering as he walks away from Dean, fighting through the crowds towards the main marquee. He would do anything—**anything**—to have Dean smile like that more often. Anything, including fetching pie to make Dean happy.

A cool breeze is blowing through the crowds now that it’s getting later, but thankfully the clouds have remained dry for now. People are crowding around vendors selling warm hazelnuts or hot chocolate, and clustering near spelled heaters that blow warm air across the walkways.

The pie judging has indeed ended by the time Castiel finds his way into the marquee, but he spies Missouri supervising a gaggle of students carrying small, white boxes out of the back of the tent. The tables crossing the space are bare, only a few crumbs scattered across the white tablecloths.
Are they really too late for pie?

Missouri spots him. "Castiel, there you are. Give me a hand with this, will you?" she lifts the edges of one tablecloth, waiting for him to take the other and help her to fold it.

As they fold the ends together, Castiel asks, "Where's the pie?"

"Oh, that's all over and done now. No thanks to that friend o' yours, not even showing up. Good thing he isn't with you right now or he'd be getting a piece of my mind!"

Castiel frowns. He promised Dean pie, and he's determined to get it. "Are you sure? Is there pie in the boxes?" he asks, eyeing another load being taken by the student helpers.

Missouri wags one finger at him. "Those are going back to the competitors. They're not for sale."

Castiel frowns. "Oh. Are you sure there isn't any I could take? Just a small piece?" He isn't sure mentioning that it's for Dean would be helpful, so he keeps quiet as they step closer to the table so Castiel can pass over the folded edges of the sheet.

"A small piece?" she asks, her eyes narrowed as she places the folded tablecloth on the table. "Well, it happens I have a few samples I had saved for Mister Moseley, but I suppose I could always cut a few more slices…"

"Thank you," Castiel says with a smile.

She shakes her head, grinning, then fetches one of the white boxes from a chair against the wall. She hands it over to Castiel, saying, "You boys have a good night now."

"Thanks, Missouri. We will," he says, taking the box and turning to leave. It isn't until he's outside the marquee that he remembers he hadn't told Missouri he was here with Dean. She must have seen them together earlier or something.

He hurries through the crowd back towards where he'd left Dean, but as he gets closer, he can't see Dean standing anywhere—not near the bar or the food vans at least—but he spots him standing at the back of a crowd gathered around a group of wandering acrobats, who are performing a series of tricks that make the audience gasp and cheer.

Castiel sidles up to Dean, watching as the lead acrobat pulls elemental magic, her flowing dress and long hair whipping around into a spiral as she rises on a tight column of air. Her partner backflips across the stage and lands perfectly beneath her, his hands planted on the grass and feet in the air. They perform a synchronized dance, held up by the whirlwind, and Dean is so enthralled that when he finally notices Castiel beside him, it makes him jump, nearly spilling the four cups in his hands.

"Jesus, sorry Cas, didn't see you there. These guys are something, aren't they?" Castiel agrees, and Dean's eyes drop to the box in his hands. "You got some? Cas, you're awesome." There's that grin again.

Castiel smiles in return, completely helpless to do anything else. He tears his eyes away from Dean's to look back to the acrobats. "Should we go and eat, or are you still…?" He nods towards the performers, but Dean shakes his head.

"Nah, I got extra cider so we won't have to get back in line—I was just waiting for you. Let's go. I think the bonfire is lit now."
Dean leads the way, heading away from the crowded food area. They join a stream of people heading for a large, open area.

Castiel can feel the elements before he even sees the bonfire—a rumbling sensation through the ground, permeating the air around them. The fire itself is huge, easily twenty feet across and built with spelled wood that will burn all night. A large crowd mills around the fire, sitting in some areas, and dancing over on the far side where a band is playing. Unusually, and pleasingly, the music is at a level that they can still hear each other without having to shout.

They find a spot on grassy hill amongst others eating and drinking, overlooking the bonfire. Castiel puts the box of pie on the ground, then places one palm on top of his other hand and moves his fingers in the pattern to draw the moisture off the grass, so they can sit down. As Dean passes two of the warm ciders to him and he gets comfortable, he notices Dean looking up and down the clusters of people sitting around them on the hill.

“What is it?” he asks, as Dean plants himself on the grass, the white box sitting between them.

“Just seeing if Charlie is around. I haven’t seen her since she took off with that friend of hers.” He takes a mouthful of cider and swallows with a loud lip smack and an “ahh.” “I hope they’re having fun, wherever they are.”

Castiel tastes the cider, enjoying the sweet tang and the way it warms him from the inside out, making him tingle all the way to his fingertips. He peers down at the cup. “Dean, is this cider spelled?”

Dean glances at him. “Yeah, usually is— bit of a tingle to warm you up. Why, does it taste funny? Mine’s okay.”

“No, it’s nice... I just wondered.” Castiel sees Dean looking around again, and wonders if he’s bored, that he needs to look around for his friend. “Did you want to go look at the rest of the festival?”

Dean turns around quickly. “Nope! I was just looking for Sam that time. He hates Halloween, but loves the Samhain festival—don’t even ask. He’ll be here somewhere. We’ve always wanted to come to this, ever since Uncle Bobby told us about it when we were kids. Never missed a year since I started as an undergrad.” He shifts as he speaks, rubbing at his chest absently.

“How are your ribs now? They’re hurting again, aren’t they?” Castiel asks.

Dean moves his arm up and down carefully. “There’s a twinge, but I’ll live. Your painkiller’s still holding up, although I know what’ll help.” He lifts the lid on the pie box, his eyes lighting up in the glow of the bonfire. “Oh my god, Cas, how much of this did you get?”

Castiel huffs out a laugh. “Show me?”

Dean moves the box around so Castiel can look into it and admire the six or seven generous slices of pie inside.

“Missouri was taking all this home to her husband? Lucky him!”

“No, unlucky him, because she gave them to us instead!” Dean crows, and breaks one piece of the pie in half. He lifts it, taking a large bite and groaning around his mouthful with a sound that might rival the gay porn Meg had sent Castiel as a joke last week (which he’s secretly been enjoying, but will never admit to her). Heat pulses suddenly in Castiel’s core. What the hell? He was never going to look at pie the same ever again.
“Spiced Pumpkin! This is incredible. Actually, no, it’s disgusting. Let me finish this one, you’ll hate it.”

Castiel laughs again. “Shut up and give me the pie.”

They share the slices out, each one a different flavor. Castiel tries his hardest not to look at Dean licking caramel off his fingers, and keeps his knees up to hide any bulge between his legs. Who knew eating anything could be so erotic?

The cider goes down smoothly and soon Castiel is comfortable on a warm, cozy cloud with Dean by his side, telling him a story of his Uncle Bobby trying to teach him and Sam to throw witchlights to each other.

“So poor Sammy takes a witchlight full in the face and nearly loses his eyebrows! Bobby was pretty mad about that one,” Dean chuckles.

“You know witchlights are lay magic, right? They’re produced from the caster’s own energy,” Castiel says, suddenly more curious about Dean’s Uncle Bobby.

Dean pauses, then turns to Castiel. “I did know that, because it was before we were students here. Hey, can I ask you something?” At Castiel’s nod, he continues, “So, you’re a mage, like you teach at an elemental school, but you cast lay magic so easily. And—and—” he waves a finger for emphasis, “—you write your own spells that use both! I guess what I’m asking is how you got so good at doing all that.”

He leaned back on his hands, answering without thinking too carefully first. "Well, I was casting lay magic with my sister long before I went to university. And my area of study at Oxford involved lay magic. Why is that so surprising?"

"Not surprising. I read some of your paper."

"Oh yes, so you did," Castiel looks over at him and nods. "I'd love to hear your thoughts on it sometime."

"Mostly I wondered why you decided to take on such a…" He waves his drink around, trying to think of the words. “Y’know, a hot-button topic."

"It's only really controversial here, I believe. In the UK and other places in Europe, lay magic is more openly used, and control of it is taught. I guess there's less of a stigma of being seen to use it. Unless you lose control and burn out, of course, like I did the other day, but at least that wasn't in public like—"

He breaks off from his ramble when he realizes what he was about to reveal. He doesn't seem to be able to help himself with Dean, though.

“Like what? Has it happened to you before?” When Castiel nods uneasily, Dean continues, "What happened? Did you cast another big spell like we did?"

"Oh no, I've certainly never dual casted quite like that before. That was—” Castiel shakes his head and lets out a breath, before he continues, “—incredible. This was a different spell—a different purpose."

"I'm listening," Dean says, lying back on his side the hill with one elbow behind him, facing towards Castiel.
Castiel considers if he should tell Dean. Meg would tell him not to, but when he looks down at Dean, he only sees open curiosity. He takes a deep breath.

"Okay. My graduation was held in the great hall of Babbage's. Since I was one of the only people graduating with a doctorate, I was asked to give the keynote speech, which of course I was honored to accept. At the time I was still full of anger about what I'd uncovered in my research. I'm not sure how much of it you read, but basically, that lay magicians in America are repressed and forced to go underground. It happens in England too, of course, but to a lesser extent." He pauses, taking a drink while he collects his thoughts.

"I had mentioned in passing to Meg one night when we were out drinking that I'd found out a few truths about Babbage I thought the council could stand to hear. Meg dared me to reveal them in my grad speech, but I really wanted to make a statement."

The memory of that afternoon is fresh and bright in his mind. He looks around furtively to make sure he can't be overheard as he describes the scene to Dean.

Castiel stands behind the lectern in his academic robe and cap, nervous as hell. He's never spoken in front of this many people before—the hall is standing room only and rows of expectant graduands sit before him.

He clears his throat, looking down at his notes to remind himself of his opening lines.

“Madame Chancellor, Honorable Council, Ladies, and Gentlemen, it’s my pleasure to welcome you to this—our graduation ceremony.” He pauses, waiting for a cheer from the audience, but only hearing one or two small murmurs. Meg wasn’t wrong about tough British crowds. He notices Balthazar sitting on one side, near the front—he gives Castiel two thumbs up and a grin. Castiel ploughs on.

“As a society, we place great value on our careful and thorough education, to ensure elemental mages in the community have the best training to wield our ancient magic. As many of you know, my field of study looks at the divides in our society, especially between elemental mages and lay magicians. The controversy surrounding this topic is well-entrenched in the media, so I don't want to talk your ear off about the topic, but a few things came to light during my research that I wasn't able to put into my thesis.”

There's a murmur in the crowd, and he waits for calm before he continues. “In fact, it's best that you hear it from the man himself, the great Doctor Babbage." He steps back towards the huge portrait of Charles Babbage, founder of the school, on the wall behind him, turning away from the curious audience. Raising his hands, he draws a combination of the elements, as well as keeping lay magic simmering beneath his skin. Moving his fingers precisely the way he's been practicing for the last week or so, he layers the elemental illusion over the famous portrait, then calls forth the lay magic and projects a voice as he moves the elements in front of the picture, so it appears to speak. It had taken hours of practice with Meg to get it just right, and he'd been pretty happy with the result. He just hopes the amplified voice is loud enough to be heard at the back.

"Congratulations, graduates." The pretend Babbage's voice booms out over the crowd, who gasp and clap. His words are those that Babbage himself had said at one point, muttered under Castiel's breath as he held the spell together. "This school was founded on my wish for careful education for
the casting of safe elemental spells. Much has been lost over the last century and a half, including
the fact that I was also an accomplished lay magician. My colleague, Ada, was also renowned for
her lay casting prowess."

Castiel pauses as he hears the crowd mutter and murmur behind him, and he realizes his hands are
shaking with the effort to hold the illusion. The painting is larger than he remembers. He grits his
teeth and keeps going. "I have always said that lay magic is the perfect companion to the elements
—it adds a spark, a dazzle, but also an organic and intuitive sense of control."

Castiel's hands are shaking violently now, and he feels the exhaustion catching up. When he
glances behind him, he sees two Councillors, Abbadon and Barthamus frowning in the front row.
His work here is done—better wrap it up.

"You are all gifted mages—do not be afraid of what you do not understand! I…" The illusion
 glitches slightly as Castiel loses his grip on the elemental part of the spell. Crap, he’s forgotten part
of the lay connection. His vision blurs—this is too close to the edge. "Councillors Abbadon and
Barthamus are having an affair!" The voice booms. Castiel tries to step back in horror, but he’s lost
control of the spell now. It seems to be taking more from his mind than he wants to offer.
"Balthazar slept with five students this year…" The voice cuts out as the exhaustion hits him hard
and he falls to the stage with a crash.

Dean laughs so loudly that a few of the people around them turn around to stare at him. He rubs at
his eye as he gasps out, “Oh god, that’s fuckin’ hilarious. Wish I’d been there to see it.”

Castiel can’t help his grin at Dean’s reaction. “Well, the council didn’t think it was quite so funny.”

“What happened?” Dean asks after draining his cider cup.

"I burned out hard—woke up in the infirmary a few hours later. The council were scandalised, told
me I’d disgraced the memory of our great founder, not to mention embarrassing them personally.
They had cast some big memory alteration spell on everyone there right away except me and Meg,
so they all thought I’d got up to speak and passed out right away. My message never got out, and
they basically told me I’d never be welcome to work at Oxford,” Castiel finished with a shrug.

Dean shakes his head. “That sucks, man.” He glances out over the bonfire, before he looks back to
Castiel with a grin. "But hey, you wouldn’t missed out on all this,” he says, gesturing to the bustling
faire.

Castiel gives him a flat look. "Yes, it was almost all worth it so I could spend tonight with you,” he
says, trying to keep the sarcasm level high—he doesn’t want to let on how close that is to the actual
truth.

Dean chuckles and looks down, then looks up again from his empty cup to ask, “So, who’s Meg?
And why didn’t they wipe her memory?”

Castiel looks back away towards the flames, saying, “Meg’s a friend. My girlfriend, at the time,
actually. She had to remember the incident to keep me in line, apparently, though she didn’t stop
laughing about it for weeks.”

"Oh.” Castiel can hear Dean fiddling with the empty cup, tapping at it. “So are you still together?
She doesn’t live around here?"

"No, we… I—" Cas falters. While the sting from the break up is mostly gone, he really doesn't want to get into it. It was a difficult time, and the reason he's not still wallowing in self-pity is sitting beside him. "No," he repeats, looking across the roaring bonfire to where fireworks have started climbing into the dark sky.

Fireworks are elemental by nature, but Castiel has always loved the spelled variety, that burst into complex patterns and recombine to produce detailed images. The sky is lit up with geometric designs, followed by a scene of a waterfall, the water appearing to flow across the sky and down onto the bonfire. A large dragon flies up out of the sparks and around over the festival, before exploding in rainbow sparks.

Castiel looks over at Dean and has to catch his breath at the way the bright lights play over Dean’s face. He pushes down the flutters again and says, “Dean? Thanks for inviting me tonight. I’ve really enjoyed it.”

Dean glances over at him, then holds his gaze and smiles. “Anytime. It’s good you’ve enjoyed being on my level.”

Castiel rolls his eyes and looks back towards the sky, his mouth quirking into a grin without him meaning to.

Chapter End Notes

Please let us know what your favourite part of festival was! Would you go to a magical Halloween fest? :)

Edit: TCBaby here! So, if you follow my other WIP you might already know this, but I wanted to share with you guys, too:

I’m participating in the Fic Facers auction, where lovely readers can bid on me to write a fic tailored specifically to your tastes. ALL of the proceeds go to Random Acts, and I’m thrilled to write for such a great cause and get to talk one-on-one with a generous reader!! You can find more information about the auction here, read my profile, and check out the highest bid. Let’s make something awesome together!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, welcome back. Thanks so much for all your support so far!

Must be time to get into this thesis project, right? (Aka, sexual tension and pining, with some academics sprinkled in…)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the middle of November, Dean and his students all seem to be in a holiday mindset, counting down until Thanksgiving. Dean is especially distracted today, since Benny texted him an hour ago and he learned that his old, Louisianian flame will be visiting Palo Alto for turkey day. He’s excited to see his friend after several months of missed phone calls, but he’s also aware that a lot has changed for him this semester. He’s become more responsible, and he doesn’t know if it’s because he’s teaching, he’s worried about Sam, or…

Cas. Having Cas around means Dean is constantly challenged—as a student, professor, and mage. Now that they’re finally friends, Dean doesn’t wanna screw it up again.

On Monday he walks into Theoris Hall with his bag slung over his shoulder, his coffee the perfect temperature thanks to the spelled travel mug Charlie gifted him last Christmas. It’s a big day for his Intro to Spellcasting students, since they’ve finally mastered enough solo spells that they’re advancing to the cooperative magic unit. Missouri mentioned that she would be sending a few professors to help Dean manage the classroom today, since twenty-plus inexperienced mages attempting complicated magic for the first time can get hazardous. If Dean had a choice in backup, he would request Castiel—thanks to their thesis meetings, they’ve become pretty damn good at simultaneous casting. It still takes Dean’s breath away, not only seeing the spells they manifest together, but experiencing such an awe-inducing sight with Cas. When he daydreams, he conjures up those blue eyes sparkling with excitement.

He crosses the threshold into his classroom and drops his stuff down on the desk. Class doesn’t begin for another fifteen minutes, but the overachieving students will begin trickling in anytime, so he spells the chalk to begin transcribing his notes onto the blackboard. He slings his leather coat onto the chair, wearing a light blue flannel and his nicest jeans. He’s taking a long sip of his coffee when Jess walks in.

Jess is one of his best students, a natural spellcaster and a genuinely kind person…which is why it concerns Dean to see that her face is streaked with tears.

“Professor,” she begins, her voice shaking. She uses the edge of her sweater to wipe stray tears from her eyes. “I-I just wanted to tell you that I won’t be in class this week.”

“Is everything okay?” Dean asks hastily, coming around the back of the desk and stepping closer to her.

“It’s…it’s my dad. They found him.”
Recognition dawns inside Dean’s brain, putting two and two together for the first time. He had no clue Jess, aka Jessica Moore, was the daughter of Professor Moore, a quiet middle-aged man who had been missing for months. Her dad only taught a class or two since his position as administrative head of security kept him preoccupied. His disappearance had been hot gossip all semester, but President MacLeod had assured them she was working tirelessly to assist the police in their search. If Dean had known Jess had been dealing with the absence of her father on top of her heavy coursework, he would’ve…helped her somehow. Been a better and more involved teacher. But the professor has been located now, and his return home is all that matters.

“Oh, that’s great—”

“He’s dead,” she interrupts, a new stream of tears cascading down her face. “He was…bloody and beaten. The police think he was tortured for a while, but that he’s been dead for months.”

“That’s terrible,” Dean says, his voice strained. He wants to ask more questions, wants to speculate on all these violent crimes targeting the university staff, but Jess isn’t the right audience to voice his concerns. She just learned that her father died in a bloody, gruesome way. “Take as much time as you need. Can I do anything for you?”

“No, thank you. I’ve already told Doctor Moseley and she’s going to email the rest of my professors. I just saw your door open and thought…” She hiccups, her breathing shallow. “I better go. My mom is waiting for me to come home.”

“Take care of yourself, Jess. Don’t worry about school right now—you’ve got the highest marks of anyone in the class, and I’m willing to bet you’re doing just as well in your other courses, too.” Even under the circumstances, his student blushes a little and nods, confirming Dean’s theory. “Your professors will understand.”

Dean watches her go with a sympathetic frown on his face, remembering what it was like to lose his parents so young. She exits through the threshold the moment Castiel walks in, and he’s such a welcomed sight after such bad news that Dean has to fight the urge to hug him. The professor is wearing his standard black suit, blue tie, and trench coat, and the image of the magic mirror flashes in Dean’s mind. It was the same outfit, and his stomach lurches with nerves. Surely he’s misremembering what he’d seen—it had been dark that night, Cas had been on his mind, it was a trick of the light…

“Hello, Dean,” comes the familiar rumble of a greeting, and Dean tries to cheer up, offering him a lopsided smile.

“Hey Cas,” he says breezily, “Missouri put you on backup duty?”

“She did.” Castiel slips his coat off, hanging it on the nearby coat rack. Dean turns his head, watching the enchanted chalk so he isn’t tempted to stare at the professor’s every move. When Cas is around Dean has to fight the urge to step closer to him, to hold eye contact longer than friends or colleagues should. When he turns around Castiel is right behind him, their boots colliding together in a way that makes Cas reach his hand out to steady Dean. He tilts his head, looking at Dean inquisitively. “What’s wrong?”

*Figures that Cas can read me like a damn book,* Dean thinks.

“They found Professor Moore,” Dean whispers lowly. “My student who just left? That’s his daughter. He was—he was found dead.”

“Oh…” Castiel’s face changes from curious to concerned, eyebrows raised in shock, lips turned
downward. “That’s awful news. I’m so sorry to hear that.”

Dean nods and sighs, noticing that they’re still standing incredibly close, but the warmth radiating from Castiel is comforting him too much to step away. “It’s the third murder this year, Cas. What the hell is going on?”

Castiel’s forehead crinkles with worry. “It is quite concerning. It seems there are some roguish characters trying to get the university’s attention.”

Before Dean can ponder that fully, or make fun of Cas for being the type of person who uses words like roguish, another professor enters the classroom. Gray hair balding on the top, wearing a stiff suit and silver tie, Zachariah Adler has a sneer already embedded on his unfriendly face.

“Well, isn’t this cozy,” he mocks, raising an eyebrow in such a way that they both take a firm step backwards.

“Dean was just telling me about Professor Moore,” Castiel says coolly. “I assume you’ve heard?”

“Missouri just sent an email to all her professors this term.” Zachariah pulls out his old blackberry phone, the email app open. “It’s tragic, but this doesn’t mean Miss Moore can let her studies slip. I don’t give easy As…isn’t that right, Dean?”

Dean doesn’t know if it’s the smirk on Adler’s face, or the callous way he’s treating Jess so soon after her dad’s death, but he’s suddenly furious.

“Oh yeah, you’re a vision of academic excellence,” he snaps. He feels two sets of eyes on him—Adler’s, full of disdain and anger, and Cas, apprehensive and cautious, warning Dean to calm down.

“I suppose I should be taking cues from you, then? After the violent altercation you instigated with a student at the Samhain Faire?” He clicks his tongue disapprovingly.

“If you heard the bullshit that guy was spouting off—”

“Brady Johnson’s father is an important benefactor to the school. Something I’m sure you didn’t realize when you were busy advocating for lay magician rights…as if that’s a thing,” Adler snorts.

Distantly, underneath all the irritation and fury, the name Brady sounds vaguely familiar…but Dean’s too distracted to remember why.

“Listen you—”

“It was a terrible circumstance,” Castiel interrupts mildly, trying to diffuse the situation. “But perhaps we should all focus on the task at hand?”

A handful of Dean’s students begin to trickle in, effectively ending the potential argument between them, and Adler scowls and leans against the large radiator. Dean smiles thinly and welcomes his students by name.

Five minutes later, everyone except Jess is in attendance—even Ruby, though she’s sitting in the very back with a hoodie covering her head. Between her presence and Adler’s constant goading, Dean isn’t sure he’s going to be able to pull himself together enough to lead the class. As if on cue, Castiel leans against the window and gives Dean a reassuring smile and tilt of the head, as if to say, go ahead, you’ve got this, I believe in you.
Dean smiles back.

“Morning all,” he announces lightly, his students’ conversations trailing off. “As you can see, we have some company this morning. You should already know Doctor Novak and Doctor Adler. They’re two fine professors who have agreed to help me observe you all today. As we discussed last week, you’ll be pairing off in teams of two to attempt…what, exactly?”

“Cooperative magic,” someone says, a student who’s usually shy so Dean nods encouragingly.

“Right. What spell?”

“Levitating,” another student volunteers.

“Exactly. We’ll be practicing a standard spell, one you’ve already mastered individually, but it’s made much stronger when two mages cast together.” He pulls a mason jar of marbles from his bag, clinking them around appreciatively. “We’ll start out small. Let’s try not to put anyone’s eye out with flying marbles, okay?”

There’s an undertone of chuckles as Dean continues, walking to the chalkboard. “Before we dig in, let’s review the key points of simultaneous spellcasting. Who can give me the first one?”

Ten minutes later, the chalkboard is filled with various notes and suggestions: begin slowly, maintain eye contact, be patient, trust your partner.

“I can’t emphasize that last one enough,” Dean finishes, the chalk still hovering next to his head. “Cooperative magic is all about connection. The stronger the relationship, the stronger the spell. It’s why many major spells are cast by families or covens, because magic is a personal practice and our emotions impact spells.” He claps his hands together, the chalk falling deftly onto the ledge. “Who’s ready to get started?”

Desks are pushed to the corner of the room, bags and books stowed away, and the students begin to pair off. Dean passes around the marble jar and each team collects one, placing it on the floor. They’ve been practicing the hand motions for weeks, but of course, the moment Adler’s prying eyes are observing him, Dean’s students act like they’ve never seen it before.

“Your palms should be hovering near each other’s, but not touching,” Dean reminds them. “Go to third position, then fourth, then first.”

“I can’t remember how to transition from fourth to first,” a student admits, and a few others nod their heads. Adler is standing close by and perks up to attention, facing Dean with an energized smirk.

“Let’s show them how’s it done, Professor.”

Dean swallows down a snide remark, Castiel glancing at him worriedly over Adler’s shoulder. He nods and flattens his palm, Adler lowering his to the bottom, as they transition from flat position, to fists with pointer finger raised, to crossed like an X. It’s clumsy and awkward casting with Adler, and Dean hates every minute of it, hates how fast Adler casts without paying attention to Dean’s own pace, hates the dark look in his eye, hates the distasteful sensation of their magic combining. The marble between them barely lifts off the ground, tilting to the left and right before raising half a centimeter and falling down again.

“I thought it would move more,” someone comments, and Dean drops his hands in exasperation.

“We weren’t really trying,” he lies, “we just wanted to show you the hand motions. Now, you all
Ten minutes later, the three professors are weaving their way through the practicing crowd, pausing to give each pair feedback. Dean overhears Castiel giving a struggling student some great advice about finger dexterity, and he smiles, glad that Cas is here. He feels more grounded and confident in his presence, though he can no longer deny the perpetual feeling of butterflies in his stomach every time their eyes meet. So...maybe his crush isn’t over after all. Who cares? It’s not like Dean’s going to do anything about it, so what’s the harm?

With only five minutes remaining in the period, Dean’s slightly disappointed that none of his students have successfully moved their marble yet. He wonders if it’s a lack of concentration while casting, if they haven’t developed a strong enough bond with their classmates yet, or if they’re simply too inexperienced to attempt such a complicated concept.

“All right, everyone, great attempts. But a few of you have sloppy handwork, and that might be why you haven’t had any luck yet.” He goes quiet, thoughtfully cataloging his options moving forward, and he goes with his gut when he says, “Watch Doctor Novak. He’s one of the most precise casters I’ve ever seen.”

Castiel seems to flush under the praise, stepping towards the center of the room. “Only if you’ll join me, Professor Winchester,” he mutters humbly, eyes on Dean, and the butterflies in his stomach return.

“Of course,” Dean replies softly, the students and Adler edging to the corners of the room, watching them closely. For some reason, Dean’s heart is hammering out of his chest—he’s cast with Cas a few times now and it’s been intense each time, powerful and all-consuming. But no one’s ever watched them cast together before, and he wonders if he’ll be able to work through his stage fright enough to show his students how to perform the spell properly.

Eyes locked together, Dean and Castiel flatten their palms, hovering so close that Dean has the urge to touch, to feel skin on skin. Boots almost touching, they transition to fourth position effortlessly, hands in parallel fists with their pointer fingers brushing. Dean fights the urge to gasp, the current of electricity that passes through him making him feel invigorated—invincible. They cross their hands into an X shape before beginning the spell again, this time decidedly faster, feeling the momentum of the magic gathering around them. Dean sees their marble levitating well above their heads now, but they keep casting together in perfect sync, the energy charged and flowing between them with incredible power. Dean is slightly addicted to the feeling of Cas’ magic, the euphoric high of being so connected, and until now he always thought it was the presence of lay magic that Castiel incorporates into his spells...but it can’t be, because here they are, both using elemental magic and performing a basic spell. But Dean still feels dizzy and enraptured by Castiel’s gaze, forgetting for a moment that they have an audience, the background fading into his consciousness as Castiel’s eyes bore into him. It’s thrilling, like nothing he’s ever experienced before.

Distantly, he hears some disruption happening around them—gasp, exclamations. The teacher in him forces himself to look away from Castiel, and then he sees it.

Their spell is much too powerful.

Not only is every marble in the room floating to the ceiling, scattered around like crystalized snowflakes, but so is all the furniture. Desks are hovering above the students’ heads precariously, every backpack and stack of books. Even Dean’s heavy wooden desk is skating several feet off the ground.
“Cas,” he whispers calmly, “let’s taper off. Go slow, okay?”

If they drop the spell abruptly, a variety of objects could fall on his students heads—heavy furniture being the most worrying. Castiel’s eyes wander up for a split second, his face incredulous, and he gulps and nods. Their rhythm decreases gradually, flat palms to fists to crossed, over and over again, the spell diminishing gently as all the floating objects are returned safely to the ground. When the scrap of wood meets the concrete floor, Dean sighs in relief, knowing his desk would’ve been the heaviest and last object to move. His assumption was correct—the desks and bags and marbles are all returned. Everything is back to normal.

Except for the classroom of absolutely awestruck students, of course.

That’s new.

“Did you two practice that?!”

“That was amazing!”

“Awesome!”

“That was the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Dean chuckles uneasily, as uncomfortable with the praise as he is with a bunch of his students witnessing what just happened. He feels embarrassed and he doesn’t quite know why. He might as well have hung a “I wanna bone Cas” sign around his neck, for how intimate and intense that was. Adler is leaned against the back wall, arms crossed and scowling, and Dean feels his neck sweating at the collar.

“Oh, okay,” he waves them off casually. “That’s enough inflating our egos for one day.” He smiles sheepishly at Castiel, whose cheeks are pink, and they look at each other companionably. “We’ll practice again on Wednesday, with a rotation of new professors to help out. For homework, I’d like you and your partner to practice for at least an hour, and be prepared with notes on what your strengths and weaknesses are.”

There are some quiet groans, but mostly everyone nods and retrieves their belongings, moving the desks back with a cacophony of sound that has Dean’s temples aching. He goes to the chalkboard, and with a flick of his wrist, the eraser begins to wipe all his notes clean. He feels overwhelmed, wishing he had a quiet place to escape to, or better yet—a private place to talk to Cas, to process what just happened.

“Well that was—impressive,” Adler calls, his voice snide and provoking. Dean turns away from the chalkboard, eyeing his own bag and coat. Castiel is slipping his trench coat back on, looking as though he’s ready to interfere at any moment.

“Thanks,” Dean says diplomatically, too preoccupied to let Adler aggravate him. “I appreciate you volunteering your time. Both of you.”

Adler exhales with a laugh, and Dean can’t help himself.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” Adler says darkly, heading for the door. “It just seems like time isn’t the only thing that Doctor Novak has been volunteering.”

Dean’s mouth is gaping wide, too flustered by the implication to respond, but Adler leaves before
either of them can protest.

“I…” Dean swallows, looking down at his feet. “I really fucking hate that guy.”

Castiel catches him off guard by mumbling, “I’m not particularly fond of him either.”

Dean laughs nervously, tucking his hands into his leather jacket. “He’s right to be surprised, though. That spell was—powerful. I didn’t know we could…”

He scratches the back of his neck, feeling flustered and unsure. He doesn’t want to say the wrong thing and scare Castiel away, but their chemistry at this point is noticeable and something they need to talk about.

“I’ve never cast like that with anyone,” Castiel admits quietly, and Dean can’t hide his surprise. They’re standing close together again, feet angled towards each other, hands swinging near each other as if they might touch.

“Seriously?”

“Not even Gabriel or Meg. The closest I came to that sort of shared power was with Anna, but she doesn’t have the formal training you do.” Dean’s been thinking a lot about Castiel’s mysterious sister who practices lay magic, wondering how that’s impacted their family dynamic, but not wanting to pry. “Dean, you and I, I think we…”

Dean’s licks his lips, fidgeting. “Yeah?”

Castiel’s gaze hits him, full of such heat that when his hand touches Dean’s upper arm, they both gasp. The professor’s hand is long and warm, fingers spread wide and touching Dean’s shoulder, and that familiar phenomenon of electricity courses through his veins.

“Do you feel that?” Castiel whispers. “It’s like…”

“My magic,” Dean says, voice hoarse, heart pounding in his ears. “It’s trying to connect to yours.”

“Dean, a connection like this couldn’t…shouldn’t…” Castiel’s breath is labored but he doesn’t remove his hand, the exchange of magical sensation making Dean’s skin tingle through the fabric of his flannel.

“I know.” Dean closes his eyes and reacts naturally, placing his hands on Castiel’s shoulders and then shuffling them slowly, perched around his neck. Dean had felt a fraction of this connection at Halloween, when Castiel’s thumb had brushed the split in Dean’s lip, healing it instantly. Now that he’s gotten a taste of the ecstasy, the harmony and joy, Dean isn’t quite sure how to go without it. He feels overcome when Cas’ hand goes from his arm, to his face, cupping his chin gently. “What does this mean, Cas?”

His eyes flutter open, Castiel’s gaze on him titillating and acute, and he realizes they’re standing barely a breath apart now. It would be too easy to close the distance between them, brush their lips together, give into the impulse that Dean’s been resisting for months.

But at that exact moment someone clears their throat in the doorway. Dean flicks his gaze over in annoyance, and Sam is standing there, staring at them.

“Uh, hey Dean,” Sam mutters awkwardly. “Hey, Doctor Novak.”

Castiel and Dean disentangle their hands clumsily, faces burning and eyes cast down.
“Hi, Sam,” Castiel manages to say pleasantly. “Staying out of trouble, I hope?”

“Trying,” Sam says, smiling, and Castiel nods his approval. “Though I hear my big brother’s the one causing the trouble lately.”

Dean narrows his eyes, wondering how Sam heard about his fight with that Brady guy, or whatever the hell is name is. It’s the first time they’ve seen each other since well before Halloween.

“Long story,” he says shortly. Sam’s been acting weird lately, avoiding his texts and phone calls, so Dean doesn’t particularly feel like opening up to him at the moment.

“Tell me over lunch?” Sam’s eyes are wide and pleading, that stupidly endearing puppy dog look that Dean can never resist. “My treat.”

Dean grunts but agrees, and Castiel nods at them both, politely wishing them a good lunch.

“See you later, at our thesis meeting?” Castiel asks casually, and Dean gives him a shy but enthusiastic yes, unsure how they’re going to revert back to academics after everything that’s transpired between them. Castiel gives them both one final smile before leaving the classroom, and the silence settles between Sam and Dean for a moment, the weight of it building.

“Wow, looks like I’m way behind,” Sam mumbles. “Between punching my roommate and hooking up with Doctor Novak, how do you even have time to write your thesis?”

“Hooking up with—we’re just—what the—” Dean blinks, the words not quite processing as he’s flooded with utter disbelief. “Hold up. Did you say that douchebag Brady is your roommate?”

They walk to the D mostly in silence, partly because the wind is blowing too loudly for conversation, partly because Dean’s anger is stewing. He’s not sure how Sam can act so not like himself all semester, ignoring him at every turn, then stop by and take him to lunch like nothing’s happened. Not to mention annoyingly devious Ruby, and the whole Brady thing, both of which they really need to talk about…but hell if Dean’s going to be the one to extend the olive branch.

Sam and Dean are sitting in their usual booth, Jo having already taken their order and placed a few cokes on the table (diet for Sam), when the awkward tension is finally broken.

“Listen, Dean…” Sam swallows and Dean lifts his gaze from his hands, his jaw set hard. “I’m sorry for how things have been between us lately. This isn’t me, this isn’t us.”

Dean’s interest is piqued, the aggravation coursing through him diminishing slightly. “You got that right.”

Sam chuckles nervously, seeming relieved by Dean’s response. “I know I got caught up with Ruby, especially the night we tried to break into the Seal. I should’ve told you then, but, uh, thanks for being willing to take my mark.” He glances away, concentrating on the condensation rolling off his glass. “Honestly, I think I’ve been avoiding you because I’m embarrassed.”

“Huh,” Dean mumbles noncommittally, trying to decide if Sam’s embarrassment is real or just an excuse.

“Yeah.” Sam blinks, his eyes large and pleading. “You want to know what I’ve spent the last few weeks thinking about?”

Dean tilts his head, grunting for Sam to continue.
“How many times I’ve let you down.”

At that, the final traces of Dean’s resentment and suspicions towards his brother evaporates. His expression changes rapidly, concern to worry to uneasiness. Funnily enough, he had been thinking that Sam had let him down lately, but hearing his brother say anything negative about himself makes Dean riled up and defensive. Nobody talks bad about Sam except him. It’s basically in the big brother handbook. “Sammy—”

“No, Dean, you need to hear this. I’m sorry. It’s like, you’re the only one who can call me on my bullshit, and I haven’t wanted to hear it lately, so I hid.” He exhales with great effort, and Dean clears his throat, fighting the urge to stand up and embrace his brother.

“We’re good, okay?” Dean’s voice is shaking—he hadn’t realized how emotionally taxing this conversation would be. “It’ll take a lot more than a shady brunette to get between us. And you’ve obviously dumped her now, and y’know what, good freakin’ riddance.”

Sam’s eyes go wide, his expression guilty, and Dean’s filled with righteous indignation all over again.

“You’re kidding. After all that, you’re still with her?”

“She’s different now, Dean. We had a long talk and…I trust her.”

“Well I don’t,” Dean snaps, trying to rein in his irritation. They’ve just reconciled and he doesn’t want to ruin it, but seriously, does Ruby have a magic vagina or something? What is up with Sam’s infatuation with her?

“I know she’s rough around the edges, and maybe this is just a phase, but I want to see where things go. I promise I’ll keep my head above water. I’ll be careful.”

“Sam, there are sexy bad girl types, and then there’s Ruby.” Dean had been asking around for weeks, collecting idle gossip from the faculty lounge. Not only is Ruby a pisspoor student, but campus security had busted her last year for carrying an illegal substance. Dean is no prude, but there had been talk about it being more than recreational…maybe she was involved in selling drugs, maybe she’s still in contact with some powerful and underhanded people. “You’ve heard the rumors, right? Drugs? Criminals? You really wanna get mixed up with that?”

“That’s her old life,” Sam says, voice insistent. He sighs heavily, burying his head in his hands. “Listen, it’s complicated.”

“No shit. But—”

“Haven’t you ever been attracted to someone because the situation felt sorta forbidden? Exciting?”

Castiel’s stupidly perfect face pops into Dean’s brain, and he flushes, remembering all the daydreams he’s had about being bent over a certain professor’s desk…

“Yeah,” he grumbles out, and Sam seems to consider that a compromise, giving him a small nod. Jo carries over their lunch, the topic of Ruby shelved as they both dig into their sandwiches.

“Anyways…what the hell happened with Brady?” Sam asks, mouth partially full of some whole wheat vegan panini crap. Dean is really gonna have to have a talk with Ellen about what real pub food looks like.

Dean recounts the whole story, skimming over the flirty Cas parts, and Sam looks thoroughly
shocked and stricken.

“What a dick,” he mutters, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “I’ve never liked him much. I hate that I have to keep sharing a room with him.”

“You can’t switch?” Dean’s mouth is full, so it comes out a garbled mess, but Sam somehow understands.

“Too late in the semester. I haven’t paid for housing next semester yet, so hopefully there’s only one more month left of bunking with him.”

“You could always come and stay at my place, if you need to,” Dean offers casually. His one bedroom apartment is small, but he hates the thought of Sam staying with Brady, or having to shack up with Ruby out of necessity. “Pretty sure Bobby has an extra mattress in the attic somewhere.”

“Cool.” Sam gives him an appreciating smile. “Thanks, Dean.”

The silence between them is comfortable now, companionable, and it makes the chip on Dean’s shoulder feel a hundred pounds lighter. He hadn’t realized how off he’d been feeling lately, being in this tense circumstance with Sam. But give or take a suspicious girlfriend, things are back to normal between them. Not only that, but now he’s friends with Cas, his thesis proposal is gonna be approved any day now, and Ellen has apple pie on special.

Everything is coming up Dean Winchester.

“So, what’s going on with you and Doctor Novak?” Sam asks out of nowhere, and Dean nearly chokes on a large chunk of roast beef.

“Nothing,” he says nonchalantly, and Sam smirks at him so broadly that he rolls his eyes in response.

Yep. Things are definitely back to normal.

Castiel walks away from Dean's classroom, shaken to his core.

He'd known something was different when they'd first cast together, felt the raw power coursing between them, but today…

Today had been incredible. His skin still tingles from where Dean had touched him, and he raises one hand to graze it over his neck as he walks.

The Witch's Brew is buzzing when he wanders into the cafe, but his head is so far in the clouds that he doesn't notice Hannah waving at him until he's right in front of her.

"You okay?" she asks.

Castiel smiles, feeling bad that he'd nearly walked right past her. "Yes, sorry. Miles away. How're you today?"

"Not too bad for a Monday, I suppose." She joins him in the queue to order food. "Hey, did you
It seems the news of Professor Moore's murder has reached the whole school. Castiel sits at a table with Hannah and shares the gossip. No one is really sure when he even went missing, or where his body was found—the whispers have spread and expanded over the morning already. All they know is, there are a lot more security guards around, as Castiel notices two near the cafe entrances. The torture and murder of the head of security is worrying to everyone.

Castiel is glad of the distraction, but when he finally finds his way to his office, there's nothing to stop him thinking about Dean again. He'll be there in an hour or so for their afternoon meeting, and Castiel's really not sure if he's ready to face him again.

But as he opens his email, he sees something that does distract him—an email from Crowley.

To: Castiel Novak

From: Fergus Crowley

Subject: Meeting request

Hi, Castiel.

I know this is quite a few times I've asked now, but I simply won't take no for an answer. I'm planning something big for the lay magic community, something that will help them to become safer, and better understood.

I need your help to make this a reality. I know the head of security there has been found murdered—don't you think empowering the magical community will help make us all safer?

I'll be at my office in downtown Palo Alto this evening until late. I'd be honored if you'd consider dropping by.

Yours,

Crowley

Castiel reads the email, frowning at the pushy tone. This is possibly the fourth email he's received from Crowley over the last few weeks, not to mention several phone calls. He hasn't even replied to any of them, only saying to him on the phone that he'd consider it.

He chews his bottom lip. Crowley’s statement about empowering lay magicians for safety is interesting. If it's training he's talking about, that will take time, and more resources than just Castiel can provide. He has to admit, he's curious, though. Perhaps he'll "drop by" later, as Crowley suggests.

Now, Dean. He clicks over to the notes he'd been preparing over the weekend, as he updates them, wondering how they're going to get through this project after their discovery that morning. He summons a small water sphere and threads it between his fingers. The casting this morning had been so powerful, he’s sure he can still feel the echoes of Dean’s magic zinging around his body. He pulls on the thread, smiling as the water ball increases in size.

He’s busily passing the ball from hand to hand when a knock on the door startles him. He nearly
drops it, but manages to fumble it between his hands to prevent it splashing all over the laptop. Blowing out a relieved breath, he looks up to see Dean looking curiously into the room.

"Everything okay in here?" Dean asks, eyeing the ball of water in Castiel's hand.

"Yes, yes, sorry." Castiel throws the ball into the air and quickly puts hands out, palms facing downwards, then twists fingers into the Evaporator. The sphere disperses into the air as Dean steps towards the chair near the desk.

Castiel sits down awkwardly in his chair. He isn't really sure how to approach what happened earlier. "Did you have lunch with Sam?"

Dean sits down as well as he says, "Yep. Guess what I just found out—one of the guys involved in the fight at Halloween—Brady, his name is—he's Sam's roommate. Fortunately Sam agrees that the guy’s a douchebag, so he’s okay with the fact I punched him.” Dean drops his shoulder bag to the group beside him, chuckling.

Castiel grins. "I'm glad to hear that."

Dean sighs, adding, "Still, I really feel like I need to step it up, set a better example for the kid, y'know?"

"Actually, I think defending Garth when he needed it sets the bar pretty high," Castiel says gently.

Dean ducks his head, a light pink touching his cheeks. "Oh well, at least we're back to normal now. It might have made an awkward Thanksgiving, otherwise."

Castiel nods, feeling a need to press on. "Sure. All right, let's get started." He really doesn’t want to think about the holidays, since he'll be spending them alone this year. He wakes up the laptop screen and takes his cue from his notes. "We've had some good news about your thesis project."

"Wait, wait," Dean interrupts. "We're just gonna gloss right over whatever happened this morning in that classroom? We levitated everything, man! What the hell was that all about?"

"Aha!" Castiel grabs a slim volume from the shelf and takes it over to the desk, placing it in Dean's hands.
Dean eyes the book dubiously, the black cover and embossed title reading, *Profound Bonds: Magical Resonation*. He looks up at Castiel again.

Castiel isn’t sure how to explain it without making things even more awkward. "Magic attracts its own kind. The more similar magic is, the more affinity exists. Our magic,” he says, gesturing between them from where he’s still standing, “is similar enough that it’s resonating—as you saw this morning, it amplified the effects of the spell we cast.”

Dean stares at the book in his hands, nodding thoughtfully. “And is this, uh… affinity thing common with mages? ‘Cause this is the first time I’ve ever heard of it.”

“No, it’s not common. The only reason I’ve heard about it is because Meg studied it during her combat training. If enough resonant mages could form a group to cast combat magic, they’d be unstoppable. I haven’t heard of it happening in recent times, though, I guess mages just don’t cast together much anymore.” He shrugs, sitting down at his desk and leaning forward on his elbows.

“It happens with lay magic too, you know. That’s why I know that I resonate with Anna, my older sister. She never…never had access to elemental magic.” He stops, his guilt at being accepted to university where Anna had not weighing him down all over again. He sits back at his desk, trying to recover his train of thought.

Dean is quiet for a moment. “So what does this mean? Do we need to stop casting together?”

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary. We’ll just have to try to be a little more aware of our surroundings so we don’t break anything, I suppose.”

Dean looks relieved. "Oh, good. 'Cause, I mean…it'll really help to be able to see the spells, I guess." He rubs the back of his neck with one hand, and Castiel has to admit, he knows just how Dean's feeling. He wouldn't want to give up their dual casting either, not after discovering their affinity. He smiles and remembers the electrifying feeling of their combined magic rushing through him.

But before they can cast together again, they really need to get the thesis project organized. He tries to pull his focus back to the laptop in front of him.

“So, can we talk about your thesis now? Did you also get the email from Doctor Moseley?”

They’d spent the last two weeks perfecting the proposal, which basically amounted to Dean requesting access to the Elemental Seal. The Seal had been cast almost a hundred years ago, so they had proposed that it was timely to study its formation and suggest possible improvements to its design.

Castiel wasn’t entirely sure what fascinated Dean so much about the Seal itself, but the project was perfectly suited to his skills, and of course Castiel was happy to chaperone him down to the Seal whenever Dean wanted to go there.

Dean nods, placing the book on the desk. "I saw they'd approved it."

The project had been approved under a few strict conditions—that Dean was to be accompanied to the Seal’s protected location by a staff member at all times, that his visits were to be recorded, and that his analysis of the spells keeping the Seal intact were purely theoretical. There were already tamper-proof alarms in place to prevent changes to the spell structure, so they'd have to be careful while casting nearby.

"I had to argue with the faculty to get there, but they accepted the conditions I suggested. Doctor
Adler still isn't happy with it, but...that's to be expected."

Dean huffs. "I doubt that dickwad is ever happy about anything."

Castiel pauses for a moment, leaning back in his chair. "I'm supposed to tell you not to say nasty things about the teaching staff, but you know I happen to agree."

Dean laughs, and Castiel tries to cover his smirk by saying, "Now, you'll need to make a research plan." He turns the laptop around so Dean can see the screen. "I've made a few notes that I'll forward to you. There's not much, but it's a start."

"Jeez, Cas, anyone would think you were more excited for this project than I am," Dean says, smiling.

Castiel glances up at him, surprised. "Well...I...I am." Castiel’s eyes linger on Dean's for a moment until Castiel looks back at the screen self-consciously. "I've always wanted to know more about the Stanford Seal. This is the perfect opportunity for a closer look."

Dean also sits back, relaxing into his chair. "Did you ever see the Seal at Oxford?"

Castiel shakes his head. "It's tightly guarded. I'm not even sure where it's located. It's a lot older, though, I know that."

Dean nods thoughtfully, scanning over Castiel's notes again. "So, what? You wanna go down there now?"

Castiel smiles. "Who's the excited one now? I actually need to get our security clearance before the wards will let us through."

"Oh yeah, unlike freaking Sam and Ruby," Dean says, shaking his head. "I can go sort it out now, shouldn't take long. We could meet at the library another day this week?"

Dean says, "Sure. You're teaching tomorrow, right? How about...I dunno, we could meet at the D for lunch on Wednesday, then head to the library after that? If you wanted to, of course."

Castiel smiles at the invitation. "Thank you, I'd like that." He’d enjoyed spending the time with Dean at Halloween, but since then they’d both been so busy, there hadn’t been time to catch up outside of thesis meetings.

“Great!” Dean beams at him, getting to his feet. “Hey, uh... mind if I borrow this?” He places one hand on the *Profound Bond* book on Castiel’s desk.

“Of course not, go ahead. I’ll be interested to hear what you make of it.” Castiel smiles, also standing up. “See you on Wednesday.”

As Dean leaves, Castiel sits back at his laptop. That hadn't been as awkward as he'd imagined it might be. Dean continues to surprise him with his open-minded interest in...well, just about anything Castiel's shown him.

The discovery of their affinity in the class this morning was just icing on the cake, though. Castiel can't wait to cast with Dean again—see what they're really capable of. It had been exhilarating, and he wishes that Adler hadn't been there to see it. And that Sam hadn't interrupted...whatever had been about to happen afterwards.
Would he have kissed Dean in that moment? Almost certainly. He rubs at his face with both hands and groans, wondering how Adler might have reacted if he had seen.

He tries focusing on his laptop, noticing the email from Crowley is still open when he clicks over to the app. Crowley wants to meet tonight. He could just go, see what Crowley wants. Even if he doesn't agree to join in, he owes it to the lay community to find out what Crowley's up to, doesn't he?

He'll have to put his Dean-related freak out on hold until later tonight when he can work it out, maybe in the shower. Instead, he lets his curiosity get the better of him, and hits reply.

Rosco answers the knock at the door, letting a tall, rumpled-looking guy in. He looks a little bewildered, probably wondering what he's doing in the top of an office building in the center of Palo Alto. As he steps forward into the brighter glare of the open, glass-walled office, Rosco can't help but notice that his eyes are a piercing blue.

The guy steps forward, thrusting out a hand. "Hi, I'm Castiel Novak. I'm here to see Crowley?"

Rosco takes his hand briefly, muttering, "Rosco," as he returns to his seat by the door. He's not sure if the boss even wants him here during the meeting.

"Ah, there you are, Novak. Welcome." The boss rounds the desk from where he'd been standing near the windows, looking out over the other rooftops in the downtown area.

Novak moves further into the office space, taking in the view himself.

The boss reaches out to shake Novak's hand, then gestures to the armchairs near the windows. "Please, have a seat." He crosses the room to the wooden sideboard, as Novak sits on one of the couches. Rosco thinks he looks a little nervous, but hell, he had been as well, the first time he came in here.

"Dreadful news about Doctor Moore, isn’t it?" he says as he pours two glasses of the good whiskey.

"Yes, things are tense on campus at the moment," Novak replies.

The boss takes the glasses over to the couches, passing one to Novak before he sits down opposite him. "It’s good they found him, I suppose. Closure for his family."

Rosco winces. That’s not what the boss had said earlier that day when he’d found out about it. Rosco was still feeling drained from healing himself after the beating he’d taken for failing to dispose of the body well enough.

Novak says something in reply, but Rosco is too far away to hear it properly. Without making his movements obvious, Rosco presses his palms together and draws a stream of magic from within, moving his fingers to create a small charm to amplify his hearing. He touches his ear, and the conversation becomes clear and focused.

The boss has just started replying to whatever Novak said. "Straight to business, Castiel. I like that about you." He pauses for a moment, taking a sip of his drink, then continues. "I have a group of
lay magicians who have come forward, each having expressed interest in honing their skills, gaining control. We’ve been practicing, building up stamina and focus, and the casting side of things is going well.”

Rosco can see the emotions cross Novak’s face at this news—wariness, confusion, even fear, perhaps. He’s worried about this revelation.

The boss continues, “I’d like you to come along to a few classes, and speak to the students about how lay magic is handled in England. A guest lecturer, if you will.”

Novak frowns. “You want me to tell them they’re repressed? Are you trying to incite some kind of...of trouble?”

The boss sighs, swirling the liquid around in his glass. “I just want what you want, Castiel. A society where all magically gifted people are given equal opportunities for learning to use their skills. Surely that’s not too radical an idea?”

Novak doesn’t say anything for a few moments, his mouth opening and closing. Eventually he puts his glass down on the coffee table in front of him, and reaches up to rub at his eyes with his thumb and fingers. “Crowley, while I agree with your ideals, I’m really not sure that doing this in such an underhanded way is the best way to approach—”

“It’s the only way to approach it, Castiel. We’ve tried applying for consideration, I’ve defended many magicians in court. The council aren’t willing to entertain the idea that lay magicians should be equal to mages.”

Novak sighs. “What about Stanford? They’ll never allow me to teach outside of the university.”

“That’s true, but do they need to know? Just come along one time under the radar, and if it goes well, perhaps you can speak to another class or two.”

Novak looks away, out the window. His face is turned so Rosco can’t read his expression, but when he turns back, his face is stony. “Without trying to sound like we’re in some mafia movie, what’s in it for me?”

The boss has him, and Rosco can see that he knows it. He sits forward eagerly. “A hefty honorarium. And permission to gather material for your next paper, if you like. Plus the satisfaction of knowing you helped those in need, naturally.” He holds out his hand. “Are you in?”

Novak still doesn’t look convinced, but he reaches out and shakes the boss’ hand across the table. “I’m in.”

“Excellent!” The boss sits back, draining his glass victoriously. He holds it up. “Another?”

Novak takes another mouthful of his own but puts the glass down again, then stands up. “Actually, I need to be going. Thanks for the drink, and the, uh, chat.”

“Very well. I’ll be in touch with you about dates and so on.” The boss stands up, beaming. “Great things are coming, Castiel!”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Novak replies, already heading towards Rosco. The demon waves away his amplification charm, standing to open the door for Novak. The man has a haunted expression about him now. Perhaps he’s not quite as on board as he’d first appeared?

“Goodnight, Rosco,” Novak mutters as he leaves.
Rosco closes the door and locks it, moving forward into the room.

The boss looks up as he pours himself another drink. “Well? What did you make of that?”

“He’s not completely sold, sir. We’ll have to put on a proper show for him.”

The boss takes a mouthful of his whiskey and nods. “I thought the same thing. Our rabble better step up, or we’ll lose our best chance.” He looks over at Rosco, a rare smile on his face. “That’ll be all for tonight. See you tomorrow?”

“Yes. Thank you, sir.” Rosco turns to leave, letting himself out of the office. Things are finally starting to move forward.

Chapter End Notes

Only six more days of bidding for the Fic Facers auction!! In case you've forgotten, TrenchcoatBaby is participating this year. If you want a fic tailored to your tastes, with all the proceeds going to Random Acts, please bid here!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday! Enjoy another long chapter, from us to you. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean sits at his usual booth at the Dionysus, taking a sip of soda and plowing through the second chapter of Profound Bonds: Magical Resonation. Jo comes to take his lunch order, but he mumbles something about waiting for his friend, too absorbed in what he’s reading. This is the first opportunity he’s had to dig into the book Castiel lent him, considering he’s been knee-deep in thesis planning since his proposal was approved. As excited as he is to have a project he’s actually motivated to work on, learning more about his supposed affinity to Castiel’s magic is also at the top of his to-do list. Thankfully, he still has about fifteen minutes before Cas is supposed to meet him for lunch, so he hunkers down and keeps reading.

A magical affinity is a biological occurrence, and when broken down to the elemental level, implies that the resonance of one’s spellcasting is similar enough to another’s that their power is magnified. Affinities cannot be altered or chosen, but rather, are quite systematic and measured in their approach.

However, an affinity between two mages can be strengthened by the emotional connection of the casters. In some cases, this establishes a profound bound. It is important to note that a bond does not develop without strong ties already existing between the mages. The presence of a bond is rare, usually shared between family members, lifelong friends, or spouses. The benefits of profound bonds will be discussed more precisely in Chapter 4, but they include: the ability to use another mage’s talisman to channel them during solo spellcasting; the awareness of the spells being cast, even from a distance; physical sensation of magic through skin to skin touch; shared and prophetic dreams; and in some cases, astral projection. However, each bond is unique to the mages, and may include other special abilities not yet uncovered.

“Working hard or hardly working?”

Castiel’s voice cuts through Dean’s concentrated reading, as the professor slides into the booth across from him with obvious interest in his eyes. Dean fumbles to close the hardback book, embarrassed that Cas caught him reading about this, of all things, with such fervor.

“Definitely the latter,” Dean says with a smile. Cas is wearing his standard getup, though the cuffed sleeves are rolled to the elbow, his backwards tie loosened. “You know you wear your tie backwards, right?”

Castiel shrugs, looking sheepish. “I could spell them to be more precise, but my father taught Gabriel and I this method when we were kids. I enjoy thinking of simpler times, though my skills obviously leave much to be desired.”

“Nah, I think it’s cute,” Dean says honestly, thinking about how endearing it is that a professor as no-nonsense as Cas keeps wearing a sloppy tie for sentimental reasons. But then he realizes that he actually said the word cute out loud, in relation to Cas, and his cheeks burn. “I-I mean, doing it for family reasons, it’s—cool. Cute. Whatever.”
Castiel looks amused at his sudden rambling, and Dean wonders if he’ll ever not be flustered in this man’s presence. Jesus.

“Thank you, Dean. I think your connection to your brother is ‘cool’ and ‘cute’ as well.” Castiel’s eyes are warm and kind, and Dean could fall into that look, can feel himself getting pulled into a gravitational force that makes him want to reach out, to touch. His hand twitches nervously on the table, aware that Castiel’s hand is flat against the surface and near his own. What he wouldn’t give to thread their fingers together…

“Deano, you all right?” Jo appears beside their table, hands on her hips and grinning wickedly. “I could see you blushing all the way from behind the bar.”

Dean feels mortified, eyes narrowing and mouth going slack as he shoots her a scowl. “You know you work for tips, right?”

“Touchy,” she smirks, drawing out the syllables. “Who’s your handsome friend? I know all the regulars, and we’ve never seen you before.”

“Castiel Novak,” Cas says pleasantly, peering forward to catch a glimpse of her name tag. “Nice to meet you, Jo. Dean mentioned this is his favorite place on-campus, but I had no idea he came so often.”

“Oh yeah, Sam and Dean are practically family,” she says casually. “Nice to meet you, Castiel.”

“You too. I’ve heard wonderful things.”

She turns her gaze back to Dean with a grin. “Wow, about time you brought in a date who has some actual manners. Even Mom would approve, and you know how she feels about your usual parade of bar flies.”

“Jo—”

“Though you haven’t brought anyone around in a while, and now we know why…”

“Jo, for the love of god,” Dean says through clenched teeth, “would you just take our order already? And after that, maybe go find a knife or a meat clever or a really sharp fork and put me out of my freaking misery?”

To his surprise Castiel laughs openly, his gummy smile so wide that Dean is reminded of the photo he found online months ago—of Cas and Meg at graduation. At the time, he would’ve given anything to have Castiel look at him like that…and now he is.

“Dean and I are just friends and colleagues,” Castiel explains mildly, and even though it’s the truth, it’s like having a bucket of ice water poured over his head. Of course Cas likes him, but only in a platonic way. Any chemistry they have is probably just the product of their magical affinity or whatever, not some hidden romance. “Though, whoever Dean does date would be quite lucky.”

Dean brightens a little at that, and Jo whistles, “Smooth talker, too. You should’ve brought this guy around much sooner.”

The conversation transitions into safer territory after that, and eventually, they each order a cheeseburger and Jo hustles off towards the kitchen.

“Sorry about her,” Dean grumbles the moment they’re alone. “She takes her role as unofficial kid sister way too seriously.”
“It’s fine.” Castiel takes a long sip of his soda and Dean waits, sensing he has more to say. “It’s actually nice to see so many people involved in your life.”

“Yeah, s’not so bad. You making friends here?”

“A few.” Castiel smile is small, humble and unassuming. “Still, nothing like the group you’ve established. You’re very lucky, Dean.”

Dean’s heart swells, knowing just how true that statement really is. Everyone in Cas’ life is scattered about and so far away—his family in Illinois, his college friends in the UK. Maybe Dean should have been more welcoming to Cas, should have spent less time ogling him and more time considering what he needed as a friend.

“Well, luckily, I’m a package deal,” Dean says with a grin, throwing his hands up nonchalantly before taking a large gulp of his drink. “You’ll have these weirdos knocking down your door in no time.”

“You make it sound so appealing,” Castiel says dryly, though beneath the tone Dean can tell he’s touched by the suggestion. There’s a brief pause between them, and Castiel clears his throat, looking up at him with curious eyes. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.” Dean’s amassing a stack of clean napkins and stray paper, absently spelling them into miniature, animated shapes—a careless, nervous habits he’s picked up.

“Jo, she thought you and I were…on a…”

Dean looks up, the beginnings of his 3-D napkin star deflating back onto the table. His heart is pounding out of his chest. Where is Cas going with this?

“Yeah?”

“Well, I guess it just surprised me, because you seem like such a ladies’ man, I didn’t know…” Castiel licks his lips and glances down, Dean tracking the moment before he quite realizes what that might imply.

“Oh, yeah…” Dean scratches the back of his neck, trying to appear cavalier. He shouldn’t be embarrassed—people “come out” everyday. But revealing that information to someone you’ve been harboring a crush on for months feels much more significant.

“I’m sorry, that was prying,” Castiel mumbles in a rush. “I apologize. Forget it—”

“I’m bi,” Dean says loudly, because if he doesn’t say it now he might never say it. Still, it comes out way more awkward than he wanted, and Castiel looks slightly like a deer caught in the headlights. “Uh, but y’know, it’s no big deal. Last summer I had a fling with Benny but that was nothing, and we’re just friends now.”

“Oh,” Castiel says mildly, with some recognition, “the friend who’s starting a restaurant?”

“Yep. He’s coming to visit next week actually. Turkey day tradition.” He can’t read Castiel’s expression, but it seems bizarrely blank. After a moment, the reason for the shift in his mood becomes apparent to Dean.

“What’cha doing for Thanksgiving, Cas?” He sets his hands back on-task, inflating a folded diamond napkin with sudden air. “We all get together at Bobby’s, y’know, and always make extra. You oughta come.”
Castiel’s eyes light up, and his smile is soft when he says, “That’s a very generous offer, Dean, thank you.”

When their lunch comes Dean can’t keep his good mood from showing, groaning the moment he takes a bite of the juicy burger. He licks sauce from his fingers, blushing when he makes brief eye contact with Cas. Today has gotten off to an interesting start, and they haven’t even visited the Seal yet.

Their walk to the library is rainy, and because the forecast boasted a zero percent chance of precipitation, Dean left his umbrella at home. It’s such a heavy drizzle that Cas insists Dean share his, and though it’s a roomy family-sized umbrella, they haven’t stood this close together since that day in Dean’s classroom. Leaning like this in the chilly, wet air, feels so intimate. Their hands and hips occasionally brush, their silence heavy with tension, and it makes Dean’s heart race a noticeable amount.

The chances of him surviving all this one-on-one time he’s gotta clock with Cas in order to finish his thesis project is…pretty damn slim.

He breathes a sigh of relief when they finally escape the bad weather, shaking the water droplets off their jackets as Castiel stows his rain gear near the door. Since it’s the middle of the afternoon, every table and chair seem to be filled with students. Dean doesn’t get to visit the library as often—in fact, the past few times have been with Cas. He supposes that will become their routine, now that they have access to the Seal. They pass rows of ceiling-high bookshelves, focused in their pursuits.

A moment later they reach the massive, wooden door where the Seal is kept locked. Dean’s never given it much thought, since it’s perpetually off-limits, but the hinges look cobwebbed and rusty, the spotty red paint in need of an update. If Dean had to guess how old this door is, he’d say…super freaking old. There’s a sign nearby that reads Highly Restricted Area, but even without the sign, any mage worth their wand would be able to feel the intimidating wall of protective enchantments. Being so close to the door actually makes Dean a little queasy, and he blinks back watery eyes, waiting for Castiel to explain their next step.

“There are sixty-six wards to lower,” Castiel says quietly. There are no students around, since it’s absent of tables or bookshelves and technically off-limits. What they’re attempting to do still feels strangely forbidden, even though they have permission, and Dean chuckles at how they both keep whispering. “This might take a while.”

The professor does a complicated series of hand motions, as precise yet familiar as something out of an advance spellcasting textbook. Watching Cas perform such traditional magic makes Dean realize how often his friend incorporates his own flair, how natural and well-honed his thaumatech skills are. His abilities have always been impressive, regardless of the magic he’s doing or the source he’s drawing from, but Dean likes it best when Cas gets creative. As a mage, he’s like a figure skater or an orchestra conductor—smooth and elegant.

After a few moments of concentrated casting, a thin white light appears around the doorframe, and Cas exhales in relief and shakes his hands loose. It must’ve been a difficult spell, then, though Dean supposes it should be.
“Coulda helped ya, y’know,” Dean mumbles, and Castiel smiles at Dean gratefully but shakes his head.

“That’s one of the rules, I’m afraid. Only a staff member with the right clearance can cast the entrance spell,” he explains, then fishes something out of his briefcase—a small drawstring bag. “This is another rule.”

Castiel pulls out two black clips, small with the glassy circle of a camera attached. He attaches one to the collar of Dean’s flannel, the other on the lapel of his suit jacket.

“How double-oh-seven,” Dean says, trying to sound enthusiastic…but truthfully, he’s not excited by the idea of their thesis research being recorded. He’s just managed to convince Castiel to let down his guard a little, so having their interactions under academic surveillance doesn’t bode well for their burgeoning friendship.

“Don’t forget about the alarms. Once we cross through the door, there could be a range of effects on our spellcasting. If we cast at all, it’s best to keep things simple unless we decide otherwise.”

Dean nods, remembering a similar discussion in Castiel’s office a few days ago. “Let’s get this show on the road,” he says, grinning, and Castiel returns the look with equal gusto. He takes a determined step forward and cracks the door, Dean following close on his heels.

The door closes behind them with a definite click.

The first thing Dean notices is that the interior looks like…well, something out of a hotel lobby. The walls are cream colored, the carpet a generic sort of gray, and there are doors up and down the hallway. Some are locked—Dean doesn’t even have to wiggle the knob to know there’s strong protective magic keeping them shut—but some of them are cracked open. Dean peeks inside all the doors left ajar, spying mostly shelves of books…ancient-looking texts and tomes.

“What I wouldn’t give to spend an afternoon with those,” Castiel sighs dreamily, and Dean laughs.

“You’n Sammy can read about magic all day long,” he says. “Me, I’d rather be doing it.”

“But reading about magic makes you better at ‘doing it,’” Castiel comments, and Dean shrugs, figuring that would be Castiel’s opinion since he loves higher education.

“Yeah, but what about lay magicians? They don’t exactly have access to all these books, y’know? The only way they can learn is by doing,” Dean points out.

Castiel leads them towards a door straight ahead, seeming to know where the Seal is located, but he pauses to consider Dean’s argument. “I suppose that’s true, though there are plenty of people trying to help. They’re organizing classes and volunteering their time to help lay magicians become more educated.”

The way Cas says it, very carefully and cautiously—as if he’s admitting something that he doesn’t quite want to discuss yet—makes Dean’s spidey senses tingle. He’s heard about an underground, lay-run resistance to the status quo here at Stanford, it’s well-known gossip. Is it possible that Castiel is mixed up in all that?

“Here we are.” Castiel leans his briefcase against the wall then claps his hands together, indicating that the plain white door is their final destination. Dean shakes his head, trying to regain his focus. “What do you think is behind there?”

The question catches Dean off-guard, mostly because he’s been lost in thought, and he tries to take
a moment to really contemplate his answer. “Obviously a big power source. The spell will have a complicated structure, right?”

“True. That’s as good a guess as any,” Castiel agrees, eyes darting the doorknob. “It’s your project…would you like to do the honors?”

They exchange another smile and Dean steps forward, seizing the plain silver knob and turning it slowly. Dean’s expecting to see dark walls with a mysterious orb or an apparatus in the middle, a room buzzing with mystical energy. Instead…

He blinks back rays of sunlight, an oppressive heat rippling through the air in waves. They’re outside and standing in an expansive clearing, a lush green field that seems to go on for miles. The edge is shrouded in tall trees, a formidable-looking forest that he wouldn’t want to enter. Dean turns back and forth, bewildered by the sudden shift, and it takes him a moment to realize they haven’t actually left the library. Not really.

“Well, this is fucking trippy,” he mumbles, spotting the plain white door standing like a statue behind them—as if doors are known to stand upright without walls. What the hell…?

“Perhaps this is some sort of alternate reality,” Castiel mutters. He’s already sliding his trench coat off his shoulders, switching his camera over to his button-up so he can shed the suit jacket, too. It must be close to a hundred degrees out here, and it’s such a contrast to the forty degree weather they’ve been suffering through all November, that Dean wonders if he’s having a heat stroke.

“Can’t be. Feel that heat. It’s unnatural.” He follows Castiel’s lead and begins to strip, first his leather jacket and then his flannel, reattaching the camera to the form-fitting t-shirt underneath. “This isn’t a transporting spell, it’s an illusion, I think.”

Dean is so distracted by his thoughts, it takes him a moment to acknowledge that Castiel has his hands on his hips, and is beaming at Dean.

“What?” Dean mumbles, flushed from either the intensity of Castiel’s gaze or the heat, he isn’t sure which.

“Nothing, it’s just…I was thinking the same thing.” There’s that sweet little smile again—Jesus Christ. Dean’s not sure what’s more distracting, the spell they’re inhabiting or Castiel’s damn perfect smile.

Instead of responding he holds a hand over his forehead and squints, trying to see over in the distance something he hadn’t noticed yet. “What the hell is that?”

Castiel is already taking long, striding steps towards the left, and Dean scrambles to follow. They walk quickly up a hill until they’re side by side on the top, and below them, is…

Well, it’s the biggest fucking maze that Dean has ever seen.

The hedges are impossibly tall, at least thirty feet, more lush and green than anything that grows in nature. Getting a birds’ eye view of it wouldn’t be impossible, but it would require advanced hover magic that they shouldn’t perform, not this close to the Seal. As hard as he tries, Dean can’t see the end of it. He has to just accept that it’s a giant block of green hedges that consumes the distant landscape.

“If I had to guess, I would imagine the Seal is in there,” Cas whispers, awestruck and dazed, obviously impressed by this display of magic.
“Of course it is,” Dean groans, having the exact opposite reaction of Castiel for the first time today. This looks like one of the most complex mazes in the goddamn world, if not the most complex, and if they want to stay here, they can only cast basic spells inside of it. Not to mention, because his thesis is centered around spell mechanics, he’s going to have to deconstruct the magic behind every element of this place, which includes drafting every twist and turn of this maze until he’s fashioned some sort of map—a visual understanding of the nuances of the spell. The most coveted and enigmatic spell in the world.

And he’s going to have to do all this in desert-like temperatures, his only companion someone he’s been fighting a powerful attraction for since the moment they met.

What could possibly go wrong?

Castiel stares out over the maze until a bead of sweat rolls down into his eye. Swiping a hand over his forehead, he turns to Dean to see him pull a small notebook out of his jacket pocket from where he’d discarded it on the ground. He starts to draw something on a blank page—a rough sketch of the maze laid out below them.

Dean glances up, then goes back to his sketch. “I tried to take a photo of it with my phone, but it just came out as a white screen.”

Castiel makes a surprised hum and goes back to staring out into the distance, one hand shading his eyes. When he sees a break in the closest hedge, he points downhill. “Look, there’s a sort of path down to that gap, there—I’ll go take a look. Catch up when you’re ready?”

“Sure. Won’t be long,” Dean says, and Castiel steps away from him, down the hill and into the shade of the high hedge. It’s no cooler out of the sun—the thick, humid air seems to press around him, making his shirt stick to his back. The hedges are made from dense, twisted branches, choked with impenetrable leaves of a rich green.

Inside the gap between hedges, a narrow path leads to the left and right for some distance. Castiel can feel energy humming around him. He’s never been actually inside a magical construct before. The scale of it is astounding, even though he’s sure most of it is an illusion. He turns, looking back up the hill to see Dean walking down to join him. The fact that he and Dean can actually see each other is interesting—most illusions are keyed to one person, unless they're specifically cast to allow people to see each other. He wonders if he and Dean are seeing the same things—the spellwork required for that kind of synchronization would be much more complex than he's ever…

His thoughts trail off as Dean approaches, face flushed, flannel tied around his waist while his jacket is slung over one arm. As Dean looks up at the hedge, Castiel finds his mouth watering at the sheen of sweat above the hem of Dean’s neckline. The compulsion to lean over and taste is so strong, he actually finds himself leaning forward before he snaps out of it and swallows heavily, turning away to hide the rising heat in his own cheeks. Dean revealing his bisexuality at lunch had really thrown Castiel—he’d known Dean was flirty, but had assumed that he preferred to be with women. Castiel hadn’t been game at the time to reveal his own preferences, partially because he still isn’t sure what they are. All he knows is, Dean is suddenly even more attractive than he was before, and it’s entirely unfair to Castiel’s professionalism.

“Are they real plants?” Dean says, peering through the gap just as Castiel had done a moment ago.
“It seems so,” Castiel replies, trying not to notice the way Dean’s shirt clings to the curve of his shoulder. Instead, he looks away down the straight side of the maze, to where it disappears into the trees of the forest at the side of the field. The other side of the maze is the same—dense trees right next to the tall hedge.

“Looks like we’re headin’ in,” Dean says with a shrug, looking up and down the first row of the maze. “Uh, you getting any feeling for which way we should go?”

Castiel follows Dean’s gaze, but can’t get a read on any of the magic of the place. He’s mostly just too hot to think, as he untucks his shirt and flaps it a few times to try to get some air moving around him. “No,” he replies shortly, and shoulders past Dean to head into the path heading left.

As he moves away, Dean catches his elbow, holding him back. The tingly electric feeling of their affinity makes Castiel draw a sharp breath, but Dean drops his hand immediately. “Wait, wait, wait. You can’t just head into a maze blind, Cas. We’ve gotta mark our path somehow, so we get out again. Like, uh, you know… Goldilocks or whatever,” he says, waving his hand down from his head to indicate long hair.

“That’s Hansel and Gretel you’re thinking of,” Castiel says, holding in his grin.

“Whatever.” Dean scratches a rough arrow in the packed earth with one booted foot. He looks up again, gesturing for Castiel to keep going. “After you.”

Castiel nods and walks forward towards the first turn. The path isn’t quite wide enough for them to walk side by side, and the hedge walls stretch up on either side, showing a narrow strip of a pale blue sky above. As soon as they turn the first corner, the air becomes close and stifling—Castiel isn’t usually claustrophobic, but in here, the heat is starting to feel oppressive. Their footfalls crunch on the path, but the maze is otherwise silent.

Dean is the first one to speak, and he’s hushed as though he doesn’t want anyone to overhear. “So you think the Seal is in the middle of this maze?”

Castiel shrugs. “Your guess is as good as mine, Dean. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

”Sam ’n I used to be great at corn mazes. Granted, once he got tall enough he could just look over the top of the walls, and we can’t really do that here.”

They reach a junction, and Dean scratches an arrow in the dirt again to indicate continuing straight ahead.

“Not really an option for this one,” Castiel says, waving one hand towards the high hedges.

“No,” Dean agrees, “but at least there's nothing really nasty in here to worry about.”

Just as he finishes speaking, a loud roaring noise sounds from somewhere nearby. Castiel stops in his tracks and turns to look at Dean, who is perfectly mirroring his horrified expression.

“I really wish you hadn’t said that,” Castiel says, looking away back down the pathway. Silence falls back over the maze, and the still air presses in on Castiel again, almost making it difficult to breathe. He moves cautiously forward to the next junction, considering their options, and trying not to think about what could be in here with them.

This time, the left path dips downwards a little and widens, while the right hand fork narrows considerably. “Should we take the wider path, do you think?”
“Sure.” Dean moves past Castiel, brushing his front against Castiel’s shoulder. As he passes, Castiel catches a breath of Dean’s scent—some kind of spicy aftershave mixed with fresh sweat—and suddenly finds himself having to hold in a groan. Has he suddenly regressed into a teenager? What the hell is wrong with him?

The path opens out considerably into a larger area with two other passages leading away on the other side. In the center stands a tall tree, the leafy branches reaching out to form a shady canopy over a scattering of rocks and clumps of dry grass across the ground.

As Castiel follows along after Dean, he catches a movement out of the corner of his right eye. He slams his palms together towards Dean to push him forward as a stream of fire blows past between them. To Castiel’s right stands a dragon—or what every fantasy dragon is described as—a four-legged lizard with a long snout and two large, leathery wings tucked behind it against its scaly, black hide.

Dean backs away from where he’s standing, saying, “What the hell? Is this *The Neverending Story* or something?” as he heads back towards the entrance they came in from. Castiel follows, and both of them break into a sprint as they reach the first junction. They turn right and run for the next corner, Castiel unsure if the dragon is following or just guarding the way through that space.

When they reach the junction, Dean stops, heaving for breath. “Look, Cas…”

“What? I don’t see anything,” Castiel replies, breathing heavily as well, but glad of his almost-daily runs. What are they for if not for running away from dragons, he thinks wryly.

“Exactly. The… the marks. They’re… gone.” Dean gasps out, bending over to catch his breath. He’s right. The scuffed arrow mark Dean had left in the dirt is nowhere to be seen.

“Let’s go right?” Castiel suggests, peering in that direction.

Dean nods, and they head that way, turning around a corner. Castiel is sure the air is getting hotter, although he still can’t see the sun anywhere above the maze to tell what time it is. Sweat runs down his face freely now, and he wipes it away impatiently with the bottom of his shirt. At least the dragon seems to have given up the chase for now.

They turn another corner at a junction, Dean not bothering to mark the floor this time, but moving his fingers and muttering to himself instead. “What’re you casting?” Castiel asks.

“Just trying to get a feel for the spells here. Something’s heating the air—do you feel it?” He looks back up the path, moving ahead again.


“What, here?” Dean asks, surprised. “I thought you said we shouldn’t cast in here?”

Castiel shrugs. “Let me help you visualize. It’s just a little lay magic.”

Dean faces him, their eyes locked as they did in the classroom just a few days ago.

They begin casting together, feeling the swirl of their combined magic around them. Dean waits until Castiel has drawn his lay magic manifestation spell before he moves his hands as well, keeping his eyes locked on Castiel’s. Casting together inside an illusion shouldn’t work as well as it is, but Dean carefully casts the spell to reveal the structure of the magic around them. Bright white and orange lines flare into being around them, and Dean tears his eyes away to gaze around
them in wonder. Castiel can’t look away from Dean’s face—he’s enthralled, the high from the lay magic lost next to the thrill of his magic resonating with Dean’s. His anxiety melts away, and he’s calm for the first time since they entered the library.

Dean lets the spell wind down, the fiery lines in the air around them winking out like sparks. Dean returns his eyes to Castiel’s, holding his gaze for a moment before he reaches up to rub the back of his neck self-consciously.

“Cas, not for nothing, but the last time someone looked at me like that…”

“What?” Castiel asks, quirking one eyebrow. They’re standing so close that he can feel the heat radiating from Dean’s body, sense his magic simmering under his skin. His own magic calls out, but their spell is complete for now.

He watches Dean swallow carefully and step backwards, away from him. “Uh, never mind. Let’s keep goin’.” Dean turns and walks further up the path. Castiel gazes after him, dying to know how that sentence was going to end. Perhaps he would ask later, once they got out of this place. He shakes his hands out, somehow more keyed up after that spell than he was before.

“It’s a Kelvin construct—some kind of heating spell like the one I did in the classroom a few weeks ago. We’re being cooked,” Dean explains as they walk along.

Castiel nods, fanning his sweaty shirt against his skin again, even though it does little to cool him. “Certainly feels that way.”

Dean reaches another junction and turns around the corner to the right. Castiel joins him in what looks like the same room as before, with the tree stretching overhead, and the rocks scattered across the ground beneath it.

“We’re back here?” Castiel asks in dismay as Dean walks along the edge of the space, keeping away from the tree in the center.

A roar sounds from the other side, and the dragon appears from one of the opposite passages. It moves, not like a lumbering beast as Castiel might have expected, but lithe and quick like an oversized reptile might. It runs forward on four legs, then breathes a short stream of fire towards the two of them. Castiel sees it step over something and crouch protectively.

“Dean,” he breathes, “it’s a nest. Look.” He points to the dragon’s feet, where a small hollow in the ground is piled with four or five round shapes.

“Dragon eggs? You’ve gotta be kidding me. What the hell books have these people been reading?” Dean mutters, but keeps moving along the hedge.

Castiel risks a few steps forward, wondering how intelligent the illusion has made the creatures inside it. “We’re not going to hurt you,” he says, gently.

“Uh, Cas? I’m not sure that’s a great idea…” Dean begins, but then Castiel takes a step too far. The mother dragon hisses at him, then moves forward toward Castiel at a run, opening her mouth to fry him to a crisp. Castiel throws up his hands, but then, nothing happens.

When Castiel dares to look again, the dragon has collapsed into a matrix of glowing red lines and geometric shapes, and vanishes into the air. Castiel bends over, gasping for air, and nearly lashes out with his fists when a hand claps on his shoulder and sends a thrill of energy through him. He looks up into Dean’s relieved face.
“Cas, it was just a spell construct! One of the most complex I’ve ever seen, but I dunno if it even would have hurt us. All I had to do was—” he holds up his palm and twists his hand “—break part of the container.” He steps backwards, still grinning. “It was like a super-complex Delambre, just a mess of—”

Castiel sees movement above them again, a moment too late. Dean’s explanation is cut short by a fire jet that crashes down from above him and engulfs him before Castiel can even react.

“No! Dean!” he screams, but Dean has vanished, not even ash to mark where he just stood. Castiel’s heart thunders in his chest. Surely he hasn’t just… No. This is an illusion. Isn’t it? He looks up at the huge, second dragon, this one flying in from above the maze. It lands in the clearing, slipping between the tree and the hedges on the other side of the space surprisingly gracefully for a creature of its size. This one—this one must be the mother, Castiel thinks. It’s his turn to be fried.

The dragon moves forward, drawing air into its lungs and readying a stream of fire, when Castiel feels a sharp stinging on his cheek.

“Cas?”

The dragon releases a blast of fire towards him, but he feels nothing as he covers his head and crouches down.

“Castiel! Come on, buddy, wake up!”

Castiel shudders, opening his eyes to see Dean standing in front of him, his face just a few inches away. He blinks, the bright light hurting his eyes. “Dean?”

“Oh, thank fuck, you’re okay,” Dean says, sighing with relief. He steps back, and Castiel immediately regrets not grabbing him to stop himself falling over as a wave of dizziness sweeps over him.

“What… what happened? Did you hit me?” he asks, reaching a hand up to rub at his tingling cheek.

“Uh, yeah, sorry. I had to try to wake you up. When I came to, you were just standing there.”

Castiel looks around him, taking in the cream walls and gray carpet of the long corridor. The white door stands behind them, closed. They’re still under the library. Dean is wearing his coat and flannel again, and while he looks like he’s been through hell, he isn’t drenched in sweat anymore.

“Gotta say, Cas, I really fuckin’ hope we’re not gonna have to do that every time we go in. Was that dragon some kinda boss?”

“I… I really don’t know,” Castiel replies, also hoping they won’t have to face any more monsters. "Nice work on that first dragon, though. I'm glad you were there,” he says with a grimace.

Dean holds his gaze for a few moments. "Likewise. Wait, the first dragon? There were more?” He pulls his phone out of his pocket, tapping at it.

"Yes, the second one was what got you."

Dean's eyebrows shoot up. "I didn't even see it. Did you see the structure, though? Awesome design! I can't wait to write some of this down…"
Castiel looks down at his trench coat, running his hands down his completely dry front. "Maybe next time we can leave the coats behind, though."

"Sure," Dean laughs, tapping at his phone again. "Damn, none of the photos I took are here." He pulls the notebook out next, shaking his head at the empty pages. "So, we going back in?"

Castiel stares at him. "What, right now?"

"Sure," Dean says with a grin.

Castiel glances at his watch. "Dean, it's after five—we should probably head up. Besides, I'm not sure I can go through all that again so soon." He rubs at his forehead, feeling a headache coming on.

"Oh, sure. Time sure goes fast when you're having fun," Dean says, disappointment clear in his voice. As he turns, he says, "Oh, here." He unclips the camera from his lapel, handing it back to Castiel. "Do you think these things even recorded anything?"

"I imagine so. They're spelled to do exactly that, and I doubt the council would want any information about the seal to be made public. I wonder if I could rig something up for your phone, though." He pauses, considering the problem as he replaces the cameras in his briefcase. “For research purposes only, of course."

As they walk back up the stairs into the library, Dean enthusiastically describes the way the magic flowed around the dragon's body.

Castiel smiles. He'd like nothing better than to jump right back into the illusion with Dean. Helping Dean with this project? It's his idea of heaven.

He's about to say something to that effect when Dean's phone buzzes loudly in his pocket.

“Benny! How're you doing, brother? Great. Can't wait to catch up. When are you getting here?”

As Dean speaks, Castiel’s buoyant mood takes a dive. This Benny character certainly sounds interesting—a lay magician, not to mention Dean’s ex. Castiel is looking forward to meeting him at Thanksgiving, but is also harboring a strong territorial feeling that he has no right to feel around Dean, at all.

Either way, it's promising to be an interesting holiday season.

Chapter End Notes

What exactly will happen next chapter, during Benny's Thanksgiving visit? Drop your predictions below!

P.S. How fucking cool were those dragons?!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

TrenchcoatBaby: Good mornin' and happy Monday! It's funny, I was writing part of this chapter during the Fourth of July, but today's chapter actually covers a much different American holiday…Thanksgiving!

EllenOfOz: I love Thanksgiving. As a non-American, I'm fascinated by the idea of a holiday dedicated to counting blessings and eating. We had to give the boys some fluff here again, of course. How could we not for such a family-oriented day?

TCBaby: Exactly. I am beyond impressed with Ellen's knowledge of American holidays, haha. Meanwhile, things sure are heating up in the kitchen…sorry, sorry, spoilers.

Ellen: That's right, especially with Benny in town! Hope you enjoy this feast.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dean wipes flour from his hands onto the front of his apron, eyes scanning the empty pie shells. Benny comes behind him, swiping at the sweat from under his page boy hat.

“Can’t take the heat?” Dean teases, though admittedly his kitchen is small and cramped. Dean’s undershirt is clinging to the curve of his back, and he’s tempted to crack open a window.

“Good luck tryin’ to kick me out,” Benny grumbles good-naturedly. He’s been back in Palo Alto for only two days, but already Dean remembers why they were such close friends. Even though Benny hadn’t been accepted into Stanford, he had developed his skills as a lay magician with an awe-inducing sort of dedication. They’d met a few years back, when Dean was just an undergraduate and Benny was buying some potion ingredients from Bobby’s magic shop. The rest, they say, is history.

“When I said I’d help you ‘whip up a few pies’ this ain’t exactly what I had in mind, brother.” Benny opens his hands wide, indicating to the nearly dozen flavors Dean decided they had to make. Pecan, pumpkin, chocolate, cranberry, sweet potato, various fruit pies.

“We got alotta company comin’ over,” Dean defends gruffly, though he hopes no one calls him on his bullshit, because truthfully, they have almost the same amount of guests as they’ve had the last six or seven years. It’s just, this time one of those guests is Cas, who will be meeting pretty much his entire extended family today. Dean’s secretly hoping if everybody’s pie hole is stuffed with, well, literal pie, then maybe his chances of not being embarrassed in front of Cas will go down significantly.

They work side by side in comfortable silence for the next few minutes, Dean keeping a close eye on the clock. It’s a late Thanksgiving lunch, with everyone arriving around one o’clock, though they don’t usually start eating for another hour or two. He’s currently a mess, with baking powder in his hair and fruit filling under his nails. He fills the last pie tin with twenty minutes to spare, and leaves Benny to preheat the oven and start sliding the pies inside. He strips in his bedroom, a little self-consciously because his apartment is a studio, so if Benny turns around at the right moment,
he’ll have a seat to the Dean Winchester Full Frontal Show. It’s nothing Benny hasn’t seen before, but Dean doesn’t want to give him the wrong idea. He has no intention of restarting their friends-with-benefits activities.

He dashes inside the bathroom and into the shower as quickly as he can, lathering and scrubbing his hair carefully. He honestly wishes he had time to rub one out, knowing the image of Cas being in the vicinity soon is more than enough to get his gears going, but that’s definitely an indulgence he can’t justify right now. He cuts the water off and stands in front of his foggy mirror, deciding at the last minute to shave. That kills extra time he doesn’t have, but he always feels a bit sexier and prepared for kissing when his skin is smooth. Not that he’s planning on kissing anyone today—it’s just nice being prepared in case, y’know, the circumstance arises. Or if he has to give CPR if somebody ends up choking on a turkey leg. Preemptive shaving is a thing. Totally. Nothing to see here.

He wipes his face clean of shaving cream, spreading on his aftershave in a rush. With dread in his stomach, he realizes that he didn’t bring a change of clothes into the bathroom with him, which means going back into his bedroom-slash-living-room-slash-kitchen. He wraps a towel around his waist and creaks the door open, hoping to grab jeans and a flannel and dash back into the privacy of his bathroom, when he hears voices drifting in from the kitchen.

Benny is standing next to Castiel—tall and sturdy, clad in a blue sweater that’s probably gonna make his eyes more beautiful than the freaking ocean. Castiel and Benny both have their backs to him, thank god, so maybe he’ll get away unseen. But when the hell did Cas get here? Who invited him up to Dean’s apartment while he’s literally naked in the shower?

The two men are chatting indistinctly, peering together in concentration, and Dean overhears how they don’t know how to set the timer on his oven. Good—hopefully that’ll distract them long enough for him to grab some clothes and make his escape. But when he takes a single step, his creaky hardwood floors give him away, and both men spin around curiously.

Dean just stands there, naked apart from the towel slung low on his hips. Castiel gapes at him, looking flustered, and glances down at the floor…until his eyes inevitably roam back up, seemingly fixated on Dean’s wet, flat stomach. Benny just looks his fill without shame or embarrassment, which is typical fuck buddy behavior, so Dean can’t even blame him. Under different circumstances, this whole episode could’ve been the start of a really awesome sex dream. Unfortunately, dripping and flushed and shivering, Dean feels more uncomfortable than confident. That alone proves the power Cas has over him, ‘cause he’s pretty sure if it’d been anyone else, he would’ve waved this whole thing off with a wink and a flirtatious joke.

“S-Sorry,” Dean mumbles in a rush. “Just forgot my clothes, but I, uh, didn’t mean to…”

Castiel clears his throat, blushing. “I apologize, Dean. Bobby sent me upstairs to check on you. Benny mentioned you were in the bathroom, not that you were in the shower.”

“Huh. Did I forget to tell you that?” Benny tries to sound apologetic and innocent, but he ends up sounding more sarcastic. Dean would be on the verge of throttling the guy if he wasn’t, y’know, still naked.

“S’fine,” Dean mutters, though it is anything but fine. He’s standing in his bedroom, in a towel, staring at Cas and nearing the edge of his bed—the bed where he gets his rocks off to images of the blue-eyed professor on a regular basis. If he doesn’t end up with a boner, it’s gonna be a goddamn miracle. “Just gonna grab some clothes, and, uh, not be naked anymore.”

Jesus Christ.
“Before you do that, would ya come show Cas how to set the timer on the oven?” Benny grins.

Dean narrows his eyes, exasperated. “That can’t wait five minutes?”

“I don’t wanna be responsible for burning your famous pecan pie, brother.” Benny’s voice is neutral, but Dean can see right through the nonchalance. Obviously, somebody told him Dean and Cas have something going on, even though it isn’t true. Who’s he gonna have to kill before the turkey’s even carved… Sammy? Jo?

Dean sighs, muttering something about what a pain in the ass Benny is, which only makes his Louisianan friend even more smug. He shuffles his feet into the kitchen, careful not to let the wrapped-towel drop. Castiel is still standing in front of the oven, but Benny has backed off considerably, heading towards the door.

“Time to get started on the bird. That cajun rub won’t make itself,” he says, excusing himself. Bobby has a bigger kitchen downstairs, one with much more counter space and a large fridge, where the turkey is currently waiting for Benny’s expert eye. Still, he couldn’t be more obvious in wanting to leave the two men alone, and Dean’s already plotting his revenge. Maybe he’ll spell Benny’s hat zebra patterned, or hot pink…

Then he’s alone with Cas, utterly and completely, and Dean is hoping that his palms won’t start sweating, ‘cause wow. If it wasn’t before, this is now definitely something out of a wet dream.

“So, uh, you just hit this button here,” Dean mumbles shakily, pressing the “timer” button on the oven dash and adjusting the cook time.

“You don’t have to press start?” Castiel asks, staring at the oven as if he’s suddenly fascinated with kitchen appliances.

“Nope, ‘start’ and ‘stop’ are the same button. You probably just kept turning the timer off by accident.” Castiel hums quietly, as if that knowledge is actually interesting, and the timer begins to countdown from fifty. Without a task to distract them, they finally turn to each other.

Dean sees that he was right, surprise surprise, that blue sweater is tight and perfect on his friend’s sculpted chest, bringing out Cas’ eyes in a breathtaking way. He has light stubble on his cheeks and chin, groomed neatly, and his teeth are vivid white. Dean doesn’t realize he’s staring until he glances back up, meeting Cas’ gaze. He feels vulnerable in a way that has nothing to do with his current state of undress.

“Shouldn’t he have started the turkey hours ago?” Castiel asks out of nowhere, as if searching for a topic of conversation to fill their avid staring.

“Normally, yeah, but he’s got this awesome spell that cooks it instantly. He makes it every year,” Dean explains. He crosses his arms against his chest, shivering a little, recognizing a little too late that his nipples have been hard this whole time. Fucking fantastic.

“I’m looking forward to tasting it,” Castiel whispers, though his voice breaks a little, sounding huskier and deeper than Dean’s ever heard it. It’s just enough of accidental innuendo that Dean bites his lip, breathing heavy, and…yep, there’s his cock hardening between his legs. He’s at half-mast now, only a towel keeping Castiel from that knowledge, and the impulse to kiss him has never been stronger or more real. They’re alone, Dean is naked, Castiel looks ruffled enough to actually be into this. Dean’s heart is about to burst out of his chest.

Castiel lifts his hand, bringing it towards Dean’s face, and Dean closes his eyes, knowing that this
is it, he’s about to get pushed against the counter and kissed within an inch of his life. But then Cas’ fingertips barely brush his cheek, and he doesn’t feel lips against his… He opens his eyes cautiously.

“Got it.” Castiel has a small patch of white shaving cream on his finger. “You missed a spot.”

Dean chuckles nervously, trying to cover up how ready he was for…well, for something that’s obviously not going to happen. Awesome.

“Cool, uh, thanks.” He rubs his hands together, the tension in the air dissipating. “I’m just gonna go change, if you wanna meet me downstairs?”

“Of course,” Castiel says, nodding, and walks away before Dean can change his mind and pull him by the wrist, push him against the archway, and kiss the everloving shit out of him. He just watches Cas shuffle through the apartment and down the steps, only exhaling when he hears Castiel’s footfalls enter the kitchen below.

“Fuck,” Dean mutters, shutting the door before he has more surprise visitors. He hits his forehead against the wood, willing his erection to go down. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

He takes his time getting dressed, mostly a vain attempt to calm himself down, thinking the least alluring thoughts so Little Dean will remember this is a family holiday. He dresses in his nicest pair of denim, grabs a light brown flannel with patterns of red and gold spun throughout, and laces up his boots. He checks his reflection in the mirror, noticing that his hair is already dry, but does the frizz spell Lisa had taught him as extra insurance. Lisa. Fuck, there’s a big ol’ ball of guilt and shame, someone he’s pushed out of his mind over the last few months. He’s pretty sure he still owes her an apology, the first of which being that he couldn’t get it up even when she was kissing his neck and rubbing against his cock. Yet he can get hard, just standing in the same freaking room as Cas…

He sighs, trying to clear his head. His oven is charmed to carefully expel dishes as soon as the timer ends, luckily, so he’s not worried about checking on them again. At least for a while. When he finally heads downstairs, Bobby has pushed aside the glass showcases, as usual, and Sam is setting the long table with cutlery.

“About time you stopped primping and preening, Cinderella,” Sam teases with a grin, and Dean rolls his eyes.

“Between the two of us, you’re the one with the princess hair,” he grumbles back, though he takes half the forks and knives from Sam’s outstretched palm, working the opposite end of the table. “Where is everybody?”

“Bobby had a customer come in, and they went…that way,” Sam nudges towards the back, where only storage closets are.

“On Thanksgiving?” Dean says indignantly. “Jeez. Workaholic much?”

Sam shrugs, unconcerned. “She’s one of his regular customers, I think. The redhead lady. You know her?”

“Seen her a time or two,” Dean says dismissively, thinking it’s probably the pale woman with long, straight hair. He hasn’t seen her in a few months, but knows she’s a frequent customer. Still, he doesn’t really care who or why Bobby is working on a holiday—only irritated that he is.

“Charlie called, she’s almost here. She said Dorothy makes the best mashed potatoes on the west
coast, and for you to be prepared to put on sweatpants afterwards.”

“Hell yeah.” Dean places the last of his cutlery on the table, watching Sam finish up. “What ‘bout Cas?”

“Doctor Novak is helping Ellen and Jo unpack their car. They had to park a few blocks away. Ash is running late—he texted and said he’s having trouble transporting the keg.” Sam laughs, shaking his head, and Dean snorts in response.

“Y’know, you can call him Castiel,” he says lightly.

“Once he becomes your boyfriend, officially. I’ll think about it.” Sam’s eyebrows are arched, his eyes full of mischief, and Dean curses under his breath. He momentarily regrets ever inviting Cas—between Sam, Jo, and now Benny, he’s not gonna be able to catch a fucking break today—but he dismisses that thought almost instantly. His discomfort is beyond worth it as long as Cas has a good holiday. Having his friend alone in his apartment, ordering chinese takeout, isn’t an option.

“Fuck you,” Dean mumbles, and Sam just laughs again, in a pure and joyful kind of way that almost makes the teasing worth it. Sam’s phone vibrates in his pocket and he begins texting fervently, thumbs moving fast and rapid. “What’s up?”

“Ruby can’t find the place. Guess I’m gonna have to go outside and find her.”

“You invited Ruby?” Dean hisses. He tries, he really does, but he can’t keep the disdain out of his voice.

“You invited your boyfriend,” Sam says defensively.

“Cas is not my boyfriend!” Dean shouts, feeling ridiculous that they’re having this conversation when the man in question could walk in anytime. “Besides, Ruby is Ruby. She’s probably gonna eat all the white meat, then empty Bobby’s cashier register on her way out.”

There’s an awkward pause where neither of them speak, Sam’s chest huffing.

“Thanks, Dean. Your attitude is so welcoming.” His mouth sets into a hard line, exhaling angrily through his nose as he stalks towards the front door. He closes it behind him with a slam, and Dean curses again, trying to console himself by remembering every family has drama around the holidays. He needs a beer—that might solve all his problems, or at least postpone them. He stomps back through the empty store and heads toward the kitchen, hoping Benny is up for some ranting and raving because he’s got problems coming out of his ears today.

But the minute he enters the kitchen, he feels an electric, euphoric feeling in the air—there’s a heavy presence of lay magic inside the room, full and threatening as rain clouds. It’s the most concentrated force of lay magic he’s ever felt. Dean hasn’t even cast a spell, but he can feel the residual energy like a handprint on glass. He gasps at the intensity, fighting the urge to tap into the atmospheric magic and begin casting, but knows that would just contribute to the problem.

The problem being, of course, that Benny is passed out on the kitchen floor.

“Benny!” he shouts, scrambling to roll his friend over and onto his back. He bends over, slapping his cheek lightly, then forcefully, but nothing rouses him. Benny has overdosed on lay magic, a fact the burnt, black turkey on the counter all but confirms.

In the seconds that follow, the back door opens and closes, Bobby’s customer taking an unusual exit. But Dean doesn’t have time to wonder about that, because as Bobby rounds the kitchen
corner, his eyes widen at the scene. Benny’s face is slack and pale, he’s still unconscious, and Dean thinks he’s on the verge of having a heart attack.

“What in the—” Bobby starts, but Dean interrupts him in a frantic shout.

“Get Cas!” he says, knowing he’s the only one here who’s studied lay magic this closely, the only mage nearby who Dean would trust with his friend’s life. “Now.”

So far, Castiel isn't enjoying Thanksgiving at Bobby's much. He'd arrived to a surly greeting from Bobby himself, until Sam had come out from the back of the shop and welcomed him with a smile.

Then there had been the disaster upstairs, when he'd been sent up to find Dean and run straight into Benny.

Benny seems pleasant enough, friendly and easygoing. He can see why Dean likes him, although he'd been a little alarmed to discover Benny in Dean's apartment, especially once Dean appeared from the shower. Had the two of them just…? He still doesn't want to think about what might have happened before he'd arrived, but the fact was, Benny had left them alone in Dean's apartment, with one of them almost completely naked, his wet hair dripping down the planes of his chest...

Castiel stumbles on an uneven patch of sidewalk and catches himself, and the box of food he's carrying, before he hits the pavement.

Ellen tuts. "Watch the sidewalk here. Really should call the council to get this fixed up," she mutters. Louder, she says, "Thanks for your help with this, Doc. We appreciate it." She grins, and beside her, Jo mirrors it.

"Don't mention it," Castiel replies. He's not even sure what's in this box, but there's at least one heavy baking dish and a load of Tupperware.

His mind wanders back to the apartment, and the way Dean had stared at him, almost hungrily. He had been so close to just grabbing Dean and kissing him senseless, running his hands all over his smooth skin…and Benny had known. That was the worst part, and why he's now lowkey dreading walking back into the shop. He feels his face warming all over again, and he doesn't have time to think calming thoughts before Jo opens the door of the shop for him and they troop inside.

Bobby is heading towards them from the back of the shop, worry pinching his features. He pounces, taking the box from Castiel as soon as he's inside the door. "Castiel! There you are. Hurry your ass, son, Benny needs help."

"What? What do you—?" he begins, but Bobby waves him away.

"In the kitchen! Dean said to get you."

Castiel exchanges a puzzled look with Ellen, and she races behind him towards the back of the shop and the apartment kitchen.

Dean is kneeling on the floor above a senseless Benny, the air thick with lay magic residue and smoke. Castiel reels back as he takes the scene in—the charred food on the counter, the burns on
Benny's hands. He's seen people lose control of their energy stream and pass out before, but this… This could be bad.

As Ellen crosses the room and throws open the window to let the air clear, Castiel drops to the floor beside Dean and feels the side of Benny's neck for a pulse. "What happened?" he asks shortly, noting that Benny's pulse is weak, but present, his chest rising and falling with breath. More worrying, though, is that Benny's magical aura is barely there.

"Should I call someone, or…?" Ellen asks from behind him.

Dean's voice is laced with panic. "It's lay magic, Ellen. Stanford won't deal with it, and a regular hospital wouldn't know what to do with him."

"There are people…people we could call," Castiel says, thinking of Crowley. He hasn't met the rest of Crowley's lay community yet, but he's sure there must be healers as part of it. But…he still doesn't trust Crowley as far as he can throw him. He looks up at Dean's worried face. "But I think I can help him."

Dean looks skeptical. "You sure about this, Cas?" he asks. When he glances down at Benny, his forehead pinches with worry again, and Castiel knows there's no choice here. He has to do something for Benny, for Dean's sake.

"I'm sure," he says, and places one palm on Benny's broad chest. He hasn't ever attempted healing like this before, but he knows the principle—it's merely a transfer of energy. He closes his eyes and draws forth his own magic, attempting to feel around the edges of Benny's. His own energy spools from inside his chest and gathers in his palm, before Benny's magic, wild and strong, swirls forward and engulfs him, drawing more. Castiel gasps at the sensation—Benny must be exceptionally powerful for his draw to be so strong. Too strong. He pulls back, opening his eyes to see a little color back in Benny's face, but his heart is still laboring, and still his magic draws on Castiel's.

He manages to choke out, "Dean?" as he's falling forward, but Dean's strong hand catches him on the shoulder, his other hand coming up to cup Castiel's cheek to keep him upright.

"Cas, what…Oh," Dean begins, then stops when his own magic begins to rise. The worry clears from his face and is replaced by a calm sort of wonder.

Castiel has never seen Dean cast lay magic, but his own magic must be calling to Dean's, drawing it to him. It feels warm, precious—like a piece of him he never knew he was missing. When he raises his eyes, Dean is glowing, his eyes bright blue.

Castiel feels like every nerve is sparking, like he could fly, given the chance. He lifts his hand and moves Dean's hand from his face to place it on Benny's chest. With Dean's help he has a lot more control, giving Benny just enough of their energy for the big man to gasp in a bigger breath and open his eyes. Castiel draws back and takes a deep breath himself, trying to calm his racing heart.

"Benny? What damn fool idea were you trying to pull off this time, ya idjit?" Bobby demands, helping Benny up to sit in a kitchen chair. Ellen moves over to fuss around him, handing him something out of one of her Tupperware boxes, and Castiel and Dean merely sit on the kitchen floor for a few more moments. Castiel glances at Dean, to see him looking intently back. He looks away self-consciously. Dean's going to have questions, and he's not sure how he'll answer them yet. Casting elemental spells together is one thing, but the merging of their lay magic? It felt very intimate. Castiel is sure his face must be burning, and he hopes with all his being that if they have developed a profound bond, that Dean can't feel his emotions right now. He looks up at Benny
instead and tries to focus on what he's saying.

“I’m sorry, I was just doin’ the turkey, and I guess I got carried away. It’s a big bird, y’know?” Benny looks good for someone who was recently unconscious, as he munches on a bread roll that Ellen had handed him. The burns on Benny’s hands look a lot better already. Castiel wonders just how much energy he’d blown away on the turkey, and how much his magic had drawn from Castiel before Dean had intervened.

Ellen shook her head. “Never mind the turkey, I’m sure we’ve got plenty of everythin’ else to keep us fed. Come on Bobby, Jo. Help me take the rest of this to the table.” She bustles out with her reluctant helpers, leaving Dean to get unsteadily to his feet.

He reaches down, offering a hand to Castiel, and when Castiel takes it he almost drops it again right away. Magic is still tingling through him and Dean’s touch feels like the fizzing of static electricity, but he struggles to his feet and then pulls his hand away quickly with a muttered, “Thank you.”

Benny sits quietly, rubbing at his forehead with his hands.

“Benny?” Castiel asks gently. “It wasn’t just the turkey, was it?”

Benny looks up at him sharply, guilt flashing across his face. “Why d’you say that?” When neither of them reply, he sighs. “Thanks for comin’ to the rescue, both o’ you. I owe you one. I guess...” He sighs out again, looking down at his hands as he spreads them palm-up on his knees. “I guess I’ve been tryin’ out spells this week ready for the Cajun Kitchen to open before I came up here. Been pretty tired all week.”

Castiel nods thoughtfully. It’s been a long time before he’s seen someone suffer long-term burn out. The last person had been Anna, years ago. “I’m sure you know that lay magic can be addictive, and the long-term side effects can be dangerous.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m aware.” Benny waves a hand dismissively.

Dean puts a hand on Benny’s shoulder. “C’mon, man, Cas is just tryin’ to help here. Promise me you’ll take it easy.”

Benny looks up at Dean, his gaze softening. “All right, all right. I’ll try. But you ain’t getting turkey today.”

"No turkey on turkey day? What kind of a hell hole have we walked into here?" Ash asks loudly from the doorway.

Dean spins around and greets Ash with a "Heeey, buddy" and a handshake.

Ash wanders in, shaking Castiel’s and Benny’s hands, then looks around, sniffing the charred air. "You been cookin’ barbecue in here? Bobby said he had a stash of glasses somewhere...I’ve set the keg up out there," he says, throwing his thumb over his shoulder. He starts opening cupboards.

When Ellen comes back in, the small kitchen really starts becoming crowded, so when Dean glances at Castiel and motions that they should get out, he gladly follows.

On his way through, Ellen grabs his elbow. "Doc, thanks for doing that, but you gotta be careful casting lay magic like that. The glowing eyes, the hands—it's not good for ya, y'know? I don't want you boys getting into trouble."
Castiel bristles slightly. "Thanks for your concern, but we're fine." He's still a little shaken over the fact that he nearly lost control himself.

Ellen gives him a calculating gaze, then lets him go, giving Castiel the distinct impression that she'll be keeping an eye on him. It isn't lay magic that's not good for the caster, per se—it's the untrained, uncontrolled use of it that can be dangerous. The misconception annoys him.

He frowns as he helps Dean bring extra chairs from around the store to the table, and when Ash comes back in with two hands carrying a tray of glasses, he grins as he sees Castiel.

"Dude, why the long face?" He puts the glasses down gently on the shop counter, not waiting for Castiel's reply. He picks up the empty tray, saying loudly, "Hey, it's spanks-giving! Who's first?" and whacks Jo on the butt with it on his way back to the kitchen.

"Ash! Jesus," Dean says, and when he sees Castiel glance at him he adds, "He's kinda inappropriate, sorry."

"It's fine." Castiel smiles as Ellen comes back out of the kitchen, carrying a baking dish full of vegetables. Jo follows with a plate of sliced ham, and soon there's plenty of food and glasses of beer being passed around. Castiel takes the seat next to Dean at the table, his proximity like a fire to Castiel's right.

The door opens again and a voice calls out, "Knock, knock!"

Bobby replies gruffly with "We're closed!" before getting up to give Charlie a big hug as she comes in. Behind her is another taller woman Castiel doesn't recognize, then Sam walks in as well, followed by Ruby, looking sullen as ever.

"Hi there," Bobby says, holding out a hand to Ruby. "You must be Ruby. Welcome."

Ruby shakes his hand, quickly dropping it, then gives a quick wave to the rest of the table and a small "Hi."

Castiel notices Dean side-eyeing her as he hugs Charlie tightly.

Charlie steps back, calling out a greeting to the rest of the table. "Sorry we're late! Had to go visit my mom for a bit. Everyone, this is Dorothy." She smiles, putting her arm around the tall girl.

Ellen holds out a hand, gesturing to the table. "Welcome. Sit down, please! We only just got the food on the table. We had, uh…a turkey incident—" she glances at Benny for barely a second "—but there's plenty of everything else."

"Pretty sure Dean's got enough pie stashed upstairs to feed the whole city, so…" Benny trails off playfully as Dean flips him a middle finger.

Charlie and Dorothy add their mashed potatoes to the table, and the whole party starts loading their plates with food, chatting amiably as they eat. Castiel settles into a conversation with Charlie on his left side about her teaching load for the semester, while keeping half an ear on the conversation at the other end of the table.

Ellen has just mentioned a restaurant across town that directly competes with the Dionysus, taking their student clientele on certain nights, when Benny says loudly, "Yeah, Dean and I used to go there a lot. Great ribs, eh Dean?" He throws Dean a smirk.

Dean murmurs "Yeah," and looks down at his plate, his cheeks coloring slightly.
Castiel narrows his eyes, wondering what the story is behind that reaction.

Benny isn’t quite finished yet, though. “To be honest, I’m surprised to see you still in school. I figured you’d give it up, since you spent more time away from it than actually studying during the last year—”

Castiel bristles. “Actually, Dean is one of the brightest mages I know, and an excellent student,” he says coldly. He picks up his drink to take a lengthy swallow, trying to cool the fire under his skin.

“Okaaay,” Charlie says, her eyebrows raised as she shares a glance with Benny.

Dean mumbles, “Jeez, Cas.” Castiel dares a peek at him to see him still flushed and looking down, but a small smile is playing on his lips. He didn’t mean to embarrass Dean like that, but it’s only the truth.

“How is your thesis going anyway, Dean?” Charlie says, obviously trying to diffuse the tension.

Dean glances up at Charlie. “Yeah, it’s going. They said I could do the project I was interested in, so that’s a start, right?”

“They’re actually lettin’ you near the Seal?” Bobby asks, incredulous.

Castiel turns back to Dean, who’s nodding. Just how many people has Dean told about his project?

“You should see it though, Bobby—it’s like nothing I’ve ever… I mean, we haven’t actually got near the Seal yet, it’s protected behind this maze—”

“We’re not really at liberty to discuss the project,” Castiel interrupts. He’s fairly sure Dean’s family is trustworthy if Dean trusts them, but all it takes is one of them to repeat what they hear and the secret would no longer be a secret. “Sorry, Dean,” he adds. “One of our restrictions, I’m afraid.”

“Sure, okay,” Dean murmurs, looking apologetically around the table.

Dean isn’t wrong about not getting close—they’d tried going back into the maze on the Monday afternoon just past. He hadn’t been sure if he could handle seeing Dean incinerated by a dragon a second time, but as it turned out, he hadn’t needed to. This time when they’d opened the door, ready for a blast of heat in t-shirts and carrying bottles of water, they’d instead stepped into a monsoon. The rain had been falling in sheets, and even Castiel’s hastily cast shielding spell hadn’t been fast enough to prevent them getting drenched. They’d trudged up the hill, but couldn’t even see the maze past the first hedge through the driving rain. They’d given it up when a chilly breeze had started up, but they plan to try again on the coming Monday.

The family goes back to eating their meal, but Castiel notices a lack of movement on the far side of Sam. Ruby sits still, watching Dean’s face intently. When she meets Castiel’s gaze, she drops her eyes immediately. Castiel wonders about Dean’s distrust of the girl, and whether there might be something in it, after all.

Ellen stands up to gather plates once everyone’s finished, and Dean runs upstairs to bring down his perfectly-cooled pies, making several trips. He’s made so many different varieties that Castiel ends up with about seven or eight slices on his plate. Everyone makes sure to properly convey their enjoyment of the pies after each bite, but even so, Castiel can only take one bite of each before he declares himself fit to burst and has to stop. Dean seems to be watching him carefully for his reaction to each pie, which Castiel finds a little intense, but endearing.
He assures Dean that he enjoyed it all. “Honestly, I wish I could bake like this. I have these peanut butter bars that I’ve been trying to make—I made them one time and everyone loved them, but I can’t seem to get them right again.”

Dean looks mildly uncomfortable. “Was that one time at the faculty potluck party, by any chance?”

“Actually, it was. Did you try them?”

“I fixed them.”

“You...?” Castiel trails off, not sure what Dean means.

Dean looks embarrassed. “I, uh… tasted one early on, and you used too much baking powder, so I just—” He waves his hands to show the start of the conjuring spell he must have used.

Benny lets out a loud, booming laugh at the stunned look on Castiel’s face. “That’s my boy! You sure you want to go on with this grad school crap? You can have a job at my place any ol’ day, brother!” he says, beaming.

Dean chuckles, rubbing the back of his neck. “Actually, I think I’m gonna stick with the ‘grad school crap.’” He glances back towards Castiel, who momentarily forgets the brilliance of Dean’s spell mechanic skills, and instead smiles as a warm glow blooms in his chest.

After dessert, Bobby, Ash, and Jo get up to gather the dishes, waving away other offers of help, since they’ll probably just cast a charm to clean up, anyway. Sam and Ruby make some lame excuse to leave (or so Dean declares it, after they’ve gone), but the rest of them sit around the table, digesting. Dean brings out a bottle of whiskey from somewhere, and as the afternoon wears on, Ellen and Bobby sit up one end, talking quietly together, while the younger crowd sit up the other end, sharing their gossip.

Dean stays close to Castiel, their knees and elbows brushing now and then. Each touch sends a rush of warmth through Castiel. He sits back, enjoying the buzz of conversation around him. He’s never felt quite so full, or so content, for that matter.

He could quite happily stay here forever, but soon enough, Ash, Jo, and Ellen get up to make a move to go, and Castiel thinks he’d better be going as well. He’s not part of Dean’s family, as much as he might be enjoying himself—he doesn’t want to overstay his welcome. Besides, he should probably try to call his own family, or at least Gabriel. He’s already spoken with Meg earlier in the morning, and she’d begged for a recap of today at some later stage. He really isn’t sure what he’s going to tell her—today has been such a rollercoaster.

“Oh, you’re not going too, are you?” Dean says, looking genuinely disappointed as he notices Castiel putting on his trench coat. Charlie and Dorothy echo his dismay from their side of the table.

“Yes, I’m afraid I’m planning to get some work done tomorrow when I don’t have those annoying students around,” Castiel replies, grinning.

“Well, it was real nice to meet ya, Cas,” Benny says, getting to his feet as well and shaking Castiel’s hand a little more firmly than necessary. “You take care of our boy, here, okay?”

“Of course.” Castiel replies, wondering at the our boy comment. “Look after yourself, Benny. Best of luck with the opening.”

After he’s said his goodbyes and thanked Bobby for his hospitality, Castiel steps outside to wait
for his Uber. Dean joins him, and they stand together out the front of the store.

Castiel turns to Dean, reluctant for their day to end. “Dean, thanks for inviting me today. I appreciate it, honestly.”

“Hey, I couldn’t have you sitting in that apartment alone! You’re part of the family now—there’s no getting away,” Dean says with a grin. “Oh, and thanks for sticking up for me with that student thing. You really didn’t need to do that. Benny likes to joke…”

“Well, I couldn’t let him say something like that, when I know it’s not the case. Not from what I’ve seen, anyway.”

“Thanks… I guess, thanks for believing in me. You’re the reason I’m still there. I mean, your encouragement. And y’know,” he adds, scuffing his feet on the sidewalk, “it helps that you’re actually nice to me now, I guess.”

Castiel huffs out a laugh. “Is that so? Well, you earned it, I guess.” He smiles.

Dean’s answering smile is brilliant and warm, and Castiel wants nothing more than to lean in and kiss Dean at this moment, much as he had earlier in Dean’s apartment. Just behind Castiel, a car pulls up. Impeccable timing from the Uber, there.

“Goodnight, Dean,” he says, reaching out to squeeze Dean’s arm gently.

“Night, Cas,” Dean murmurs as Castiel gets into the car.

As he heads home, he wonders what might have happened if he’d given in to that impulse to press his lips to Dean’s… to let his magnetism draw him in. But to actually try to pursue Dean would be a terrible breach of ethics. He can’t do that, not while they’re technically teacher and student. It wouldn’t be illegal, as such, but it certainly wouldn’t be right.

He stares at the street lights, remembering the hungry look in Dean’s eye in his apartment, wondering what might have been, had he been brave enough.

Chapter End Notes

We know you're getting thirsty, but we need to keep the boys on a simmer for just a little longer...
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Afternoon, friends! TrenchcoatBaby here. Apologies for the skipped update last week. Ellen was putting the final touches on an awesome contemporary romance story (linked in the end notes) and I've been coauthoring another WIP that's finishing up very soon. In short—we're both busy little authors! But now that we have some other projects finishing up, we'll have more time to commit to this magical world we love.

On that note, onto the chapter. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean peeks over a bookshelf, craning his neck to see over a row of dusty hardbacks.

“Your phone keeps buzzing,” Charlie complains, nose tucked inside *The Art of Digital Spellcasting*, yellow highlighter between her fingertips. “The librarian is shooting me dirty looks.”

“Oh, whoops…” Dean abandons his search momentarily—he’s pretty sure the encyclopedia he’s looking for doesn’t actually exist anyways—and returns to the round table he’s been sharing with Charlie all afternoon. He has trouble locating his phone, but finally spots it wedged between two stacks of books he’s been meaning to reshelf. He taps the screen and sees he has an unread text message.

Castiel 3:20 PM << Running a few minutes late. Sorry!

Dean types out a reply, Charlie eyeing him suspiciously.

Dean 3:21 PM >> I'll think about forgiving you…

Castiel 3:22 PM << Would you forgive me more quickly if I bribe you with coffee?

Dean fights the urge to whistle. Man, this guy really gets him.

Dean 3:23 PM >> Deal

He grins, stomach fluttering with nerves. He can hardly believe it, but they’ve been texting all weekend, ever since Thanksgiving, when Cas had left his glass baking dish at Bobby’s. Dean had decided to bite the bullet and shoot him a text about it, letting him know he’d return it to Cas soon, and here they are…three days later, still chit-chatting, updating each other at various intervals and discussing their days.

And, you know, if they *happen* to flirt upon occasion…well, who could blame Dean? Surely no one who has eyes, ’cause Cas is fucking drop-dead gorgeous. Lately his crush has blossomed into a full-blown infatuation, and Dean can’t seem to stop it even though he tries. Texting with him now, it’s a far cry from the days when Dean’s heart swelled just from the sight of an email from cnovak@stanford.edu…

Jesus. These past few months feel surreal.
He slips his phone into his messenger bag and sits back down. He considers asking the librarian for help, but she’s looking stern and unfriendly as she casts between the shelves, books flying haphazardly around her head. He opts out of that option purely for self-preservation.

“You oughta see if it’s online,” Charlie says reasonably. “Did you know the Stanford library has digitized almost every text? There are centuries of magical pedagogy at our fingertips.”

“Oh, you don’t say,” Dean mutters sarcastically, distracted as he flips through another unhelpful textbook. She cuts him a look and he frowns ruefully. “Sorry Char. Problem is, I don’t know if the library even has it. I dunno where to start.”

“What’s it called again?”

“Uh…” Dean scours through his notes, spotting the title written down in his messy, all-caps scrawl. He only knows of its existence from a shady online message board he ended up on last night, which he’s pretty sure is run by lay magicians. But there’s so little information known about the Seal, that he has to consider every avenue. “The Complete Encyclopedic History of 20th Century Magic Regulation in the US. Fuck, that’s a mouthful.”

Charlie snorts. “Hmm, never heard of it.”

“That’s because it’s a restricted text.”

Dean cranes his neck to see Castiel behind him. The first thing Dean notices are his rosy cheeks—they’re red and windburned. He’s shivering in his trench coat. It’s a few weeks early for snow, but the temperatures are plummeting fast. Cas places a cup of coffee from the Witch’s Brew in front of Dean, steam rising through the plastic lid.

“Thanks,” Dean says, smiling softly. He really needs the caffeine jolt—research is so not his forte. He’d much rather be doing something more hands-on, though being in Castiel’s company is enough to make him feel pumped full of adrenaline. “Where’s yours?”

“Drank it on the way,” Castiel explains, shrugging off his coat even though he’s visibly chilled. “Was hoping it would warm me up, but the windchill is exceptionally strong today.”

Dean lowers his eyes, trying and failing to mask his concern. “C’mon,” he instructs quietly, and Castiel tilts his head but obeys. Dean reaches upwards, clasping his hands—they’re not only chilly, they’re borderline frigid.

“Damn, Cas,” he mutters, trying to rub some life back into them. “Ever heard of gloves?”

Before the professor can respond, Dean closes his eyes and focuses on transferring his energy…not casting a heat spell like they’ve done together before, but simply shifting some of his body’s energy and filling Cas up instead. Castiel gasps audibly and Dean shivers, feeling the creep of cold traveling down his spine. An exchange is happening, a transfer that feels organic and new—now he has Castiel’s coolness, and Castiel has his heat. After a few moments both temperatures even out, until they’re neither hot nor cold, just perfectly balanced and in-sync.

“There you go,” Dean says timidly, opening his eyes. He drops his hands and suddenly feels foolish. He hadn’t even asked Cas if he could perform magic on him—he just went ahead and did it, like some self-important douchebag. “Sorry…I just wanted you to feel better.”

“Never be sorry for magic like that,” Castiel whispers. “It was…Dean, you didn’t even cast a spell or a charm. You didn’t say an incantation or use a potion. You just—had the thought and made it happen.” Castiel looks absolutely thunderstruck, and maybe his reaction has some validity to it.
Dean’s never done magic before without following some sort of casting process. He hasn’t seen many mages do it, at least not on purpose or in a way they can control.

“S’nothing,” he says humbly. “Sure loads of mages who share an affinity can do it.”

Castiel looks doubtful, but he lifts his gaze up and spots… “Oh, hi Charlie.”

“Hey, Doctor Novak,” Charlie greets, a tone of amusement in her voice. “Nice of you to finally notice me.”

“Apolologies,” Castiel flushes, looking down in embarrassment. “Dean, well…caught me off-guard.”

“I can see that. He warmed you up, huh?” Charlie grins, voice heavy with suggestion, and Dean kicks her shin under the table until she mumbles a small “ouch!”

“Uh, anyways…” Dean takes a cautious sip from his mug, smacking his lips together. He turns back to Castiel, ignoring the daggers Charlie is shooting him. “How was the rest of your weekend?”

“Pleasant, thanks. I visited that bookshop Sam recommended,” Castiel replies, pulling out a chair and joining them around the table. He pauses, as if his next words are measured. “How was the remainder of Benny’s visit?”

“Much less exciting than Thanksgiving, thank god,” Dean grumbles, and Castiel offers him a companionable smile. Truthfully, Benny’s trip to Palo Alto had been fairly normal, apart from his dangerous burn out. Dean doesn’t know how the fuck to stop Benny from using excess amounts of lay magic, or if he even has a right to, considering that lay magicians don’t have any other choice if they want to hone their skills. The fact that there are infinite amounts of safe, powerful, and renewable magic being buried behind a Seal grinds Dean’s gears. “Just went and visited some old stomping grounds.”

“Oh? Like the…rib place?”

Dean feels like an anchor has been dropped inside his stomach. He wishes to god that Benny had never brought up that stupid inside joke—for whatever reason, “ribs” had been their codeword for having a quickie in the bathroom stall of whatever bar they were camped out at.

“N-nope, no ribs. None. Lost the taste for them. Don’t even want them anymore,” Dean babbles, and Charlie and Castiel both give him a disbelieving look. He doesn’t blame them, considering he orders himself a meat lover’s pizza practically once a week. Dean Winchester is practically synonymous with artery-clogging meat. “Uh, anyways, yeah. We got some drinks, had some burgers. He went back and crashed with Ash, so who knows what kinda trouble those two got into.”

“Oh,” Castiel says, voice brightening. “He…I mean, I just assumed he was staying…?”

“Nah.” Dean tries to sound casual, but misses the mark by a mile, because…wow, is Cas jealous of Benny? Did he think they were sleeping together again? “Apart from my brother, I can’t really see myself sharing my apartment with someone who I’m not, uh—”

“Knocking boots with?” Charlie offers, her tone feigned with helpfulness, and Dean narrows his eyes.

“Something like that.” He can’t get a read on Castiel, but it’s almost as if the professor is trying to
appear neutral, his face suddenly blank of any expression. “Anyways…you said something about
the book I’m lookin’ for being restricted?”

“Right…yes,” Castiel says, blinking back to attention as if he’d been lost in thought. “I’m not sure
how you even heard about that book, but I know it’s not available for academic study.”

“That’s bullshit,” Charlie says fiercely. “Sorry professor, but Dean’s project is all about the SEAL,
including its history. And besides, they can’t just—keep something like that from us!”

“I agree with you, Charlie,” Castiel says, his voice dipping low. “Unfortunately, the amount of
things the Council and the university keep from us is high. There are many things not even the
faculty has access to.”

Dean slumps in his chair, feeling frustrated, when Castiel speaks again.

“Have you thought about doing a locator spell?” he asks, then clarifies, “For the book, I mean.”

“Aren’t those sorta…dangerous?” Charlie asks, wrinkling her nose. “It like, requires blood and
everything.”

“Not dangerous, or even against the rules, though perhaps frowned upon,” Castiel concedes
thoughtfully. “Besides, it’s not like you could cite the book as a source for your project, anyways,
Dean. The panel would wonder how you gained access to it. Perhaps we should just forget it—”

“No, I want to find it,” Dean interrupts firmly. “Just for myself, for my own understanding,
y’know?”

Castiel nods, as if he understands completely. “I’ll conjure up a map, then. Does the library have
any casting bowls? It’ll need to be fireproof.”

Charlie’s eyes widen, seemingly with both fear and excitement, and Dean says, “Not that I know
of, and I’ll be damned if I’m bothering that librarian. But Bobby has some… Let me give him a
call.”

Ten minutes later, after pleading with one very grumpy magic shop owner, a small metal bowl
appears in Dean’s vicinity. “Magic fucking rocks,” he says, grinning, and Castiel chuckles at him.
He’s already holding a foldout map of the state of California, since they agreed to try and find a
copy of the book locally.

“Let’s go upstairs and find a practice room,” he suggests. Dean agrees, polishing off the rest of his
coffee and saying a quick goodbye to Charlie (while also ignoring the evocative eyebrow raise she
shoots in their direction). Dean and Castiel trudge up several flights of stairs until they’re
breathless, locating the most deserted corridor. They decide on a room they think no one else
would want, dark and dim and barely larger than a closet, and shut themselves inside.

“How does this work, exactly?” Dean whispers, trying not to focus on how closely they’re forced
to huddle.

“I’ll show you.” Castiel drops to his knees and Dean follows, placing the bowl and the map
between them. Castiel pulls a stray piece of paper and a pen from his bag and hands them both to
Dean.

“Write the name of the book,” he instructs, and while Dean is busy scribbling, he mumbles out the
incarnation with a few practice rounds. It sounds like Latin, and though Dean’s definitely not
fluent, he can pick out certain words—fire, blood, location. He hands the paper back to Cas, who
folds it and drops it in the bowl. “Next, blood.”

Dean’s already rolling up his sleeve, ready to donate, when Cas casts a quick but violent slashing spell, producing a large cut on his own palm.

“Cas!” Dean watches the blood trickle onto the paper, feeling stressed out and irritated. “What the hell! You should’ve let me do that!”

“I’m more than willing to bleed for the sake of knowledge, Dean,” Castiel mumbles, aiming for a joke but sounding immensely serious. Dean wonders if that just might be true—even though he’s a professor, Cas is kind of a badass, a rebel. That graduation prank he pulled back at Oxford was Exhibit A. He’s sure as hell not someone you’d want to cross in a fight, physically, magically, or otherwise.

And it’s really freaking hot, if you ask Dean.

After a few moments, the paper is soaked red. Castiel pulls away, wincing so quietly that Dean almost doesn’t catch it.

“Let me heal you,” Dean implores, fighting the urge to do it already, but he’s already cast magic on Cas today without asking.

“It’s just a scratch,” Cas replies stubbornly, waving him off. “Besides—when did you learn a healing spell? They only teach medical magic at the PhD level.”

“I watched you.” Dean’s voice goes soft. “After the fight, at the Samhain Faire, remember? You healed my lip.”

“Oh…” Castiel’s voice shakes a little, nodding. “Of course.” His cheeks begin to redden lightly. “With all these injuries, we seem to be bad luck for each other.”

“That’s not how I see it,” Dean replies gently, being far too honest, and Castiel holds his gaze with a probing sort of intensity.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah,” Dean says, not sure where all this confidence is coming from, but figuring he might as well embrace it for the time being. “Cas, meeting you might’ve been the luckiest thing that’s happened to me in a long time.”

He knows that statement can be taken a variety of ways—there’s the academic side, where he and Cas have developed a great rapport. There’s the magical side, where their affinity continues to awe and surprise them. There’s their friendship, which is growing stronger everyday. But the way Dean means it—and the subtext he’s hoping Castiel is picking up on—is about his feelings for Cas. How he longs to hold him and be held by him, how he daydreams about kissing him.

“Dean…” Castiel sounds nearly breathless now. “I…”

Dean waits, heart racing, wondering where Cas is going with this.

“I… I think the paper is disintegrating,” he says suddenly, breaking their gaze finally to glance down at the bowl. “We have to do the locator spell now, or we’ll have to repeat those steps again.”

Dean swallows, disappointed that their potential moment has been ruined by a stupid, flimsy piece of paper, but he’d do anything to avoid Cas cutting himself again. “Okay, let’s do this.”
He finds a handkerchief in his bag and ties it around the cut on Castiel’s palm, hands light and soft so he doesn’t injure him further.

“Thank you, Dean,” Castiel whispers, and Dean nods in acknowledgment.

“Do you need me to help? I don’t know the incantation, but you could teach me.”

“No, I can do it. Although…” Castiel tilts his head in a thoughtful way. “With our affinity, physical touch seems to increase the power. So even if you don’t chant with me, perhaps just—touching me would help?”

“Worth a try,” Dean says, hoping his voice doesn’t sound too hoarse, because he wants to do a lot more than touch Castiel right now…

Cas sits on his bottom, ankles crossed comfortably, and Dean folds into the same position. He scoots over some, so he’s beside Cas instead of across from him, and their kneecaps touch. Dean can feel Cas’ proximity like an extension of his own body, and when Castiel reaches over with his uncut hand, Dean opens his palm willingly. Their hands cup each other and Dean can feel the undercurrent of their magic entwining, flowing between each other like a two-lane highway. Castiel begins to chant and Dean closes his eyes, focusing on the husky sound of Cas’ voice, the feeling of their hands clasped together. At some point their fingers end up threaded, and Dean isn’t sure if he initiates it or Cas does, but they’re holding hands properly now. Dean strokes his thumb over Cas’ skin in an intimate gesture and the professor seems to lean into the touch, their shoulders brushing. Dean’s heart is racing again, an occurrence that seems typical when Cas is nearby. He’s not sure he’s ever felt this connected to anyone. It’s pure power, pure joy, an exuberance that feels like flying.

“Dean,” Castiel breathes, which is odd, because shouldn’t he be speaking in Latin? When did he stop?

Dean cracks an eye open, surprised to find the bowl is already filled with fire. The flames are dwindling, diminishing quickly.

“Sorry, must’ve drifted off a little,” he remarks, because they’re still holding hands and he’s nervous, dreading the moment they have to pull away. “That didn’t take long.”

“Indeed. I’ve never—done a locator spell that quickly before.” Castiel gives his hand a squeeze before disentangling, reaching for the bowl just as the final lick of fire dies down. Dean already misses the weight of Cas’ hand, the feeling of skin against skin. “Now we pour the ashes on the map, and…”

Castiel trails off, and Dean watches with rapt attention as the ashes begin to clump together. They move, dredging slowly up the state until they land squarely on Palo Alto.

“That’s a good sign.” Dean peers more closely at the map. “Any way to narrow that down, though?”

Castiel does a quick casting motion with his forefingers and thumbs, and the map has switched to a detailed map of the city. The stream of ashes move again, wandering away from Stanford, to Dean’s dissatisfaction. He’d been hoping there was a copy hidden behind that big red door, in the rooms leading up to the Seal. He still thinks it might be worth exploring though, just in case the Seal’s protective charms are strong enough to block their locator spell.

While he was lost in thought, the ash had situated itself firmly downtown, on the corner of two
streets known to house business buildings. It’s an industrious part of town, with expansive warehouses and a handful of skyscrapers. There are very few mages in this part of town, or even lay magicians, so the idea that a human has this book is astonishing to Dean.

“What the hell,” he mutters. “Why would the book be there?”

He glances up, expecting Castiel to be just as incredulous. Instead, the professor looks…upset, even alarmed.

“I know someone who works here,” he says evenly, tapping his finger lightly right under the ash. “Maybe it’s a coincidence, but…then again, maybe not. I’ll investigate. If he has it, I’ll get it for you.”

“Cas…” Dean scratches the back of his neck, mind whirling. He had hoped they’d find it in some second bookshop, or on the shelf of an old mage family who wouldn’t mind them borrowing it. But from the look on Castiel’s face, nothing about retrieving this book will be easy if his suspicions are correct. “I don’t want you to go to any trouble.” Or get in any trouble.

“It’s no problem,” Castiel says briskly, back on his knees and cleaning up the spell ingredients.

“Yeah, but…” Dean wafts for a moment, worried about pushing Castiel away if he pries too deeply, but then he decides—fuck it. He cares more about Cas’ safety than about the possibility of pissing off his friend. “Who is this guy anyways? And why would he have a book about magic regulation that’s basically like, black-market forbidden?”

“That,” Castiel says quietly, “is exactly what I intend to find out.”

Castiel hurries away from the library into the driving rain. He had to expand his rain shield to keep the weather off, but it's coming in sideways and the shield is tricky to maintain, so he hunkers down and runs for the edge of campus, hoping the weather will be nicer in Palo Alto.

As he crosses the boundary the rain thankfully lets up, but a cold wind still blows, chilling his damp clothes.

He mutters to himself as he continues along the road towards his apartment block, wishing Dean were here to warm him up like he had in the library. He marvels again at how easily Dean is taking to lay magic, although he suspects their affinity is partially responsible for it.

Still, his energy transfer, and their close proximity while casting the locator spell had been intoxicating—the way Dean had held his hand so gently, the joy of their combined magic flowing freely as he cast the locator—but it had still taken a toll on him. Now he feels like he's hungover. His back hurts, he has a sharp pain behind his left eye, and he's ravenous.

To top it all off, he misses Dean, even though he only just left him at the library ground floor, as he went back towards the stacks to look for Charlie. The Profound Bond book had said their affinity would strengthen the more they cast together, and today, it felt like Castiel had a hook in his chest pulling him back towards the campus, made ten times worse when he'd come through the wards to California.

He stomps upstairs and heads straight for a hot shower, first drying his damp clothes before
removing them and leaving them in a heap on his bed.

Why did he agree to meet Crowley’s lay magicians tonight? He'd had an email late last week inviting him tonight, and he'd agreed, but now all he wanted was to take his time in the shower, perhaps slowly work out the fact that he was horny as hell, the memory of Dean's thumb stroking across the back of his hand sending a warm shiver down his spine and right to his core.

He moves a soapy hand downwards, experimentally squeezing his half-hard cock and breathing out a sigh. Perhaps he has a little time to spare before he has to leave again.

He grips harder and strokes slowly, trying to recapture the way Dean’s touch had felt as their magic flowed, twisting his hand around his head and back down the shaft. Dean’s magic had surrounded him, merged with his own, made him feel like he was expanding past his own body.

What would it be like, for Dean to be here with him? This certainly isn't the first time he’s had these thoughts in the shower, but after today, their energy mixing, the unbearable intimacy—he had wanted to do a lot more than just hold Dean's hand. He wants to undress him, slowly revealing his body, then lick every inch of the skin he covers up with layers of flannel and denim.

He pumps harder, trailing the fingers of the other hand under his balls, across the tight ring of his ass. What would it be like to have someone…inside him? Or...or...for him, to fill someone else, to pound into a tight hole, to—

"Ah, Dean..." he cries without intending to, as the intensity of the orgasm catches him by surprise. His knees nearly give out as he stumbles forward, catching himself with one hand on the tiled wall and letting the water run over his hair and down his face.

Castiel knows this is crazy. This…infatuation. It's getting worse as the weeks go by. And the terrifying thing is that he's starting to think Dean feels the same way—his admission earlier today that he was glad to have met Castiel, then the gentle way he’d held his hand—he’d have to be blind to miss the sincerity in Dean's eyes as he said it.

He turns off the shower and grabs a towel, cursing himself for an idiot. At least he’ll have a break over Christmas in a couple of weeks, and Dean will be busy writing his thesis. Perhaps a little space will help, but at the same time, the idea of not seeing Dean as often leaves a hollow feeling in his stomach. He roughly dries himself and rubs at his hair, then wipes across the mirror and stares at his reflection. “Pull yourself together,” he mutters, then jumps in surprise as his phone buzzes on the countertop.

His eyes widen as he sees the text is from Dean.

Dean 7:34 PM << Hey Cas, this is a long shot, but are you doing anything tonight? Charlie had to bail on me, want a drink at the D?

Castiel takes a few deep breaths, trying to calm his racing heart. For a few moments, he seriously considers cancelling with Crowley to go out with Dean. Thing is, this is his best opportunity to try to get a look at that book they located this afternoon. Why Crowley has it is anyone’s guess, but Castiel needs to try to get a look at it, for Dean’s project’s sake—time is running out and they need a real win.

He sighs, typing out his reply, his wet hair still dripping down onto his shoulders.

Castiel 7:36 PM >> I'm sorry Dean, but I have plans tonight.
He dries his hair again and wanders into his bedroom to get dressed, hearing his phone vibrate with a message while doing so.

Dean 7:37 PM << Sure. Have a good night.

He tries to push away the fantasies. He can stress about Dean later.

Wondering whether he should have told Dean where he’s going, he finishes getting ready quickly. He’s running late.

Castiel pulls his coat tighter around him, fighting against the cutting wind as he walks up to the main entrance of the King Legal building. The windows are dark, but Crowley had said they’d be on the top floor.

Crowley's bodyguard, Rosco—Castiel assumed that was his function since he always seems to be hanging around—waits for him near the elevator when the doors open.

"This way, Doctor Novak," he says, gesturing down the corridor away from Crowley's office.

He can hear voices coming from an open door as he approaches.

"But sir, the Captain said…"

"I don't care what the Captain said, keep your casting small! Don't you remember what happened to Adam?" That's Crowley, but Castiel doesn't recognize the other voice.

"Yes, sir. I'll be careful."

Castiel stops still in the doorway as he takes in the scene. Crowley is standing at the front of the large meeting room with another man, young, but authoritative—another teacher perhaps. There are a few more people seated around a large table, intently watching one guy, who holds a flame in his open palm.

As Castiel watches, the young man carefully passes the flame between his hands, the swell of his magic radiating out of him. Castiel admires the illusion it as he watches the man turn his hand over, the flame now dancing across his knuckles—how is he able to hold it so steady?

The man grabs the flame with his other hand and with a flourish, it's gone. But not without a cost—the guy slumps forward onto the table, out of breath and red in the face.

Crowley claps, and the rest of the students join in with the applause, some more enthusiastically than others.

The other teacher says, "Very good, Aiden! That's better than last time, as I recall."

Aiden shrugs, and finally notices Castiel watching him from the doorway. Crowley follows his line of sight and says, "Ah, there you are. Come in, come in. Everyone, this is the visitor I told you about, Doctor Castiel Novak. He's from Stanford."
Castiel nods to the group, still unsure what he just witnessed. "Hello."

"You didn't say he was gonna be a mage," a young, bored-looking girl says, twirling her hair in her fingers.

"Yes, he's a mage, but believe me, he's the furthest thing from a Hardy Boy. I'll let him introduce the rest. Castiel, that's Krissy." He points to the girl who had just spoken, then follows with the others in turn. "Josephine, Aiden, Seth, and," he turns to the man standing beside him, "my colleague, Inias."

"Pleased to meet you, Doctor Novak," Inias says, stepping towards Castiel with his hand outstretched. As Castiel shakes it, the rush of Inias' magic flows over his hand with a pleasant, warm tingle.

"And you," Castiel replies, then turns back to Crowley. "Thanks for inviting me here, Mister Crowley."

Crowley holds up a hand, wincing. "Just Crowley, please. Tell us about your experiences in England with lay magic." Crowley speaks with a tiny smirk that doesn't help Castiel's nerves. He turns to the class, deciding to start with them, rather than him. Better he know more about what they're doing here before he tells them anything in return.

"Actually, I'd like to get to know you all first." He faces the kid sitting nearby—the one who'd been playing with fire. "Aiden, isn't it?"

Aiden nods, not looking happy to be singled out.

"That was impressive—that trick with the fire. Where did you learn to do that?"

"I’ve always been able to do it. I…” his eyes flick to Crowley for a moment before he continues, “I set fire to things. But I’m getting better at keeping it small."

Castiel stares at him. "You...you actually create a flame? It’s not just an illusion, then?"

Aiden clicks his fingers and produces another, smaller flame at the tip of his pointer finger. He holds it out and Castiel holds his palm over the top, feeling the heat. He’s never seen a lay magician produce actual flame before—an illusion is one thing, but the energy required to create fire is quite substantial.

He turns back to Crowley. "When I came in,” he asks carefully, “you said, ‘remember what happened to Adam.’"

Crowley says, "He didn’t learn control well enough. He lost it, and unfortunately is no longer with us.”

Castiel nods, a feeling of dread starting to creep up on him. He suspects these people aren’t quite sane—why would anyone want to cast an actual fire using their own energy? Unless they're addicts, of course. Just because they don’t particularly look like addicts doesn’t mean they aren’t.

"Maybe I could show you a thing or two."

He first shows Aiden how to cast a Euclidean structure to contain the flame—holding it in place and drawing less energy to maintain. It’s possible using only lay magic, although awkward, and it leaves him feeling slightly shaky by the time the whole class are able to produce flames of
different sizes, each within a containing structure. Even Crowley’s colleague, Inias, gets involved, producing a perfect flame that wavers in his palm.

The teaching leaves Castiel with a pleased warmth in his chest. He’s actually kind of enjoying this, although he has to remind himself that he’s supposed to be keeping his guard up. As he stands watching the students, he puts his hands into his coat pockets out of habit, and nearly rips them out again as he finds them deliciously warm. He feels his way around the obviously magical heat, and can’t hide the smile on his face when he can feel Dean all over it. Dean has spelled his pockets to stay warm? When had he done that? Dean’s magic is smooth and familiar against his palms, and he feels his breath quicken at the sensation, and at the memory of his shower earlier in the evening. He bites his lip, trying to will away the feeling again, but it’s no use. The idea that Dean had done this for him after he warmed him up the first time sends the warmth right through him.

He’s going to have to try to find out how Dean feels about him, whether he’s just warming his pockets to be kind, or if he really… If he’s interested. The idea seems so absurd to think about, but maybe Castiel could try flirting a little, dropping some hints. He's really no good at flirting with anyone, as Meg has told him before, but he needs to know.

“Um, Doctor Novak?”

Castiel is pulled from his epiphany by Inias, and he pulls his hands free and sits down in the spare seat at the table beside him. “Yes? I’m sorry, I was miles away.”

Inias smiles. “Thank you so much for coming along tonight. It can’t be comfortable for you to be here, but we appreciate your help.”

Castiel nods. “That’s okay, I’m glad I came. This is the kind of teaching I really enjoy, you know? Gifted children in Britain learn this stuff at elementary school—not with flames, naturally, but with practical skills. Warming up food, protection from rain, small healing spells. It’s all about control.”

Inias nods, obviously fascinated, but just as he’s about to say something, Crowley stands up from the side of the room where he’d been observing and says, “Well, thank you for the very informative lesson tonight, Doctor Novak, but I’m afraid that’s all we have time for. Next week, everyone?”

The class leaves, thanking Castiel as they go, and Inias shakes Castiel’s hand again as he follows them.

Crowley remains standing in place. “Kudos to you, Professor, for showing up. The kids certainly enjoyed it—they’ll be casting—” he waves his hands around in the air, “—whatever that structure thingy was in their sleep. Though I know you didn’t come here just to earn your angel wings. Your payment will be sent soon.”

As he’s about to walk to the door after the others, Castiel remembers the other reason he wanted to come here tonight. He puts his hands back in his pockets, and lets Dean’s magic give him the courage. “Actually, I wonder if I could ask a favor. There’s a book that I’m hoping to reference as part of some research I’m doing. It’s out of print now, and even the Stanford library doesn’t seem to have a copy available. I wondered if you have a collection here that I might be able to check?”

“No copy at Stanford? That is interesting.” Crowley crosses to the door and flicks the light off, and Castiel follows him out and down the hall towards his office. “I happen to have a small collection, yes. What sort of research is it that you’re doing?”

Castiel waits while Crowley unlocks his office door, noticing Rosco tailing them in the hallway.
He’s not sure why the bodyguard sticks so close, it’s not like he’s in a position to harm Crowley and get away from here. It’s a little creepy, but he guesses he doesn’t blame Crowley for wanting to be careful.

“It’s unconventional research. The book is called *The Complete Encyclopedic History of 20th Century Magic Regulation in the US.*”

“Quite a mouthful,” Crowley says, echoing Dean’s sentiments from earlier in the day. “What makes you think I might have it?” He crosses the room to the sideboard and pours a drink, much as he had the other week when Castiel had visited.

Castiel shifts uncomfortably, not sure if his honest approach is a great idea after all. He still doesn’t trust Crowley one bit. “Well, it’s a book about regulatory measures. I thought a law firm might take an interest in such things.”

Crowley considers him for a moment over the lip of his glass, eyes narrowed. Eventually he takes a sharp breath and says, “I guess I could let you take a look at my shelves. But I have a few… requests.”

Castiel raises an eyebrow. He should have known there would be some caveat. “Such as?”

“Come back and teach my class again. They need the control you’ve shown them tonight. I can be flexible on payment.”

Castiel nods. “I can do that.” He doesn’t really have the time to take on another class this year, but he’s still curious about Crowley’s magicians and what they’re capable of. Plus, he feels like he needs to keep an eye on Crowley. He’s definitely up to something, and until Castiel knows what it is, he will have to keep it all a secret.

“And,” Crowley continues as he starts to move, “you can’t take it with you. I’d prefer you to do your research here.”

Castiel narrows his eyes as he follows Crowley over to a dark, wooden cupboard standing against the inner wall of the office. “I’m very careful with books, no harm would come to it—”

“I’m sure that’s the case,” Crowley says over his shoulder as he unlocks the cupboard and stashes the keys back in his pocket. “These books are valuable, Castiel. I wouldn’t want anything untoward to happen to my things.” He opens one side of the cupboard and stands back, gesturing at the rows of volumes lined up inside.

Castiel’s jaw drops as he takes in some of the titles, running his finger along one row. *The Ancient Fae Magicks of Skye*, *The Rise and Fall of Plato and his Academy*, a very old-looking leather-bound volume with an Omega symbol embossed into the spine.

“Some of these books have been restricted for a hundred years. How...how did you…?” He trails off, his fingers pausing over the spine of *20th Century Magical Regulation*.

“Oh, here and there. I have my sources,” Crowley says from over near his desk.

Castiel pulls the encyclopedia out, the smooth hardcover in immaculate condition. It was only published in the late 1990s, but as far as Castiel could tell when he’d looked into it at Oxford, it had immediately been restricted, with only vague reasons recorded.

Taking the book over to the couches near the window, he sits down and reverently opens it to the contents page. The chapters cover the span of the century, with sections on the development of the
magical schools and their practices, lay magic during the 1960s, and a few more chapters that seem of little interest, but the one that catches his eye is “Chapter 2: The Sealing of the Stanford Well.”

Castiel pulls his phone out of his pocket to take photos of the relevant pages, intending to show them to Dean later. He quickly scans the page, taking in much of what he already knows, but then finds a passage that makes him read more carefully.

The regulation of Elemental Magic at Stanford was enacted as a defensive measure by the then faculty, under advisement from the Magical Council. Elemental magic was to be restricted to those studying at the university and graduates, at differing levels of access depending on their level of magical training and mastery. This course of action naturally caused quite a stir amongst those gifted individuals in the community who did not have links to the university, but in the end the Seal was cast and locked in June 1912.

The spell to create the Seal over the Elemental Well was a complex undertaking, requiring vast amounts of energy, and was engineered by some of the brightest minds associated with magical research of the day. Members of the team are listed below, and there were many students who were involved whose names were not recorded.

The list in the box below contains around twenty names, but there’s one name that jumps off the page at Castiel and makes him draw a sharp breath.

Henry Winchester.

“Found something interesting?” Crowley asks, wandering over from whatever he’s been doing at his desk.

Castiel glances up, then hurriedly turns over to the next page. “Some, yes. It’s all fascinating.”

He scans the next section.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, and indeed at the time of publishing, students of Stanford are taught that access to energy from the Elemental Well has always been restricted to those trained in the controlled use of magic. This rhetoric implies that those without education, including gifted individuals who have not been accepted into Stanford, are not able to control magic in a safe manner.

The teachings are contrary to several studies over the years since the Seal was cast that show empirical evidence that gifted individuals are able to cast elemental magic, albeit in a much reduced potency and at great personal risk. Casting using personal energy rather than an exterior source is commonly referred to as “lay magic,” and simple control of personal casting is taught in many countries. In North America, the use of lay magic is considered beneath qualified mages. Why should they use their own magic when they have a limitless source available to them?

Castiel has to stop for a few moments, taking a sip of the glass of whiskey Crowley had placed beside him at some point. All his study, his doctorate, had been on this topic. He wishes he’d been able to get a look at this book at Oxford, but they’d kept their restricted books closely guarded and unavailable without special permission.

But how did Crowley have a copy? He looks over at Crowley, peering at him as he stares out the glass windows over the lights of the city, one ankle resting on the opposite knee.

"You've read this book already?" Castiel asks.
Crowley doesn't even look at him as he sips at his drink. "Keep reading."

Castiel stares at him for a moment, then forces himself to read on.

*Despite these modern misconceptions, according to the original university records rigorously kept at that time, the Seal was originally cast as a temporary measure. The reason for its casting in the first place has been mysteriously lost or removed from the university records, and why it has remained in place for almost a hundred years is a topic of much speculation.*

Castiel turns the page, but the chapter ends there, and the following chapter deals with the uprisings of lay magicians during the Great Depression. He sits back on the couch, letting the news soak in. That explains how the book was restricted so quickly. “It was meant to be temporary?” he murmurs, mostly to himself. “But why put it there in the first place?”

“Control? Politics? Who knows?” Crowley says. He turns towards Castiel and sits forward, keenly regarding Castiel. “Point is, it’s a recent thing. Magic should be for everyone.”

“Can’t say I disagree,” Castiel says carefully, “but what’s in it for you?” He doesn’t want to outright suggest that Crowley isn’t gifted, but he’s finding it difficult to believe that the guy would just do this for some philanthropic reason.

“You’ve met my mother, haven’t you? Anything I can do to rub her smug face in the fact that magic exists outside her precious school is a win for me. Plus, I get to help people, which is my great passion.”

Castiel is fairly sure that there’s only one person Crowley is passionate about helping, but he keeps that to himself. He nods, saying, “Very well, I’ll help your magicians, but if you could please keep this quiet, I’d appreciate it. I’m still not sure how the university would handle it if they found out.”

“Very well.” Crowley stands up, extending his hand across the coffee table. “Pleasure doing business with you, Castiel.”

Castiel shakes his hand and hurries out of the building, putting his hands into his pockets once he reaches the street. Dean’s spell remains warm and comforting.

As Castiel walks the few blocks home, he wonders how much of this he should share with Dean. He doesn’t want to bring him into Crowley’s world before he’s sure it’s safe. He can share the news about the Seal, but they’ll need to do some more research—why was the Seal put in place as a temporary measure? Until they know that, he’d better keep Henry Winchester’s involvement quiet, at least until the stress of his thesis project is over, anyway. He may not even be related to Dean and Sam, but he doubts Dean will be happy to hear that his possible ancestor was part of it all.

He pulls out his phone and sends off a quick text.

Castiel 7:36 PM >> *I’m sorry about earlier, Dean, but I’ve got some research to share with you. If I got out of work early on Friday, I could come meet you somewhere near your place? Have that drink I missed earlier?*

Putting his phone back in his pocket, his stomach flutters with nerves. He has absolutely not just asked Dean out on a date, no matter how he might wish to, but perhaps, perhaps he could finally try to find out if Dean might be interested in…something more.
Things are heating up! We always love to hear from you in the comments, so please tell us what you're thinking :)

And if you're looking for something else to read before next week, how about a Destiel contemporary romance set in London? Ellen's fic for the Destiel Harlequin Bang posted earlier this week: Inheritance and Temptation
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Welcome to this week's chapter!

We worked hard over the past few days to make sure we had some new content to share with you all. We're really pleased with the direction the story is going in…but enough of that. Go see for yourself!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean’s back arches. “Cas,” he whines, a moan falling from his lips, so breathless and needy he hardly recognizes his own voice. He stares straight down his naked body as Castiel’s head bobs, his mouth wide and stuffed full of Dean’s cock. “Fuck, you’re good at that.” Castiel’s lust-filled eyes light up with mischief as he takes Dean further into the warm, wet cavern of his mouth. Jesus, that mouth. Dean tries to keep watching, tries to keep his elbows propped up, but then Cas swallows and Dean can’t keep himself upright anymore. He falls back against the mattress knowing he’s close, so incredibly close, he’s about to come in Cas’ fucking mouth and it’s the hottest fucking thing that’s ever happened to him. He makes a final effort to keep his eyes open, fixating on the feeling of a firm mattress beneath him, and zeroes in on the navy blue curtains framing the window. He has no idea where he is or how he got here, but he knows he’s on the receiving end of one of the best blowjobs of his life—not because of Castiel’s technique, though it’s amazing, but because it’s Cas. It’s someone he’s been daydreaming about for months and now it’s finally happening, he’s tightening his hands in Cas’ hair, screaming, coming—

There’s a distant, blaring sound, an obnoxious interruption to one of the best dreams Dean’s had in a long time. His eyes flutter open and he groans, sunlight streaming in through the blinds in his bedroom. He reaches over to the end table for his cellphone, but can’t find it, and he nearly performs a transporting spell with the intention of sending his phone (and the accompanying alarm) to Timbuktu. But then he remembers what day it is, and what activity he’s doing and who he’s doing it with, and all the blood travels back down to his leaking erection. He’s gotta take care of this before he hangs out with Cas all day, or he just might explode with horniness. It’s only the responsible thing to do, he reasons. He slips his boxers off and takes himself in hand, eyes cracking closed just long enough to put himself back inside the dream—lying on a bed, Cas’ tongue swirling around the head of his dick, his hair tousled and crazed. Fuck, it had just felt…so real, so insanely good, so right. It’s like he can feel the soft imprint of Cas’ hands all over him, can still feel the warmth of his body, hazy as a memory. That’s crazy, pure freaking lunacy, but as he strokes and pants, finally spilling all over his hand and crying out Castiel’s name, Dean knows what he feels. He feels like he really needs to kiss the fuck out of Cas already.

After wiping himself clean with a handful of nearby tissues, Dean finally locates his cell phone, stuck between the crack of his bedframe and the table. He smiles sleepily, reading a text from Cas.

Castiel 8:06 AM << Remind me again why we’re getting up this early on a Saturday?

Dean chuckles, tucking his chin down against his chest. Last night they’d finally shared the long-awaited drink Cas had asked him for earlier in the week. Dean had tried not to think about it as a date, because that made this whole thing way too good to be true. Though the facts were that it’d
been a Friday night, at his usual date spot, with someone he’s ridiculously into…well, it isn’t that big of a leap, is it? Their interactions had been nervous at first, a little forced and stifled. But a few drinks in Castiel had revealed he had uncovered a copy of *The Complete Encyclopedic History of 20th Century Magic Regulation in the US*. Dean had been cautiously excited, still remembering how worried Cas had looked when he realized he might know the current owner of the book. The professor was still being extremely tight-lipped about this mysterious contact, though he admitted to reading sections of a chapter. Cas had then pulled out his cell phone to show Dean pictures, only then realizing the book must be spelled against any form of copying, because the photos were just slates of gray. Dean was disappointed and Castiel had frowned as well, promising to take notes next time. They had settled into other topics then, sharing funny student interactions from the week and performing small spells together—animating the sugar shaker, floating themselves an inch or two off their chairs. It was addictive…doing magic with Cas, their hands entwined longer than was strictly necessary. After a while, Dean realized that they had been holding hands without doing any magic at all.

It wasn’t much, but fuck it, it was something.

He began texting, a goofy smile still plastered on his face.

Dean 8:11 AM >> **Not a morning person, Cas?**

Castiel 8:12 AM << **You say that like it’s a bad thing**

Dean 8:12 AM >> **I mean…**

Castiel 8:13 AM << **Don’t you judge me, Winchester.**

Castiel 8:13 AM << **I’ll have you know that recent studies suggest late sleepers are more intelligent than early risers.**

Dean 8:14 AM >> **Yeah, but, the early bird gets the worm. ;)**

Castiel 8:15 AM << [eye roll emoji]

Dean 8:15 AM >> **Or should I say, the early bird brings his night owl friend coffee on the way to pick him up in like, 30 mins?**

Castiel 8:16 AM << **Now we’re talking. ;)**

It’s closer to nine o’clock by the time Dean is sitting behind the wheel of the Impala, fingertips thrumming as he idles, waiting for Cas to come down. He’s fighting the urge to park and go knock on his front door, but that would make this less of a casual friend day and more of a romantic excursion, and he’s trying his damndest not to ruin things by rushing them. He’s half-convincised that Cas is more affectionate with him now because of their affinity, so all those hand-holds and elbow brushes and small gasps of contact can be easily explained away. Their shared magic is powerful, there’s no denying that. But there are other times that Dean wonders if it’s more than that, if his crush isn’t quite so unrequited—like when Cas stares at him with something that looks like longing, or when he texts Dean cute little things throughout the day. If Castiel were anyone else, Dean would’ve made a move by now…but this isn’t just anyone. This is someone who
matters to him, and the thought of being rejected by Cas makes him feel like an anchor has been dropped inside his stomach.

The other thing making him anxious these days is his ongoing obsession with the Seal. They’ve been behind the old red door a half-dozen times now, doubling up their efforts to twice a week as the semester’s end approaches. He’s supposed to have some sort of draft ready for his thesis, at least an inkling of what his presentation might entail for Dr. Moseley’s approval. But he’s not any closer now to solving the mystery than he was three weeks ago, and the lack of progress is making him panic. If he could just figure out that damn maze… But he can’t find a way to assemble a map inside the illusion, not when his notes and drawings and pictures keep disappearing. It’s maddening, how complicated this whole puzzle is. The situation is made even trickier by the little tidbits Cas has garnered from 20th Century Magical Regulation, which he only has access to through some dubious acquaintance. Last night, Castiel had said the Seal was only meant to be temporary, at least according to the book. But then why is it still active? Why are lay magicians like Benny risking their lives everyday just to taste a fraction of the power hidden away behind the Seal?

There’s a tap on the driver-side window and Dean flinches on instinct, startled out of his thoughts. Cas is wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, the most casual outfit Dean’s ever seen him in, and he’s smiling down at Dean sheepishly. He comes around to the passenger door, sliding into the leather interior and mumbling an embarrassed, “Sorry I scared you.”

“Nah, takes a lot more than that to scare a Winchester,” Dean says boastfully, flashing Cas an exaggerated grin. When Cas meets his eyes, all ocean-blue and full of expectation, the grin turns from impish to charming. Dean knows how to turn on the charisma, and he even tosses Castiel a little wink just for the hell of it, noticing the professor’s cheeks flush red. Dean suddenly thinks about the sex dream he had this morning, and the subsequent and frantic jacking off while imagining Castiel’s mouth doing some incredible things to his cock, and his clears his throat and looks away, feeling much less in-control of the situation.

“Uh, anyways,” he mutters, scrambling for a topic, “coffee’s hot.” He points to a paper cup with the Witch’s Brew logo printed in black cursive, and Castiel sighs with gratitude and thanks Dean heartily, taking a tentative sip as Dean drives the Impala out of Castiel’s apartment complex. It’s been weeks since he’s driven around Palo Alto, since he spends most of his time on-campus or holed up in his apartment, and the rays of morning sunlight make him feel energized. They pass a farmer’s market on the way to the coast, making small talk about the city, and Dean learns that Cas hasn’t had any time to explore California since moving here.

“We’ll have to take more trips, then,” Dean says easily. “I’m a midwestern boy through and through, but you’ve gotta see the redwoods, man. It’s like walking right into Lord of the Rings.”

“Lord of the Rings, huh?” Castiel says cheekily. “Books or movies?”

“Both,” Dean admits, thinking of the worn copies on his bookshelf and the DVD collector’s set edition Charlie got him years ago for Christmas.

“I didn’t peg you for a fantasy lover.”

Truthfully, Dean is a big ol’ nerd, but the longer he can hide that from Cas the better.

“What’s not to love? Epic battles, good versus evil, the underdog wins, and Viggo Mortensen is hot as hell.” Dean stops talking abruptly, stuck at a red light as he looks away. Even though Cas knows he’s bi, he still doesn’t quite know Castiel’s sexual orientation, and it’s a subject he’s terrified to broach. Falling for a straight person is like, Gay Faux Pas Number One, but if Cas isn’t interested
in him, he’s pretty sure he’s too far gone.

“I thought everyone had crushes on Legolas,” Castiel comments conversationally. “Anna had a huge poster of Orlando Bloom on the back of her door for years.”

Dean laughs, turning right and heading towards the freeway. “Not me. Always had a thing for brunettes.”

Whether it’s conscious or not, Castiel runs a hand through his brown locks, and Dean feels butterflies fluttering around in his stomach.

“Yeah, so,” he begins uncertainly, “you really oughta take more trips. San Francisco has some amazing food. And I’m not a wine drinker really, but Napa Valley has the best fucking wine on the planet.”

“Sounds like you’ve done a lot of traveling,” Castiel says pleasantly, a question in his voice.

“Yeah, I roadtrip with Sam most summers. Just pile into the car with duffle bags and a cooler of beer. We sleep in Baby, or get cheap-ass hotel rooms, and see how far we can get.” He smiles, wistfully recalling their last trip to Lake Tahoe. “Sometimes we camp, though it took a while to get used to the no-fire rule around here.”

“Does anyone else ever travel with you?”

“Sometimes, but mostly it’s just me’n Sammy.” Dean searches for their exit sign, thinking about last summer and how irritated Benny had gotten when he refused to let him tag along. Truth was, Benny and Sam had never gotten along all that well. Sam could be a stubborn ass when he wanted to be, but more than that, Benny had never understood that family comes above everything else.

“I’m sure I’ve said this before, but I think it’s wonderful you’re so close to your brother,” Castiel says earnestly, and Dean smiles warmly at him. In an alternate reality, he wonders how Cas would’ve reacted if the situation from this past summer had been reversed—if Cas had been Dean’s friends-with-benefits hookup instead of Benny. It’s a totally impractical daydream, mostly because Dean wants a lot more than a casual relationship with the man sitting beside him. Still, something tells Dean that Cas would’ve respected his boundaries, would’ve understood that him and Sam need their family time together.

They settle into an easy quietness after that, the radio crooning classic rock as the Impala exits the freeway. By the time they reach the beach, the sun is glistening perfectly off the top of the water. It looks like something off a damn postcard, and even though it’s the start of December, the weather is a welcomingly warm fifty-four degrees. It’s windy, but still the best weather they could’ve hoped for, and Dean chuckles at himself, remembering all the weather spells he had looked up last night just in case it’d been cold and rainy. He isn’t strong enough to affect the weather on his own, not for more than a minute or two, but his affinity with Cas is growing stronger by the day. Who knows what sort of badass spells they’ll be able to cast six months from now?

They exit the car, slamming their doors simultaneously. Dean uses his hand as a shield against the sun, overlooking the stretch of sand and water. There are a few surfers out in long-sleeved wetsuits, and some local families in long pants and sweaters, but otherwise it’s pretty empty. Dean thinks he might shrug off his own zip-up jacket at some point and get some sun, though the wind is a bit too bracing to attempt that now. He riffles through the backseat and comes back with a few canvas tote bags and sunglasses, noticing that Cas has slipped on a pair of aviators. He looks damn good, hair whipping in the wind, skin somehow maintaining a glow even in the winter months. He looks eager as a kid, excited to walk in the sand, and Dean’s heart swells.
“Did Bobby give you a list?” Castiel asks curiously, coming to Dean’s side. Dean snorts in response, let’s out an ominous, “oh…yeah,” then pulls a long, folded-up piece of paper from his back pocket.

“He doesn’t like making supply runs, so I usually end up going every few months and grabbing as much as I can,” Dean explains, handing Castiel two of the empty tote bags, their hands brushing. Bobby had called Dean just last night, asking him to make an emergency run the next morning for one of his top-spending clients at the magic shop. Dollars to doughnuts, the mysterious customer is that red-haired women that Dean’s spotted a few times now, but never met. He had been on the verge of refusing Bobby’s request—hoping to stay in all day Saturday and do some more research on the Seal—but Castiel had shyly volunteered to accompany him to the beach. Spending more time with Cas had been all the motivation Dean needed.

“How long does it usually take you?” Castiel’s voice is conversational and light as they head towards the shore, sand sinking under their shoes.

“Depends. In the winter, most of the native flowers aren’t in bloom, so that cuts the list in half.” Dean walks with purpose, heading straight for some shrubbery he usually finds good pickings in. “Sorry to drag you along just to work. I promise when we’re done, I’ll buy you something fried and unhealthy once the food trucks open.”

Castiel smiles, shaking his head. “Don’t worry about it. Working or not working, I’m just…happy to be here.”

Dean nudges his shoulder a little, just a playful gesture, but Castiel’s shoe gets caught in the sand and he stumbles slightly. Dean lunges for him, hand on Cas’ elbow, and they both chuckle at the collision.

“Woah there,” Dean laughs, helping Cas regain his footing. “Didn’t know you were so easy to take down, Novak.”

“You caught me off guard is all,” Castiel defends, narrowing his eyes friskily. “Trust me, next time I’ll be ready for you.”

Dean’s heart pounds at the thought of tackling Cas right now, lying together in the sand and smothering his face in kisses. The back of his neck warms and he resists the urge to pounce, looking down at his feet, concentrating on his steps. They reach the evergreen shrub and Dean shows Cas how to reach behind the small, light-green leaves and snap off the bundle of red berries hidden underneath. The berries make a great combining agent for potions, and there are tons of them growing, so they spend a good twenty minutes chatting idly and searching every shrub. Once they have a bag partially full, Dean concludes that it’s plenty, and they head in closer to the shore.

Crushed seashells are another ingredient Castiel has apparently never considered using, but he’s never lived this close to the coast before, so it’s understandable. Dean tells Cas how to find the perfect seashell, at least for potion making—small and thin, delicate and easy to crush. They sit together, the sand turning wet as the tide comes in closer, and use their hands to dig for more shells. Castiel gets ambitious and is eventually wrist-deep in sand, and Dean thinks that he could watch those hands work all day long. Truthfully, he does—he gets so caught up watching Cas that he realizes he’s been staring for a while, just admiring how gorgeous this guy is, how his every movement seems interesting. He blinks back down, red-faced, hoping Cas hasn’t noticed.

“This is way more beautiful than I imagined,” Cas comments quietly. “Wish I could’ve seen this as
a kid."

Dean blinks, surprised. "Your parents never took you to the ocean?" Castiel looks up at him, confused, so Dean explains, "When we’ve talked before, your childhood sounds so—suburban. Y’know, the type of family that goes to Disney World or some shit."

"We were," Castiel says, chuckling self-deprecatingly. "At least, at first. My parents are both mages, but they have regular jobs too. Dad’s a writer, Mom’s an administrator. But magic was a huge part of what kept the five of us together, the thing we all had in common. But when Anna was rejected by Oxford, Gabe and I were still too young to really understand, and everything sort of…" Castiel stares down at his hands intently, a small seashell snapping softly in his hands. "Well, you know the rest of the story. We’re more or less estranged now."

"I get that," Dean says, echoing the same soft tone. "It’s sorta like when someone dies, y’know? Not that things with your sister can’t be fixed one day. But after Mom passed, we realized she kept us all together. Sam and I figured out how to be a family again, just the two of us, but Dad…"

Dean’s voice breaks a little, and he takes a deep breath, suddenly drowning in an intense feeling of regret. They hadn’t been able to repair the damage between them before John had died, and it still fills him with grief even though it’s been nearly a decade.

"The way you took care of your brother, not only in your mother’s absences, but in your father’s, is admirable, Dean." Castiel reaches his hand out of the sand and covers Dean’s, a comforting clasp, and it makes Dean’s heart seize up. "You’re an amazing brother and friend."

Dean’s gaze casts down, embarrassed by the sincerity in Castiel’s voice. "Bet you tell that to all the boys," he jokes, hoping Castiel will crack a small smile. He doesn’t.

"I don’t, actually," Castiel mumbles gently, and he opens his mouth as if he wants to say something more but is uncertain. Dean leans forward, clinging to his every word. "Around you, I find myself doing and feeling…saying things that…I…" He licks his lips and Dean follows the movement, heart beat practically in his throat. "Forgive me. I’m not sure what I’m trying to say."

Dean feels pretty certain what Cas is saying—at least, he thinks he can read between the lines. And it gives him immeasurable hope.

"Do you remember that fight we had?" he asks, seemingly out of the blue, and Cas’ eyes widen. "That day, in my office, when…?"

"Yep," Dean answers instantly. Fuck, as much rage as he’d felt for Cas that day, he had felt an even stronger surge of lust. Chest to chest, yelling wildly, filled with fury… Even thinking about it now makes his cock twitch.

"Of course." Castiel swallows, withdrawing his hand from Dean’s. "We had a difficult start, I know. I apologize for—"

"I’m not fishin’ for another apology, Cas," Dean interrupts, leaning in closer again and dropping his voice to a whisper. He already misses the feeling of Cas’ palm against his hand. “I’m glad it happened, even though it felt shitty at the time. Honest to god, man, I never knew that one person could make me so angry…so sad…and now, so fucking happy. You—you’re something special, okay? At least to me. That’s all I’m saying.” He’s blushing furiously now, and hopes he hasn’t oversharped. He secretly wears his heart on his sleeve, but he’s definitely not used to sharing those feelings.
Castiel tilts his head, his smile bright, eyes filled with something that looks pure and sweet and hopeful. “Thank you for putting that into words, Dean. It’s exactly what I was trying to say.”

“S’nothing,” Dean mumbles out, embarrassed. He examines their seashell collection, and—finding it rather impressive—clears his throat nervously. “Uh, so, ready to do a little magic?”

Rather than wading in the ocean, the temperature too chilly for either of their likings, they travel to a deserted edge of the beach and cast a simple charm, drawing the eelgrass and kelp to the shoreline. Sometimes Dean spends too much time at the university, and he forgets that magic is not normal, not everywhere—not to the unsuspecting, non-magic family building sandcastles nearby.

“Next time, I want to go swimming,” Castiel announces, as they stuff the wet and slimy vegetation into tote bags. Dean laughs good-naturedly.

“It’s pretty cold year-round,” he warns, but Castiel just shrugs in an unaffected way. Hmm… They waterproofed all their belongings earlier—phones and wallets—and the bags are far enough away to be out of the line of fire. So what could the harm be? Grinning wickedly, Dean casts a quick slashing spell, watching a small wave stretch and collide with an unsuspecting Castiel, who shrieks from the sudden cold. Dean laughs so hard his sides hurt, and once the shock has worn off, Castiel just scowls at him under his damp hair.

“You’ll regret that.” Castiel says threateningly, and then his hands are flying, casting quickly, and a much larger wave comes straight for Dean’s head. The impact of the water is so powerful it knocks him off his feet, sputtering as salt water seeps into his mouth, jacket drenched.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean grouses, already retaliating with a wave of his own. They go back and forth for ten minutes, hitting each other with increasingly larger and more forceful waves, panting and dodging sheets of water until they’re lying side by side on the shore, laughing.

“We’re idiots,” Dean mumbles, a grin on his lips. He carefully eyes everyone on the beach, checking to make sure no one noticed their magical equivalent of a water balloon fight. Thankfully, all the other beachgoers are happily distracted by each other.

“We’re idiots about to catch a cold,” Castiel points out reasonably. He stretches his arms wide in invitation, and Dean looks at him blankly, wondering if Cas is offering what Dean thinks he is…

“C’m’here, scoot closer. We’ll dry faster together.”

In an instant, Dean finds his head nuzzled against Castiel’s chest, arms wrapped around his back, the feeling of Castiel’s innate magic swirling inside him as they lie on the sand. It feels mind-blowingly good, but Dean doesn’t want to make Castiel feel obligated to share his magic, so he mutters, “You don’t have to…”

“I want to. And I owe you for the warm pockets in my trench coat,” Cas murmurs faintly, and Dean smiles into the fabric of Cas’ sweatshirt. He’s been wondering when his friend would bring that up. Dean had cast a quick heat spell earlier in the week, during their meeting at the library when Cas wasn’t looking. “You always find a way to surprise me.”

“Just keeping you on your toes,” Dean breathes, nudging Cas’ foot with his own, their legs tangling together. “Or, y’know, off them in this case.” Castiel chuckles, Dean’s head jostled by the rise of Cas’ stomach as he laughs. He doesn’t know if it’s their lay magic, their affinity, or the feeling of being held by Cas, but as their clothes begin to steadily dry, he hums contentedly in the back of his throat.

“Feels nice,” he whispers. His ear is close enough to Castiel’s heart that he can hear his racing
pulse, can feel how their proximity is affecting the man beneath him. It’s intimate, the growing warmth between them, and Dean is struggling to keep a clear head.

“Which part?” Castiel asks, sounding more timid than usual.

“All of it,” Dean admits, reaching a hand around Castiel’s waist to move in closer. “The heat, the magic, the affinity…” His mouth feels dry, palms sweaty, but he has to push forward. He has to be brave, because Castiel is giving him all the cues he’s been looking for, all the indications that his feelings aren’t one-sided. “You.”

He tilts his head up, batting his eyelashes in a way that have made lesser men and women swoon. Castiel looks down at him, thunderstruck, their lips a breath apart. Their clothes and skin are freshly dry, but neither of them have moved apart.

“Dean,” Castiel begins huskily, “would it be okay if—”

But then there’s a vibration between them, the front pocket of Dean’s jeans parallel with Castiel’s upper thigh, and they break apart as Dean fishes his cell phone out. He’s irritated, in utter disbelief that a moment like that could possibly be interrupted. But then he sees it’s Sam on the caller ID, and he mumbles an apology to Cas and walks a few yards away.

“What?” he snaps into the receiver.

“Dean,” Sam wheezes, sounding like he’s out of breath. “Listen, you were right. Ruby’s bad news.”

Dean narrows his eyes, spinning to look back at Cas, who’s standing up again with his hands in his back pockets. “Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

“I’m serious,” Sam says irritably. “She’s been coming and going and lying about it, so this morning when she left my dorm, I followed her. She went downtown and met with this shady lookin’ guy in an alley of the business district, and I think…Dean, I think she’s in something bad.”

Dean pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes fluttering closed. “Where are you?”

“Running to my car, on my way back to Stanford.” Some of the tension in Dean’s chest dissipates—at least his little brother is safe. “But I think I have to…I dunno, confront her.”

“Bad idea, Sammy. Just breakup with her, block her number, move on.”

“It’s not that easy,” Sam answers impatiently, huffing out a breath. “Listen, I really need to talk this out… Can I come over?”

Dean bites his lip, considering. He looks at Cas again, looking adorably lost as he waits. Dean had wanted to take him to lunch, to visit the nearby cove, to entwine their fingers together and see if Castiel might finally kiss him. But this is Sammy, and Sammy in potential trouble… He groans, feeling conflicted, but knows if he told Cas the situation, he would immediately tell Dean to go and make sure Sam doesn’t do anything stupid. Those might not be his exact words, but whatever. When it comes to Ruby, Sam’s brain cells seem to dwindle exponentially.

“Yeah, okay,” he says finally, sighing. “Hang tight. I’m on my way.”
Castiel watches the Impala until it’s out of sight along the street. With a sigh, he climbs the steps to the front door of the apartment block, pausing to enjoy the not-quite-warm sun on his face before he heads inside.

The trip back into Palo Alto had been slightly strained, with Dean obviously worrying about Sam, and Castiel worrying that he’d overstepped some boundary with his drying spell earlier on the beach. Another few seconds and he would have jumped off that cliff with two feet, asking Dean's permission to kiss him like some teenager…

But the phone had rung, and Dean had rushed off to be with his brother. Castiel sighed as he unlocked his front door. He'd only said a few minutes previously that Dean was a good brother—he couldn't really complain about it now.

*There will be other opportunities,* he reminds himself firmly. Just now in the car, Dean's words had let a tentative swirl of hope spread through Castiel's chest.

Before he’d got out of the car, he’d reached over and squeezed Dean’s arm gently, feeling the buzz of his magic even through his jacket. He’d murmured, “Thank you for today, Dean. I enjoyed it, even the wet parts.”

Dean had laughed, the sound filling Castiel with a warm joy. “Any time you wanna go to the beach, just ask, okay?” At Castiel’s agreement, he’d added, ”I’ll see you on Monday, as usual, right?” His smile had warmed Castiel to his toes.

"Of course. Meet in the library again?”

Dean replied, “Sure. I hope we can find something this time. I’ve only got, what—two weeks to finish the draft?”

“Yes, it’s due by December twenty-first. You’ve started it though, right?” Castiel had felt mildly guilty, knowing that the two of them were enjoying working and casting together than they probably hadn’t done as much research on the maze as they could have done.

“I’ve...started, yeah,” Dean had said, evasively. When Castiel had eyed him worriedly, he’d added, “It’s cool, Cas, I’ll get it done. We just need some results, that’s all.”

Castiel had agreed, then said, “I’m sure we can find some results on Monday. We’re quite a team.”

“We really are,” Dean had said, with a smile that had made Castiel’s stomach do a back flip.

In the warmth of his apartment, Castiel’s mind buzzes with the day’s revelations as he slumps onto his couch, bag of pretzels in one hand and bottle of beer in the other. It’s obvious that Dean enjoys working with him, and their casting together has improved even more than he ever thought might be possible. Even last night when they’d had their not-date drink together, Dean had reached for Cas in order to cast some small spell without thinking or creating any containing structures, and their magic had flowed like a river, relentless and powerful. He’d have to wait until Monday to feel it again.

He sighs. He should really get started on the grading he needs to get done this weekend, but after having his day with Dean cut short, he feels like he’d rather not face it. Just as he’s about to turn on the TV, his phone buzzes where he’s left it on the coffee table. He blinks at Meg’s name on the screen—they haven’t actually spoken on the phone for a few weeks, favoring messages and the occasional email instead.

“Hi Meg,” Castiel says, sitting back on the couch as he takes a mouthful of beer.
“Hey, Clarence! How’s things?”

The sound of Meg’s voice relaxes Castiel, warm and familiar. “Not bad, thanks.” Not bad? Like he hasn’t just had the most enjoyable Saturday morning with the man of his dreams? “How about you?” he adds weakly.

“Good, good. I just wanted to catch up on last night’s date with the mysterious Dean.” She slows the word mysterious down, making Castiel roll his eyes and huff with amusement. He hasn’t heard the end of this for weeks now, and the “date” situation had Meg so excited that she obviously hadn’t been able to contain herself until he replied to her messages.

“It wasn’t a date, remember?” he says, allowing a smile to creep into his voice. Letting out a sigh, he drops his head onto the back of the couch. “And it was amazing.”

Meg lets out what can only be classified as a squeal. “Tell me everything!” she enthuses, and Castiel groans.

“Nothing happened! We had a nice dinner, I got an Uber home afterwards. But, today…” He trails off, trying to decide how much to tell her.

“Today? What happened today?”

“Dean needed to collect some spell reagents for his uncle, so we went to the beach.” Castiel grins as she squeals again.

“You went on another date? Cas, tell me you kissed him. Or something, come on, you’re killing me here.”

“No, nothing’s happened. I mean, we might have been close. But the magic, the bond, it’s...incredible. It’s like my whole body lights up when we’re close, like I’m about to—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it, sharing affinity with someone is awesome, you’ve told me a million times,” Meg says, the grin clear in her voice. “You still want to kiss him, right?”

Castiel sighs again, closing his eyes. “Yes. No—maybe? I don’t know, it’s terrible timing. He’s still my student, for God’s sake.”

“Castiel.”

He drinks deeply from his beer, knowing what she’s about to say, and not wanting to hear it. He speaks again before she can continue. “Yes, all right? Yes. I want him, and I don’t even know if it’s just the affinity, or if he really does like me as well. Maybe the whole thing is an illusion.”

Meg cuts in again, stopping his rambling. “Nope, it’s not just that. The ancient battle mages were not romantically involved. Well, some of them were, I guess, but the nature of the bond, the little we do know about it, is that there’s a resonance between your magic and his. Anything else you’re feeling is you, and him.”

Castiel frowns against the swelling of warm hope in his chest.

Before he can say anything, Meg continues, “Are you freaking out? ‘Cause he’s a guy?”

“What?” They’ve talked about this before, after he’d first admitted his attraction to Dean after the phone sex incident. Meg had been nothing but supportive ever since, and Castiel is grateful for it. “No, I told you, that doesn’t matter.” It isn’t strictly true—he’s nervous as hell. But it isn’t the guy
thing he’s worried about. It’s the chance that he’s imagining the whole thing, and their friendship could be destroyed, maybe even their affinity. Dean’s thesis project could be at risk, and he doesn’t want to be responsible for that.

Meg’s silence on the other end of the line meant that she doesn’t believe him. He puts the beer bottle down on the table in front of him, then rubs at his eyes with his cool fingers. “We’ve got a busy couple of weeks coming up. Maybe after the holidays—”

“Oh, honey. Are you going to be able to wait that long?” Meg asks, barely a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

Castiel huffs. “I’ll have to. Anyway, enough about my problems. What’ve you got planned for Christmas?”

They spend the next half hour or so chatting about life in England, Meg’s research work and the shenanigans of students in both countries. Castiel enjoys the distraction, and he idly rolls a ball of conjured water around and between his fingers, but when he says goodnight to Meg and hangs up, the longing in his chest is back to distracting. He glances at the screen of his phone and his heart swells to see several message notifications from Dean.

Dean 3:40 PM >> Hey, thanks again for coming this morning. Bobby says good job on the stuff we collected.

Dean 3:42 PM >> We should really do that again sometime :)

Dean 3:46 PM >> Also little brothers, what are they even for :(  

Castiel chuckles at the last message, then fires off a reply.

Castiel 4:12 PM << I enjoyed today as well! Thanks again for letting me tag along :)  
Everything okay there?

He stands up, stretching, then moves his fingers in a spell to translocate his empty beer bottle and snacks back to the kitchen. Maybe he’ll go for a run this afternoon, since the sun is out.

His phone buzzes with another message.

Dean 4:15 PM >> Yeah, we’re good. I’ve just spent like an hour trying to convince him to dump Ruby because she’s bad news, but I’m not sure he’s buying it

Castiel 4:17 PM << Love is blind, as they say. I’m here if you need to rant more :)  

Castiel imagines Dean leaning back against the counter in his apartment, smiling at his phone. The mental image hits him so strongly that the almost immediate buzzing in his hand surprises him and he nearly drops his phone.

Dean 4:18 PM >> Thanks Cas, you’re the best. Might have to be later though, we’re just heading out again for a few drinks. Talk later, k?

Castiel 4:19 PM << Okay, have fun.

He types his reply as he’s wandering into his bedroom, then throws the phone on his bed. The light in the room is dim—he hadn’t bothered opening the navy curtains this morning as it was still dark when he’d dragged himself out of bed. Not to mention the fact, of course, that he’d ducked straight
into the bathroom—he’d woken up with one of the hardest morning boners he’d had since he was
sixteen after a particularly vivid dream, where he’d sucked Dean’s gorgeous cock in this very
room.

It had seemed so real, though—he remembers the way dream-Dean had thrown his head back in
ecstasy—he’d almost been able to taste him on his tongue. He’s never had his mouth anywhere
near another man, but just the memory of the dream sends all the blood rushing back downstairs.
He’s glad now that he’d dealt with that particular problem this morning in the shower before
spending the day with the star of that fantasy.

But for now, he’ll go for a run, work off some of this nervous energy. Monday will come soon
enough.

Chapter End Notes

So, tell us what you're thinking… :)

And just a heads up, if you were waiting for TCBaby's other fic, Waiting on a Signal
to complete before reading it, today's update is the final chapter (☞). Make sure you
go check it out, it's incredible (not to mention hot!) -Ellen

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

EllenOfOz: Arrrrrggh, TCBaby, I don't know how much longer I can take this tension!

TrenchcoatBaby: I knooooow, they just need to bone already.

Ellen: I wonder how long we can draw it out for…

TCBaby: I mean, personally, I could go on forever, but our readers might kill us.

Ellen: Gotta earn that slow burn tag, though!

TCBaby: Yep, which we definitely have. These boys are killing me in the best way.

Ellen: Maybe we'll hold out just a little longer…

TCBaby: Hehehe. We'll just have to see, won't we?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Castiel looks out over the maze, shielding his eyes from the harsh sunlight. As Dean had said just a few days ago, after their trip to the beach, they’re running out of time to collect information for the project—today’s going to have to be the day, for better or worse.

He’s been plagued by frustrating dreams for the last few nights, some involving a different version of Saturday where he’d actually kissed Dean on the beach, and others where the maze is constantly shifting, making patterns that he just can't grasp. Last night's had even involved Sam—as they'd all stared at the maze from this spot, Sam had piped up with, "If there's a key, then there has to be a lock."

Castiel had been so confused by that statement that he'd woken himself up, and now, standing in the same place, he's still just as baffled.

He glances at Dean, standing beside him. He’s already shed his jacket and overshirt, and the sight of his t-shirt straining against his shoulders is making it difficult for Castiel to focus on why they’re here. In fact, ever since he’d met Dean in the library, he’s been painfully aware of the man’s presence at his side—his magic simmering and drawing him close to brush hands or shoulders. He wills himself to retain a cool, professional image, but he’s finding it difficult.

“At least we’re back to sun again,” Dean says, pulling his notepad and pencil out of his back pocket. “I fuckin’ hate dragons, though,” he adds, frowning.

Castiel glances over at him again, murmuring his agreement. He’d been thinking the same thing. Each time they come down here, the weather is slightly different—sunny, windy, pouring with rain or deep in snow. It hadn’t taken them long to realize the weather conditions were linked to the elements, and today, it seems, they’re back to fire. Castiel really isn’t looking forward to dodging dragons, if they’re here again. He looks back out over the maze, but the sky above it is empty.
Dean mutters, “We’ve gotta be missing something. We could wander around in this maze for weeks—no, we have wandered around for weeks and never made it far. Maybe there’s some trick we’re missing.”

Castiel hums noncommittally, but squints back down towards the maze, letting the sun warm his back and neck. They haven’t said anything to each other about their moment on the beach on Saturday, even though Castiel has longed to. There’s still something there, though, simmering between them, apparently neither of them willing to make a move. It’s almost unbearable, but Castiel grits his teeth and keeps quiet, determined to stick to his decision to wait until after the holidays.

If only they could stay here, relaxing side by side, enjoying the flow of pure magic as it swirls around and down towards the maze…

The magic—the pure, elemental magic. It flows into the maze—could it show them the way through? Castiel curses himself for not thinking of it sooner.

“Dean, could you help me cast the manifesting spell?” Castiel asks, making Dean look at him in surprise.

“What, here?” Dean asks, putting his notebook back in his pocket as he turns to face Castiel.

“I just want to see if I’m right about the magic flow here,” Castiel explains, mirroring his position. As their eyes lock, Castiel draws in a breath at the jewel green of Dean’s eyes in the bright sunlight. Dean gazes back at him for a few moments, before he looks down at their hands, briefly.

“We casting?” he asks, a little breathlessly.

Castiel moves his palms together until they are touching, then says, “I just need you to amplify, please. Would you put your hands around mine?” He feels awkward asking for this, but he’s rather not burn through his energy from lay magic while inside the illusion. It’s risky this close to the well with all this raw magic zinging around, but he thinks it’s worth a try.

As Dean moves his hands to either side of Cas, his warm palms against the back of Cas’ hands, Cas has to close his eyes. The rush and euphoria of Dean’s magic enveloping him makes his head spin for a few moments, until he brings it under control and draws the magic he needs to begin casting.

Castiel has cast this spell many times now, but usually while Dean is casting something else. With him participating, lending his power to Castiel’s, the manifestation leaps into sight as soon as the initial cast is complete, a bright orange fire signature filling the air around them. Castiel opens his eyes and finds it almost difficult to look at, but then he sees that Dean is not looking at him any longer—he’s gazing down the hill to where the magical signature is flowing.

“Stay with me, Dean,” Castiel says, as he gets to his feet, Dean following. He pulls more energy in from around them and channels it into the spell. The orange manifestation of the magic of this place is certainly moving, flowing like a silent orange forest fire, racing down the slope and lighting up a clear trail towards the entrance to the maze.

Castiel draws more and more magic into his casting until he can feel it buzzing in him, his nerves sizzling with the power of it. On his own he might be burning out right now, but Dean’s presence is grounding, his magic only lifting Castiel’s.

At his next glance, Castiel sees the trail to the maze isn't leading between the hedges—it's lifting and heading away from them, across the leafy top. If he could just…
He flips one hand over the other, dragging the edge of his hand along his other palm, then spins, flinging the spell out across the maze. Orange fire rains down, and Dean murmurs a "Holy shit" as the hedges light up in sparkling gold.

Castiel feels a moment of elation as he sees their magic spread across the scene.

Dean grabs his arm, pointing towards something. "Look! D'you see that?"

Castiel can feel his knees weakening just before his hold on the spell gives out, and he falls to one knee, panting hard. He braces his hands on the grass in front of him while Dean drops as well, one hand on Castiel’s shoulder.

"Hey, hey… You okay there?" Dean asks, crouching further so that when Castiel looks up, Dean's face fills his vision.

His breath hitches for an entirely different reason, and he sits back onto his butt, pulling his knees up. "Yeah, I'm okay. The maze is bigger than I thought."

Dean sits next to him, their shoulders brushing. "You should've told me you were gonna drop it, man. You're gonna hurt yourself."

Even just sitting next to Dean is helping, Castiel realizes. Dean's magic swirls around him in a blaze of comforting warmth, balancing him, and he turns gratefully to thank his friend, but Dean's looking away, over the maze.

"What was it? You saw something?" he asks, following Dean's gaze back to the view, now empty of golden flames and back to its usual sun-baked haze.

Dean still looks concerned when his eyes return to Castiel’s, but he says, “Yeah, there was something…like I saw a pattern down there. On the side of the hedge.” He wipes sweat from his forehead with the bottom of his shirt, exposing a flash of skin around his navel as he does so. Castiel tries to keep his eyes up, despite the clamoring thoughts of what he’d like to do to that stretch of skin…

Dean gets back to his feet, grabbing his notebook and pencil from the grass beside him. “You good? I might go down and check it out.”

“I’m fine,” Castiel replies, then takes the hand Dean offers down to him. He sways a little when Dean hauls him to his feet, until Dean puts a steadying hand on his shoulder. The effect is almost instant between each of Dean’s hands—a warmth flowing into Castiel and fortifying him, along with a rush of affection for the man. He can’t keep drawing energy from Dean like this, no matter how good it feels—they’ll wear each other out, but he doesn’t seem to be able to help it.

Dean’s hand lingers on Castiel’s shoulder as he looks into Castiel’s eyes, squinting slightly against the bright sunlight in the illusion. “You sure about that?”

“Yes,” Castiel replies firmly. He steps away from Dean and heads down the path towards the maze before he does something problematic, like lean forward and kiss him.

From behind him, he hears Dean’s boots crunching down the path as well, but as they near the maze entrance, Castiel can see nothing but the leafy hedges reaching above their heads. He readies his hands to cast the visualization spell again, but Dean stops him, stilling Castiel’s fingers with his own hand.

“Let me,” he says, letting his hand linger as he steps away again. “I think I got it.” He moves his
hands just as Castiel did, fingers crossing and one palm moving over the other until he holds his left palm up and releases the lay magic. The effect is much smaller than their combined effort had produced earlier, but Castiel is impressed at how Dean is able to create the wispy orange effect, and push it towards the hedge. Plus, the sight of Dean casting a spell of Castiel’s is really hot for some reason. He’s distracted when the side of the bush lights up in a complex pattern as the spell hits it—in fact, Castiel notices, his eyes widening, it looks just like a—

“It’s a container, look,” Dean says, sounding excited. “But there something woven into it—I can’t quite make it out…” He moves his hands closer to the hedge, and Castiel can now see what Dean must have been looking at from the hill.

“Dean,” he says, stepping back to see the full effect. “Can you hold it there for a moment?”

Castiel comes forward and gently grabs the notepad and pencil from where Dean had tucked it in the back pocket of his jeans.

“Easy, tiger,” Dean says with a smirk. “If you wanted to get into my pants, shoulda just asked.” He winks and Castiel rolls his eyes, trying with all his being not to ask right here and now.

Instead, he steps back from the hedge, taking in the large, glowing markings on the side of it. He has no idea what they mean, but he sketches the four shapes onto the pad. Letters, perhaps? But it’s not a language he’s come across before.

Dean is still looking up at the hedge, studying the structure of the spell, if Castiel had to guess. “Cas, I think the whole maze is...it’s the Seal. It’s just like a huge, interlocked Delambre—you know, it keeps the elements contained, but if you know the right spell, you can get through.”

Castiel stares at the hedge. If Dean’s right, if this whole maze illusion is the Seal itself… how did they not realize already? “Come and see this,” he says.

Dean drops the spell, shaking out his hands and wiping his forehead again as he comes over to look at the notepad. He’s slightly out of breath from the casting, and he’s standing so close to Castiel that the residual lay magic on him hums on the edge of Castiel’s mind. Dean’s arm brushes his as he takes the notepad, and the tingle travels up Castiel’s arm and all the way to his chest.

“What’s it say?” Dean asks, glancing up from the notepad.

Castiel shrugs, feeling helpless all of a sudden. “I don’t know. It doesn’t look like Greek lettering—a little like Aramaic perhaps, but nothing I’ve studied. I suppose we’ll have to go and do some research.”

“Huh. I wonder…” Dean trails off, his eyes narrowed as he considers the four shapes. “Sam might know. He’s taking Doctor Milton’s ancient history class this term.” He pulls out his phone, then curses when the screen is blank. “That’s right, phones aren’t working. I’ll have to go out into the library. Wanna wait here, or…?”

“I’ll come,” Castiel replies. He wants to hear what Sam thinks of all this as well.

They trek back to the white doorway on the hill, through the hallway and step out again into the muted magic of the library, Dean immediately unlocking his phone to take a photo of the notepad. “Oh, hang on, the symbols are gone. You remember ‘em?”

At Castiel’s nod, he hands the notepad over and Castiel sketches the message as best as he can remember onto the now-blank page while Dean find’s Sam’s contact.
“Sam? Hang on, I’m putting you on speaker.” Dean pulls the phone away from his face and glances at Cas.

“Hello, Sam,” Castiel says.

“Hey, Doctor Novak. What’s up?” Sam’s voice is strained, almost impatient, and the line crackles with static from magical interference.

Dean says, “We found some, uh, symbols, I guess. Part of our research. But we don’t recognize them. Thought you might have some idea what they are. I’m just sending you a picture.”

He taps at the phone to send the photo.

After a few moments, Sam’s muffled voice comes through, as though he’s holding the phone away from his face. “Ruby, just give me a second, all right?”

“You’re with Ruby? I thought we agreed you were gonna dump her ass?” Dean says, scowling.

“No, Dean…we’re just sorting a few things out, okay? Yeah, I have seen this alphabet before, but I’m gonna have to go look it up. Hang on, I’ve got the textbook here somewhere…”

“You let that skank into your place? Dude…”

Castiel huffs a laugh, trying to stifle his amusement. Dean hadn’t said much about his day with Sam after Saturday afternoon, but it sounds like Sam hasn’t taken heed of his brother’s warnings. Castiel still isn’t sure what Dean’s problem with Ruby actually is, apart from that day in the library. Dean’s indignation is pretty cute, though.

Sam says, “Shut up, Dean. Okay, here it is. It’s, uh… Enochian. The letters look like—let’s see. F, T, maybe? Third one looks like I or Y, then the last one is A.”

“It says Fotiá?” Castiel asks in wonder. Surely the Greek word for “fire” was too obvious. But then, it hadn’t been so easy to find the word in the first place…

“Far as I can tell, yeah,” Sam says. “Look, I gotta go, guys. I’ll just send you a photo of the transliteration, okay?”

“Yeah, well, tell your ’girlfriend’ to leave you alone when you’ve got exams to study for,” Dean says, still scowling.

“Thanks, Sam,” Castiel adds, and they hang up, staring down at the Enochian word.

“Fotiá. Some kind of password?” Dean says eventually, looking up at Castiel. “Why would they use a weird alphabet to write a Greek word, though?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Dean.” Castiel turns back to the red door, but he quickly checks the time before they head back in. Time seems to be a funny thing in the illusion—sometimes they’ve been deep in the maze and come out to find only half an hour has passed, while other days it had been hours outside, while only a short stretch inside. He has another evening with the lay magicians at Crowley’s offices planned for later, but for now there’s plenty of time to check this password out. Besides, he selfishly wants to spend as much time with Dean as he can before Dean has to start writing.

Back through the door, the weather has changed again. A light rain falls from a slate-gray sky, and Castiel is glad his trench coat had been reset on him while they’d been outside the illusion.
“Why do I get the feeling this ‘fire’ password isn’t going to work anymore?” Dean says, frowning down at the soggy maze.

Castiel nods thoughtfully. “I guess we could try neró.” He peers around, then when the rain still falls silently, he adds, “We don’t even know what we’re trying to open. Maybe this isn’t such a good idea—”

“No way,” Dean interrupts, his expression determined. “There’s no way we’re giving up now, when we’ve come this far.” He wipes the rain away from his eyes with a huff, then bends his fingers in sequence, one, two, and turns his whole hand ninety degrees in the incantation to unlock —then says aloud, "Neró."

Nothing happens.

Dean turns to Castiel, disappointment in his face, but then at a rumble under their feet his eyes widen. "You… You feel that?"

Castiel turns to the maze, but he can’t see anything to explain the magic he feels racing around him. The elemental pull from all directions steadily rises, until it’s almost like a physical wind—or like a piercing, high-pitched whine at the back of Castiel’s mind. It circles around and between them, ever increasing. Dean reaches out to grip Castiel's forearms, and Castiel clings to him as the roar of the magic grows so strong he ducks his head, closing his eyes reflexively.

A few moments later, He hears a soft, "Cas?" from Dean.

Opening his eyes, he sees only darkness. The maze, the hill, the door are all completely gone, replaced by completely black...nothing. "Dean?" he replies, and feels Dean’s hands shifting on his arms.

"Where are we?" Dean asks, a nervous edge to his voice.

As Castiel's eyes adjust, he can make out Dean's shape in front of him—a dim blue haze haloing his head and shoulders. He unclenches his grip on Dean's arm and reaches up, gently brushing his fingertips across Dean's hair just above his ear.

It's only when Dean takes a surprised breath than Castiel realizes how close they are standing. The energy around them here hasn't fallen, it's still as charged and moving and loud against Castiel's senses, but all he can think of is leaning forward, closing the distance, and...

The halo around Dean flares brighter, startling Cas out of the moment. It's not Dean that's glowing. He tilts his head to the side to look over Dean's shoulder and gasps.

Castiel hears Dean let his breath out in a whoosh as they step apart, as though he'd been holding it.

It's the well. It has to be—the magic is blasting out from it like the sun. The light is coming from a ring of brightly glowing runes and symbols around the edge of a wide, dark hole. Everything else around them is pitch dark, just...empty.

Castiel takes a step towards the well, then stops as Dean grabs his arm again. “Hey, wait,” he says.

Before he can continue, Castiel says, “Wait for what? This is what we’re here for.”

Dean shakes his head, his eyes wide. “Remember what I said earlier about hurting yourself? You’re always all, jump in first, ask questions later.”
Castiel bristles. “It’s fine, Dean. My spells haven’t let me down yet.”

“No, but we don’t know anything about this. This is my project, let me take a closer look, please.” Dean’s face is as serious as Castiel’s ever seen it, a vulnerability in his eyes that isn’t usually visible.

Castiel takes a breath and turns to face him. “I’m the teacher here. It should be me taking the risk.”

Dean steps forward, their faces now only a few inches apart. “I know that, Professor,” he hisses, raising his voice a little, “but just this once, I’m asking you to let me do the stupid thing.”

Castiel tries to take a breath to calm his racing pulse, but it doesn’t seem to help. He can’t let Dean do this. “Dean, we have no idea what we’re dealing with inside this…wherever this place even is. The maze can’t be the only defense—anyone with the password can get to this point.” Can’t Dean see that?

Dean huffs. “Whatever it is, if we can't beat it, it'll just dump us back out of the illusion.”

“We don’t know that.”

Dean glares at him. “I’m willing to take that chance.”

Annoyance makes Castiel snap, “Well, pardon me for stepping in and stopping my student from getting hurt.” He regrets his tone immediately, especially when hurt passes across Dean's face, followed by disappointment.

He scoffs. “Yeah, ‘cause that’s all I am to you, huh? Your student. Of course.”

Castiel feels whatever reality they’re in shifting slightly. He hesitates before speaking again, his brain blanking out for a few moments. “What…? No, of course, you’re not just my student. You’re my friend, you mean a lot to me.”

“Really, Cas? Just what am I to you? ‘Cause I gotta tell you, I’m getting some real mixed—” He cuts himself off. Lowering his voice slightly, he takes a breath, and says, “Whatever this…this affinity...bond thing is between us, all I know is, I can’t let you get hurt. I can’t lose you.”

Castiel’s heart hammers in his chest as he stares into Dean’s flushed face, his eyes shining in the dim light from the edge of the well. Dean’s right—he’s much more than Castiel’s student, his colleague, his friend. He’s the first person in Castiel’s life who’s ever tried to put him first, to protect him, and the thought is electrifying. His breath catches as it hits him—he’s not alone in this.

Before he can think himself out of it, he grabs Dean by the front of his t-shirt and pulls him forward, jamming their lips together.

He pulls back only a second later when he realizes what he’s just done, his wide eyes taking in the shocked expression on Dean’s face.

Then Dean makes a choked kind of sound, and pulls Castiel in by his own shirt until their lips meet again.
Dean’s pretty sure he’s having a heart attack, like fuck, somebody call him an ambulance because what the hell, he’s kissing Cas! Castiel lips are slightly chapped and Dean can hardly see him thanks to the pitch black darkness, but he gives zero fucks because Cas…Cas is an amazing kisser. It had happened so suddenly—one moment they had been arguing, Dean’s heart racing, his adrenaline up thanks to the proximity of the well. The next moment, their lips were touching and Castiel’s hands were every-fucking-where, on his neck and his back, their bodies pressed and flushed.

Now their lips are sliding together, smooth and gliding like well-oiled machinery, and this doesn’t feel like a first kiss—it feels like a fiftieth, a hundredth. They’re so insanely in-sync that there’s no awkward shuffling, no stepping on each other’s feet in the dark. There’s just trading open-mouthed kisses with a sweet sort of desperation, as if neither of them can believe they’re doing this, finally, afraid that taking a breath will draw attention to the moment and shatter their newfound intimacy.

Dean feels Castiel’s hands sliding from a relatively tame location on his back, to lower, lower, lower still, settling on the dip and curve right before his ass. He slips a hand into the back pocket of Dean’s jeans, and the atmosphere goes from tender to heated in ten seconds flat. Dean searches the seam of Cas’ lips with his tongue, prodding and teasing, and then they’re both panting, gripping each other tight. Castiel gives Dean’s cheek a firm squeeze and Dean can’t help it, he moans a little, widening his stance and letting Cas move in. He takes the cue, placing his thigh in between Dean’s parted legs, and Dean’s cock is already embarrassingly half-hard from just a few kisses. But damn if they aren’t the best of his life, not only because of the intensity he feels around Cas, the emotions he can never seem to suppress, but because of the magic.

Literally.

He feels their affinity buzzing like high-voltage electricity, the skin-to-skin contact making their energies swirl and combine. It’s like a burst of energizing lay magic mixed in with the most amazing kisses he’s ever experienced, and the whole thing is intoxicating as hell. Like eating apple pie on vacation, or listening to Zeppelin while driving down backroads. Kissing Cas is pure bliss, and now that he’s had a taste, he’s not sure he’ll ever be able to stop.

Cas’ hair is still slightly damp from the rain, the outside of his trench coat wet, but when Dean slips a hand and grabs him by the back of his belt, he’s surprised by how cool and dry the leather is. Then—without breaking the hold he currently has on Cas’ bottom lip, sucking and nipping in a tantalizing way that he’s fairly certainly is turning Cas on—he snakes a hand inside Cas’ pants, intending to untuck his button-up shirt and feel skin. Gorgeous fucking skin.

But then he feels a hand against his shirt—not halting him fully, but making him pause. Castiel pulls away from the kiss, but keeps one hand groping Dean’s ass and the other on his hip. They share the same air for a while, foreheads touching.

“Dean,” Cas mumbles lowly, voice husky and low, “we…we should…”

“If you say ’stop’ I might kick your ass,” Dean mutters back, though if Cas is having doubts about what they’re doing right now, of course he’ll stop, no matter how difficult that might be. But based on the fact that Cas is pushing their hips together, closing the nonexistent distance between them even further, Dean feels like stopping is the last thing on his mind. “Though, this ass of yours is pretty awesome, so maybe that wouldn’t be so bad…”

He trails a hand down mischievously, and Castiel chuckles, licking his lips in a way that shouldn’t be this hot. “I just want to make sure this is okay…that you’re okay.” Cas’ voice is a vulnerable whisper and it makes Dean melt a little, heart fluttering. “There’s—there’s a lot between us. Our history, our affinity, our relationship as teacher and student and colleagues.”
"Cas…" Dean’s voice is a whine, sounding a little impatient—but he can’t help it. He needs those lips back on his.

“I meant what I said earlier,” Castiel says firmly. “You mean a lot to me, Dean. And I would hate to make you feel anything less than—”

Dean silences him with another kiss, cupping his chin with both hands and stealing the breath from his parted lips. He tries to infuse the motion with everything he’s feeling, every positive emotion pounding in his chest. Castiel must feel the bliss coursing through him, must be interpreting his message clearly, because the tension in his shoulders eases up.

“The only thing you’re making me feel right now is amazing,” Dean admits hoarsely, only separating long enough to speak before kissing Cas again. Evidently satisfied with his answer, Cas hums in the back of his throat, licking into Dean’s mouth. The kisses they’re sharing are deeper now, more urgent and unreserved, and Dean’s weaving his hands in Cas’ hair and tugging as Cas practically scoops him up, backing them up several yards, perhaps in search of something to lean against. Dean lets himself be crowded and moved, loving every minute of the manhandling offered to him. He’s finally getting back to his main mission—untucking Castiel’s shirt, slipping off his trench coat, unbuckling his belt, and then, seeing how many notches they can take this whole thing up to—when Castiel pushes them forward again. Dean feels a pressure behind his back, and he realizes too late that they’ve gone too far, collided with some sort of…invisible magical ward protecting the well.

“Cas!” he shouts, or at least he’s pretty sure he does at some point, because the impact of the magic is zinging through his goddamn bones with an excruciating tingle. Dean’s body was struck first, his lungs gasping for breath, but now he’s focused on Cas—the grunt of pain as he hits the ward, his hands grasping empty space, the sound of his name on Cas’ lips. They’re knocked off their feet with the force of three covens, flying in the air and separated suddenly by several feet, and Dean is extending a hand over to find Cas. Reaching for each other even as the spell repels them, the wards glows, the space overpowered by a curtain of light. Dean’s not sure what sort of ground they’re going to land on—dirt? Linoleum? The floor of a fucking dungeon? It had been too dark to tell anything about their surroundings, and now they’re being blasted off all to hell, eyes squinting in the overbearing brightness and landing who knows where—

Then Dean feels the familiar rub of carpet beneath him, an uncomfortable burn on his elbows. He blinks, taking in the cream-colored walls, the doors up and down the hallway. Like a few weeks ago, when the dragons had gotten them, the illusion’s been broken and they’re back where they started…staring down at the white door, on the other side of it now.

“Cas,” Dean calls instantly, trying to keep the edge from his voice as he whips his head around. “Cas?”

“I’m here! I’m okay.”

He spots Castiel lying on his back several yards away, near the threshold of entrance back into the library. Cas sits up on his elbows, groaning.

“That was rather unpleasant,” he remarks, using both hands to work out a sore spot on his shoulder.

“Yeah,” Dean grumbles, feeling stiff and achy, as if he’s been lifting weights for hours. “What the hell was that?”

“A ward, one of the strongest I’ve ever seen,” Cas responds gravely. “And I pushed us right into its perimeter… I’m sorry, Dean.”
Dean’s surprised by the apology—how was Cas supposed to know that ward was there, and that it would knock them on their asses? Besides, they had both been a little preoccupied… “S’fine, Cas. That protection charm is no fucking joke.”

“It was powerful,” Cas agrees. “I think it drained some of our energy, depleted our magic…”

Dean rises to his feet with an embarrassing amount of effort, feeling shakier than he’d care to admit. “How long will it take to recuperate, y’think?”

“A few hours,” Castiel says, wincing as he stands, then adds, “maybe a few days. It’s likely meant to impede intruders long enough that they won’t try to enter the well anytime soon.”

“Well, consider me good’n impeded,” Dean jokes, smiling weakly. He walks down the hallway, ambling towards Castiel with his hands rustling nervously at his sides. He’s not sure how to process the fact that they finally got past the Seal, or even more apprehensively, how to act around Cas after spending god knows how long making out together in the dark. With the fluorescent lights pouring over them and the library door in view, the reality of their situation crashes down around him. Is Cas on the verge of freaking out? Is he about to push Dean away? Not only is Dean technically his student, he’s very much a dude, and unless he’s read the situation wrong, he’s the first guy Cas has ever kissed.

“Oh, so…” He scratches the back of his neck, his stomach twisted in knots. Cas tilts his head, waiting patiently. “If you…if you want to forget any of that happened, I get it.”

Castiel squints, the skin around his eyes crinkling. “Why would I want to do that? What we just witnessed—what we just solved—it’s incredible.” He takes a step closer but Dean withdraws on instinct, gearing up for a rejection he can feel coming. All he can think about is the kiss, but all Cas can think about is the Seal, and maybe that means something? Dean has always been crazy about Cas, even at the beginning—the intensity of his crush had sent him spiraling more than once. He’s not sure he can go through all that heartache again, not if his feelings aren’t fully returned.

“Yeah, I meant…” He trails off, wavering and uncertain, until Castiel’s eyes widen. “Y’know. That.”

“Oh. Oh!” Cas smiles softly, looking a little sheepish.

“It’s okay, it doesn’t matter,” Dean dismisses, wanting to walk away and back into the library, but Castiel blocks his path.

“Dean,” Castiel begins cautiously, looking like he wants to touch Dean but is hesitant, as if he’s not allowed. “I’m not sure how you’re feeling, but I don’t want to forget about that, either.”

Dean feels the air around him shift, feels the tight knot of anxiety loosen up inside his chest. “Really?”

“Really.” Cas smiles, placing tentative hands on either side of Dean’s hips. Dean reciprocates, slotting his arms around Cas’ back and resisting the urge to lean forward. “I’m tired of fighting this…whatever this is, whatever you want it to be, I want to explore it with you.”

He leans forward slowly, like he’s giving Dean plenty of time to turn away, but Dean moves and kisses him first—lips wet and sweet.

“I can’t believe this is actually happening,” Dean whispers, chuckling breathlessly, unable to keep a grin from growing on his face. He’s still worried, still scared that pursuing things with Cas is going to end badly somehow, but the possibility of the good makes him more hopeful than
anything else. “It’s sort of ridiculous how much I’ve wanted this.”

The admission slips out of his mouth before he can gather the words back up, and he opens and closes his mouth a few times, gaping like a fish while Castiel just smirks at him.

“You’re cute when you’re floundering,” Castiel teases, voice a purr in his ear, and Dean tries not to show how much the sound is affecting him. He lifts a hand to Cas’ lapel, intending to pull him into another kiss, when his fingers brush against…

“Fuck,” he breathes, panic rising up again. He grabs the clipped camera from Castiel’s coat, the red blinking light making it clear that the video is still recording. He snatches the one from his own collar, ruffled from all the times Cas gripped his neck and kissed him. “Uh, any way you know how to modify these cameras, so my entire thesis panel doesn’t have footage of us making out?”

Castiel’s eyes widen, mouth hanging open, eyebrows furrowed. It’s a look Dean’s never seen on his face before.

It’s complete and utter horror.

“That,” Cas stays unsteadily, his frown growing deeper, “is going to be a problem.”

Chapter End Notes

Go ahead, tell us how you feel... :)
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Howdy, y'all.

TrenchcoatBaby here, and boy, has it been a stressful few weeks for us both. Reading your comments on our last chapter, though, was AMAZING. This story, and the opportunity to coauthor with Ellen, has been such a bright spot in my life. She rocks, y'all rock, and I'm thankful for you all. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean walks home in a daze, head swimming, analyzing everything that’s transpired today—getting past the Seal, kissing Cas and enjoying it way more than he should, realizing the cameras had caught the whole damn thing… What the hell are they gonna do now? Can they alter the footage without anyone noticing?

As he rounds the corner, the two-story building of the magic shop fills his vision, he releases a sigh. It’s early evening and he can’t wait to get upstairs, grab a beer, and decompress. Though he wouldn’t have minded the company of his blue-eyed… professor? Colleague? Friend? Boyfrie—

No, no, no. No way he’s gonna let himself hope for anything like that. So what if Cas is a boy who’s a friend who he occasionally sucks face with?

Doesn’t make Cas his boyfriend. Nope.

Bottom line is, whatever Castiel is to him now, he wishes they could have grabbed dinner at the D to process the day’s events. But Cas had taken one look at his watch and realized he had a meeting to get to. Knowing that it couldn’t be a Stanford-sanctioned event—all the on-campus offices close annoyingly early—Dean had a sinking feeling in his stomach. Cas must be returning to that shady acquaintance who’s in possession of 20th Century Magic Regulation in the US. As much as Dean wants to know more information about the Seal, to understand how a temporary measure has somehow become permanent—impacting their society in ways that may be irreversible—at the end of the day, he values Castiel more than any knowledge he might gain. As interesting as it is, what could Dean even do if he did learn more? It’s not like the council would listen to some twenty-five-year-old mage with a cocky smile and a give-’em-hell attitude.

Bobby closes the shop around six o’clock during the week, and the sign on the door is already flipped when Dean approaches. After one too many times carrying home hands full of grocery bags in the rain, he spelled the front door to open for him the moment he approaches the threshold, even if it’s locked. He figures he’ll sneak up the staircase, heat up some leftovers in his small kitchen, then stare up at the ceiling while pointedly not replaying his steamy makeout session with Cas, over and over again in his head.

Which is why it jolts him a little, being pulled from his thoughts when he sees Bobby at the counter, hunched over, talking to the mysterious redhead woman who’s been hanging around more and more lately.

“—need all the help we can get,” the woman says, her voice low and insistent. When Dean comes
trailing in, she turns to him fully. He notices how soft her features are, how gentle her expression is. Her skin is pale, eyes light hazel, hair long and straight.

Bobby looks him up and down, like he’s ready to throttle Dean for interrupting, arms crossed at his chest. But the redhead woman just smiles at him warmly. “This must be your nephew who lives upstairs,” she says.

“That’s me,” Dean responds evenly, giving her a small smile. “Dean Win—”

“Dean’s got a lot of homework, doncha son?” Bobby interrupts, eyes fluttering over to the door of Dean’s apartment at the top of the stairs. “Don’t let us stop ya.”

“Nah, I mean…I got a whole thesis to write. But the Seal can wait five minutes while I meet your best customer,” Dean says charmingly in the woman’s direction, ignoring the look of irritation crossing Bobby’s face. What, does he think Dean’s gonna say something stupid and embarrass him? Why all the freaking secrecy?

“The Seal?” The woman’s eyes light up wide. “You mean, the Stanford Seal?”

“One’n only. Been studying it for a while now, and today I totally cracked it.” Dean gives her a crooked smile, enjoying the way her cheeks flush under his gaze. If he hadn’t just been making out with Cas an hour ago, he might’ve gotten this woman’s number. Which, speaking of…“And your name is?”

“People call me the Captain,” she answers, without a shred of embarrassment. Dean chuckles, thinking she’s pulling his leg, but based on the blank expression on her face, she is decidedly—not. His laughter dies out quietly, wondering who doesn’t have the self-awareness to know that offering a title instead of a name is weird as hell.

“Huh,” Dean says dimly, scratching at the back of his neck. “Captain… Like, Bono? Or Prince? You one of those one-name celebrities?”

“The Captain. It’s not meant to be flashy, I can assure you. It’s a nickname I was given.” She laughs at little, as if she realizes the absurdity of their conversation, and puts Dean at ease again. “There are just…certain types of magic-users who can’t share their real name freely. Ones who the council wouldn’t want hanging around a classically-trained mage like you.”

She smiles again, but this time it’s rueful and sad, and Dean reads between the lines. He’d always suspected this woman was a lay magician, since Bobby is probably the only shop owner in town who doesn’t discriminate against them. But having it confirmed makes him feel strangely vindicated, even though that can’t be the reason Bobby never wanted them to never meet. Benny is a lay magician and one of the most important people in his life, so Dean’s the last thing from prejudiced.

“Well, that’s bullshit in my book,” he says, the passion in his words making his voice quiver. “I got a buddy just like you, and he’s one of the best casters I know. I’m proud as hell to be his friend.”

The Captain looks between Dean and Bobby now, grinning as if she’s won the lottery. “Where have you been keeping this little ally?” she asks Bobby, her gaze returning back to Dean. She takes a step closer, touching his arm, and the flow of her magic feels—familiar, friendly. Good. He trusts her instantly from the feeling alone, which doesn’t happen often.

“I’d love for you to come to one of our meetings, Dean,” she says, words dripping with sincerity. Dean must look at her with a question on his face, because she explains, “Just a peaceful gathering
of like-minded individuals from all walks of life, discussing how best to solve the issue of magical inequality."

“That’s a tall order,” Dean comments, though he’s already nodding his head his head. "Sounds awesome."

“Dean—” Bobby begins, a warning in his voice.

“I’m in,” he says.

“Excellent.” The Captain clutches Dean’s arm tighter. “Look for a sign next week. It’ll lead you to the right place.”

Before Dean can ask her to translate that vague-as-shit, fortune-cookie talk, she gives Bobby a small wave, tucks her shopping bag into the crook of her arm, and says quietly, “Nice to meet you, Dean. I look forward to learning more about you.” Then she’s walking past him, closing the shop door behind her with a breezy click. Dean can’t deny the buzz of excitement, even danger, he feels at the prospect of being involved in—what, exactly? Is this really just a peaceful gathering of lay magicians and sympathetic mages? Or is that woman called “the Captain” because she’s in charge of that underground, lay-run resistance garnering more and more followers in Palo Alto?

“You shouldn’ta done that,” Bobby grumbles out with a deep frown. “Don’t need you gettin’ mixed up with any of this.”

“Sorry, guess you can’t keep your mysterious little friend all to yourself anymore.” Dean grins sarcastically and Bobby rolls his eyes.

“You are one hell of an idjit, boy,” he spits out. “You ever think there’s a reason I never brought her around? That lady’s sweet as punch, ‘til you get in her way.”

Dean shrugs, slinging his messenger bag more firmly on his shoulder. Truthfully, he knows he’s been a little flippant, but he’s too annoyed at Bobby to care. “Wow, you mean the lay magician with a fake name and a secret club has a hidden agenda? Did not see that one coming.”

Bobby’s face turns red, and Dean thinks he might’ve finally gone too far, but then Bobby sighs and stares down at the floor. “Just be careful, y’hear? Don’t tell her your name. Your full name, anyways.”

“Why?” Dean asks curiously. “Doesn’t she know your full name?”

“Yeah, and I ain’t been the better for it, trust me.” Bobby closes the cash register with a definite slam and stalks away, down the hallway and out of sight. Dean bites his lip, worrying, wondering what Bobby’s dealing with that he’s not talking about. Maybe going to this clandestine meeting and learning more about the Captain will be the only way to help.

Dean’s footsteps are heavy as he finally heads upstairs, dropping his bag by the coat rack and immediately heading to the kitchen for a beer. He heats up some leftover Winchester surprise—one of his mom’s infamous recipes—and while the plate spins inside the microwave, he pulls his phone out and checks his notifications. He has a message from Jo, a text from Sam, and an email from Charlie. Nothing from Cas, though, Dean thinks with unmasked disappointment. He shakes his head, trying not to read too much into it, and texts Sam back first.

Sam 6:34 PM << How’d the translation go? Did it work?

Dean 7:04 PM >> Yeah, thanks man, we finally cracked it.
Sam 7:05 PM << That’s awesome, Dean! I can’t wait to hear all about it.

Dean takes his plate out of the microwave, the edge of the porcelain hot enough to burn his hand. “Dammit,” he mutters, dropping the plate onto his bistro table and grabbing some silverware.

Dean 7:08 PM >> Thanks.

Dean 7:09 PM >> You free tomorrow? Think we need to have a family dinner with Bobby.

Bobby may not feel up to spilling his guts to Dean, but nobody can resist Sam’s big ol’ puppy dog eyes. It’s about time Dean gets some good intel outta those, rather than being on the receiving end. He takes a large bite and finds the food isn’t quite warm enough, but is too lazy to stand up again and reheat it. He tries to cast a quick heat spell over the meal, but his hands feel slow and sluggish, his shoulders slumping forward. *Fuck*, Cas wasn’t kidding about those wards draining their energy. Dean couldn’t summon his fork to him right now, he’s so tapped out.

Sam 7:10 PM << I’m busy tomorrow. Wednesday?

Dean narrows his eyes, looking back at the screen. He knows without a doubt that Sam finishes up class early on Tuesdays, so while he could be studying, that’s nothing he couldn’t rearrange for a family dinner. He probably has plans with Ruby, and the realization makes Dean’s dinner significantly less satisfying.

Dean 7:12 PM >> Fine.

Dean 7:13 PM >> But you’re bringing something.

Dean 7:13 PM >> Preferably pie-shaped.

Once he’s solidified plans with Sam and finished eating, he cleans the dishes and unpacks his messenger bag, slinging his binder of Seal-related materials onto the kitchen table. He’s procrastinated on projects before, but this…writing an entire draft of his thesis in under three weeks? Well, that would be hard as hell even if finals weren’t coming up. Thankfully he’s just teaching this semester, but he’ll have a shitload of grading to do soon. If he doesn’t make a significant dent in his word count before December 21, there’s no way he’ll finish in time. Surprisingly, he feels awake and ready to get some work done—fatigued as his magic is, he’s still pulsing with adrenaline from the kiss. *Kisses*. Plural. Like, they had kissed a lot, over and over again, on purpose. How is he supposed to focus after something as amazing as *that*?

He starts by spreading out all his textbooks, his notes, then sets his laptop right in front of his chair. He makes a list of things he wants to cover, but it ends up being five pages long, which is super intimidating. He decides he should outline some main ideas first—briefly covering the history of the Seal before zeroing in on the mechanics of the spell, which is his real concentration. Having the incantation hidden in letters of the Delambre container had been clever as hell, some of the most complex design work he’s ever seen. Pretty soon he has a solid outline configured, and he’s only thought about Cas about, a thousand times over the past few hours, so he could be doing worse. He wants very much for Castiel to text him, but as the hours start ticking by, he forces himself to focus on his project. He locks his phone and places it facedown on his mattress, walking away and clearing his head.

Around ten-thirty he decides to brew a small pot of coffee, and he figures he’s had a long enough break from his phone that he can catch up on his messages, right? Taking short breaks in the middle of studying is good…it’s science or some shit. His meager justifications fade away when he sees he has a text and a missed call from Cas.
Castiel 8:50 PM << I hope your night has been more interesting than mine.

Dean scratches the back of his neck, thinking. He finally met the mysterious redhead woman, but otherwise, it’s been business as usual.

Dean 10:34 PM >> Not bad. Though nothing could beat this afternoon.

Castiel 10:35 PM << Agreed. :)

Dean can’t seem to suppress the stupid grin spreading on his face. Fuck, he’s so gone on this fucking guy.

Dean 10:36 PM >> How was your meeting?

Castiel 10:36 PM << Good, just long.

Dean 10:37 PM >> Is it too late to call you back? You’re not in cute little jammies already?

Castiel 10:37 PM << I am, though that’s all the more reason for you to call.

Butterflies…motherfucking butterflies are fluttering around in Dean’s stomach. He’s used to Cas being a lot of things—smart, kind, bossy—but outwardly flirty? He’s never made a call so quickly in his damn life.

It only rings twice before Cas picks up.

“Hello, Dean.” Castiel’s voice flows into his receiver, deep but relaxed, and Dean pictures him wearing a cozy pajama set and sitting in a leather recliner. He has no idea if that’s correct, obviously—he’s never been inside Cas’ apartment or seen him in non-public attire.

“Hey Cas.” Dean clears his throat and walks over to the coffee pot. “In bed already?”

“Very much so,” Castiel answers happily.

“Didn’t know you were such a grandpa. Early riser?”

“Not at all,” Cas answers, sounding amused. “I do value my sleep, though. What are you up to?”

“Uh…” Dean searches around to find a way to avoid telling him the truth, worried his current activity will be met with disapproval. “Pouring myself a cup of coffee…?”

“Dean,” Castiel says admonishingly. “At this hour?”

“Dude, you’re like, twenty-eight. Chill out. Don’t you remember what it’s like to keep college hours?”

“Don’t blame college for your bad habits, Dean,” Castiel says, though there’s an easygoing tone to his voice that makes Dean smile.

“Well, it’s fueling my thesis writing, so I thought you might approve.” Dean takes a tentative sip as the other man hums with recognition.

“Just this once.” Cas’ voice sounds warm and sleepy and Dean feels wistful, wishing he was there, could see Cas so relaxed. “How’s that going, by the way?”

“Not bad,” Dean says slowly, not willing to admit he essentially only has a bunch of research
gathered and a makeshift outline.

“Well, I should let you go—”

“No!” Dean interrupts, surprising himself with the strength in his voice. “I mean, uh, not yet. We just started talking.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Cas says, his voice amused, “You know, I’m not sure if you’re excited to talk to me, or just avoiding working on your thesis.”

“Uh…” Dean chuckles, sitting back down in the kitchen chair. “Guilty. Little of both.”

“I know you well, Dean Winchester,” Castiel says, so low it’s practically a purr, and the sound of his name from that voice makes Dean’s heart race.

“You know me a whole lot better after today,” he rumbles.

“I do,” Castiel agrees, just as deep. “So far, I like it. A lot.”

“Haven’t been able to think about much else, to be honest.” Dean’s not sure where this surge of confidence is coming from, but if Cas was here right now, he’d be stretched out on Dean’s bed in two seconds flat.

“When can I see you next?” There’s a ruffle of movement on Castiel’s end of the line, then he adds, “Why don’t we meet at the library tomorrow? I have to do some grading, but you could work on your thesis.”

Dean mulls it over. “Cas, no offense man, but if I want to meet the deadline, I don’t think I can be within twenty yards of you while I’m trying to write this damn thing,” he confesses, laughing a little.

“Why not?” Castiel asks, sounding genuinely startled. “We’ve worked together for months with no problem.”

_That was before I knew what it felt like to have your tongue down my throat and your hands groping my ass. You know why._

“Oh?” Castiel pauses, static growing in the background, as if he’s rolling around in his bedsheets. “I can control myself, you know.”

“Thing is, I don’t want you to,” Dean answers, not even trying to be flirty—just being honest. Castiel chuckles, evidently enjoying Dean’s answer. “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course, Dean.”

“I really liked kissing you.”

He can practically _feel_ Cas’ smile at this point. “I really liked kissing you, too.”

“Think we can do it again sometime?”

“Depends on how much thesis work you can get done by Friday,” Castiel says casually. Dean narrows his eyes down at his computer, as if it’s ratted him out somehow.

“Uh…Friday? What’s happening Friday?”
“We’re going on a date,” Castiel says evenly. “Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Dean repeats, somewhat floored, but most excited because holy shit—a real fucking date! With Cas!

“Wow, Cas,” Dean concedes, feeling a renewed burst of energy, “you sure know how to motivate a guy.”

Castiel ends the call and smiles at Dean’s name on the screen for a moment. Today has been such a roller-coaster of emotion. Breaking through the Seal had been one thing, but kissing Dean? That had been more wonderful than he had ever imagined it might be. The way their magic had clicked together, merging and twining together—it had been so intense that he'd been feeling echoes of it all evening, like aftershocks behind his ribs.

He'd been completely distracted during the session with Crowley's lay magicians, until Inias had offered to help him cast a levitation spell, and the sharing of lay magic had been almost an antidote to what's beginning to feel like an addiction to Dean's magic. Or at least, it had suppressed the feeling, because the longing is back now in full force after speaking with Dean.

This evening, he’d been pleased with how responsive the magicians were to what he'd shown them. He still has no idea what Crowley’s planning, and he'd told himself before tonight's session not to get too attached to these students in case he had to suddenly abandon them, but the delight on Krissy's face when she'd managed to levitate a whole chair had warmed his heart. Meg always used to tell him he’s a sucker when it comes to kids.

He puts his phone on its cradle on his bedside table and rolls over, hoping Dean actually is progressing with his writing and not just bluffing. God knows Castiel had definitely been bluffing his way through that phone call, having no idea how to approach this shift in their relationship—apparently his brain has decided to take the "confident flirt" approach without his permission, but it seemed to work. Now he just needs to work out where to take Dean for their date on Friday. He drifts off, smiling to himself.

Dean’s hands are all over him, running over his back, followed by gentle kisses as he moves down Castiel’s body. Cool fingers run across his ass, making him cry out with a burst of nervous energy, but he’s ready, he’s so ready...

A wet finger slides in, feeling odd but not uncomfortable, then a second. The fingers are slightly bent as they dip in and out, stretching Castiel wider as he arches his back and shoves his hips backwards. Castiel gasps as the fingers are removed, leaving a slight ache behind, but soon, a different object is pushing at his entrance. This is it, he’s finally going to feel what it’s like to—

The alarm blares out, startling Castiel out of the dream. He fumbles for his phone, turning the noise off, then slumping back onto his pillow, groaning. He wonders if he goes back to sleep now, if he could return to the dream—it had seemed so real, he could almost still feel the sweet ache where Dean’s fingers had pressed inside him. He rolls over, his morning wood rubbing over the sheets.
from inside his pajama pants. He might be awake now, but the arousal is still amped up. As he takes himself in hand and strokes, he remembers the feeling of Dean's lips on his yesterday, the taste of his skin. He can't wait a whole four days until he sees Dean again, but they both have busy weeks between now and Friday. Instead, he imagines how Dean’s firm body will feel when he can finally undress him, when he can taste the rest of him, taking him apart until he’s gasping out Castiel's name. Castiel strokes himself until he’s panting harshly, and when he parts his legs and rubs over his own hole with the fingers of his other hand, he tenses up and comes all over his pajamas, throwing his head back.

He lies there as his breathing calms, thinking he must really be infatuated with Dean to be having so many dreams involving having sex with him in one way or another. That’s three times this week, and that’s just the dreams he can recall. He looks down at the thick streaks of white all over the Ravenclaw crests of his pajamas and frowns, then grabs a tissue from beside the bed to clean up a little, before getting up to head into the bathroom. At least he’s got that out of his system early in the day—it might help him stay focused to get his grading done.

Two hours later, Castiel is sitting in the library, trying desperately to stop thinking about Dean's lips and the kiss they'd shared. Or what Dean's fingers had done in the dream…

He shakes his head. He'd come to the library rather than hole up in his office, partially because he was more accessible for his students studying for their finals, but also because he really needs to be around people today. He really has no idea how he's gonna last until Friday—the need to get a hold of Dean and do something, anything, with him is making him anxious, and he keeps catching himself checking his phone to see if Dean has texted him.

Turning the last paper over in the first batch, he stretches his arms above his head with a satisfying pop. He's pleased with the way his first-year “World of Magic” students have taken to the idea of lay magicians also being a part of magical society, rather than completely separate and ostracized from trained Mages. He’s modified the teaching plan slightly to have the students discuss the differences in a paper. He’s not sure how the faculty will react when they find out, but he’d rather the students have a wider view.

He reaches down to his bag to pull out the second stack of papers to be graded, but as he straightens up, a familiar and welcome tingle spreads across his skin. Hadn’t Dean said he wasn’t coming to the library today? Spinning around in his seat to take in the aisle behind where he sits on the second floor, he frowns when he can't see Dean anywhere. He's close by, though. He’s almost sure of it.

Castiel unlocks his phone and shoots a quick text to Dean.

Castiel 11:45 AM >> I'm upstairs, near the arts section.

He stares down at the paper for a few moments, trying to refocus on the topic for this set of grading, but none of the words are making sense. His magic is rising, buzzing with Dean's proximity.

Then there's a hand on his shoulder, and Dean's magic washes over him. He turns to look up at Dean with a smile, only to be blinded by Dean's in return.
"Hello, Dean," he murmurs, his eyes traveling over the freckles dusting Dean's flushed cheeks. "Hey, Cas," Dean replies warmly. "How'd you know I was here?" He holds up his phone for a moment.

Castiel’s face warms suddenly, as he wonders how he can put it into words. “I...felt you were nearby. Haven’t you noticed that our magic reacts to each other?”

Dean sits down at the desk beside Castiel, his flush deepening as he puts down two paper cups. "Oh. Yeah, I had noticed that, but…I thought I was just, y’know…"

Castiel can’t help grinning at Dean’s embarrassment. “Just what?”

Dean pulls his laptop out of his bag and opens it on the desk in front of him. He throws Castiel a pointed look like he knows he’s being wound up. “Excited to see you. Which I am, every time.”

Castiel’s heart gives a squeeze as he shares a soft smile with Dean. How was he lucky enough to end up paired with him? “I thought you said you’d be too distracted here?” he asks.

Dean huffs a quiet laugh. “I was way more distracted at home. Here, I thought you might need this.” He pushes one coffee cup over to Castiel’s side of the desk, and Castiel nearly jumps up and kisses him right now.

Instead, he clears his throat and murmurs his thanks, turning back to his stack of papers. He starts going through the first one, sipping at his coffee while Dean starts typing away, his quiet key-taps joining the ambient quietness of the library.

Castiel has just got into his grading zone, marking up the paper with a red pen, when he feels Dean’s foot nudging at the side of his own. A tendril of magic sends a shiver up his leg, and he shifts his foot away from Dean's, suddenly aware of their proximity all over again. Dean moves his foot again, running the side of his boot up the side of Castiel’s calf, dragging on the fabric of his trousers. Castiel looks up at Dean over the top of his laptop, and when Dean’s eyes flick up to meet his accompanied by a smirk, Castiel realizes his day of grading is over. He’s never going to be able to resist those sparkling green eyes, never in a million years.

He raises one eyebrow, and Dean ducks his head, looking intently back at his screen, but his foot still rests alongside Castiel’s.

Glancing around, Castiel checks out the other people studying in various nooks in their vicinity. All of them are absorbed in their work, with no one looking their way. They could find an empty meeting room somewhere, but he’s sure they all contain cameras. There are strict rules against fraternization in the library. He doesn’t want to cause a scene.

Castiel clears his throat, standing abruptly. “Dean,” he says quietly, without emotion. “I just need to find a particular volume.” He glances pointedly over at the stacks.

Dean looks up at him in surprise. “Up here?” he asks, his brow creasing slightly. “These are arts books—”

“I need your help to find it.” Castiel leans over and brushes his fingers over the back of Dean’s hand, sending a warm jolt of magic into him that he hopes is laced with his intent. Dean pulls his hand back with a jerk, a soft “oh” on his lips. He closes his laptop, getting to his feet as well, and follows Castiel away from their shared table towards the stacks.

Castiel grabs Dean’s hand once they get into the shelter of the laden shelves, and as soon as he
thinks they’re far enough away from any studying students or security cameras, he turns towards Dean. He drops Dean’s hand, but brings his own up to run his fingers down the side of Dean’s cheek. Dean leans into the touch, and Castiel feels the rising of Dean’s magic, like he’s walked into sunlight. Dean’s eyes flutter closed and he murmurs, “Cas—” as Castiel leans forward until their lips brush, just barely.

They break apart, but only long enough for barely a breath before Dean’s lips are on his again. Castiel is never going to be able to get enough of the soft scrape of stubbled skin against his own or the press of Dean’s body against him as he draws him in.

One of Dean’s hands finds its way to the hair at the back of Castiel’s head, the other on his hip, pulling him forward. Castiel licks his way into Dean’s mouth, and Dean makes a noise Castiel is sure is the most sinful these books have heard in a while. He pushes a knee between Dean’s and Dean stumbles backwards into the shelf—the frame shakes, but when nothing seems to topple over, Castiel presses himself up against Dean and kisses him with all the frustration he’d been feeling while sitting at the desk, while working with Dean on the Seal, while getting to know him over the last few months.

Threads of elemental power are spinning up around them, and Castiel moves his hands behind Dean’s back to cast a quick magical dampener.

Dean pulls back at that, resting his forehead against Castiel’s and taking a few breaths. “What did you do that for? Felt so good…”

“You really want to bring a bunch of students over here to see what the magical disturbance is?” Castiel asks, smiling gently. He puts one of his hands inside Dean’s jacket, enjoying the warmth between the lining and his shirt underneath, then he sneaks it lower and tucks it under Dean’s t-shirt, his fingers meeting bare skin.

Dean hitches in a breath, his hands coming up to Castiel’s face again and drawing him in for a sweet kiss, but Castiel lets out a frustrated groan and deepens the kiss when Dean’s hips shift and grind what is definitely something hard in his jeans down onto Castiel’s thigh.

No, they can’t do this here. Castiel pulls his knee back, and gasps into Dean’s mouth, “Stop…If you keep doing that, things are...are gonna get a lot louder.”

Dean turns a positively mischievous smirk on him. “Are they?”

Castiel steps back, putting his own back against the opposite shelf. “Dean, come on. You’ve got a lot of work to do, and I… I don’t want to distract you.” That’s a complete lie on Castiel’s part—he so very badly wants to distract Dean.

Dean steps forward, crowding back into his space. “I don’t mind the distraction,” he murmurs, stealing another kiss from Castiel’s willing lips, but he pushes Dean back with a hand on his chest.

“Let’s wait until Friday. Can you do that for me? Just concentrate on your writing for a few days, and then we’ll go out Friday. Okay?” Because if they start doing this, once Castiel gets his hands on Dean, he’s pretty sure he’s not going to want to stop. And he doesn’t want to be responsible for Dean failing his thesis at the draft stage.

Dean looks kind of like a kicked puppy. “But I like kissing you,” he whines, leaning in to bite at Castiel’s lower lip, making him close his eyes and will down his arousal again.

“Please, Dean. You need to focus, and I need us to not get booted out of the library.” Castiel wraps
his arms around Dean, pulling him close.

Dean relaxes into him, putting his face into Cas’ neck for a moment as he lets out a long sigh.
“Okay. But I get to pick where we go on Friday night. Unless you had somewhere in mind already?”

Castiel pulls back to look at him again. “Actually I hadn’t decided yet. Where are you thinking?”

“I’ll let you know on Friday,” Dean says, his eyes bright.

Castiel leans in for one more kiss, before turning to lead them back out of the stacks. They sit back at their table, exchanging plenty of shy glances and foot touches as they work.

And when Castiel has to leave to teach a class, he hopes no one notices as he drops a lingering touch on Dean’s shoulder as he’s on his way out. How he’s going to get through the next few days of classes is anyone’s guess.

Rosco steps out of the shadows, enjoying the startled jump of the tall boy when he sees him there. Ruby sees him, too, and she steps forward in front of the boy.

“Rosco,” she calls.

Rosco rolls his eyes. The whole street’s gonna know about their meeting if she doesn’t shut up. “Keep your voice down, girl,” he says, not unkindly. “Who’s your friend?”

She looks up at the boy, her features soft. So she cares for him, huh? That’s a dangerous game to play in times like these. “This is Sam, that friend I told you about. He’s interested in helping out.”

“That so?” Rosco turns his gaze on the kid—Sam—and watches him shift awkwardly.

He nods, saying, “Yes, sir. I’m interested in hearing more, at least.”

Rosco returns the nod. They needed more mages on the inside, and if Ruby saw something in him, maybe he’d be of use. “All right, then.” His gaze shifts back to the girl. “You told him about the Demons?”

“That we’re interested in helping free magic for all gifted magic-users, yeah,” Ruby says, sounding bored.

It isn’t far from the truth, Rosco supposes. A good enough reason to be meeting in secret. He nods, wondering just how much this kid knows about the Seal, if what Ruby has passed along about his brother is true. For now, he’ll make the kid feel welcome, at least.

“Meeting’s on Friday night. To get in the door, flash your eyes to black, like this.” He raises one hand and draws forth a quick illusion to make his eyes appear black, whites and all. Sam flinches, then gives a tight nod. Rosco continues, letting go of the spell. He nods to Ruby, “She’ll show you the place. Don’t tell or bring anyone else.”

They both nod and murmur goodnight, and scurry off down the dark street. Rosco watches them go, hoping this Sam kid holds the answers to some questions he’s been asking for too long now, and is smart enough not to ask too many of his own. He’d hate to have to make him disappear, like
the last kid who got too nosy.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi in the comments!
Chapter 16

By the time Friday comes, Dean is thrumming with nervous energy. He'd been up until three o'clock in the morning hammering away on this thesis, so he hadn't even woken up until midday. Even with the late alarm clock he's still tired, guzzling coffee like it's going out of style. The excitement of tonight's date simmers under his skin, though.

He teaches his final class of the semester in a distracted haze, telling his students for the third—or maybe the thirtieth—time about their upcoming exam schedule. Standing up at the blackboard, the chalk spelled behind him to transcribe his talking points, he’s hit by the magnitude of this day. He never thought he could actually do this, could know enough about magic to teach it to other people. He’ll be teaching the same course next semester, though assigned a whole new batch of students. He’s still apprehensive, but it’s encouraging to know he has some experience under his belt.

While some of his students had been impossible to reach—his thoughts drift over to Ruby, slouched in the back and proudly texting in the middle of class—most of his freshmen have expressed their appreciation in various ways. Dean is especially proud of his best student, hoping Jess will keep in touch. Even after losing her father in a horrific way, she had returned to class with a renewed vigor, throwing herself into her coursework. As far as distractions go, homework definitely wasn’t the way Dean would choose to grieve. He’s pretty sure it makes Jess the most mature eighteen year old he’s ever met, and he wishes Sammy would pick a girl like that to spend time with instead.

“I want to thank you all for taking my class,” he tells them, looking at the clock on the wall. Five minutes to go until he’s more or less free for nearly four weeks. “Teaching is hard and scared the hell out of me at first, but watching you guys push yourselves and progress these past few months has been weirdly…gratifying.” He huffs a laugh, clasping his hands nervously. He never expected to get sentimental at the thought of telling his students goodbye, but here he is, baring his soul. He’s about to open his mouth again and make a self-deprecating joke when he feels a familiar buzz of euphoria, the rush of magic in his veins. Cas is nearby—he can feel the other man’s proximity, as if part of him has left his body and is approaching the open door. At first, he’d assumed the sensation was purely imagined, a by-product of his crazy infatuation with Cas. That was, until Cas
had confirmed it the other day at the library.

Dean’s not at all surprised when he sees the edge of a trench coat in the threshold, and he blushes a little at the thought of Cas checking in on him. He smiles without meaning to, perhaps too broadly, because his students begin to turn around in their seats.

“Uh, anyways,” Dean mumbles, scratching the back of his neck. “Thanks for being a great class. Good luck during finals, and feel free to shoot me an email if you need anything. My door is always open…or, uh, inbox. You know what I mean. Get outta here, guys.”

His students chuckle, offering him goodbyes as they begin to stream out in groups. Cas walks fully into the classroom afterwards, arms crossed against his chest, smiling in Dean’s direction. Dean hadn’t expected to see him until their date tonight, and the fact that Cas is standing against the classroom wall—watching Dean talk to a straggler student as if it’s the most interesting thing in the world—is making his heart thump with excitement. He’s barely seen Cas this week, since he’s had his head buried in his thesis draft, and the number of sex dreams he’s having these days is borderline ridiculous. They’ve texted constantly and talked on the phone most nights, but still, Dean misses him. It takes everything in him to remain patient when the final student asks him about the exam schedule while the answer is neatly written on the blackboard behind him.

Finally she turns and walks away, blushing and mumbling something about Dean having a happy holiday, and he wishes her the same. She closes the door behind her, though the latch doesn’t fully catch and cracks open a little. Dean hardly notices, though, pulling himself on the desk until he’s sitting on the edge, legs swinging, staring straight ahead at Cas.

“I think she has a crush on you,” Castiel comments, amusement in his voice as he walks through the rows of desks.

“Who?” Dean asks, genuinely confused since they’re alone.

“Your student, the one who just left,” Castiel muses, dropping his briefcase at his feet. He stands in front of Dean closely, never one for personal space. Dean spreads his legs wide and pulls the man in closely by the hips, Castiel’s eyebrows shooting up at this development, his expression pleased.

“Jealous, Professor?” Dean quips, thumbing at Cas’ sides. Castiel places his hands on Dean’s neck casually, as if they do this everyday, even though this…thing…between them is barely a week old. Touches as slight as these make Dean’s heart race, and he grins up at Castiel flirtily.

“I’m just saying, I know the signs,” Castiel says lightly, dodging the question in a way that makes Dean chuckle. “Eager to please, asking questions they already know the answers to, staring at you at every opportunity…”

“Hey,” Dean protests, cheeks flushing red. He had hoped his crush on Cas hadn’t been that obvious, but apparently he was wrong. It seems a little silly to be embarrassed now that their friendship has developed into something pointedly not platonic, but still.

“What?” Castiel asks innocently. He’s rubbing Dean’s neck tenderly now, and he hums in the back of his throat, feeling some of the week’s stress melt away. “I wasn’t thinking of you, Dean, but if you’re feeling singled out… Perhaps that’s a personal problem.” He gives him a playful smirk and Dean laughs unexpectedly.

“Asshole,” Dean scoffs, blushing at Castiel’s teasing. He grabs him by the tie and pulls him down, lips meeting with a soft brush. The desk is high enough that Cas’ neck barely has to crane, and his hands travel through Dean’s hair, fingernails gently raking over his scalp in a way that makes Dean
shudder. The kiss deepens as they grasp more of each other, Dean’s hands around his waist, tongue prodding the entrance of Castiel’s parted lips, and fuck, this is every one of Dean’s fantasies come true. How many times had he imagined them doing this in a classroom, or in Cas’ office?

Then the door creaks and Dean freezes, opening his eyes and looking past Cas’ shoulder. The threshold is empty, but he could’ve sworn he had seen something or someone out of the corner of his eye…

“Dean,” Castiel mumbles, throwing his head back and searching, all traces of his lighthearted mood gone. “Was there someone…?”

“I don’t know,” Dean admits, a sinking feeling in his stomach. “Shit. Maybe we should…”

He drops his hands regretfully, swallowing and trying not to look too panicked. What they’re doing isn’t against the rules, not really, but it could make things complicated for Cas. The nature of this thing between them—if it’s secret or open, casual or serious—has yet to be defined. As if reading his mind, Castiel tucks his hands into his pockets, looking sheepish. “I suppose we should talk this evening?”

“Yeah,” Dean answers lamely, glancing down, distracted by the minor freakout he’s having. What if someone saw them? What if Cas gets scared and breaks things off between them? What if—

“It’s going to be okay,” Castiel whispers, his gaze soft and pleading, and Dean nods and gives him a lopsided smile. He looks like he wants to touch Dean reassuringly, maybe clasp their hands together or kiss him. But they’re both too skittish to do anything here after their potential lurker. “What time should I be ready?”

Dean does the math in his head, totaling up the time it’ll take him to leave campus, put some finishing touches on his thesis draft, and get showered and dressed. “Six-thirty okay?”

“Six-thirty is perfect,” Castiel says agreeably, looking relieved. “I’ll see you soon.”

Dean watches him go, feeling strangely forlorn. Finally, he pulls his cellphone out of his messenger bag and pulls up his message with Cas.

Dean 3:07 PM >> Wish I could’ve kissed you goodbye.

He’s halfway back to his apartment by the time Castiel texts back, but the reply makes him grin stupidly down at his phone.

Castiel 3:25 PM << Me too.

Castiel 3:25 PM << We’ll make up for it tonight. :)

Hours after he left Dean in his classroom, Castiel’s phone buzzes on the kitchen counter. Castiel is still pacing in his bedroom, trying to decide which tie goes better with his dark blue button-down, but when he hears it, he throws the two short-listed ties onto his dresser in disgust, deciding to go without.

He hasn’t been able to tamp down the buzzing anticipation for tonight, no matter how hard he's
tried over the last few days. He's gone through this week’s classes and grading in a blur, trying to
maintain some level of professionalism while compulsively checking his phone for messages from
Dean.

Hurrying into the kitchen, he grabs his phone along with his wallet and keys on the way to the
door, throwing his trench coat over his arm.

When Castiel opens the main door of his apartment building, Dean pushes away from the wall
where he’d been leaning and smiles widely, sending a warmth rushing through Castiel down to his
toes on top of the surge of magic he now feels with Dean nearby.

"Hello, Dean," he says, taking in how effortlessly hot Dean looks in his skinny jeans, dark button
down peeking out from his heavy leather jacket.

"Hey, Cas. All set?"

The door closes behind him as he nods, leaning into Dean’s space to plant a kiss on the corner of
his mouth. A pleasant tingle caresses his lips as they meet Dean's skin, and as he pulls back to lock
eyes with Dean. Dean reaches out to grab Cas’ shoulder and pull him back in for a lingering
smooch.

They share a smile as they separate again, then Dean says with a cheeky look, "Let's go before I
drag you inside."

Cas feels his face warm even as he pulls on his coat against the cool evening air, as they walk
down the stairs to the sidewalk. He'd like nothing more than to take Dean upstairs as well, but
they've taken so long to get to this point, all of a sudden he doesn't want to rush anything.

"So," he asks, following Dean as he sets off down the street. "Where are we headed?"

They fall into step together, and Cas fights the urge to grab Dean's hand as they bump together.
He's still not quite sure how public Dean wants to be with this, but he’s saved from his wondering
when Dean has to step ahead of him to get around a group of students walking the other way along
the sidewalk, and he reaches back to grab Castiel’s hand, lacing their fingers together as they draw
even again. Castiel tries to dismiss his worries about students seeing them together.

They walk along, right past Dean’s car where it’s parked on the side of the street a block up from
Castiel’s place. Dean asks, “The place I’m thinking of is just downtown, only a couple of blocks.
You okay to walk?”

“I don’t mind,” Castiel replies. “There’s nowhere to park downtown, anyway.”

As they continue walking, Castiel tucks this content feeling away for later. He’d be perfectly happy
spending every Friday night like this, discussing their day, their magic flowing between them and
swirling around them. He feels eyes on them as they move into the center of town, but he’s
reasonably sure Dean attracts attention like this wherever he goes.

He’s just about to ask again where exactly they’re going, when Dean glances around and casts a
masking illusion over them with his free hand—a simple charm, usually one of the first learned on
admission to Stanford, to keep mages hidden from non-magical folk.

Dean pulls him down a narrow alley partially hidden behind a large dumpster. The alley is dark,
scattered puddles from earlier rain reflecting dim lights from higher up in the buildings on either
side.
“It’s just down here,” Dean says quietly. “Benny told me about this place when he was in town—a friend of his runs it. It took me an hour to actually find the door the first time.” He chuckles, stopping in front of a smooth brick wall.

“Some kind of illusion?” Castiel asks, watching Dean move his free hand across the bricks from side to side.

Dean’s hand stops, and Castiel gasps slightly as he feels Dean’s magic rise and flow, a bright blue outline of a door appearing in the wall and filling in.

Dean turns to Castiel, smiling. “A concealment, yeah.” As he opens the door, fiery blue letters spell out “Mana Bar” in flowing letters above the doorway.

Inside, the bar is larger than Castiel might have expected from such a small doorway. They check their coats near the door and move into a space filled with mostly occupied dining tables, lit by floating spherical lights floating near the ceiling. One wall of this dining area is a large fireplace where a fire roars, lending the space a cozy feel, especially with the festive decorations all over the mantle.

As Dean leads Castiel across the dining room, he sees the other wall opening into a bar area with more informal seating, where most of the patrons now seem to be standing or perching on stools by the bar. Some are students, a few he recognizes as teachers or other technical staff from the university.

As they move forwards through the crowd standing with their drinks, Castiel notices a shifting pattern across the wall behind the bar. It only changes when he’s not directly looking at it, but it changes from a deep blue to a forest green, then while he glances away, it becomes an actual forest, with trees and bushes and sunlight filtering through leaves. He could be mistaken but it looks more like a magical illusion than a screen of any kind.

“This place is amazing, Dean,” Castiel says over the loud music playing. “Benny’s friend’s a mage, then?”

Dean looks over at him. “Nope, don’t think so. He said this place welcomes mages and magicians. It’s part of why I thought you’d like it.”

“Oh. I do, thank you.” Castiel glances around the bar as they wait to be served. He hadn’t even been aware places like this even existed here in the States, although now he thinks about it, it’s obvious they would.

As his gaze travels around the room, he notices the bartender serving a group of people down the bar a ways. As the man turns, Castiel recognizes him, but before he can turn away or duck his head, Inias has seen him and raises a hand in greeting.

Castiel smiles at the magician as he comes over. “Inias, how are you?”

“I’m well, thanks. I haven’t seen you down here before. Can I get you something?” Inias asks amiably, as Dean looks on, curiously.

“Oh, actually,” he says, pausing a moment to consider how he should introduce Inias and Dean. Is Dean his boyfriend now? Or are they keeping things quiet? He’s out of time, he needs to say something, so he blurts out, “Inias, this is my boyfriend, Dean.”

Dean glances at Castiel in surprise, then recovers quickly. “Hi there,” he says, holding his hand out for Inias to shake. “Nice to meet ya.”
“Likewise,” Inias smiles. “I know Castiel through—”

“—a mutual friend,” Castiel interrupts, nodding at Inias and willing him to shut up before he says anything incriminating.

Inias seems to take the hint, nodding back and saying, “That’s right. Well, what can I get for you?”

Castiel wonders if he’s imagining the slight disappointment that he sees pass across Inias’ face, although he has no idea what it might be caused by.

Dean speaks up, “Two El Sols, please.”

As Inias fetches the bottles, Castiel thanks him silently for playing along. He’s going to have to apologize on Monday night for this, but he really isn’t sure he should be involving Dean in any of Crowley’s mess.

Beers in hand, they move over to an empty table and order some burgers when the server comes around. After she leaves, Castiel reaches across the table and puts his hand over Dean’s, squeezing slightly. “Thank you for bringing me here, Dean.”

“Hey, any time. I’ve been missing you all week, y’know.” Dean turns his hand so their fingers can lace together, and a faint blush colors his cheeks. “So, uh… you called me your ‘boyfriend’ back over there…”

Castiel’s heart sinks like a rock into a still pond. He’d known it was a dumb thing to say, but as usual, his bravado had got the better of him. “Was that not okay? I’m so sorry, Dean, I shouldn’t have assumed—”

“Cas,” Dean interrupts, “it’s fine. Honestly.” Dean strokes the side of Castiel’s hand with his thumb. “Whatever we’ve got going here, I don’t want it to stop. If you’re okay with that, of course.”

Castiel allows himself to smile again, exhaling heavily. “I don’t think I’ve ever been more okay with anything in my life.”

Dean’s smile is like the sunrise. “I’m glad we’re on the same page, then.” He huffs out a laugh, rubbing one of his pink-tinged cheeks. “That got serious all’a sudden.”

Laughing nervously, Castiel replies, “You said you wanted to talk.”

“Actually, that was you,” Dean says, then soberly up slightly as he takes a mouthful of his beer. “So, would you rather keep this quiet at Stanford? What’s the deal with teachers having relationships? Especially, uh, our kind of relationship?”

Castiel shrugs. He tries to appear casual—he doesn’t really want to let Dean know just how much he’s thought about this topic over the months since they met, but he gives as honest an answer as he can. “I’d love to say that I don’t care, that people can think what they like. It’s not against the rules, but until I know what the faculty make of it we might have to be a little discreet around campus, at least.”

Dean nods, looking disappointed. “That’s a shame, but I’m sure we can work around that.” He smirks, tapping his boot against the side of Castiel’s again, and Castiel widens his eyes as he takes in the suggestive comment.

The server returns with their meals—it’s been so long since Castiel has eaten in a magical
establishment that he’s forgotten how quickly food could be prepared with a bit of elemental (or lay) magical help.

Castiel looks at the burgers and fries with some confusion—he was expecting some sort of magical effect on them with a name like “Spicy Dragon Burger,” but so far, it looks like a standard beef patty on a soft bun. Dean takes a bite, humming his appreciation, but when he opens his mouth to say something, a burst of flame shoots out. Castiel flinches back, being reminded all too vividly of the dragons in the maze, but there’s no heat in the flame—it seems it’s just an illusion.

Dean coughs out a laugh as he manages to swallow his mouthful. “’M sorry, dude, but…your face…” he says, still chuckling.

Castiel merely raises one eyebrow, then takes a bite of his own burger. The flavor is surprisingly delicious, and not as mouth-numbingly spicy as the fire-breathing had led him to think. He breathes his own stream of fire right into Dean’s face, grinning as the flame licks harmlessly across him, lighting up his hair in glowing tips. “The fire illusion is clever,” he says. “I can hardly detect the trace of magic at all.”

Dean nods his agreement as he tucks back in.

Castiel waits until they’re nearly finished their meal before he asks the question he’s been dying to ask since meeting Dean tonight. “So, your thesis. How’s the writing going? You haven’t said much in texts.” In fact, Dean had complained about having to write several times, but said hardly anything about the process of writing itself, and Castiel is bursting with curiosity.

Dean waves a hand at him, a fry between his fingers. “It’s fine—nearly finished.” He eats it, then turns an embarrassed look on Castiel. “Actually, d’you think you could read it for me before I submit?”

“Yes, of course! I thought I was going to do that anyway,” Castiel says, surprised Dean would even consider not letting him read it. “It’s my project too, remember?”

Dean returns his grin. “All right, I’ll send it over sometime this week. But I don’t wanna talk about that, I’ve been working on it all week.”

"Very well," Castiel replies, completely understanding the need to forget about work for a while. Dean’s looking at him intently with one of those stares that warms him to his toes. He shifts in his seat. "What would prefer to talk about?"

"I dunno, uh… Tell me about Oxford."

Castiel smiles. He can talk about Oxford all day—he misses life there now and then, although this time of year was usually the most stressful. He thinks back to his first impressions of the place. "It's a city in Oxfordshire. Beautiful old buildings. Big university. Students everywhere."

Dean gives him a flat look. “I meant what was your life like there? What was the nightlife like?"

Castiel shrugs. “Oxford’s a pretty compact place, but there are a lot of pubs and restaurants. When I went out there in winter like this, we’d get a few beers in and dare each other to run across the Isis."

Dean’s eyebrows rise. “The Isis?"

He grins. “The river—it’s the local name for the Thames. We’d run across, freezing the water under our feet. Meg used to call it Elsa-style, but I never did understand that reference.”
Dean laughs, surprised. “And did you fall in?”

“Depends on how drunk we were,” Castiel grins. “But Meg was great at drying anyone off that fell in. It was usually the lay magicians who ran out of steam partway across and fell in.”

“Oh, crap.” Dean pauses, and Castiel’s sure he saw a frown on his face at the second mention of Meg. Is Dean...jealous? Or maybe he’s just worried about the idea of falling through the ice. His face is back to the look that Castiel loves to see on him, though, his eyes alight with curiosity as he asks, “And the lay magicians...they’re all really taught magic in schools?”

Castiel nods. “The gifted students, yes. They take an aptitude test when they’re eleven, and gifted students are put into extracurricular classes, you know, AV clubs and music groups—but they’re really fronts for secret magical training.” He fake-whispers the last sentence dramatically, and Dean laughs.

Dean starts to say something, but hesitates before he speaks. “Cas, I wanna do something to help the lay magicians here, like you did in England. You think there’s any hope of that?”

Castiel hesitates, trying to decide if he could tell Dean about Crowley and his lay magician class. His eyes flick to where Inias is still serving drinks on the other side of the bar. Having to hide something like this feels wrong to him somehow, especially hiding it from Dean, but he owes it to the magicians to keep their secret safe. Besides, getting Dean involved could be dangerous for Dean himself, as well as his career. No, he’d better keep it to himself for a little longer. The sentiment is so sweet though, so like the caring nature he’s coming to see in Dean, that he smiles despite his worried thoughts. Maybe, just maybe if Crowley’s plan comes to fruition, he can bring Dean along to help.

He takes a breath, considering his answer. “There’s always hope, Dean. But changing the mindset of a whole society is a tall order, for anyone.”

Dean nods, thoughtfully. He drains the last of his beer, and sits back in his chair, watching as the empty glass rises towards the ceiling and flies back to the bar. “What about this underground movement that I’ve heard rumors about?”

Castiel can’t help the flinch that strikes him. “Underground movement?” he asks, stalling.

“Yeah, Bobby said something the other night that got me wondering just how many lay magicians there are who want a better life, y’know? Apart from those a-holes who’ve been murdering people, of course.”

Castiel shrugs, trying to stay as nonchalant as possible while his mind is frantically wondering whether Bobby might also be involved. “I don’t think most of them are much threat. Not everyone’s a murderer, Dean.”

“Yeah, I just...” He shakes his head. “Never mind. You wanna get out of here?” he asks, pushing his chair back.

Castiel blinks. Has he said something wrong? Dean looks troubled all of a sudden. Cas needs to lighten the mood somehow, bring things back to just the two of them, rather than solving the problems of the world.

“Sure. Let me just go and settle the tab.” He stands up, but Dean reaches out to put a hand on his arm.

“Wait, I’ll get this one,” he says, also getting to his feet.
Castiel shakes his head. He’d invited Dean on this date, and he’s going to do things properly. “I insist. You can…take care of me later. It’s my turn.” He leaves Dean standing at the table, open-mouthed, and heads towards where Inias is standing behind the bar.

Inias takes his payment for their meal, and murmurs to Castiel, “I hope you’re enjoying your night.”

Castiel smiles. Inias has no idea how much he’s been looking forward to tonight, but he seems to have picked up on the excitement. “Yes, thank you. And I’m sorry about earlier. I can’t let anyone at Stanford know about…that other class.”

“No trouble. I didn’t realize Dean was a colleague of yours.” Inias looks over Castiel’s shoulder. That isn’t quite their working relationship, but close enough, Castiel supposes. “He is, yes. Anyway, have a good night. See you Monday.”

Castiel can’t see Dean anywhere when he turns away from Inias, but when he steps outside the hidden door into the alleyway, shrugging on his coat, he sees him standing nearby. Dean shivers in the cool breeze, looking concerned. What if he’s having second thoughts already? Castiel hates to think that he might be the cause of heartache for Dean at all, and he moves forward, keen to try to reassure Dean that he’s in this, heart and soul. This date is going to be the start of something, and he’s going to make sure Dean knows just how he makes Castiel feel.

Dean’s thankful to have a moment alone. He’s standing in the alley, the December chill making him shiver. After paying their bill (Dean fully intends to return the offer, and then some) Castiel stayed behind to say goodbye to that friend of his… Ian? Isaiah? Dean’s not the best with names. Whoever the guy was, he’s nice and sorta handsome, and Dean didn’t miss that flicker of disappointment crossing the dude’s face when Cas called Dean his boyfriend.

His boyfriend.

Honestly, the whole episode feels like a freaking dream. He’s still unconvinced that this is really happening, that he’s going out with Cas. He’s practically been a figment of Dean’s overactive imagination for so long that he has no clue how to act normally around him, how to muddle through the expected first-date small talk and act like he hasn’t been wanting this for far too long. He’s done an okay job so far, hasn’t put his foot in his mouth yet—but he knows himself, so yeah, it’s bound to happen. He doesn’t want to come across as too eager, and as much as he doesn’t want to admit it, Castiel’s harmless teasing from earlier in the classroom has invaded whatever self-assurance he’s been building. What if he really is just some lovesick student? Or what if he’s Cas’ sexual experimenting gone wrong? What if Dean falls for him?

What if maybe, possibly, that’s already happening?

“Nut up, Winchester,” he grumbles out loud, pacing around the alley and reminding himself that Cas is the one who defined their relationship just an hour ago. He had used the B-word, a word Dean had spent most of his twenties avoiding like hell—but here he is, embracing it, smitten like a damn teenager. Logically he knows that Cas is into him, that his feelings are shared. But there’s a nagging thought in the back of his mind that dating someone as awesome as Cas is way too good to be true. He’s waiting for the bottom to fall out, ‘cause when it comes to Dean’s life, it usually does.
He exhales, his breath a gust of air against the cold, and tries to shake out his nerves. He doesn’t want Cas to spot him like this, all contemplative and worried, but when he straightens up and turns back around, he spots the familiar trench coat. The outline of the concealed door has faded, which means he must’ve been here for a minute or two, at least, just observing Dean. He tilts his head, biting his lower lip, looking curious.

“That’s a serious face,” he comments lightly, coming to stand close to Dean. “What’re you thinking about?”

There’s a lot of honest ways to answer that question, but zero that don’t make Dean sound like a neurotic weirdo. Still, he doesn’t want to start their relationship by hiding things—he’s already kept this thing with the Captain secret, since broaching a subject that serious could impact things between them. So, in the name of truthfulness, he opts to admit, “You.”

“Hmm…” Castiel’s eyes shine in his direction, hands reaching out to grasp the edges of Dean’s leather jacket. “And what about me has captured your thoughts?”

Dean rests his hands on Castiel’s hips, loving how even this minimal contact has his insides buzzing with the vibrancy of magic. “It’s hard to pick just one thing,” he responds flirtily.

“Is that so?” Cas’ eyes flick to his lips, and Dean’s heart hammers for a moment in his chest, wanting very much to brush their lips together. Is it weird to kiss in the middle of a first date? Isn’t that usually reserved for doorsteps or front porches or something? Then again, they’ve already kissed a few times today, and now they’re officially dating. Surely that means dumb, first-date rules don’t apply to them anymore? “Give me an example.”

“You fishin’ for compliments, Cas?” Dean smirks broadly, and Castiel shrugs adorably, as if it can’t be helped.

“I’ll make you a deal, then. A compliment for a compliment,” Dean proposes casually, because honestly, it’s difficult for him to talk about his stupid feelings without some game or ruse attached. He’s trying to work on that, but hey, Rome wasn’t built in a day.

“Seems fair.” Castiel brings their bodies closer, and Dean shivers again at the cold, wondering if they oughta start walking soon. The moment he has the thought, though, his iciness evaporates, Cas’ magic flowing through him like a softly spreading fire.

“Thanks,” Dean breathes, feeling soothed and warm, relaxed like he just had an hour-long massage. “Must be some kind of mind reader.”

“Well, I did feel you shivering…but sure, let’s go with mind reader.” Even under the jesting tone, Castiel is a little breathless himself. Is he feeling the intensity of their shared magic flowing between them? “Anyways, I believe I was promised a compliment.”

Dean can’t help it—his eyes roam around hungrily, trying to pick a favorite feature. It’s near impossible because Castiel Novak is a work of freaking art. Maybe his perfectly tousled hair? His hot as hell five o’clock shadow? His thick and muscular thighs, which make no damn sense, really, since Cas’ idea of exercise is carrying books to and from the library?

“Your eyes,” he says finally, trying not to notice how his voice breaks a little. He fingers the collar of Cas’ button-up. “I like how this shirt brings out your eyes.”

Castiel just stares at him, head tilted slightly up and beaming, as if Dean just said his eyes had won the Nobel Peace Prize. Fuck, that stare… Just like that, Dean can barely breathe, lost in that
incredible gaze. It feels like every moment between them lately—even ones that begin fun or flirty—delve into romantic territory way more quickly than Dean expects. He can’t risk blurting out how insanely into Cas he is, not without scaring his brand-new boyfriend away on their very first day of dating. So chuckles uncomfortably, trying to diffuse the moment. “Weirdo. Don’t look at me like that.”

“How am I looking at you?” Castiel asks nonchalantly, as if he has no clue the power he has over Dean.

“You do know. You’re doing it now,” Dean mumbles, Cas’ gaze intensifying and making him blush. There’s a hint of mischief in Castiel’s eyes now, as if he likes watching Dean squirm. “Cas, seriously…just gimme my compliment so we can head to our next stop.”

“Oh, there’s more to tonight’s date?” Cas asks, sounding surprised.

Dean scoffs with exaggerated volume. “Of course there is. Dean Winchester does not half-ass dates. He…uh, whole-asses them.”

“Now there’s a visual,” Castiel says, and Dean throws his head back, laughing. Jesus, this guy never stops surprising him. Cas is being a bit looser and more unpredictable tonight, and it’s definitely keeping Dean on his toes. “If you don’t mind, I’ll think on it a minute. We can go for now.”

Dean’s a little nervous with how much thought Cas seems to be putting into this stupid little “compliments” game, but he just shrugs, trying to act like it doesn’t make him uneasy. He threads their fingers together again, calmed by the touch, and they begin walking in the chilly air.

“Where are we headed?”

“Well…” Dean pauses, squeezing Cas’ palm and hoping this idea will be met favorably. “It’s sorta cheesy, but there’s an ice skating rink a few blocks down, and y’know, it might be fun for you to watch me fall on my ass.”

“I can think of much better activities for that ass, but sure, sounds fun,” Castiel says breezily, sliding one hand into Dean’s back pocket. Dean’s pretty sure he’s forgotten what breathing even is, because what the hell, he’s supposed to be out in public with Cas right now while getting teased like this?

“Jesus, Cas,” he swears, trying to continue walking in a straight line down the sidewalk and failing miserably. Despite himself, he shivers a little, imagining himself laid on naked on a mattress, Castiel above him, fingers sliding into his entrance, Dean squirming, begging for more…

“Cold again?” Castiel asks, sounding a little concerned. When Dean wrinkles his forehead, he adds, “I just felt you shiver.”

“Oh, uh…” I was just thinking about what it would feel like if you pounded my ass. “I’m good.”

Once they finally reach the ice rink Dean feels immeasurably less flustered, almost happy to see a large crowd of people there to keep things PG. It’s not that he doesn’t want to have sex with Cas—he sure as hell does, and badly—but it’ll be Castiel’s first time with a man. Dean has no intention of pressuring him into anything. Though, judging by that time in the library when they both got hard just from making out, he’s feeling just as excited as Dean at the possibility of taking their relationship to the next level.

Before Cas can whip out his wallet, Dean rents their ice skates and buys them two hot chocolates.
They chatter as they lace up the skates, standing wobbly and laughing at each other as they inch towards the ice. They spend the first ten minutes clutching the sides, chuckling and swearing, and Dean mutters, “Y’know, this looks a lot easier on movies.”

“Yes, it’s clear we are not the leads in a Hallmark movie,” Castiel mumbles dryly, his left skate dragging as they make their way around. “Though, it is two weeks till Christmas, and there’s an enormous Christmas tree in the center over there.”

Both facts are true—there are ornaments on that tree the size of Dean’s freaking head, and enough fairy lights to rival Times Square. America, man.

“And I’m here with the hottest guy in town,” Dean adds, leaning back enough to give Cas a wink.

“That was my next line,” Castiel jokes, his cheeks pink from exertion. They continue stumbling around until their hot chocolates are empty, and Dean gets brave enough to grab Cas’ hand, attempting to glide around the ice without any wall-related assistance. They begin falling almost instantly, Cas unintentionally dragging Dean down with him. Backs on the ice, they become the public spectacle of this very crowded skating rink.

“We suck,” Dean concludes after their third fall. Somehow, though, their spirits are just as high and hopeful as they were at the beginning. He’s pretty sure he could go dumpster diving with Cas and still have an awesome time.

“At least we suck together,” Castiel adds, then visibly winces as they rise to their feet, holding each other for stability. “I-I’m sorry. That innuendo was accidental.”

“But all the others weren’t?” Dean asks, smirking and trying to lighten the mood. He’s hoping Cas will laugh, but he doesn’t. “Hey, I don’t mind.” Castiel doesn’t look convinced, though, so Dean adds, “Honestly, Cas, no worries. I like ‘em. Probably too much.”

That makes Castiel’s gaze snap up, a question in his eyes. “Really?”

Dean glances down at Cas’ lips instinctively, watching the other man follow his gaze with piqued interested. “Really. You gotta know, Cas…” Dean crowds against him, the other man’s back against the barrier of the wall, Dean’s forearm perched above Cas’ head.

“What you do to me,” Dean whispers, and then he feels a tug on his jacket pulling him close, then lips against his—chapped and chilly, but he doesn’t care. Their mouths are pressed together firmly and Cas has his hands wrapped around the back of Dean’s neck. Dean forgets everything else but the feeling of Cas’ chest pressed against him, the feeling of all things Cas consuming his consciousness.

“Proud,” Castiel says suddenly, pulling away as if he can’t wait to explain something, and Dean’s confusion must be painted all over his face. “Your compliment, remember? It took me a minute to put it into words, but it’s… How proud I am of the work you’ve done on the Seal, how curious and intelligent you are. How proud I am to be here with you, to be seen with someone so breathtaking and beautiful. How proud I am to be your friend, someone so open-minded and accepting. And now, to be your boyfriend…” Castiel’s exhales shakily. “I’m just proud, Dean.”

“Uh, wow…” Dean’s voice is hoarse, his lips still wet where Cas last kissed him. He feels something inside his heart begin to warm, the walls he’d built around his emotions crumbling. “Cas, you cheater. That was like, six compliments in one!”
“I can’t help that I’m efficient,” Castiel argues with a smile, and Dean rolls his eyes, pulling him in for another kiss, maybe a deeper one this time. That’s when he feels a raindrop land squarely on his head, then another hits his shoulder blade, until they’re quickly in the middle of a torrential downpour.

Dean curses and grabs Cas’ hand, moving in the direction of the crowd seeking shelter, but Cas is strangely planted where he stands.

“C’mon, we’ll catch a cold out here,” Dean says, but Cas has his palms flat, a look of concentration on his face. Dean knows that look...

“I want to try something,” Cas says, speaking loudly over the rush of rain, hands posed. “Will you cast with me?”

“You don’t mean…” Dean looks up at the rain, thinking back to all the weather spells he’d looked up that day they went to the beach. In all his previous attempts, he had barely been able to alter one cloud. “We won’t be strong enough to stop this.”

“Dean,” Castiel says, voice loud over the pounding weather, “I’m beginning to think our affinity is strong enough to do things I never thought possible. Don’t you feel it?”

“Yeah, but…” Dean bites his lip, unsure why he feels so hesitant. He loves performing magic with Cas, it’s exhilarating and addictive, but this seems too ambitious, even for them. “What if we turned the rain to hail by accident? I would never forgive us if our spell dented my Baby.”

“I already know you have an amulet that protects your vehicle from harm, Dean,” Cas says, and it’s in his no-nonsense tone he uses when he thinks Dean is being unreasonable.

Out of excuses, Dean sighs, feeling nervous about attempting this magnitude of magic. The rain is coming down in sheets now, but at least it’s dark enough that they’re well-hidden from any prying eyes. Casting a spell in ice skates in the rain poses a whole new set of challenges, and it takes them a few practice rounds before they have the hand motions fluid enough to mirror one another. Hands clasped, then spread open, thumb and forefinger of their left hands sliding against the right, then middle finger and forefinger sliding against each other, before finally finishing by hooking their pinkies in an inverted twist. It’s a bit more involved than the heating spell they’ve mastered, the freezing charm requiring every wave of their hands to be cast with precision. Still, it takes barely a minute before the spell is in motion. The rain freezes into a soft, drifting snow almost instantly, and Cas looks like a vision with his wet hair and eyelashes, hands long and confident as he continues the spell. Dean can feel the mounting energy between them, the adrenaline rising to three-shots-of-espresso level. His hands are shaking—he feels overwhelmed.

“Cas, I…I can’t…” They haven’t stopped casting even though the rain has stopped and the snow is falling, and Dean tries to slow his hands, but the look of pure joy on Cas’ face is memorizing. “Should we stop?”

“Dean, your magic, it feels…” Cas closes his eyes, shivering, hands still moving in sync with Dean’s even though he’s clearly not trying anymore. He opens his eyes again, clearing his throat. “Y-yes, you’re right, we should stop.”

They lower their hands almost forcefully, the urge to keep casting flooding Dean’s senses. He glances up at the sky, the fresh snowfall peppering his jacket, his hair, his skates. “We did it,” he breathes, unable to keep the awe out of his voice. “It never snows here, Cas. Ever.”

Castiel’s expression is fit for a photo album—eyebrows raised with a combination of excitement,
smugness, and amusement. Like all his other looks, Dean can’t seem to tear his eyes away, leaning in close to touch the small of his back.

“Will people know it’s magic?” Dean asks, more curious than anything. “I wonder how far it’s reached…” He’ll have to check the weather report tomorrow. He returns his gaze to Cas and almost snorts. “You seem unconcerned.”

Cas gives another adorable shrug and head tilt.

“Good things do happen, Dean,” he whispers softly. That certainly hasn’t been Dean’s experience, but his pessimistic response fades as Cas leans in, kissing him, the impossible snow still falling around them.

Kissing Dean in the midst of their magical snowstorm is like nothing Castiel has ever experienced. The magic rushes through his body and swirls the snow around them in eddies, so that when he eventually opens his eyes and pulls back, a small whirlwind is spiraling around them.

Dean laughs, and it’s so joyful that Castiel’s eyes snap back to him in wonder. The fairy lights glimmer and shine in Dean’s eyes as he gazes into Castiel’s, and Castiel has to remind himself all over again that this is really happening, he’s definitely here and not in one of his dreams.

As he gradually becomes aware of the rest of the world around them, he can hear the shouts of amazement from the other ice-skaters as they play in the softly falling snow.

Castiel shakes his head as he watches the excited children (and some not-so-young others), catching the flakes in their mouths and scooping up piles of melting slush to throw at each other. “Can you believe I missed snow like this while I lived in England?” he says. “They do get snow there, but very rarely, and it’s usually gone within the day. These Californians don’t know how lucky they are not to have to deal with it regularly.”

“Wow, you spent way too much time in England, dude,” Dean says with a chuckle as they support each other across the ice, heading for the exit.

Once on firm ground, they walk awkwardly on their skates towards where they rented them. Castiel puts his hands in his coat pockets to find them deliciously warm again. “Dean, you’ve spelled my pockets again, haven’t you?”

Dean ducks his head. “Just thought you needed warming up again.”

“Thank you,” Castiel says, eyeing the adorable pink tinge on Dean's cheeks and trying hard to push down all the comments he could make about other ways Dean could warm him up. Instead, he puts his now-warmed hand on Dean’s cheek, turning it towards him so he can place a kiss there. He grabs Dean’s hand, pulling it into his pocket along with his own, and Dean immediately puts his other hand into Castiel’s other pocket, sighing at the warmth.

Castiel pulls Dean’s chest against his own by the lapel and plants another kiss on his lips. “May I keep you?” he asks in a whisper.

Dean’s eyes widen in a flustered expression Castiel finds irresistible. “Sure,” he murmurs back, leaning back in for a firm kiss, then adds, “As long as you don’t make me go back on that ice
again.”

Castiel chuckles, separating himself from Dean and sitting down on the chairs nearby to unlace his skates.

Dean walks Castiel home, their hands together again and firmly in Castiel’s warm pocket. They don’t say a lot, but their magic flows between them, warm and steady. As they draw even with Dean’s car, Castiel wonders what should come next. Should he invite Dean upstairs for a drink, or whatever the kids called it these days—“Netflix and chill” or some nonsense? He’s been dreaming about sex with Dean so often lately that he finds himself a little unsure of how to even broach the subject, or how guys even go about inviting each other upstairs for chill and whatever, and now he’s pretty sure he’s overthinking this whole thing—

“I’m sorry, Cas, but I’m going to have to call it a night,” Dean says, halting Castiel’s runaway thoughts.

“Oh?” he replies, possibly a little too hastily.

“Yeah, I gotta make sure that brother of mine got home okay. Kid’s still hanging around with Ruby, so I made him promise he’d text me when he got back to his room.” Dean grimaces, and although Cas is disappointed in having to say goodnight to Dean, his caring for his brother is sweet.

"I suppose I can bear to let you go, then," Castiel says, pulling Dean's hand out of his warm pocket.

Dean smiles, leaning into Cas and laying another kiss on him. If he only knew how much Castiel’s thoughts fizzed out every time he does that…

Castiel pulls himself together enough to say, “I had a wonderful time tonight, Dean.”

“I did too. Let’s do it again soon, okay?” Dean says, stepping back towards his car, but Castiel steps forward and grabs Dean again, pulling him back in for another lingering kiss. He can’t get enough of the rough scrape of stubble against his own—the taste of Dean and his magic send his senses spinning. They kiss until Castiel has pushed Dean against the side of his gorgeous car and Dean is pushing back, almost grinding against him.

Dean breaks off the kiss, panting as he stares at Cas in the dim light from the street lamps. “Cas, you gotta stop or I’m not going to be able to…” he says, breathless.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel says hurriedly, sure he must have done something wrong, but Dean shakes his head.

“It’s fine, honestly, but I think we should take things one step at a time, okay?” Dean smiles as Castiel steps back, nodding.

Disappointment floods through him, but if Dean wants to take things slow, he won’t be the one to push. “Will I see you at the library this week?” Castiel asks, knowing full well that Dean needs to finish his draft this week and the last time they’d met in the library hadn’t exactly gone to plan.

Dean grins. “I’ll see what I can do. Night, Cas.”

“Goodnight, Dean,” Castiel replies as Dean walks around to the driver’s side door.

As Castiel turns and walks towards his apartment building, he hears the bassy rumble of the Impala behind him. He feels an odd emptiness where Dean’s magic had wrapped him up, warmed him,
and it only grows as Dean drives away up the street. He lets himself into the building and trudges up the stairs. He’d been low-key hoping that he’d be bringing Dean up with him at the end of tonight, but he guesses taking it slow is a good idea.

He opens his apartment door and stops dead in his tracks. Standing in the middle of his living room is the last person he expected to see here tonight, or at all, for that matter.

“Hi Castiel,” Anna says, a hopeful smile on her face. “It’s been a long time.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so in this writing of this chapter, we mixed up our fried potato nomenclature and got terribly confused. Allow me to explain with the limited formatting of the end notes.

America=Chips
Australia=Chips
Britain=Crisps

America=Fries
Australia=Hot chips (or just chips)
Britain=Chips

The things you learn while co-writing porn, honestly.

(Come chat in the comments!)
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Happy, happy Monday!! We're so glad that everyone enjoyed the snowy fluff fest from last chapter. Enjoy a little more, with some surprises here and there. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Anna,” Castiel says, swallowing dryly. “What are you doing here?”

It feels strange hearing someone say her name, her real name. Anna has been the Captain for far too long—cut off from her past, her family, her identity. She didn’t realize how overwhelmed she would feel, seeing Castiel again after all this time.

She crosses through the living room and wraps her arms around her little brother, mind buzzing. Something’s changed about him, a shift in his magic that she can sense through physical touch, but she can’t pinpoint it fully…

“I’m here to see you,” she says carefully. She doesn’t want to admit that she’s been living in Palo Alto for a few months, as long as Castiel himself. She lives in a small basement apartment with other members of the resistance, at an undisclosed location she takes care to keep hidden. She hasn’t been inside Castiel’s apartment for very long—it took time to unravel all the protective charms he had placed around his apartment, particularly effective in warding off unfamiliar or dark sources of magic. But thankfully, her and Castiel share an affinity—a warm, familial link that makes his magic open up to her. His spell had unraveled itself easily enough.

Afterwards she had wandered around inside his one bedroom apartment, fingers dragging over the hardcovers lined up on a shelf, not even a speck of dust in sight. He has an impressive library—she copied the contents of a few instructional textbooks, ones that aren’t readily available for someone like her. Perhaps Castiel would’ve given her copies if she’d asked, but Anna is not the type to rely on anyone’s help.

Which is why coming here today is so difficult.

His kitchen is small but neat, his couch gently ruffled and likely bought secondhand, his bedroom adorned in navy blue curtains. Surely no one could blame her for snooping—it’s been years since she’s spoken with her younger brother, the summer before he left for Oxford. After that, she’d dropped in on him over the years, holidays he spent with their parents in Illinois, weekend trips with Gabriel. She had even checked in on him during grad school, when her search for resources had taken her to England, the home of the strongest lay magician community in the world. The things she had learned during her travels had been invaluable, but she made sure Castiel never saw her there…or anywhere, for that matter. She’s been floating on the edge of his peripheral vision for nearly a decade, but he’s only seen her when she wants to be found.

One of those moments is now. Anna is happy to see Castiel again, but she’s not quite sure her younger brother feels the same. Her eyes sweep over him—he’s wearing nice jeans, a button-up, a trench coat dusted with snow. Snow…?

She pulls back the blinds on the nearby window, her suspicions confirmed. “Unusual weather
we’re having,” she comments, since Palo Alto isn’t exactly known for its snowfall. Now that she thinks about it, she can feel the buzz of powerful magic in the air, residual as a wet footprint. “The weather’s been tampered with—a strong spell of some kind. Can you feel it?”

Castiel squirms a little as he hangs his coat on the rack, as if he doesn’t want to discuss it. “Anna,” he begins, exasperation in his voice, “it’s not that I’m not happy to see you, after all these years, but—”

“I’m sorry to barge in like this,” she interrupts, hedging his defenses before he can start, ”it’s just, I wanted to see you, and it’s safer for me to wait in here inside your wards than, y’know…”

The practicality of her words, perhaps coupled with her brother’s guilt over Anna’s lay magician status, makes the edges of his irritation wane. They both know it’s dangerous out there for a lay magician. The lack of training and overall desperation of magicians means the Council either ignores their plight completely, or deals with them in more harmful terms. Anna has seen a lot of things she’d rather forget—things that would make her little brother’s toes curl.

Castiel sighs, running a hand through his hair and shaking out the excess moisture. “Would you like some tea?”

She nods, watching Castiel fill up the tea kettle and pull down two mugs from a cabinet, offering up his tea selection for her to peruse. He’s so grown-up now, so put-together and set in his ways, and it makes her both proud of the man he’s become and nostalgic for the little boy she grew up with. He’d only been fourteen when she had received the rejection letter from Stanford University’s School of the Occult. At the time he had barely known what that meant, how that would change her life and their relationship forever.

They don’t speak as they settle onto opposite ends of his small kitchen table, steeping their tea bags quietly.

Finally, Castiel drops his mug with a deafening clang. “Are you in trouble?”

Anna nearly laughs—she’s been in trouble most of her life, it seems. Since the moment she realized she was different, other. “Depends on your definition of trouble.”

Castiel sighs, elbows planted on the table. “Where have you been?” His voice breaks, shaking a little. “I haven’t seen you since…”

“The summer before you left for England,” Anna finishes, grasping her mug and savoring the warmth. She looks around his apartment, making a show of admiring the degrees hanging above his desk. “Looks like you’ve done well for yourself, Cassie.”

Castiel gives her a small, rueful smile and she peers forward, curious. “What?” she asks.

“Nothing, it’s just…very few people call me that nowadays.” He stares down at his hands, eyebrows furrowed, looking so dejected that Anna can’t help it—she reaches across the table, grasping his open hand. Instead of giving her brother comfort, though, she gasps at the flow of magic she feels emanating from his skin. It feels immensely more powerful than she remembers ever feeling from Castiel, and it’s not just his access to the Well of elemental magic, a power source she’s never experienced firsthand. There’s something strengthening his magic, something woven into the very makeup of his being—

“You’re bonded,” she whispers, and his gaze shoots up, eyes wide.

“No I’m not,” he argues, though by the tone alone, it’s obvious he’s uncertain.
“Yes, you are,” she says firmly, confident in the way only an older sister can. “Castiel, I know your magic, remember? We have an affinity, we always have, but what you have now…whoever you’re bonded to…” She swallows and withdraws her hand. “Who is she?”

“Why do you assume…?” Castiel huffs out an impatient breath and doesn’t finish.

“I’m no expert, Cassie, but a bond this strong is usually romantic,” she points out. It can’t be the woman Castiel was dating back in Oxford—Meg Masters. Anna had gathered enough intel on her to know she wasn’t a perfect fit for her brother, though her proficiency with battle magic could come in handy. She hasn’t been keeping close tabs on Castiel now that they live in the same city, but that had apparently been foolish on her part.

“I am dating someone,” Castiel admits softly, his voice becoming more open as he smiles. “We met at Stanford. Just had our first date tonight, actually.”

“That’s wonderful,” Anna says genuinely, though if he’s already developed a profound bond with someone after one date, her brother has almost certainly fallen in love. Based on his own disbelief in his very real and present bond, though, Anna decides not to mention this. “You seem happy.”

“I am,” Castiel says in that same soft tone. He certainly has it bad for this girl, whoever she is. Perhaps Anna needs to look into this further, make sure she’s worthy of her brother. “But enough about me. Anna, tell me why you’re here. Are you safe? What can I do to help you?”

This is one of many reasons why Anna loves Castiel, and why she’s kept him in the dark about the underground resistance she’s been leading. His heart is too big, his loyalty too great—he’s bound to get himself hurt if he’s not careful. She’s tried to keep him far removed from all of this, but it seems she might not be able to any longer. Against her better judgment, she’s bringing in new people all the time—she’s particularly excited about Dean, the handsome nephew of her favorite magic shop owner, Bobby Singer. Dean has real potential, especially if he has information about the Seal.

“I’m looking for a book,” she says slowly, and Castiel tilts his head, nodding at her to continue. “It has a rather wordy title. The Complete Encyclopedic History of 20th Century Magic Regulation in the US.”

The color drains from Castiel’s face. “What exactly are you mixed up in, Anna?”

Anna can’t help but show her surprise, eyebrows shooting up. “So you’ve heard of it? Does that mean Stanford has a copy?”

Castiel stares at her, his gaze hard and unrelenting, as if he’s trying to understand her through sheer force of will. “Stanford doesn’t, but I have…access to one, as it were.”

“That’s great,” she says, though her tone is immensely cautious. “Could you, perhaps, retrieve it for me?”

“Depends,” Castiel replies coolly, “on what you need it for.”

Anna leans back into her chair, taking an exaggerated sip of her tea. “I can’t tell you that.”

Castiel chuckles, the sound dark and unforgiving. “I haven’t seen you in years, and you break into my apartment to ask me to track down a book for you about the Stanford Seal? You’re my sister, Anna, and I love you. But do you know how absurd this is?”

“I wouldn’t involve you if I had another choice,” Anna says, more sharply than she intended.
Tension begins to grow between them, silence hanging heavy between their half-empty mugs of tea. “I’ll give you anything else, Castiel. Anything but telling you why. You just have to trust me…it’s better if you don’t know.”

Castiel shakes his head and scoffs, looking disappointed and sullen. Anna drains her mug in one quick gulp, realizing that this was a mistake, that Castiel won’t help her and she shouldn’t have involved him anyways—

“Don’t go,” Castiel begs suddenly, evidently noticing her exit strategy. “I won’t press you for information, okay? Just please, don’t go.”

“Cassie…” She feels sick to her stomach, wondering if she’s made a grave mistake coming here tonight. She had just been out of options, but putting her brother in harm’s way? Could she really do this?

“Just don’t disappear. That’s all I need, to get the book for you,” he says in a rush, the desperation clear in his voice. Part of Anna is surprised by Castiel’s reaction, not realizing how badly her little brother must’ve missed her all these years. But they’d been close as kids, even more than they’d been with Gabriel—they do have an affinity, after all. “Just stay. Let’s have coffee, get dinner. We’ll video chat Gabriel and go home for Christmas. We’ll be a family again.”

Anna feels tears pooling, threatening to spill, but she takes a deep breath and steels herself. She never intended to hurt Castiel by coming here tonight, but it seems unavoidable now.

“I’m sorry, this was a mistake,” she mutters, though everything within her is begging for her to stay, to reconnect with her brother and her family and everyone she’s lost. But she can’t endanger them. She stands up abruptly, ignoring Castiel’s calls and shouts, and walks back through the front door and into the enveloping darkness.

The morning after his date with Castiel, Dean wakes up with a raging boner and a stupid grin on his face. Fuck, has a first date ever gone that well? He squints his eyes, the early morning light streaming in through the blinds. Dean doesn’t usually have dates so much as one-night stands or hookups—in fact, he can’t even remember the last time he went on a date and didn’t try to score. He hadn’t even attempt to get in Cas’ pants, and actually, Dean had been the one to call it a night when he was pretty sure Cas might’ve invited him inside. And here Dean is, the morning after, all goofy grins and butterflies in his stomach. He rolls over and shoots Cas a good morning text, waiting for a response before remembering it’s Saturday, and his adorable ass boyfriend is probably fast asleep.

In all the warm and fuzzy thoughts of Cas, it takes him a moment to remember why he’s up so early. He’s having breakfast with Sam and Charlie…breakfast he’s supposed to be in the process of making. Oops.

Ignoring his twitching cock—which had been valiantly hardening during a particularly naughty sex dream with Cas that Dean just woke from—he takes a quick, lukewarm shower. While he’s toweling off, he has a sudden stroke of brilliance, and decides to invite Cas to breakfast too. They’re dating now, right? Breakfast with the best friend and little brother is sort of a boyfriend requirement. Hell, Cas might be offended if he didn’t invite him. Yeah, Dean reasons, towel wrapped around him as he shoots off another text to Cas. This is a great idea.
He dresses quickly, tossing on a pair of worn denim and a long-sleeved henley. He brushes his teeth and puts a little product in his hair—he doesn’t give a fuck how he looks around Charlie or Sam, but if Cas does stop by, he doesn’t want to look sloppy. He checks his phone, frowning when he notices there’s no reply, but remembers they hadn’t actually made plans today. He has no right to be disappointed, really. Maybe Castiel already has plans, who knows.

Dean has bacon sizzling and pancakes bubbling when Charlie strides in. She’s shivering and swearing, wrapped up in so many layers it takes her entirely too long to finally be standing there in a Stanford sweatshirt. It’s been too long since they’ve hung out, and Dean grins wide when she shouts, “What’s up, bitch?”

Dean doesn’t immediately answer—he needs to check the fridge and see if he has enough eggs to scramble—so she answers, “I’ll tell you what. The freaking weather, dude.”

“What’s up, bitch?” Dean asks, distracted as he checks the egg carton.

“It’s a snowpocalypse!” she shouts dramatically.

Dean freezes, torn between getting more information from Charlie and going over to the window. He opts for the latter, situating the eggs back into the fridge, then pulling his blinds all the way up and parting the curtains. And…shit. White. White everywhere, covering the sidewalks and the rooftops and the streets. It’s barely an inch, maybe two, so not exactly a national disaster. But Californians are more accustomed to rain, particularly in the northwest, so even a light dusting is noteworthy. Not a snowpocalypse, as Charlie suggested, but it’s definitely not nothing.

“Cas,” he mumbles, missing him suddenly, because holy hell—they did this. Their magic.

“Huh?” Charlie asks.

“Nothing,” Dean says quickly, mouth still hanging open in awe. “The whole town is like this?”


What the fuck?

Thank god Charlie doesn’t notice anything off about Dean’s reaction, just dropping a bottle of champagne onto the kitchen table as he silently freaks out. Did he and Cas seriously blanket the whole freaking state in snow? How, in the name of god, did they become that powerful?

He clears his throat, saving his freakout for later, when he’s either with Cas or in private. He glares down at the champagne bottle on his table. “Uh, Char,” he says, back at the stove with a spatula now in-hand, “what the hell is that?”

“C’mon, you know you want a snow day mimosa,” she says, eyebrows raised. Dean rolls his eyes, planning to stick to coffee, thank you very much. Charlie’s instantly at home in his kitchen, pulling the orange juice out of the fridge and mixing herself a drink. Then she slides onto the kitchen counter, practically beaming, and Dean grumbles out, “What?”

“I have news.”

“Which is?”

“Dorothy asked me to be her girlfriend,” she announces with a squeak, and Dean smiles as he flips a particularly large pancake.
“Awesome,” he says genuinely, nudging her elbow. “Last night?”

“This morning,” Charlie says with a wink, and Dean laughs, blushing a little at the image of him and Cas having sleepovers. As embarrassing as it is, even more than the sex, he can’t wait to reach that stage in their relationship. “You know I don’t say romantic bullshit like this, but…this feels different somehow. Whatever I’ve got going on with her, it’s special.”

Dean nods, ducking his head down. “Know whatcha mean.”

Charlie takes a long sip, giving him significant side-eye. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Dean cuts the heat off, transferring the bacon onto a paper-towel-covered plate. Jesus, this stuff smells heavenly. He should eat bacon every freaking day. “Uh…anyways, I’m happy for you Char.”

Charlie narrows her eyes, tucking a strand of long red hair behind her ear. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Dean fidgets, checking his phone—it’s ten o’clock and still no word from Cas. But on the off-chance that he does come, won’t Charlie figure out that there’s something going on between them? Well, more than the usual flirting and long gazes and touches she’s been witnessing in the library. Subconsciously, Dean must want Charlie to know, or else he wouldn’t have invited Cas over. And last night, they had only agreed to be discreet on-campus, not keep their relationship secret from their family and friends. Would Cas mind him telling Charlie?

He takes his time over at the coffee pot, pouring the brew clumsily into a mug and taking a sip before finally mumbling, “So, uh, Cas and I are together.”

“I knew it!” Charlie punches his shoulder so hard that he nearly drops his coffee.

“What the hell,” he barks, attempting to stabilize the sloshing contents of his mug.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Charlie says, an equal amount of heat and excitement in her voice. “You two are so not subtle. I’ve spent months telling you that you and Cas have something going on, but it was all, ‘we’re just friends, Charlie’ and ‘put a sock in it, Charlie’ and ‘you’re imagining things, Charlie’—”

“Okay, okay,” Dean interrupts grumpily. Damn, he wouldn’t have told her if he knew he’d be facing the third degree. “I do not say your name that much, by the way.”

Charlie actually scowls at him, though at the same time she drops her drink and wraps her arms around his neck. The positioning is a bit awkward, since she’s taller than him when she sits on the countertop, but the gesture is nice all the same.

In the middle of their hug, the door swings open and Sam shuts it behind him, chuckling at the scene of Charlie’s arms wrapped around Dean, greasy spatula still in his hand.

“What’d I miss?” he asks, hanging his winter coat onto the rack. “Besides the weather report. Who would’ve thought, you guys—snow?” He sounds cheerful, much better than last night, when Dean had grilled him on where he’d been with Ruby. His brother had dodged the question again and again, until Dean had finally relented, not wanting to disrupt the peaceful period they’re currently in.

“Dean has something he wants to tell you,” Charlie says loudly, pulling away with a broad grin on her face.
“Charlie,” Dean grumbles indigently, noticing Sam’s face full of curiosity. She smirks down at him, and Dean on the verge of kicking her out of his kitchen.

“Let’s eat,” he says flatly, figuring that pancakes and bacon is plenty for today, because he needs a way to distract his guests from his goddamn love life. Sam and Charlie are exchanging looks over his shoulder, but he ignores them and sets to work, pulling down plates and setting the table. A few minutes later they’re gathered around his round kitchen table, pancakes piled high. Sam is shooting him a classic puppy dog look, obviously wondering what information Dean is withholding from him.

“Okay, fine.” Dean tosses his fork down on the table, hoping he’ll be able to enjoy his breakfast more once Sam stops looking at him like that. “I’ll tell you, but you can’t get all weird.”

“You’re the only one acting weird here,” Sam points out, and Charlie nods in agreement, the freaking traitor.

“Well, ain’t this fun,” Dean says sarcastically. “I’ll have to invite you guys over more often.”

“Oh, stop it,” Charlie says, her tone exasperated. “You know we love you. We just want you to be happy, Dean, and I think you finally are, so stop being a baby and tell Sam.”

Dean takes a deep breath, his gaze glued to his pancakes. “So, Cas—”

He hesitates, sensing a change in the air, moments before a knock on the door. “Speaking of…” He crosses to the door and opens it wide to reveal a rumpled looking Castiel standing in the threshold. His cheeks are tinged pink from the cold, snowflakes in his hair, and he looks so fucking good that Dean wants to kiss the breath out of him.

“Sorry I’m late,” Castiel says apologetically, hanging up his coat and scarf as Dean returns to his seat. He’s in a bit of a daze, surprised by Cas’ sudden appearance and the sensation of his magic reaching out for Dean. “I just saw your texts—you know I like to sleep in. ” He comes behind Dean’s chair, sliding his hands around his shoulders, then bends down, planting a kiss on top of Dean’s head. Charlie and Sam look like they’re having a simultaneous heart attack, but Dean is feeling weirdly emboldened by Cas’ presence. He grasps Cas’ forearm, noting how cold his skin is, and his magic floods through Cas, warming him, the gesture second nature by now.

“No worries,” Dean says softly, giving Cas’ hand a squeeze. “Plenty’a food over there.”

“And coffee?”

“Course, sweetheart.” The pet name slips from his lips effortlessly, a brand-new-speaking experience for Dean Winchester, but Castiel just hums in appreciation. He gives Dean’s head another peck before heading towards the counter, and Dean watches him, feeling practically joyful at this turn of events. So what if Sam is gaping at him in shock?

“So, uh, me’n Cas are dating,” Dean says confidently, stating the obvious at this point.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Sam says with a sardonic huff, eyes still wide, though softening around the edge. “How long?”

“We actually had our first date last evening,” Castiel informs them casually, spearing a pancake as he makes his plate.

“Last night,” Charlie repeats dimly.
“Yeah.” Dean takes a large bite of his stack, syrup making his lips sticky. Castiel comes to sit down at the table, taking the open chair next to Dean. Their hands brush each other, fingers entwining. “So what?”

“You just seem so…” Sam waves a hand at their general direction, trying to make a point somehow.

“Couply,” Charlie finishes.

“Exactly,” Sam agrees.

“You’ve seriously only been together one day?” Charlie’s voice is incredulous, borderline disbelieving.

Dean feels a blush spreading on his cheeks, and clears his throat, taking a long swallow of his coffee. “All right, that’s enough input from the peanut gallery.”

Castiel turns his attention to Charlie and Sam’s direction, changing the subject like a goddamn champ. “I hope I’m not intruding. I know Dean hosts family meals often, but I would never want to impose—”

“Shuddup, Cas, you were invited,” Dean says, voice soft, and Charlie and Sam repeat similar sentiments. Castiel seems to ease into his chair after that, and the conversation steers away from Dean and Cas’ new relationship, all of them fretting over finals in various ways. (Castiel, Charlie, and Dean, grading; Sam, studying.) Later, as a form of payback, Dean brings up Dorothy. Immediately Charlie’s cheeks are flushed—either from the champagne or the news of her new girlfriend, Dean’s not sure which. Cleanup is a breeze thanks to the spelled, self-washing sink, and Dean is stacking up his freshly washed coffee cups when Castiel clears his throat.

“Actually, while you’re here, Charlie, I wondered if you would take a look at something,” he says, looking slightly embarrassed as he retrieves something from his coat pocket. Interest piqued, Charlie watches as Castiel drops two small clip-on cameras into her palm. “There’s some footage on these that Dean and I were hoping to have erased.”

“Ew,” Charlie laughs, grinning wickedly, and Dean nearly drops a dish.

“Not like that!” he shrieks, thinking there are a hundred other things he’d rather do than relive their first kiss with his best friend and brother present. Charlie has that mischievous glint in her eye again, though, and Dean doesn’t care what she says—she is so totally a Slytherin. Ravenclaw my fucking ass.

A few minutes later she has Dean’s laptop open, Cas’ camera connected through a USB cable. Dean is pacing around his kitchen, trying not to watch, but everyone else is huddled around the footage—absorbing the past few weeks of Seal-related adventures with bated breath.
“This is incredible,” Sam comments, thunderstruck when the dragons appear. Dean can’t resist any longer, joining the group just in time to see himself get incinerated, not missing the despair in Cas’ voice when his body is burned to a crisp.

“Weren’t you worried,” he says, teasing, slipping a hand into the curve of Cas’ back. Castiel gives him a sad smile but doesn’t answer, and Dean realizes Cas must’ve been a lot more worried than he ever knew.

It’s weird hearing themselves on camera—Dean thinks everything he’s saying sounds idiotic or dull. Charlie and Sam are transfixed, though, never imagining they might witness such a strong illusion, and Dean can’t help geeking out about the spell mechanics. He gives them an abridged version of his thesis conclusion and Castiel listens with rapt attention, hanging on his every word. Eventually, though, the hours they spent lost in the maze grows boring, and Charlie fast-forwards to the last twenty minutes. She manages to land them right in the middle of the climax, when they’re figuring out the incantation. Then the camera goes completely black, and there isn’t a sound apart from Dean and Cas’ frantic whispers.

*Remember what I said earlier about hurting yourself? You’re always all, jump in first, ask questions later.*

Dean’s not really up for re-experiencing their argument, even though he very much appreciated the end result. “Yeah, so, uh, just cut out all this.”

“No way, this is just getting good,” Charlie says, shushing him like she’s watching a TV show.

*It’s fine, Dean. My spells haven’t let me down yet.*

“No way, this is just getting good,” Charlie says, shushing him like she’s watching a TV show.

*It’s fine, Dean. My spells haven’t let me down yet.*

“And then there’s the shuffle of feet and a small gasp of breath. The video is still pitch black, but Dean knows without a doubt that Cas just kissed him. If that wasn’t obvious to everyone else watching, though, their next kiss is practically obscene—the slick sounds of lips meeting, the breathy little moans, the brush of bodies colliding. Sam is suddenly very interested in reviewing all
the titles on Dean’s bookshelf. Yeah, Dean thinks dimly, not blaming his kid brother one bit. He wouldn’t wanna hear Sam and Ruby making out either.

“Damn,” Charlie says appreciatively. “You two ever consider—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” Dean interrupts, pointing a finger at her firmly, knowing the words do porn were on the tip of her impish little lips. Castiel reaches over her shoulder and pauses the video, bless him, though he seems a lot less flustered by this whole, first-kiss-on-tape situation than Dean is.

“Can you manipulate the footage?” he asks Charlie, all-business now. She bites her lip, thinking hard.

“It’ll be tricky not to leave a trace of the deletion, or my spellwork for that matter, but I’ll do my best,” she promises, separating the camera from the cord and pocketing them both. “When do you need it by?”

“Late January, when the spring semester starts,” Dean answers, and Charlie nods, seeming satisfied with a month of lead time. When she glances down at her watch, though, she exclaims at the unexpected time, and within minutes Sam and Charlie are both saying their goodbyes.

“Stop by and see Bobby ‘fore you leave,” Dean instructs them both, every bit the commanding older brother he’s always been, and they give him matching looks of amusement before agreeing. He waves after them once more before latching the door behind him.

Then he’s alone in his apartment.

With Cas.

Hands wrap around him from behind. As awesome as Cas’ body feels pressed against him, Dean spins around, wanting nothing to see Cas’ face. His boyfriend’s features are soft but a little tired. Dean cups Cas’ chin, thumb stroking over his cheek. Now that they’re alone, permitted to be them again without any commentary, he notices that Cas looks stressed.

“What’s wrong?” Dean asks gently, wanting to kiss him, but knowing this conversation matters more.

Castiel gives him a quiet smile, a companionable one, and wraps his hands around Dean’s waist. “I can’t seem to get much past you, can I?”

“Call it a sixth sense,” Dean jokes, with a lopsided grin.

“Can we…” Castiel hesitates, as if he’s not quite sure how to word his request. “Can we lie down? I just want to hold you.”

Dean’s heart thumps wildly in his chest. Thank the fucking lord he made his bed this morning. “Y-yeah,” he says inadequately, ‘cause what he really means is fuck yes, I’ve been dreaming about being in this bed with you since day fucking one.

Castiel toes off his boots and strips off his sweatshirt, down to jeans and t-shirt, and Dean soaks up the view of all this untouched skin. Leading Cas to his bed feels significant, and he has to will Little Dean to calm the hell down and remember they’re just supposed to be cuddling and talking, that’s it. Castiel scoots back onto the mattress, appreciating Dean’s memory foam with a pleasant sigh, and Dean falls onto the other side of the bed. His head cradles itself onto Cas’ chest, arms wrapping around him from behind, and he’s not sure he’s ever quite so warm and content in his
“Remember when we did this at the beach?” he mumbles, lips moving against the cotton of Cas’ t-shirt.

“Of course.” Castiel tightens his grip on Dean’s back, rubbing the muscle there. “Mostly I remember wanting to kiss you.”

“Hmm,” Dean mumbles, then lifts his head up. He knows they’re supposed to be talking, getting to the bottom of Cas’ current predicament, but all he can think about is kissing the hell out of his boyfriend. Goddamn, that neck looks so beautiful…he wants to mark it up with hickeys, wants to grind his dick against Cas’ thigh, wants to slide a hand up his t-shirt and feel a nipple harden between his fingers. “Wanna make up for lost time?”

Castiel struggles to believe any of this is real. He’s been dreaming about holding Dean, possibly here in this very bed, for weeks now. And now here Dean is, in Castiel's arms, asking if they can make up for the time they've lost from being blind to how much they both want this.

"Of course," he says, his hand moving to the curve of Dean’s jaw. He brushes his fingers gently across the light stubble there, then runs his thumb over Dean’s lips, feeling his sharp intake of breath. Dean’s eyes stare up into Castiel’s, bright green and beautiful, making Castiel’s magic stir within his chest.

Dean moves forward and presses their lips together, then tilts his head, deepening the kiss. Castiel trails his hand down Dean’s neck and around to the back of his head, threading his fingers through Dean’s short hair. He feels so different in his arms than Meg ever did, not only in physical size, but he’s firm, and strong. He’d wondered for a while now if he might freak out if he ever got to this stage with a guy, but he doesn’t feel like he’s doing something wrong here. In fact, as he licks into Dean’s mouth, moving his hand across the broad plane of his chest, he’s never felt so much like he belongs here, like this is home and he never wants to leave. It’s a dangerous feeling, and it brings him up short so that he pulls back from Dean, leaving him gasping.

Dean gazes into his eyes again for a few moments, before he says, “You gonna tell me what’s up now?”

Castiel sighs, looking away across the room. He reaches down, pulling the blanket up to cover both of them in the cool afternoon air. “I had an unexpected visitor last night.”

Dean shuffles back a little, moving onto his side so that Cas can clearly see the worry in his face.

Castiel continues, “Do you remember me saying I hadn’t had contact with my sister in a while?”

“Sure, after you moved to England?” Dean replies, running his fingers down Castiel’s arm gently, the movement soothing.

“Yes. Well, she’s here in town. She turned up at my place last night. And when I asked her to stay in contact, to be part of my life again, she left.” He frowns, the memory bringing back a tightness in his throat. He’d pleaded with her to stay, but in the end she’d still gone, and he was left with nothing. No idea where she was living, or any number to contact her on. He’s still a little shocked at himself for offering to retrieve the book for her, knowing how difficult it would be to wrestle
“20th Century Magical Regulation” from Crowley’s clutches. It had been reckless, there’s no question about that. As disappointed as he is by his sister’s abrupt departure, Castiel is also relieved Anna hadn’t taken him up on his offer.

“She in trouble or something? What did she want?” Dean asks quietly.

Castiel hesitates before answering, “What makes you think she wanted something?”

“Well, no offense to your sister, but no one just turns up out of the blue then leaves again unless they want something from you.”

“It’s...not really my place to say,” Castiel hedges.

“That’s okay, you don’t have to tell me,” Dean says, smiling. “Is she okay, at least?”

“I really don’t know. She just left. I thought...I thought we might...” He trails off, the tightness in his throat preventing him from putting into words the pain he's felt for years after falling out of touch with his family. It wasn't until he'd seen Anna standing in his living room that he'd realized how much he's been missing her.

Dean hums in sympathy and lifts his hand to run over Castiel's cheek and along his jaw. "I'm sorry, Cas," he says softly. "I'm sure she'll be back. I'd like to meet her." The corner of his mouth lifts into a half-smile, and Castiel can't help returning it.

"I think you'd both get along well." His smile fades again as he adds, "But she wouldn't stay, even though it was snowing outside."

Dean looks up suddenly, a broad grin on his face. “Oh yeah, that snow! What the hell, man? Charlie said it was the whole state! How is that even possible?”

Castiel smiles, slightly sheepishly. He'd also been surprised by the amount of snow that fell during the night. "My Uber driver was telling me about the weird weather on the way over earlier. It's not quite the whole state, but certainly spread along the coast from here, quite a way."

“Yeah, Charlie obviously exaggerated.” Dean snorts fondly, shaking his head. “Doubt she’s ever seen snow in her whole life. She’ll be talkin’ about this till Christmas.”

“Sounds like Oxford. Everyone getting all worked up, the city practically shutting down over just a few inches.”

Dean huffs, picking up Castiel's hand and lacing their fingers together. When he speaks again his voice is softer, more earnest. "Did we do all that?"

"It seems so. We're stronger than we realize.” It scares him, in fact, how much he'd wanted to continue casting with Dean last night. How far might they have gone? Anna had mentioned she thought he and Dean were bonded—if that were true, what might they be capable of? He hasn’t read through the Profound Bond book for a few years, the one he let Dean borrow, but perhaps he needs to do a little more research.

Dean shifts slightly, fitting his body to Castiel’s side. “Watching that footage again, seeing the way
we got through the Seal, and what came after...it was fucking incredible, Cas.”

Without really meaning to, Castiel pulls his fingers back until his fingertips touch Dean's, then summons a thread of electricity—just a mild plasma tickling between them. It crackles and hums, and the light it emits flickers over Dean’s delighted expression. The spark winks out, the charge dissipating. Castiel’s never been that good with electrical spells.

Dean touches their fingertips together again, but this time when Castiel calls a spark, he feels Dean’s magic surging to meet it. Dean closes his forefinger to his thumb, and the charge lifts away from their fingers, drifting upwards like a small, fizzing bubble for a few seconds, before popping into nothing. Castiel can’t hold in his laughter.

“D’you see that?” Dean asks, sounding like a kid at Christmas. “I just closed off the encasing… y’know, the, uh—”

“Magnetic alignment? From Cardano’s theory, that’s right.” Castiel shakes his head. Dean never ceases to amaze him with how he can alter spells to improve them. “You’re incredible,” he adds, placing a kiss on Dean’s forehead, then grinning at the pink spreading on Dean’s cheeks.

They make more plasma bubbles, enjoying the rush and buzz of sharing magic, even on such a small level. Eventually the casting turns into more lazy kisses, then Dean moves his head back to Cas’ chest. Castiel scratches his fingers across Dean’s scalp, perfectly content.

Dean murmurs, “Should really get up and show you my draft, but…” He doesn’t move from his position, his eyes closed.

“It can wait,” Castiel replies. “Just relax for now,” moving his hand from Dean’s scalp down to the tight muscles of his shoulders.

Dean hums in approval, and as Castiel lies there, spinning another energy bubble in his fingers, he realizes Dean’s breathing has evened out. He’s asleep, long lashes resting on his cheeks, completely at peace. Castiel’s heart swells with affection, and he dissipates the plasma and pulls his arms around Dean, placing another kiss on the top of his head. He could get up, do some of his own work, maybe slip out and leave Dean in peace…

He covers up a yawn, thinking he could probably do with resting himself. He closes his own eyes and lets himself relax.

Castiel leans over Dean, drinking in the sight of his tall, lean body beneath him. He drops down to place kisses across his stomach, the skin there warm and soft, then moves lower to lick a stripe up the underside of Dean’s thick erection, making Dean gasp. Castiel looks up for a moment, a cheeky grin on his face, and notices they’re lying in Dean’s bed, in his apartment.

Oh, this is a dream.

He’s not always aware of dreaming, but it’s happened more and more often over the last few weeks. They rarely speak, but he’ll only become aware of the dream after they’re already engaging in sex of one kind or another—sometimes dream-Dean will ride him, and other times Castiel will be on his knees while Dean drives into him from behind. And sometimes, like now, he’ll take Dean’s full cock into the back of his throat until he nearly gags, and Dean will moan loud and
filthy, nearly enough to tip Castiel over the edge without even being touched.

Dean grabs a handful of Castiel’s hair and pushes his mouth down onto his cock, pushing his hips upwards. He says, his voice sounding wrecked, “Yeah, Cas, take it. Your fucking mouth, it’s so good…”

Castiel glows with the praise, and he looks up at Dean through his lashes, admiring the way his head is thrown back and face twisted in passion. His mind spins for a moment, remembering Anna’s words again about being bonded. If he really does share a bond with Dean, could they be sharing this dream?

No, that can’t be possible. He dismisses the thought, taking Dean down over and over until he’s breathing in short gasps. Dean tenses up, then comes hard down Castiel’s throat, and Castiel does his best to swallow it all down, choking a little at the force of Dean’s final thrust.

Sitting up, he licks his lips as he runs a hand lightly over Dean’s stomach, then leans forward to cup his cheek. What if Dean really is here with him, though? He strokes Dean’s cheek with his thumb softly as Dean’s hand comes up to fit around the back of Castiel’s.

Castiel says softly, “Dean?”

Dean makes a small “mm?” sound.

“Are you in my dream with me?” His heart is in his throat, even though if he’s wrong, there’s no harm done. But if he’s right...

Dean’s eyes flick open, and he stares at Castiel, horror clear in his gaze.

Castiel is jolted out of sleep by Dean shoving himself back on the bed, scrambling off to one side. From his expression alone, Castiel can tell that Dean certainly had just been in the dream with him. His eyes are filled with confusion, with excitement, but above all—

Lust.

Chapter End Notes

Gerolamo Cardano was a sixteenth-century Italian polymath, mathematician, physicist, physician, as well as a pioneer in many other sciences, and mage. He made discoveries and inventions in many disciplines, including in magnetism and electrical field theory as it pertains to elemental magic, and was generally considered to be all kinds of fun at parties.

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Come, do tell us how you're feeling about all this! Are you ready for things to get steamy between these two?
Incidentally, are you WIP-readers reading along with *Season Z*? It's a collaborative alt-season 15 zombie apocalypse story, and I (Ellen) am just about to post my chapter. I'd recommend reading from the start, because the whole thing is brilliant and I wouldn't want to spoil you, but if you like canon-divergence with slow burn Destiel, check it out!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

And now, what you’ve all been waiting for…

Seriously, this is rated Explicit for a reason guys. Enjoy ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean doesn’t remember falling asleep, but dear fucking god, does he remember waking up.

He’d been having an amazing sex dream. Cas was there, which was par for the freaking course, considering the dreams were happening with some frequency nowadays. He hadn’t put much thought into them—he just figured he was extra horny now that he hadn’t gotten laid since the summer. Plus he’s been into Cas since the moment he laid eyes on him, so it wasn’t surprising that Dean has some pent-up sexual tension going on.

What was surprising was—one minute he was face fucking Cas to utter completion, feeling reved up as his cock was expertedly sucked, his orgasm mounting as his gripped Castiel’s hair. The next minute, dream-Cas was asking him, plain as day: Are you in my dream with me?

He’d woken up pretty damn quickly after that.

“Jesus,” Dean mutters, chest panting as his head hits the headboard. “Cas, were you—and was I—and were we…?”

“It appears so, yes,” Castiel croaks, his voice husky. They’re sitting shoulder to shoulder in Dean’s bed, Cas’ eyes wide as he watches Dean closely. Dean’s cock is hard as a fucking rock, uncomfortable as hell considering he had gotten off in the dream but not in real life. Then again, he reasons, maybe the dream is real life? Maybe they’ve been in and out of each other’s dreams, maybe everything he’s been dreaming about has actually happened, maybe Cas really was just sucking his cock ten seconds ago—shit—

“Cas,” he whines suddenly, pressing the heel of his palm against his painful erection and turning his head. “I dunno what the fuck is happening but I need you right the fuck now.”

“Dean—”

Cas never gets the chance to finish that sentence, though, because Dean pounces on him with everything he’s got. He situates himself against the strong, slender planes of Cas’ body, thighs touching as he kisses his boyfriend’s neck, tongue wet and sloppy as he sucks a hickey onto his skin. Meanwhile Cas’ hands are everywhere, grabbing his ass, sliding underneath his t-shirt and clutching Dean’s bare skin. He hums impatiently as Dean continues zeroing in on Castiel’s neck and collarbones, kissing and sucking as he slots their denim-clad erections against one another and grinds. Cas’ back arches beneath him and Dean nearly loses his shit—Christ, he needs to get their jeans off and he needs it now.

“Cas,” he breathes, every exhale tickling Cas’ skin, goosebumps spreading, “please, can I—can we —”
Dean is so far gone at this point that he’s not even sure that request was entirely coherent, but somehow Cas seems to understand, muttering, “Yes, Dean, yes,” before bringing his hands up to begin casting. He angles his palms into a prayer stance, then flattens them straight as a line, threading his fingers together, before pushing his hands forward with an eager burst of energy. It’s a relocation spell, something Dean honestly never thought about using during sex, which is a damn shame because all of the sudden their clothes are zapped away to god knows where and there are miles of gorgeous, tight skin for Dean to eye and kiss and...

“Fuck, you’re so fucking hot,” he whispers, running his hands down Cas’ bare abdomen and then up to his chest, raking his fingernails down roughly. He bends over and sucks one of Cas’ nipples into his mouth and Castiel cries out, evidently not expecting the sudden sensation, writhing beneath Dean and breathing heavy. He flips their position abruptly, an impressively firm grip forcing them down until Dean has his back on the mattress and Cas is high above him, the blue of his eyes nearly gone, his pupils blown wide with lust.

He kisses Dean without preamble, sucking Dean’s lower lip between his teeth, the dirtiest and most frantic kiss Cas has ever given him. Any semblance of restraint is shattered and Dean moans into Cas’ mouth, licking between his parted lips and grasping his neck to pull him down further, deepening the kiss. Cas’ erection is hanging down above his groin now, hard and leaking at the tip, and Dean can’t decide if he wants to taste or touch. He wants both, he wants everything Cas will give him, but his boyfriend’s body is a goddamn dream and Dean’s gotta get this show on the road before he blows his load prematurely.

With a quick flick of his wrist, he summons his small bottle of lube out of his nightstand and into his waiting hand. They stop kissing long enough for Dean to open the cap and drizzle a generous trail of lubricant directly onto their shafts, and Cas stares down at the motion as if he’s never seen anything quite this arousing. He’s planted on his elbows, hovering high enough that Dean thinks he can do exactly what he wants to do. “Fuck, Dean, are you—”

Dean’s spurred on by Cas’ dirty mouth, throwing the lube down on the floor before wrapping a tight fist around their cocks without preamble. Castiel moans loudly, his dick twitching against Dean’s hold, and he nearly loses his footing and falls against Dean’s body.

“You’re amazing,” Castiel coos, his hair sticking out in odd angles that are strangely sexy, “even better than I dreamed.”

“Wasn’t a dream, Cas.” Dean loosens his grip slightly, rearranging their cocks so they’re lined up more closely, then jacks them quickly, hand gliding down the shaft and back up to the head, over and over again. “Seems like everything you dreamed about, I was doing to you.”

“Shit,” Castiel moans above him, precome leaking as his eyelids flutter closed. “Dean, I was just…I had your cock in my mouth a minute ago and you tasted so good…”

“Cas, baby,” Dean pants, reaching up for a kiss, and Castiel brushes their lips together absently, evidently too focused on his cock to do much else. “Fuck, the things you do to me. The things you’ve already done.”

So far in his dreams they’ve traded blowjobs, Dean’s fingered Cas’ hole, he’ll drive into Cas from behind or ride his cock, exchanged handjob after handjob… Shit, just thinking about all those moments and how they might’ve actually happened in some freaky magic way—that Dean’s not entirely sure he understands—is making his belly flutter with heat. He wants Cas, wants every part of him.

“I’m gonna do all that’n more,” Dean promises breathlessly, speeding up his hands as Castiel fucks...
himself inside Dean’s fist, hips moving rapidly. The drag of Cas’ cock against his makes his breath hitch, his skin vibrating with longing, his magic curling around Cas’ in a powerful burst. “Want to have you in my mouth, Cas. Want to feel your fingers inside me. Want to ride your cock until we’re both screaming.”

“Baby, I-I’m gonna—”

Dean concentrates on the sounds: Cas’ shaky breath, his moans, the slippery glide of his wet hand as they both begin to tumble off the edge. He’s trying so hard to stave off his orgasm, wanting nothing more than to last a few more strokes so they can come together. “You want that, Cas? Wanna bend me over, stuff me full, pound into me from behind?”

“Fuck, yes,” Castiel whimpers, voice increasingly more desperate as Dean rubs a thumb over the head of his cock. “Need to come so bad, Dean…”

“Shh, I got us, sweetie,” Dean whispers, reaching up to kiss Cas fully on the lips just as he doubles down and strokes them both hard and fast. Castiel practically wails against Dean’s lips, the back of his neck glistening with sweat, and then he’s coming all over Dean’s fist. Dean pumps him firmly still, milking every last drop of Cas’ release, and when Cas sits back up and leans against his heels, he surprises Dean by shooing his hand away and wrapping his own hand around Dean’s cock. Castiel’s strokes are sure and confident in a way that Dean didn’t expect and it feels unbelievably good.

“Jesus Christ,” he whines, exhaling more and more desperately. “Don’t stop, Cas, fuck, feels so good…” It takes only a handful more before his back arches and he borderline whines, eventually coming all over Cas’ hand with ropes of thick come.

Once Dean is completely spent, Cas falls back down, his weight pinning Dean to the mattress in a way that feels solid and safe. All the come on their hands and abdomens is another story, but Dean’s too fucking boneless to care about the mess, because…fuck. He just had sex with Cas. Real-life sex, not dream-sex, which is apparently something they do and have been doing for a while now? Long before their first date? What the hell…

“God, that was…” Dean threads his clean hand through Cas’ hair, scratching at his scalp, and Castiel hums against him in appreciation.

“Intense?” Castiel offers, leaving small kisses against Dean’s collarbones in a sweet, soothing motion. The afterglow is nothing like the frantic encounter they just had, and Dean’s not sure which vibe he likes better. Honestly, when it comes to Cas, everything they’ve done together has been absolutely—

“Perfect,” Dean mumbles, his hand trailing down to Cas’ neck, his back, the slope of his ass. It’s only when he gets mildly excited at the feeling of groping Cas’ tight ass cheek that asks, “Uh, babe?”

“Yes?”

“Where’d you zap our clothes?” His eyes sweep his bedroom but it’s completely unchanged, no clothes in sight.

He feels Castiel freeze for a moment before he relaxes again, chuckling quietly to himself. “Well, I was aiming for your bedroom floor, but I was incredibly distracted. So it’s just as likely that they’re downstairs, or somewhere down the block, or a few miles in either direction of us…”
Dean laughs fully then, the roll of his body making Cas laugh harder. “Oh well. Never liked those jeans much anyways.”

They keep laughing and smiling as Dean grabs tissues and cleans up the mess on their stomachs and hands, flicking the messy trash off with a translocation spell of his own, hopefully to a trash can this time, and not downstairs or down the street. They eventually transition back into kissing, trading open-mouthed kisses in a way that feels natural, easy. Good.

Slipping his tongue into Castiel’s mouth, he realizes that—now that he’s had a taste, there’s no way Dean is ever gonna get enough of this.

He is, without a doubt, too far gone.

Castiel lies next to Dean as he comes down from his orgasm. The dreams have been one level of incredible over the last few weeks, but the real deal is...overwhelming. Intense.

Their shared magic simmers beneath his skin, making tingling sparks fizz where he’s touching Dean.

He’s actually touching Dean, underneath the layers of clothes he’s been dying to get under. In the dreams he’d not only touched him, but taken him into his mouth, fucked him, without a second thought. Now, he isn’t sure how he feels about it. Touching him in this way—it’s certainly been mind-blowing, and all he wants to do is to pleasure Dean in that way all over again, but... He’s not even sure where this hesitation is coming from. He’s been crushing on guys, jerking off to images and fantasies for years now, on and off. But to jump into all this, after the dreams?

The only trouble is, he can’t seem to keep his hands off Dean now that he’s started. As he pulls back from another languid kiss, he runs his fingers down the smooth skin on Dean’s side. Dean flinches.

Castiel eyes him, a grin ticking up the corner of his mouth. “Ticklish?”

“Stop it,” Dean says, leaning in to steal another kiss, only to yelp as Cas strokes the sensitive skin lightly once again. “Hey, come on!”

Castiel chuckles. “I can’t help it, Dean. I want to discover every inch of you.” He nibbles gently at the skin behind Dean’s ear, murmuring, “For example, I have already discovered that you taste delicious just here, but—” he shuffles his arm out from behind Dean’s shoulders, moving down until he could lick the skin around Dean’s nipple, without actually touching the pink nub, “—you’re also tasty here.” He looks up at Dean through his lashes, smirking.

“Hey, slow down there, unless you’re ready for round two already.” Dean smirks, adding, “I’d say you’ve already discovered those things, anyway. How long have these, uh, dreams been happening for you?”

Castiel considers it while he shuffles back up the bed to lie back down beside Dean. “Maybe soon after we started casting together?” He feels his face warming—he’s not really sure how many of the dreams had been shared, and admitting to being attracted to Dean for all this time is embarrassing, to say the least.
Dean pulls Castiel in until his head is resting on Dean’s shoulder, tucked under his arm. “So, okay, just so I can work out how much we’ve actually shared…” He trails off, rubbing a hand over his face. “Man, this is the weirdest post-sex conversation I think I’ve ever had.”

Castiel can’t help but chuckle at that, looking up at Dean’s flushed cheeks. “It’s okay, Dean, I enjoyed the dreams very much.”

Dean uncovers his face and looks down at Castiel with a relieved smile. “Okay then. Were you there the time we...I mean I, uh, rode you? In a bedroom with dark curtains?”

“That’s my bedroom, in my apartment. And yes, I particularly liked that one,” Castiel replies, trying to keep his smile to himself as he watches Dean squirm.

“Okay, so what about that time with the hat, where you tied me to your bed...?”

Castiel glances up at him in surprise. “The hat?”

Dean looks nervous as he adds, “Yeah, like a...a cowboy hat.”

Castiel blinks. “Um, no, I didn’t get that one.”

Dean’s face flushes beet-red, and he says quietly, “Just me, huh? Okay then.”

Castiel tries hard to keep his face straight as he asks, “Dean? You want me to wear—”

“No, never mind, it was nothing,” Dean interrupts. “Forget I said that. Okay, we haven’t shared everything.”

Castiel presses his grin to Dean’s shoulder. His boyfriend is so damn cute when he gets flustered.

Recalling the dreams, though, brings back the feeling of unease. Would Dean expect him to jump right into doing all that? And if he refused, would he ask him to leave?

He runs his fingers across the soft skin of Dean’s collarbone as he says, “Dean, I know we’ve...done things in dreams. Amazing things. But I’m not sure if I—if you want…” He trailed off, not really sure what he was trying to say.

Dean also hesitates, and when he speaks, it’s careful. “Cas...I’m so sorry. If you don’t want to do that stuff anymore, then...it’s okay.”

Castiel looks up at him sharply. “What? No, I never said I didn’t want… You asked me just now and I said yes, didn’t I? I’m just saying...would you be willing to give me time to work up to this? It’s all very new, and—”

“Oh, thank fuck,” Dean says, exhaling a hard breath. “I thought you were about to break up with me or something.”

“You idiot,” Castiel says, grinning fondly at Dean. “After what we just did? Of course I’m not.”

“Okay, okay. Because I’m not ready to give this up. Ever. Said you could keep me, remember? You’re stuck with me, professor.” Dean returns his grin, leaning down to plant a soft kiss on Castiel’s lips.

“Good,” Castiel murmurs, cuddling into his side again, going back to stroking his fingertips across Dean’s skin.

Dean says after a few moments, “Look, how about this? I have a lot of work to get through this
week. Like, I should really be doing it right now. How about we just forget the dreams for now, and take things slow, at least until after Friday. That okay with you?”

“Yes, Dean, that’s okay with me. Thank you.” He smiles, wondering at how this man continues to surprise him with the size of his heart at every turn. He wonders if the dreams will continue now that they’ve been together in the real world. He looks back up to Dean, adding, “I guess the other pertinent question here is, why are we sharing dreams?”

Dean shrugs the shoulder that Cas isn’t lying on. “Guess you just can’t resist this, even while you’re sleeping,” he says, smirking as he gestures to his own body with his free hand.

“Shut up,” Castiel chuckles, swatting at Dean’s hand. “Bring out your cowboy hat and see who can resist then.”

Dean groans. “Any chance you’re gonna forget that one?”

“Nope.” Castiel sits up, wincing at the residual stickiness on his midsection. “Dean, do you still have that Profound Bond book? You didn’t bring it back to my office, did you?”

Dean looks puzzled at the change in topic. “No, it’s still around here somewhere. I can probably find it if you wanted to grab a shower. There’s a towel in the closet in there.”

“Thank you.” Castiel climbs out of the bed, heading into the bathroom and letting the warm water wash away his doubts. Dean comes in while the water is still running, looking hesitant, but the tiny shower is barely wide enough for Castiel to squeeze into, let alone two. He trades kisses with Dean as they trade places, smiling reassuringly as he runs a hand along Dean’s jaw. He heads out with the towel around his hips to find Profound Bonds: Magical Resonation lying on top of the now-neatly-made bed.

He sits back on the bed, his back against the wall, thumbing through the pages until he finds the section he remembers reading before.

The presence of a bond is rare, usually shared between family members, lifelong friends, or spouses. The benefits of profound bonds will be discussed more precisely in Chapter 4, but they include: the ability to use another mage’s talisman to channel them during solo spellcasting; the awareness of the spells being cast, even from a distance; physical sensation of magic through skin to skin touch; shared and prophetic dreams; and in some cases, astral projection. However, each bond is unique to the mages, and may include other special abilities not yet uncovered.

Well, they can tick a few of those off the list. Castiel wonders if Dean would consent to testing out a few of these other things—astral projection, for instance, although he’s never tried that before. He’ll have to look into it before they could try.

He flicks to chapter four, reading a lengthy description of a pair of bonded mages who were able to cast together across the country, through the use of enchanted amulets to channel each other’s energy. Castiel thinks it sounds exhausting.

Bonded mages are able to share their energy freely, helping each other to regulate their abilities and strength. Studies into the physiological effects are varied and inconclusive, due to the rarity and deviation of bond-granted abilities, but in general, bonded mages have stronger magic, are able to hold more magical energy in their neural networks, and are able to cast with more precise focus and efficiency.

Dean’s hand on his shoulder startles him out of reading, and he looks up as Dean drops a pair of
sweatpants and a t-shirt on the bed beside him. Dean’s already wearing another pair of jeans himself, and he pulls on a shirt over his damp hair as he sits on his desk chair nearby. “I’ll admit, I borrowed the book but I didn’t read a lot of it—just the first few chapters. Something about dreams in there?” He opens his laptop.

Castiel nods, putting the book down on the bed and standing up to put Dean’s clothes on. “The dreams…. I think we might have a bond, Dean.”

Dean’s eyebrows rise as he takes in Castiel in his clothes with a hungry look, then his eyes drift up to Castiel’s face. “Nah, man, it’s just the affinity thing, right? And the fact that we’re…y’know, attracted to each other.” He looks away again, his cheeks pink.

Castiel turns back to the book. “No, there are other signs. Are you able to tell when I’m nearby? I don’t know, Dean, the further away I am from you, it’s like I’m being pulled towards you, just here.” He puts his closed fist on his chest, watching Dean’s look of surprise. “The fact that we made it snow in California—”

“Okay, we are pretty fuckin’ awesome, I’ll give you that,” Dean says, laughing. “But the bond… Even if we had one, what difference would it make?”

Castiel blinks at him. “Nothing, I guess. It’s just a label for strong affinity. The strongest.” He looks back at the book, a little hurt by Dean’s skepticism. But he now has a feeling Anna had been right. “It just means that together, we’re more powerful than we can imagine.”

“Sure, Obi-Wan, but I thought we already knew that,” Dean says, clicking away at his computer for a few moments.

“What did you call me?”

“What, Obi-Wan?” Dean looks horrified. “Don’t tell me you’ve never seen *Star Wars*!”

Castiel frowns. Non-magical movies hadn’t been allowed at home with his parents. They believed too many of them were made by magicians and therefore were not to be watched. After Castiel moved to Oxford, he’d taken the route of books for his new-found freedom of entertainment rather than films. He tries to sound flippant in his reply, although he still resented his sheltered childhood. “All right, I won’t tell you.”

“Oh man, we have got to fix that.” Dean shakes his head. “Just…after I’ve written this draft, okay? Christmas Eve, you, me, movie night. Capisce?”

“Okay,” Castiel smiles as they share a heated look, then he turns back to the book, as Dean starts typing.

After an awesome weekend with Cas, they both arrive back on campus too busy to see each other much. Castiel is buried under a mountain of freshman exams, and Dean has grading on top of finalizing his thesis draft. At least he has plenty of weekend memories to keep him motivation throughout the week—rolling around in bedsheets with Cas, sitting side-by-side as they sip coffee and read, playing footsie under the kitchen table. Still, by midweek, they haven’t been able to do much but send a few text messages and wave at each other from across the quad. Dean wishes he
could cross the space between them and entwine their fingers together, give his boyfriend a deep, take-his-breath-away kiss, or even a peck on the cheek. But Cas’ only requirement for them had been to be discreet on-campus, so Dean’s been following the professor’s lead whenever they’re in public. As a result, by Wednesday Dean is feeling strung-out and overworked and ready for winter break already.

He calls Cas at dinnertime, a spelled-spoon stirring a pot of beef stew as the phone rings and rings. When he gets Cas’ voicemail for the third time this week, he’s just grumpy enough to leave a message. “Uh, hey, this is your boyfriend calling to make sure you’re alive and that finals week hasn’t made you put your head in the oven.” He chuckles awkwardly. “Uh, that got really dark, sorry. Anyways, I… Just gimme a call if you get a chance.”

He ends the call feeling like a needy teenager, but distracts himself with a bowl of soup and a stack of essays to grade. He loses track of time again, and pretty soon it’s dark outside and he’s feeling tired from days of nonstop work. He decides an early bedtime might be in order, especially if Cas is gonna be hard to reach tonight, so he strips down to his boxers and slips between his sheets. He’s nearly drifted off to sleep when he hears his phone ringing, and he groans and cracks an eye open. “Son of a bitch,” he grousers, but when he checks the screen and sees Castiel’s name, his heart soars. He really has been missing that nerdy little hottie of his.

“Hey stranger,” he answers sleepily.

“Hello, Dean,” Castiel says, the deep bass of his voice sounding warm and familiar. “Did I wake you?”

“S’no problem,” he says, resisting the urge to yawn.

“I can call you tomorrow—”

“Don’t you dare,” Dean interrupts, only half-joking. “Been tryna catch you all week.”

“Apologies. I’m teaching an extra section this semester and vastly underestimated my workload,” Castiel says wearily. “And I’ve been reading your draft every night. I just finished, actually.”

“Oh yeah?” Dean perks up a little. “Sorry to add another thing to your list.”

“Don’t be. Tell you the truth, it’s the only work this week that I’ve enjoyed,” Castiel mumbles with a chuckle. “I was just writing you an email, but I’ll go ahead and tell you—it’s a fascinating analysis, Dean.”

Dean grins widely against the phone. “Yeah?”

“Yes. I was very impressed with your understanding and application of Steven Weinberg’s theory of electroweak interactions, and how elementary particles are used to generate elaborate illusions like the Seal. The way you combine Engineering and Physics to explicate spell mechanics is truly amazing.”

Dean can’t help it—he preens under the praise, feeling a warmth settle into his chest. “Thanks, Cas,” he says softly, “but a lotta that stuff you’n me talked about all semester, so I can’t take all the credit.”

“Yes you can,” Castiel says firmly. “I assigned you reading materials and observed you in the maze, but everything you’ve learned and accomplished is yours, Dean.”

Dean rolls his face into his pillow, blushing despite himself. “You sayin’ that as my advisor or my
“Advisor,” Castiel answers. Then his voice goes down an octave and he adds, “As your boyfriend, I’m very impressed by your intellect, but think you have many other assets worth praising.”

“Mm, such a sweet talker,” Dean whispers flirtily. His hand slips over his bare chest, and he realizes his cock is twitching a little just from the sound of Cas’ voice. “You in bed?”

“Not yet. I still need to undress.”

“What are you wearing?” Dean uses his huskiest voice, hand stroking his upper thigh.

He can practically hear Castiel’s confusion. “I’m wearing what I always wear, Dean. Why do you ask?”

Dean laughs into the phone. “C’mon, babe, do you seriously not get what I’m trying to do here?”

There’s a long pause where it’s evident Castiel is thinking very hard about something, and then says, “Oh. Oh.”

“There we go,” Dean chuckles.

“I’m undressing now.” There’s an excitement in his voice that travels straight to Dean’s lower belly. He can hear the flutter of fabric at the end of the line, and Castiel says, “My shirt’s off.”

“Wish I was there,” Dean whispers. “I’d have my hands all over you.”

“I would enjoy that very much. What are you wearing?”

“Just boxers.”

“Hmm.” From the sounds on the other line, static again with movement. Dean wonders if Cas has unbuttoned his trousers.

“You like that? Me naked in bed?”

“Yes, Dean. What I wouldn’t give to kiss up and down your chest, your neck, your stomach.”

“God, just imagining you kissing me gets me going,” Dean confesses, fingers skating across the hard bulge in the front of his boxers. “Fuck.”

“Love hearing you like this, Dean.”

“Keep going,” Dean breathes. “What would you do next?”

“I would keep kissing you before sinking down and mouthing at the cotton of your boxers,” Castiel says lowly. “Would you be hard for me?”

“Already am.” Dean shudders while he rubs his palm against his erection.

“Good. I don’t want you to touch yourself yet, though.” Dean deflates and withdraws his hand, wondering if he should cheat a little. Cas would never know, after all. Still, there’s a much larger part of him that wants to follow Cas’ instructions perfectly. He wants to make this good for them both. “I want to kiss your hip bones, suck hickeys all along your thighs.”

“Such a tease,” Dean breathes, not daring to say more and break the spell of Castiel’s naughty
words. “I’d be begging for your mouth, sweetheart.”

“Oh, I’d like to hear you beg,” Castiel says breathlessly. Dean knows it’s just a general comment, but if Castiel is telling the truth, perhaps Dean can use this to his advantage.

“Please, Cas, can I please touch myself?” he asks in his most desperate voice, and Castiel moans on the other line. Jackpot. “Please, I need you, been thinking about you all week, been wanting you so bad…”

“Yes, Dean, stroke that hard cock for me,” Castiel instructs silkily, and Dean uses his shoulder as leverage as he angles the phone down, slipping his boxers off. He flings them uselessly to the floor, his dick rubbing against the bedsheet, and finally takes himself in-hand. He whines at the first stroke, his skin feeling on fire.

“Oh, fuck, Cas.”

“Wish my mouth was on you,” Castiel says in a rush.

“You touching yourself too?” Dean thumbs at the end, squirming at his own touch, but wishing more than anything that Cas was here with him.

“Yes, of course, always do when I think about you,” Castiel gushes, as if him jerking off while thinking about Dean should be common knowledge by now. Jesus. That, coupled with the sheer want present in Cas’ voice, makes Dean speed up his hand. “Think about spreading you open, about being inside you, hearing you scream—”

“Fuck, Cas, why are you so good at this,” Dean growls, staving off an orgasm now with everything he’s got. “I’m seriously about to blow my load over here.”

“Do you want me to stop?” Castiel asks with feigned innocence, and Dean responds hell no with an unhappy grunt. Castiel chuckles mischievously, but his breathing is still laborious, and Dean can hear the sweet slick sound of Cas fisting his cock. “If it makes you feel better, I’m close too. So close. Everything is always better with you, Dean.”

Dean wants to agree, wants to explain how heightened things feel with Cas, how he can barely even form coherent thought when he’s got Cas on the other end of the line, moaning in his ear. But all that comes out is, “Mmmmm, Cas,” and then he lightly brushes his balls with his other hand, and he shudders violently, the sensations all combining until there’s a tingling heat pooling in his belly. “Baby, you close?”

“Yes, Dean, so close, just talk to me,” Castiel says, tone needy and urgent.

“What do you wanna hear, Cas? Wanna hear how desperate I am to get your cock in my mouth? How much I want you to pound my ass until I can’t walk straight? Want you, baby, want you so bad—”

“Dean—”

“Come for me, Cas.”

A high-pitched moan, long and drawn-out, erupts from Dean’s receiver. And then Dean is tumbling over the edge too, listening to Castiel’s sounds of ecstasy and making similar sounds himself, his breath caught in his throat as he comes. He keeps stroking himself even as the ropes of come hit his stomach, keening as quietly as he can, but then Castiel demands, “Let me hear you,” and Dean lets go of whatever remaining inhibitions he had.
The silence between them is filled with their heavy breathing, but eventually Dean blinks enough to come back to himself. “Uh, so…wow.”

“Indeed,” Castiel agrees, with a groan. “Well, those pants will have to be dry cleaned.”

“You didn’t take your pants off?” Dean asks incredulously.

“It…it seems I couldn’t wait,” Castiel admits sheepishly, and Dean’s stunned into silence. He can’t believe that Cas wants him so badly that he came in his goddamn pants. “I should probably go and clean myself up, but I greatly enjoyed that, Dean.”

“Me too,” Dean mumbles, all blissed-out and boneless. “Can I see you tomorrow? This never-seeing-each-other shit is for the birds.”

“It’s only been three days,” Castiel points out, though his tone is teasing. “But yes, how about Friday? Let’s go over my notes for your draft and then we can go together to turn it in.”

“Deal.” Dean stretches over, wiping himself up with a wad of tissues. “Can you come over here beforehand?”

“I’ll be grading most of the day in the library. Meet me there?”

Dean’s disappointed, knowing meeting on-campus means the likelihood of getting his hands on Cas is slim to none. “Sure.”

“You sound hesitant,” Castiel notices.

“Nah, it’s fine.” He swallows, not wanting to make Cas feel bad about their current arrangement. There’s no need to rush into things, especially if it’ll make things harder for Cas at work.

“Okay then,” Castiel replies, a little stilted. “See you soon.”

Dean clicks out of the call and stares up at his ceiling, angry at himself for making things end on a weird note. He thought having a secret relationship would make things exciting, but it’s just making him frustrated—emotionally and sexually—and he’s not sure how to tell Cas his troubles without making him feel guilty.

He sleeps poorly, but wakes up to a sweet morning text from Cas, which brightens his mood instantly. His day passes in another blur, and he’s tempted all day to stop by the library and see if he can catch a glimpse of Cas working, but stops himself.

By the time Friday comes around he’s bursting with eager excitement, but wants to try and show a little self-control. The minute their eyes meet in the library, though, Castiel drags him into a deserted stack of books and practically knocks him off balance, bowlegs going weak as Cas lays a heap of kisses on him. They head back to their table looking sloppy and red-faced and rush through Castiel’s notes and edits, then print off a fresh copy and head to Mechanikos Hall. The office is nearly empty, but Lisa is working the front desk, so he asks her to slide his draft into Missouri’s mailbox. She does a small raise of her fingers and the stack of papers begin flying, zooming out of sight.

Dean begins to make an awkward exit when Lisa cuts her eyes between Castiel and Dean, standing shoulder to shoulder, and gives them a little nod. “I’m happy for you,” she tells Dean, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and giving him a smile. Dean’s mouth gaps, wondering how the hell she could’ve known. Castiel looks just as floored…and, if Dean is being honest, a little worried. If Lisa can tell just by the way they’re standing, how long will it take for the administration to put
two and two together?

Dean doesn’t breathe again until they’re well out of earshot.

“That was, uh, surprising,” he grumbles, and Castiel nods emphatically.

“Let’s talk about it later. Can I see you tonight?” Cas whispers as they walk back towards his office. “We should celebrate.”

“The end of the semester?”

“That too, but I meant you turning in your thesis,” the professor says, bemused. “It’s a great accomplishment, Dean, and I’m very proud of you.”

Like always, Dean’s cheeks glow red with the praise, and he flutters his gaze down to his feet. “What time should I pick you up?”

“Let’s just meet at the D. Say, seven o’clock?”

“Perfect.” Dean takes a step closer, wanting to crowd against Castiel with a kiss, but freezes when he realizes they’re still in the hallway. He steps back with a frown and Castiel offers him a weak smile, chancing a quick squeeze of his wrist and mouthing, Later. Dean’s not sure what exactly he’ll be receiving later, but he figures whatever it is bodes well for him, and he grins ear to ear. Only a few more hours until he gets to have his hands and lips on Cas again. It’s more than worth waiting for.

He adjusts his collar as he steps outside, shivering in the frigid temperature. This week, he had overheard some people excitedly predicting what sort of magic had caused their snow flurries from the weekend, and Dean still feels smug about the strength of their affinity. He thinks back to Castiel believing that they’re bonded, and while that would be freaking amazing, Dean can’t imagine an incredible mage like Cas being tied to him. Dean hasn’t even graduated, and compared to Cas, he feels like he has so much to learn. He would be the deadweight in a bond, that’s for damn sure.

He’s musing about all-things Cas when he notices a curtain of energy rippling in the air, blurry and rounded at the edges. For a moment he wonders if it’s an illusion, but the closer he draws near, the more he sees it’s actually a doorway.

“You seein’ this?” he asks a stranger walking by, a young-looking kid who has bags under his eyes from finals week.

“How?” the kid says with a shrug, continuing to walk with a concentrated stare.

“Huh.” Dean gets closer, wondering if he should leave it alone or call Cas for backup. But something tells him this doorway has been sent to him for a reason, that it’s not random happenstance. The Captain did say the invitation to his first resistance meeting would be delivered via sign, and an invisible entrance only he can see is a pretty big freaking sign. Odds are, this is her handiwork. Besides, he can get himself out of any trouble he might get into, right?

So he mumbles, “Fuck it,” and steps inside it, closing his eyes tight as he’s transported to another place entirely.

Chapter End Notes
Steven Weinberg (born May 1933) is an American experimental physicist and pre-eminent Mage on the Magical Council (now retired).

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How's it going, friends? Did you enjoy the smut? Have a good weekend? Come chat with us below!
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

TrenchcoatBaby: So, Ellen, I gotta know. If you ever found an invisible magic doorway that may kill you, or may take you to an underground anarchy group, would go through it?

EllenOfOz: Well, if there was a chance Dean was at the other end of it, sure, I'd jump in!

TCBaby: Haha, you and me both! What will Dean uncover in this chapter? And how will Cas respond to all this? Things are surely heating up!

Ellen: They are indeed. So grab a cuppa, get comfy and enjoy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dean stumbles as his feet meet solid ground. Being transported from campus to…well, wherever the hell he is now, had been crude and jolting magic. He feels shaken, full of adrenaline, and if he’s being honest, pretty damn nauseous.

“Son of a bitch,” he swears, blinking away the blurriness in his vision. He needs to regain his senses, needs to be ready in case he’s in danger, but all he can do is put his hands on his knees and breath in and out.

“First timer?”

Dean inhales through his nose and focuses, his eyes opening. For a second, he wonders if he’s dreaming—the woman in front of him is gorgeous, her auburn hair long and shiny, her eyes a chocolate brown. He has to remind himself that he’s very happily committed, thanks but no thanks, because this lady is looking at him like he’s a whole damn entrée.

“Something like that,” he says noncommittally. He finally feels steady enough to do a sweep of his surroundings, and finds that he’s standing in a dirty old barn, dust caking his boots with every step he takes. There are fifteen, maybe twenty people around them, leaning against haystacks or weathered wood walls.

*Where the hell is he? And with who?*

“You’ll get used to it,” the woman says, laying a comforting hand on his back. “What’s your name?”

“Dean.”

“Dean…?” she asks, probing for his last name.

He thinks back to the warning Bobby had given him weeks ago. Even if this has nothing to do with the Captain, being cautious is something Dean could use more of…right? So he simply says, “Just
Dean.”

If she’s bothered by this omission, she doesn’t show it. “Anael.” She flips her hair over her shoulder, smiling broadly. Damn, if he had met her six months ago… Nope, he’s got a date with his boyfriend in a few hours. Which means he’s gotta figure out what’s going on here and then GTFO.

“Uh, not to be weird, but—” Dean spins around on his heels, looking for the doorway he came through. It’s vanished behind him, as he expected it to, but it’s still a little startling. “Where the hell are we?”

“Who invited fresh meat?” a bald, unfriendly looking guy asks suddenly, evidently overhearing Dean’s confusion. There are a few murmurs of agreement and Anael frowns, looking worried on Dean’s behalf. Dean’s not stupid—well, that’s up for debate, isn’t it?—but he reckons they’re all lay magicians. He can feel the static of untampered magic hanging heavy in the air. He can’t take them all, not if they know an inkling of magic, but maybe he could cast a diversion of some sort. Even better, he could just transport himself back to Stanford. But is he strong enough to do that on his own? Could he channel Cas somehow, use their affinity to escape? But he needs a talisman to do that…

“I invited him,” comes a cool, calm voice that Dean recognizes instantly. The barn doors have been thrust open and the Captain waltzes in, her long red hair streaming behind her in the gusted wind. The rest of the group grows silent, almost reverent at her arrival, and Dean knows now that she doesn’t wear her title honorarily. Whatever this group is, she’s their leader through and through.

She stops in front of Dean, smiling warmly. She’s wearing almost the same outfit she was when Dean first met her, just a different sweater, and Dean wonders where she lives and what sort of conditions she’s used to. “Dean. I’m so glad you came.”

“S’nothing,” he answers mildly. He likes her just fine, and weirdly trusts that her intentions are good, but his guard is way up. “You’re the one who provided transportation.” He gives her a sideways, crooked smile, and Anael chuckles softly beside him.

“The doorway was the first test,” the redhead says, and her poker face is so good that he legitimately can’t tell if she’s kidding.

“Oh, uh, there’s gonna be a test?” Dean jokes, though he’s slightly worried, because what the hell sort of test could an underground group come up with? Knife throwing? Dodging fireballs?

“No, not exactly. Maybe ‘test’ wasn’t the right word. More like a leap of faith, which you’ve already taken just by being here.” Dean thinks she sounds sorta like a cult leader, but he’s pretty sure she means no harm, so he lets it go. She touches his arm in a companionable way and Dean is flooded with that good feeling again—familiar, warm, comforting. It reminds him a little of something, or someone, but she pulls her touch away too soon for him to ponder it. She addresses the crowd instead.

“Welcome, comrades,” she says formally. “Thank you for being here, for risking your own safety each and every day to make our society a better place.”

This seems to be a greeting the other members are used to, because they nod minutely and keep listening.

“Has everyone met Dean?”
A heavy pause falls upon them, no one wanting to admit that they had been wary of Dean’s presence. Anael gives a perky smile and a nod, and then Anna is introducing everyone to him by name. It’s too much to keep up with even if he tried—Hester, Rachel, Zuriel, Neil, Benjamin. Those were just the faces that stood out to him. The guy who had so nicely called him “fresh meat” is named Uriel, and Dean can feel a startling undercurrent of magic coming off the guy when they shake hands. He seems powerful and a little douchey, which puts Dean on the defense from the get-go. Everyone else he meets seems nice enough, though, especially since the Captain seems to be vouching for him.

Halfway through another round of introductions, Dean pulls out his cellphone to check the time, and sees he has no service. Huh. What is this, 1993?

“Where are we?” he asks, knowing Anael has already avoided answering this question, but hoping the second time’s the charm. There’s another long pause, and Dean wonders if this is classified information or some shit.

“Vacant farmland in Illinois,” the Captain says, voice a little tight, and Dean’s eyebrows shoot up.

“Illinois?” Why the hell would the Captain pick this a safe space to meet? What’s her connection here?

“Where’d you think you were? LA County?” Uriel says sourly, and Dean tries not to glare.

“We have to stay on the move, at least when we all congregate,” Hester explains evenly.

“Makes us harder to predict and follow,” Anael adds.

“Yeah, but what…I mean… Who’s after you guys? And why?” Dean feels dumb as hell asking these questions when he’s the only one who doesn’t know, evidently, but he’s got to get some info because he’s in fucking Illinois.

“Oh, you’ve brought in a green one,” Neil says with a snort.

“Everyone begins somewhere,” the Captain says a little sharply. She turns back to Dean, her face immeasurably kind. “How about you observe our meeting and see what you pick up on. If there’s time for questions afterwards, I’ll see what I can do. Sound fair?”

Dean thinks it over, not knowing what his alternative choice would be, so he nods.

Turns out, the super clandestine meeting of the underground resistance is just like…most meetings. The group is pretty small, but there are still committees—Recruitment, Public Service, Petitioning, Tactical Analysis. Each group leader gives an update, some short and some long, but Dean finds each of their updates fascinating in different ways. Hester in recruitment has been hanging around arcades, since that’s where eighteen-year-old lay magicians apparently seem to cluster. Neil runs small workshops for the lay magicians willing to try and hone their magic, though the location is hard to nail down. Anael has been organizing protests outside every mage-owned business, which has gotten volatile lately. That’s where Uriel’s come in, from Tactical Analysis, running protective measures and even performing combative spells when the need arises. The rest of the members help where they can, instructed by the committee heads or the Captain herself.

The movement is impressive as hell, and a lot more structured than Dean thought it would be. He loses track of time during all their updates, and before he knows it, nearly two hours have passed. He’s glad he’s wearing a wristwatch, because his phone still has shit service, though he’s wondering if that has less to do with the location and more to do with magical interference.
“Excellent updates,” the Captain says. “Do we have requests of the group? Any points of action?”

Uriel asks for monetary funds to purchase spell ingredients, a request that Anna says they’ll discuss in private since she has a “sympathetic contact” in the magic shop business. Dean squirms uneasily in his seat, knowing without a doubt that her contact must be Bobby.

“Anything else?”

“Neil and I could use some help canvassing next month,” Anael says, speaking loudly so her voice carries. “Early Stanford admission results will be coming in after Christmas. Once the list of rejected students is posted, we’ll visit homes and offer support—a safe place for new lay magicians to retreat to.”

Dean nods appreciatively, thinking that an effort like that could’ve helped someone like Cas’ sister, Anna, who was dismissed by her parents once her mage status was denied.

“Volunteers to help canvass?” the Captain asks, and Dean surprises himself by raising his hand, along with five or six others. He’s still unsure if he even wants to be involved with this group—are they the “good” guys or just another part of the problem?—but if he can help a few kids while maintaining a healthy amount of skepticism, then he’ll do it.

“Excellent.” The redhead leader beams at Dean particularly, and he’s uncomfortable with the scrutiny.

“Don’t you go to Stanford?” Neil asks him suddenly, the rest of the group growing quiet. It’s obvious that he’s the only one here who’s a mage, not a magician, and Dean can feel the tension rolling off him in waves.

“Uh, yeah, I do,” he answers truthfully, scratching the back of his neck.

“Can I ask you something?”

This is most definitely a trap, but Dean shrugs and says, “Knock yourself out.”

“How can you take their snooty education and dirty, classist magic and try to support us at the same time?” the guy asks point-blank.

“Neil—” The Captain begins, her voice admonishing.

“No, it’s okay, it’s, uh, a fair question.” Dean’s eyes sweep the crowd. “Listen, I don’t pretend to know what the hell I’m doing or even how to fix any of this crap. I just know the system we have right now is shitty, and if I can help it become better, then, uh, that’s what I’ll do. I never really fit in at Stanford, and maybe that’s a good thing. I’m still not sure what all you guys got goin’ on, but I’m willing to ride it out and see.”

Dean has a lot of other opinions, too—like how access to the Well should be a human right for any magic user. How burnout of lay magic is scary as fuck and life-threatening and needs to be stopped. How he had to resuscitate his own friend on Thanksgiving after he OD’d trying to cook a stupid turkey. But he doesn’t have to prove to these people that he’s on their side, so he keeps his mouth shut and waits.

Slowly, a few of the magicians begin to nod in understanding, a knot of anxiety loosening from Dean’s chest. He’s still guarded, and one good meeting isn’t going to convince him otherwise. But maybe, just maybe, he can make this work.
He exchanges contact information with a few of the members, especially Anael since she’s in charge of the canvassing trip. He thinks the meeting is just about winding down, and not a moment too soon—he literally has to meet Cas at the D right now—when a frail blonde woman steps forward.

“I hate to bother you all,” she says shyly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “But it’s been a few months since…last time, and the doctor says the tumor has only grown since. I wondered if we could, maybe, try again?”

Dean knits his eyebrows together, so Rachel leans forward and whispers, “Layla has a brain tumor. We keep casting healing spells together as a coven, but we don’t know the spell to diminish it completely. All we can do is keep the cancer frozen, more or less.”

Dean frowns, looking at the pleasant young women with pale, pink lips.

“Dean, I hate to put you on the spot,” the Captain begins slowly, “but you’re the first classically trained mage we’ve ever had help us. Do you know a spell strong enough to remove Layla’s tumor?”

Layla looks at Dean as if he might be a godsend, and Dean’s insides are twisted up with guilt. “I’m sorry, I wish I did. They don’t teach medical healing until the PhD level,” he says regretfully, watching the woman’s face fall. “But I’ve picked up a few things here’n there from my boyfriend. I can try?”

The mood shifts instantly—Anael frowning at the word “boyfriend,” Layla smiling broadly at the promise of renewed efforts. Dean would love to bring Cas here one day to try and heal this woman properly—even though Cas isn’t a healer, per se, their affinity is a force to be reckoned with.

But does he want to risk getting Cas mixed up in all this?

Dean stares at his watch nervously as the resistance members set up for Layla’s healing spell. She lies horizontal on the ground, and a few people surround her with crystals and sage, tokens from which they’ll draw their energy. Dean’s antsy to get back to campus, to not leave Cas hanging, but he can’t exactly leave when a woman’s life is hanging in the balance. If Cas knew Dean was trying to heal someone, he would understand, right?

Once they begin casting, though, many of Dean’s worries begin to fade. He loves using magic with Castiel, there’s nothing quite like it. But moving his hands in-sync with a coven gives him a burst of energy he hasn’t felt in a long time. The hand motions are simple enough—touching palm to palm with the person to your left and right, then hooking both thumbs around before making a tight fist. After a while the rhythm becomes second-nature, the feeling of magic a truly euphoric rush that makes Dean…laugh unexpectedly. Huh, that’s weird. This is taking much longer than he anticipated, but for some reason he’s not concerned. Casting with this many lay magicians feels like being on a rollercoaster, like flying, like being perpetually drunk and never coming down—

But before long he’s gasping for air, his heart beating too fast, his hands moving of their own accord. Distantly, the rational part of his brain knows he’s approaching burnout, that he’s in dangerous territory without Cas there to steady him. “I, I can’t…I need…” He wheezes, his skin feeling clammy and cold, and he closes his eyes for a moment. Just a moment. He needs a little rest, a little…

He hits the floor with a limp and sudden crash, mouth hanging open in the dirt.
Castiel drums his fingers on the table, then twists around to look towards the door again. No sign of Dean. He'd said seven, hadn't he?

The Dionysus is quiet for a Friday night. It’s just a few days before Christmas now, and empty tables across the room glow with alternating multicolored lights from the large decorated tree near the bar. Castiel knows most students have already left campus for the holidays, but there are still a few other groups of students sitting around the bar, plus Castiel, sitting alone.

Unease curls in his gut. Dean's not usually the most punctual, in Castiel's experience, but it's unlike him to be more than a few minutes late without letting him know.

He picks up his phone—no new messages, and the bright 7:18 on his lock screen makes him frown.

He keeps hoping to feel the concentration of magic that means Dean is nearby, but his magic is calm in his chest. Where could he be? Maybe there's Friday night traffic around Palo Alto? He really hopes Sam hasn't got into trouble again—he and Ruby have been nearly inseparable lately, according to Dean.

But none of those things would warrant radio silence.

They’d only made their Christmas plans just a few hours ago, after their makeout session in the library—the memory of which makes Castiel a little hot under the collar now. Dean had apologized and said that Bobby was closing up the shop over the holidays so they wouldn’t be able to have lunch at his place, but Castiel had found he wanted to spend with holiday with Dean, no matter where they held their celebration. So he’d invited Dean and Sam over to his apartment, plus Charlie and Dorothy. He’s looking forward to it, but he’s hoping to firm up the plans tonight. If Dean gets here anytime soon, that is.

He picks up his beer, draining the end of it. At least Ellen and Jo aren’t playing holiday tunes in their soundtrack, instead opting for a more mellow Top-40 variety. A few moments after putting his glass down on the table, it rises up nearly to the ceiling and floats off in the direction of the bar, and Castiel watches idly as Jo plucks it from the air, adding to a rack of other dirty glasses. She sees him looking over and raises one eyebrow, casting her gaze over the bar. When her eyes return to him, she mouths, Where's Dean?

Castiel just shrugs.

Jo frowns, then mimes tipping a glass towards her mouth, raising her eyebrows questioningly again.

Castiel nods with another shrug, wondering why she doesn’t just shout across the bar like he’s heard her do on more than one occasion since he started coming here. He might as well drink more, if Dean’s going to keep him waiting.

This is the last thing he needs after the week he’s had. Not only has he spent the whole time missing Dean, dying to see him but knowing they both had too much work to get through, but he’s also had an underlying level of worry over Monday night’s session at Crowley’s offices.

The lesson had started out well enough. Crowley’s group of lay magician students has grown over
the last couple of weeks and now includes about twenty of varying ages, all keen to hear what he has to say about techniques for controlling energy while casting. He’d asked them to practice with a few exercises, and of course, Krissy had gone and overdone things to try to impress Aiden with her levitation. She’d managed to levitate both of them, plus a table and several other objects before burning out hard and crashing to the floor, breaking her wrist. Aiden fared worse, cracking his head on the edge of a table and had to be taken off to the nearest magical healer. Head wounds could be dangerous and no one in the class had been willing to try to heal him, not even Castiel. Split lips were one thing, but healing bleeding head wounds and possible concussion wasn’t something he was willing to risk trying.

He’d had a stern word with Krissy, and had left the lesson doubting his own teaching ability, and that anxiety had followed him into the week. The only bright spot had been his phone conversation with Dean mid-week—a rather arousing memory that he then had to suppress during a busy day of exams on Thursday.

Earlier today though, Dean had seemed overjoyed to have completed his draft and handed it in. He’d sounded like he was looking forward to celebrating with Castiel tonight, so where on earth has he got to?

He frowns to himself as he remembers the moments just before they'd said goodbye, when Castiel had avoided kissing him in public. Dean wouldn't be upset about that, would he? They'd talked about keeping their relationship quiet on campus, purely because there were plenty who looked down on a teacher-student relationship, despite their close ages. He tries to breathe past the tight feeling in his chest as his worry escalates.

He nearly jumps out of his skin when Jo plonks down in the booth opposite him, placing a board lined up with filled shot glasses on the table between them. She gives him a sympathetic once-over, then says, "He better have a damn good reason for standing you up. You look like someone stole your favorite comic book."

Castiel opens his mouth to protest but closes it again and gives a wry half-grin instead. His eyes drop to the drinks in front of him, then flick back up to Jo's grinning face.

"Who are these for?"

"For you."

Castiel shakes his head, shifting back in his seat. "Oh, no. Thanks Jo, but I don't really—"

Jo puts up a hand to interrupt. "Shh, yeah, you do. These are special. I'm trying out a new recipe my mom came up with."

When Castiel just raises his eyebrow and doesn't move towards them, she says, "Come ooon, Cas, do me a favor. I need a guinea pig so I can get the recipes right. Might take your mind off your dumb boyfriend for a few minutes."

Castiel tries to hold in his surprise. Apparently he and Dean hadn't been keeping things as quiet as they could have been. Had Dean said something to her?

Jo's eyes widened in turn as she takes in his reaction. "Oh shit, you guys really are...? Damn, he really did stand you up?"

"No. I'm hoping he's just been delayed for some reason, and unable to use his phone." He tries to keep his voice light, but he must still sound worried because Jo gives him a pitying look.
"Here," she says. "Try this and tell me what it tastes like."

He sighs heavily. What else is there to do while waiting? Might as well help Jo out.

Picking up the first shot glass, he sniffs it experimentally—vodka, probably. He throws the whole shot back, to a gasp from Jo. He hadn't grown up with someone like Meg without learning how to drink liquor.

Yes, it was vodka. Flavored with something lemony, something… Something like the taste of a warm breeze blowing across his face, sun on his back, the smell of the ocean, that day when he and Dean lay on the beach and nearly kissed…

He blinks open his eyes to find Jo staring at him, a broad grin on her face.

"Well?" she says expectantly. "Must be good to make you smile like that!"

Castiel looks down at the glass. He hadn't sensed the magic in it at all until it was in his mouth, but it had to be lay magic. Nothing else could alter moods like that, invoke memories like that. His own magic was humming now, responding to the lingering energy he’s just consumed.

“It tasted…summer-y,” he offers. Jo’s beaming smile drops when he adds quietly, “And also quite a lot like lay magic.”

“Maybe just a touch,” she says dismissively. “Most of the students who’ll be drinking them wouldn’t recognize it.” She points to the next shot in the row. “Drink up. Next one’s my favorite.”

“Are they different?” Castiel asks, wondering if she expects him to drink all four shots. Maybe this one, then he’ll stop until Dean shows up. He’ll be interested in seeing this for sure.

“Yeah, slightly different spells, but basically the same ingredients.”

Castiel picks up the second shot and downs it like the first, tasting the bright green of a grassy meadow full of wildflowers, a picnic by the river with Meg, the bells ringing in town. The elated freedom of being finished with classes for the term, and the first not-quite-warm sunny day they are able to really enjoy.

He taps the empty glass, saying, “Spring.”

Jo nods. “Very good. You like?”

“It’s very clever, Jo.” The vodka is sending warmth all the way down his chest and into his stomach, calming him somewhat, and for that he is grateful. There’s still no sign of Dean, though, and now he’s curious about the other two shots.

He picks up the third and is surprised to find it icy cold as it goes down. A prickle of snowflakes dust his cheeks even though nothing is there when he looks up, and a cold wind makes him shiver as he recalls a winter long ago when he stands with tears in his eyes, watching as his big sister drives away into the snowy night. He clenches a rejection letter in his fist and the guilt presses down on him.

He forces a deep breath in, opening his eyes and barely taking in the shocked curiosity on Jo’s face before he grabs the final shot and throws it back, desperate to move on to a nicer memory.

And immediately tastes pumpkin spice. He closes his eyes as a shiver tightens across his skin. An evening, sitting on cool grass, watching fireworks and eating pie with Dean. Warm cider coats his
tongue and he breathes in the slightly acrid taste of bonfire smoke.

His own magic rises in response to this spell, twisting and scorching as it goes. The pleasant feeling slides into a harsh taste on his tongue.

Something’s wrong. His skin feels chill, but there’s a raging fire in his veins that’s going to consume him if he doesn’t let it out. It feels a lot like burning out, and he hasn’t even…

He opens his eyes and gasps out, “Dean…?” then the room goes dark.

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When Dean blinks back awake he’s flat on the barn floor, dusty eddies of footsteps swirling around him. He coughs and groans, feeling strangely sore.

“Thank god,” the Captain sighs, a hand on her chest. Anael is perched on her knees, a hand on Dean’s forehead.

“His temperature is down,” she says with relief in her voice.

Dean pinches the bridge of his nose, then rubs his eyes. He does feel better, but he has no idea why. The last thing he remembers is feeling so out of control, so amped up and exhausted… “Shit, did I…fall over?”

Uriel snorts, crossing his arms and looking unimpressed. “More like fainted.”

“Uriel—”

“Stanford sure is producing feeble-hearted academics these days,” the man says snarkily.

“Enough,” Layla says sharply, causing everyone to pause. “I feel better than I have in months, and that’s because of Dean.”

The gravity of her statement hangs in the air, thick and revealing, until Dean clears his throat uncomfortably and begins to stand.

“Who, uh, set me straight?” He knows this feeling isn’t something you generally get over—during the incident with Benny, he and Cas had been forced to channel the lay magic and expel it themselves. The Captain tilts her head in response, and Dean’s unsurprised to learn she’s the one who woke him. Their magic has always felt connected somehow, more attuned than the average pair.

“Thanks,” he says evenly. He looks at Layla then and offers her a fifty-watt smile—which she returns in spades. The rest of the group begins chattering again, and Dean’s happy to have the attention off him finally. “How come it affected me more than you guys?”

“We’re used to it and can recognize the warning signs,” Benjamin explains with a shrug. “Plus we’ve built up a tolerance, I guess, since it’s the only magic available to us.”

Dean has a pang of guilt settling in his stomach at that comment, so he just nods grimly. He glances at his watch, wondering if it’s time to go meet Cas, when he sees—

“It’s eight o’clock?” he demands incredulously. “How the hell did that happen?”
“You’ve been unconscious for a while, Dean.” Anael is still looking at him like he might collapse again, but Dean is far too focused on getting to Cas to even notice. “We almost went to the hospital.”

“Not that they could’ve done anything,” Hester grumbles somberly.

“Jesus. I gotta go,” he says in a rush. “How do I get outta here?”

It takes a few more excruciating moments for the transport thresholds to be cast, and Dean feels rude as fuck for taking the first exit out, but the Captain looks too preoccupied with the immense amounts of extraneous magic buzzing inside her to take it personally. So much for their heart-to-heart on what the hell is going on here—maybe next time. Dean is so late to meet Castiel that he’s pretty sure his boyfriend either thinks he ditched him, or has sent the National Guard out looking for him.

Either way, he’s never been more relieved to wave goodbye to his new…friends? Acquaintances? Enemies? It’s far too complicated to try and define, and his head is swimming with news and developments. He crosses through the doorway and holds his breath, hoping it helps with the nausea this time. It does, and he finds himself spit back out on the same patch of earth that he entered through hours ago. It’s dark now, and cold as hell as the wind whips in his face, but he’s so glad to be home he could kiss every blade of grass in a mile radius.

What a trip, man.

He checks his phone now that he finally has service, and sees six missed calls from Cas and three text messages. He can’t feel the familiar stir of magic in his chest that tells him Castiel is nearby, and he wonders if his collapse somehow affected... No, there’s no way. Their affinity is strong, but not that strong.

“Fuck,” he mutters miserably. Guy tries to join an underground resistance movement, and his personal life immediately suffers for it. Shit. He begins sprinting in the direction of Ellen’s bar, calling Cas as he runs, but the phone just rings and rings.

And rings.

Castiel hears a muffled voice, saying something. He attempts to roll over to block it out with a pillow, but he’s not really able to move. And he's pretty sure he's not in his bed.

“Just where the hell have you been, Winchester?” an angry voice hisses.

Castiel extends his magical awareness, not quite conscious enough to make sense of where he is. He feels a familiar brush of magic and lets himself relax slightly. It feels like home. Like Anna, he realizes sleepily. She'll look after him.

“That doesn’t matter. What the hell have you done to my boyfriend?”

No, not Anna. Dean.

A warmth pours into Castiel from a hand that touches his back. He seems to be lying on his stomach, his head on something soft, but when he opens his eyes, he gives an involuntary groan at
the bright lights around him.

“Cas? How’re you doing there, buddy?” Dean’s voice sounds strained.

More warmth flows into him and he realizes it’s Dean, sharing his strength to get Castiel upright again. He lifts his head from the couch where he’s lying and squints. “Dean, I...”

He’s so relieved that Dean is here that he feels tears pricking at his eyes, and he quickly puts his head back down to stop the room from spinning. He was drinking...something. Wasn't he?

"It's okay, sweetheart. I've got you," Dean says, pouring more energy into him.

"Stop," Castiel protests, trying again to sit up. "Stop that...don't want you to...burn out." He seems to be having trouble with words.

"Jesus, Jo, what'd you give him? He's wasted," Dean says, his eyes never leaving Castiel's.

They're such pretty eyes, Castiel muses, trying to keep his own open.

Jo's voice comes from somewhere else in the room, but Castiel doesn’t think he can turn his head without it flying right off his shoulders, so he keeps his gaze locked on Dean instead.

"Well when you didn't show up, he was helping me test some new shots Mom and I have been making. He had a few of them and just passed out cold. I managed to levitate him in here, but you gotta take him home, Dean. I don't want him puking in here."

Castiel blinks, and moves his tongue in his dry mouth. "Dean, they were ssso nice. They tasted like summer, and pie, and you..."

He lurches forward, trying to pull Dean forward so he can taste those gorgeous lips again, but instead Dean grabs his into an awkward hug. He speaks over Cas' head. "How long was he out for?"

"I dunno, like half an hour maybe?"

Castiel can feel Dean’s shock as a shift in his magic. He lifts his forehead from Dean’s shoulder and peers at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Dean replies quickly. “Nothing’s wrong. I just need to get you home. Let me up.” He pushes Castiel until he flops back into the soft couch, head lolling on the cushioned back. He watches Dean stand up and speak with Jo, the words barely registering as he reflects on how pleased he is that Dean is actually here now. He knew he’d come eventually.

Castiel closes his eyes and lets their chatter flow by.

“Next time you better at least send him a message to tell you where you are, Dean. He was really worried about you.”

“I told you, I was doing a thing for Bobby and my phone was busted. I would never stand anyone up, least of all Cas.”

“Really?” Jo says, voice thick with sarcasm. “Because that’s pretty much exactly what you just did!”

Dean takes a step towards her. "Yeah? Well thanks for filling him full of juice while I wasn’t here!”
Castiel abruptly can’t stand their bickering. “Please…stop fighting. ‘M fine.” He tries to get to his feet, but only makes it halfway up before overbalancing.

Dean catches him by grabbing the arm nearest to him, and Cas looks over into his worried face. “C’mon, Cas, let’s get you home.”

Castiel is momentarily lost in Dean’s flushed cheeks, the scattering of freckles like fairy footsteps across his nose. “So beautiful,” he murmurs, then blearily looks over at Jo as she snorts.

“You guys are so adorable, I think I’m gonna puke. Get out of here,” she says, heading out of the room.

Where are they, anyway? Castiel finds he doesn’t much care, because Dean is here, and his magic is spinning happily around both of them.

“Hey,” Dean says, swatting at something in the air. “Quit that, Cas. You’re gonna set something on fire. C’mon.”

Castiel squints at him as Dean pulls one of Castiel’s arms over his own shoulders, supporting him as they shuffle towards a door—a different door than the one Jo just left through. There are actual, literal sparks floating in the air around them, and Castiel can’t help the laugh that bubbles out of him at the sight. “’M sorry, Dean. I’m jus’ so glad that you’re okay,” he slurs, grinning. “You set my magic alight.”

Dean rolls his eyes and chuckles as they stumble into the alley he recognizes as running beside the D. Once they’re moving, Castiel finds that he can stumble along without too much trouble, although the blast of cold wind that blows across the dark campus does a great job of sobering him up. He still leans into Dean just for his grounding warmth as they walk.

As the drunken haze withdraws a little, he asks, “Dean? I waited for you for so long...so long. You didn’t call me…”

“I know,” Dean begins, hesitantly. “I’m sorry, Cas. My phone wasn’t working—I must have been out of signal.”

Castiel’s stomach clenches—out of signal means nowhere near here. “But, where…” he trails off, concentrating on keeping his dinner in his stomach as they near the translocation boundary. The shimmering threshold stretches across the road leading into and out of the university, and as they step across, the lurching sensation of being flung across the country and planted in California makes Castiel’s gorge rise.

Dean hesitates again, but says, “Well, d’you remember when I said I wanted to help lay magicians —”

He stops when Castiel loses his battle. Stumbling to one side, he empties the contents of his stomach into the bushes planted along the side of this section of Palm Drive. He coughs to clear his throat, and stands up, his eyes stinging with tears.

Dean gives him a pitying look. “You okay there?” he asks as he pats Castiel’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Dean. What were you saying?” he grits out, swallowing heavily.

Dean gives a wry chuckle, rubbing circles gently into Castiel’s back. “Never mind, I’ll tell you about it later. Let’s get you home.”
In no time at all, it seems Castiel is being dropped gently onto his bed, his shoes and jeans stripped, and a glass of water tipped into his mouth. He hums sleepily, still aware of Dean’s presence only because his magic is a warm pulse inside his chest.

“Love that,” he mumbles, rubbing a lazy hand over his sternum. Dean is running a hand through his hair, lulling him to sleep. “Love feeling you, being with you. Dean, just love…you…”

The words linger with the smile on Castiel’s lips as he drifts to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading this week's chapter. What would your seasonal drinks taste like?

Update: Real life got in the way and there will be no update for the week of Sept 15. Sorry! Lots of extra holiday fun coming up, though.
Chapter Notes

Welcome to Chapter 20! TrenchcoatBaby here. Apologies for the week delay—we've both been so busy. I'm actually posting this chapter while I'm in Boston visiting CBFirestarter, which, if you haven't read her Destiel works, what are you even doing with your life?! (Kidding, but seriously, go scope out her stuff.) Also, I'm pretty sure Ellen is boarding a plane any minute now, with full intentions of writing on Chapter 21 while she's in the air. How amazing is she?

Ellen: TCB seems to be forgetting that she also wrote a whole chunk of this and chapter 21 while en route to Boston! Planes are great for captive sit-down time, aren't they? Wish I was heading off to join them, but it's just a holiday with my family for me ;)

Hope you're in the Christmas spirit a few months early, because it's the holidays in Palo Alto! Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The credits roll. As Castiel turns his head to look up at Dean from his position lying on Dean’s thigh, Dean stills his hand in Castiel’s hair and looks down, a smile in his eyes.

"Well?" he asks, sounding a little apprehensive.

Castiel gazes up at him, entirely distracted once again by the freckles dusting Dean’s cheeks. "Well, what?"

"Empire? What d'you think?"

Castiel opens his mouth, but pauses, trying to formulate a diplomatic answer. Dean has just made him hook up his own DVD player to Castiel’s TV, then watch two of the films from the earliest Star Wars trilogy, which are apparently chapters four and five of the whole story. It isn’t that he hadn’t liked them, as such—it’s just that Dean seems so invested in his opinion.

"I enjoyed it. Thank you, Dean."

Dean's smile falls away. "But?"


Dean rolls his eyes. "Come on, you hesitated. Honest opinion, give it to me."

"Well, they're not exactly deep, plot-wise," Castiel says, bracing for impact.

Dean’s jaw drops. "What? No way, you’re not supposed to watch them like you’re a critic or something! It’s the adventure! The space ships, the fucking light sabers!"

Castiel swings his legs off the couch and sits up. "Dean, it’s a standard farm boy meets wizard, saves the princess and the kingdom trope. I can show you half a dozen books here with a similar
plot." He waves a hand at the bookshelves surrounding the TV.

When Castiel had woken up yesterday morning, deeply hungover, he’d found Dean sound asleep beside him, warm and soft. He’d smiled to himself, glad that Dean hadn’t stood him up after all, and closed his eyes again. The next time he’d woken up he’d been alone, and he’d dragged himself out of bed to find Dean dressed and slumped on the couch, reading. He’d been happy to let Dean take care of him as he must have done the previous night, although he honestly doesn't remember much of that beyond drinking Jo's shots.

But now it’s Sunday, Christmas Eve, and Dean had gone home and come back with DVDs. Lots of DVDs, all piled up on the coffee table next to the tiny Christmas tree Castiel had picked up at Walmart during the week, with its sparse tinsel and magical, twinkling witch lights he’d added himself.

They may well be up all night.

Dean continues to stare at him, aghast. "The plot doesn't even matter. It's a kids movie!"

Castiel turns back to the screen where the credits are still rolling. "Look, I'll concede, the music is great. And the effects must have been brilliant forty years ago."

"Yeah," Dean says, frowning as he leaned forward to grab his nearly empty beer from the coffee table, "I was kinda hoping you'd love it."

"I enjoyed it," Castiel says, defensively. "I just don't understand why, if Darth Vader is so powerful, why does he fight everyone with a sword?"

"Light saber, Cas."

"Why doesn’t he just pull the air out of Luke’s throat like he did with the other guy? Or throw a few fireballs around, that’d do the trick."

Castiel stands up and stretches his arms above his head, just as Dean says, “It was made by non-magical people, Cas. He’s not actually...uh...”

Castiel looks down at Dean, curious as to why he stopped mid-sentence, to see him staring at Castiel's hip. Castiel drops his arms again, only for Dean to wave his own hands upwards. "Up... put your hands up again?"

Castiel does so, confused, and watches as Dean leans forward, still sitting on the couch, and latches onto the skin now visible between his jeans and the hem of his button-down. He sucks hard on the soft skin there, pulling a gasp from Castiel, before he softens his mouth somewhat and licks over the red mark left in Castiel's skin.

The sensation travels straight to Castiel’s pleasure centers and he groans as Dean looks up at him through his lashes, licking a trail across the skin of Castiel's stomach. He can actually feel the blood rushing to his cock, his jeans tightening, then even more as Dean lifts one hand and trails it over the front of Castiel's pants. Castiel hitches in a breath again, letting it out with a "Oh, Dean."

Dean looks up at him, his face full of awe. His voice cracks as he says, "The sounds you make, Cas…do you know what you do to me?"

Castiel is overcome by the want in those green eyes. He doesn't deserve this. His throat tightens as Dean starts to unbuckle his belt.
“Tell me if this is too much,” Dean says, moving on to the button of Castiel’s jeans.

Castiel shakes his head. “Don’t stop,” he murmurs, running his fingers through Dean’s hair. He leans down as he moves his hand under Dean’s chin, tilting his head up so he can kiss him, slow and tender.

As their lips part and Dean smiles up at him, Castiel asks quietly, "You want me to show you my laser sword, Dean?"

Dean blinks up at him for a second or two before he laughs. "Shut up and help me here." He pushes Cas in his middle so that he flops back onto the couch, and as he falls, he moves his fingers carefully to translocate their clothing to...hopefully somewhere else in his apartment, this time.

“Fuck,” Dean says. “You need to teach me that trick.” He shuffles forward, shoving Cas’ knees aside so he can kneel between them, and takes in Castiel’s naked body in a long, hungry look. “Wanna make you feel so good, Cas,” he murmurs, and all Castiel can do is watch as Dean grabs the base of Castiel’s erection and licks a long stripe up the underside.

He manages to choke out a “oh god, Dean” as Dean wraps his mouth around him and takes his whole length into his throat. As he starts to bob up and down, he grabs Castiel’s balls and pulls them down gently, the mild pain sending a further jolt of pleasure through Castiel.

Nothing he’s dreamed so far could prepare him for the actual real sensation of having Dean suck his cock. He somehow manages to get just the right pressure on his head, while pumping the base with his hand. Castiel already feels the heat pooling in his core as he gasps out Dean’s name again.

Dean hums appreciatively as Castiel moans his approval and the vibration in Dean’s throat makes Castiel buck his hips into Dean’s face involuntarily. Dean makes noise again, sounding wrecked, and Castiel tries thrusting forward again, one hand on the side of Dean’s face to reassure him.

The sight of his cock disappearing in and out of Dean’s stretched lips is enough to send him perilously close to the edge, and he pants out, “Dean, I’m… I’m gonna…”

Dean pops off the end of Castiel’s cock, and as he rocks back, Castiel can see he’s been stroking his own, just below his line of sight. Dean just watches as he pumps Castiel a few more times, and Castiel lets go, closing his eyes and moaning loudly as the orgasm rocks through him.

When he can finally open his eyes again, he sees Dean getting to his feet, sticky mess on his chest. He pumps one strong hand along his length as he stands in front of Castiel, breathing hard.

Castiel looks up and grabs Dean’s thigh, the other reaching between Dean’s legs to rub along the smooth skin behind his balls. “Come, Dean,” he says, and Dean does with a cry, thick white spurting all over Castiel’s chest and stomach in return. Dean stands there, pumping through his orgasm, until finally he opens his eyes and smiles down at Castiel. He carefully slumps into the chair next to him, one hand falling onto Castiel’s thigh.

They look at each other, smiling almost shyly, until Dean regains his breath enough to say, “That was so much better than a dream.”

Castiel is just opening his mouth to agree when there’s a loud buzzing against the table. Castiel looks down at his phone, wondering who the hell could be calling at this hour. Surely it’s too late for Meg to be… His thoughts are derailed when he sees the name on the screen, and he snatches it up, momentarily glad his hands are still mostly clean.

“Gabriel?” he answers.
“Hey, bro,” his brother says. Loud background noise makes it sound like he’s in a bar or a club.

“Well are you?” Castiel asks. “It’s late—”

“Yeah, yeah. I just wanted to tell you that I’m in SF for a week or so. Thought I’d come see you for Christmas.”

“What, now?” Castiel asks, looking down at the drying mess on his chest, and his naked boyfriend sitting beside him, staring at him questioningly. Dean leans forward to grab the napkins left over from their dinner and starts mopping up the mess on his own chest and stomach.

Gabriel scoffs. “No, doofus, it’s like, midnight. Tomorrow? Y’know, Christmas Day?”

“Oh!” Castiel says, relieved for a moment, until he remembers that tomorrow he’ll have not only Dean here, but Sam, Charlie, and Dorothy as well. Does he really want to inflict Gabriel on all of his friends at once? Will they have enough to eat? It’s too late to head out to get more now. “Yes, sure, that’ll be great,” he replies, anxiety settling in his chest.

“Okay, bud. Can you text me your address?”

“Sure. See you then.”

Castiel hangs up, feeling a little shell-shocked. “My brother is coming for lunch tomorrow.”

Dean looks surprised as he hands over the remaining napkins. “Your brother? I didn’t know you had one.”

“No, I guess I haven’t mentioned him. Gabriel lives in New York, runs a magic shop there, kind of like Bobby’s.” Castiel sits back, lost in thought. Why did Gabriel suddenly want to see him? It’s not like they really kept in contact much while he was in England, other than the usual liking each others posts on Facebook and birthday texts. Kind of like he and Meg have been reduced to, lately. Their last conversation was weeks ago, after he and Dean had first got together, and he’s barely heard from her since apart from the occasional text exchange.

Dean leaned in to kiss him gently on the cheek. “Come on, let’s get cleaned up. We’ve still got one more movie to watch tonight.”

He stands up, pulling Castiel to his feet, and leads him away towards the bathroom.

Castiel isn’t sure he wants to sit through two more hours of cheesy acting and religious overtones, but he’s pretty Harrison Ford is the main reason Dean loves watching them so much. “Dean?” he asks, “Why does Chewbacca hang around with Han, anyway?”

“Have you seen the guy?” Dean asks, turning back to grin at him as they reach the bathroom door.

Yep, Castiel guessed right.

“I didn’t pick you for liking the furry type,” he says, grinning back, and earns a shove in the shoulder in return.

On Christmas morning Dean rolls over early, his mind already cataloging all the various tasks he
needs to begin so Christmas lunch will be ready on time. He stares up at Castiel’s ceiling as he makes a mental list—marinate the roast, peel the potatoes, chop the veggies—more focused on his to-do list than the realization that it’s officially a holiday. His practical thoughts are disrupted, though, when he feels Castiel stir beside him, turning over in bed and drawing Dean close to him in the darkness. Castiel is still fast asleep, humming quietly in his throat as his grip tightens around Dean bare skin. Dean really should get up, should head to the bathroom first and then the kitchen, should cast a few helpful spells to get the prep work moving along. But he doesn’t want to let any of these moments go, wants to hoard them and remember them in case there’s ever a day Cas doesn’t want to hold him anymore. The thought alone is depressing as hell and Dean chastises himself for even entertaining it, on freaking Christmas of all days, and lets his sleepy boyfriend draw him in. His head falls into the hollow warmth of Cas’ neck, and he sighs into the air and grins stupidly. He’s never spent a holiday with a significant other before, not like this at least, not as a true couple. The feeling of waking up together, of sharing this day from start to finish, makes Dean’s heart feel more full than he ever thought possible.

It’s Christmas and he’s in love.

The thought startles him, his breathing suddenly uneven. Shit, they’ve only been dating a few weeks, he can’t be…he couldn’t have already fallen…

In the midst of his panic, he somehow remembers that Castiel already dropped the big “L” word. A few days ago, in fact, and Dean is still processing. But he’d been drunk as a skunk, so can Dean really count that? He’s not sure if Cas is the kind of drunk to be spouting off nonsense—maybe he would’ve told anyone he loved them that night, because whatever the hell spelled alcohol Jo had supplied him with made him all lovey dovey. Or maybe the whole, “drunk words, sober thoughts” adage applies here, and Cas’ feelings are real…just like Dean’s?

Jesus, no time like Christmas day for a complete freak out. Dean steels himself, suppressing this whole train of thought for a day and a time when he can think through it more clearly, ‘cause yeah…that roast won’t prepare itself. He pulls himself from the warmth of Castiel’s arms with a regretful frown, but can’t help himself and plants a small kiss on his forehead before hitting the head. He slips on some loose-fitting sweatpants, and the first order of business after that is coffee. Dean finds it endearing that Cas has an actual coffee pot instead of those annoying keurigs. It occurs to him belatedly that he should’ve grabbed a shirt, because his torso is cold, so he goes to Cas’ laundry room and borrows an Oxford sweatshirt. It smells like him, or at least, smells like his detergent—floral and bright—and Dean grins to himself without wanting to acknowledge why.

The next few hours pass in a peaceful sort of rhythm. The Christmas tree in the corner glows with soft yellow light, a sight that makes him feel warm all over. Dean loves cooking, the creativity and consistency and domesticity…though that last part he would never admit out loud. Even though their lunch is a potluck, he’s making enough food for their group of seven and then some. Around nine o’clock he gets a phone call from Bobby, who’s back in South Dakota visiting his late wife’s family, and after an exchange of “Merry Christmas” they chat casually for a few minutes. He tells Bobby that he’ll work the front counter of the magic shop for the rest of the week, so he can extend his trip a few days, and they both pretend that when Bobby says, “Thank you, son,” that it doesn’t make Dean’s voice shake a little. Bobby’s family, the dad he and Sammy never really got to have, and as fucked up as it is to lose both of his parents so early, Dean knows he’s lucky for the family he has now. As if to reinforce this thought, he’s reminded of it again thirty minutes later, when Ellen calls and scolds him for not calling her first. He chuckles and apologizes half-heartedly, wondering if her and Jo’s yearly trip to visit Bill’s grave will ever stop making him feel sad. But Ellen sounds strong and cheery, and he can hear Jo in the background yelling, “Merry Christmas, asshole! Hope you’re not still mad at me!”
Almost immediately Ellen scoffs into the receiver and says, “Joanna Beth!”

Dean laughs, his hands soapy from washing dishes. He knows he could magic them clean, but he’s got most of his food prepped now and he likes to keep his hands busy. “Tell her I said all’s forgiven, but just ‘cause it’s Christmas.”

“What’d she do to you, anyways?” Ellen asks curiously. Dean hears Jo responding too, but her voice is too quiet now to hear.

“Got my boyfriend drunk off his ass,” Dean says self-righteously. It’s only after he’s finished speaking that he realizes… “Uh, I mean…y’know, Cas’n me are…I haven’t told you yet, but—”

“Boy, don’t act like it’s some secret,” Ellen says fiercely. “You’ve been datin’ that man since the moment you brought him into my bar, and neither of you can tell me different.”

Dean’s eyebrows raise, knowing that’s certainly not the truth. Though he did have feelings for Cas back then, there’s no use denying it. Truthfully, his instant attraction developed into feelings the moment he learned the sexy, no-nonsense Dr. Novak was also the kind and adorable Cas. His boyfriend is kinda the perfect human—badass and smart and sweet and hot as hell.

“Yeah, well, keep it to yourself. Jo too—no blabbing, got it? Cas could get into trouble.” He’s not sure if that’s totally accurate, but Cas wants them to keep a low profile on-campus, so he’d rather err on the side of caution. Now that Ellen officially knows, though, he reckons everyone important in his life is up to speed. Bobby found out pretty quickly since Cas is always trekking through the magic shop to find Dean. Benny apparently got the news from Ash (who got it from Jo), and Dean told Charlie and Sam himself that day at breakfast. He wonders who all Cas has told. They only agreed to keep it a secret at Stanford, so he’s probably mentioned Dean to most of his family and friends by now.

“You listenin’ to me, boy?” Ellen asks, and Dean scrubs a hand against his face, shaken from his thoughts.

“Uh, sorry. This roast is giving me trouble,” he says. They hang up shortly after that, Ellen promising to give Sam a call and hassle him about Ruby, which makes Dean secretly gleeful. He’s pretty sure his brother has invited his shady ass girlfriend along to lunch today, which he agreed to against his better judgment. He’s gotta play nice with Sam for now, but when the spring semester starts he fully intends to talk to Pam. Maybe she’s got intel that could be useful in proving Ruby is about as trustworthy as a worn tire.

He’s sliding the roast into the oven, setting the timer for four hours, when he hears the patter of Cas’ feet against the tile. He shuts the oven door and spins around, the customary “Merry Christmas” greeting on his lips, when Castiel collides against him, pushing him against the kitchen counter and kissing the breath out of him. It makes Dean a little dizzy—one minute he’s completely alone, the next, Cas has his hands on Dean’s waist and is lifting him onto the kitchen counter with little effort. Dean widens the space between his knees and Castiel leans in closer, lips traveling down Dean’s chin and neck, hand slipping underneath the borrowed sweatshirt and itching closer to Dean’s nipples in a way that makes his heart race.

“Shit, babe,” Dean sighs, feeling his cock already twitching with interest, “if this is how you do holidays, I gotta say, this is gonna be the best Christmas ever.”

Dean’s hands slide around miles of bare skin, Castiel deliciously exposed in only his boxers, and the kiss deepens as Dean slinks his hands down lower. Cas is already hard, must’ve woken up hard and rolled over looking for Dean, and the thought of being wanted and desired makes Dean burn
with lust. He sucks Cas’ lower lip slow and sensual and then gropes for the front flap of his boyfriend’s boxers, being anything but shy as he pulls his cock through the open flap and begins to stroke his erection.

Castiel moans and steps back minutely, just enough to give Dean’s hands space to work. “Dean, oh, Dean…”

Hearing his named uttered with such desperation, such reverence, makes a fire burn in Dean’s belly. He tightens his grip and uses his other hand to grab Cas’ neck, smashing their lips together again in a wet and forceful smack. Dean’s hand flies up and down, up and down, and though he’s hard too he’s not remotely concerned about getting off. He just wants to take care of Castiel, to make him pant and swear, to make him look at Dean the way he does in the afterglow—blissful, relaxed, full of something that looks a lot like love.

That’s when they hear a heavy knock on Cas’ front door, and Dean’s hand freezes, their lips hovering in mid-air.

“What…uh…” Dean isn’t even the one getting off right now and he still can’t seem to form coherent words. Damn, Cas really does something to him. “Who the hell is that?”

“On Christmas morning?” Castiel asks, as if that’s absurd, which…it definitely is. “Oh, actually, my neighbor said she might drop off a fruitcake.”

“Fruitcake?” Dean repeats, making a disgusted face that makes Castiel chuckle.

“It’s an acquired taste. But she’s really very sweet, would you mind…?” Castiel looks down at his leaking cock, held loosely in Dean’s fist, and mutters, “You’re dressed, and I can’t exactly answer the door like this, honey.”

“Why not? I think you look damn good,” Dean jokes with a flirty wink, and Cas gives him a peck on the lips. “Can’t we just let her think we’re sleeping?”

“Dean,” Castiel says in his admonishing tone of voice, and Dean sighs as he slips off the counter.

“Okay fine, I’ll grab the fruitcake,” he says, slapping Cas’ ass as he passes by. “But you better keep it up for me.”

“Never a problem when you’re around,” Castiel says, and Dean smiles and blushes pink. Christmas sex just might be the best sex, and they still have a few hours before their guests arrive, so maybe they can take some time together in the shower. Or the bed. Or the couch. Or, apparently, kitchen counter. Really, Dean is fine with any place as long as it involves a naked Castiel.

He shifts his sweatpants around, effectively hiding his semi, and cracks the door open. He expects to see a little old lady with a saran-wrapped bread loaf tin in her hand.

That is not who is standing on Cas’ front doorstep.

Instead he finds a brunette with long wavy hair, short with gorgeous pale skin, wearing a leather jacket and a sideways smirk.

“Dee-licious,” she says, checking Dean out openly and raising her eyebrows. “Can definitely see why Clarence switched teams for you.”

“You’re…” Dean blinks, head feeling fuzzy. He stares down at the suitcase perched beside her. He’s seen her before, but only in photos. “You’re Meg.”
“And you’re Dean.” In one fluid motion, she puts her hand on the outside of the door and pushes her way inside, dragging her rolling suitcase behind him. “At least I’m assuming. Would be really awkward if Clarence shouted some other dude’s name during phone sex.”

Dean shuts the front door with a dazed slam. “Uh, he…you…” He pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to think straight, because what the absolute hell is happening? “You and Cas had phone sex?”

“That was ages ago, Dean-o, don’t get your cute little boxers in a twist,” she says with a grin. She pushes her way down the hallway and towards the kitchen with long strides. “Where is that angel of mine—”

There’s a sudden clatter, and Dean recognizes it as one of the metal mixing bowls crashing to the kitchen floor. He runs up behind Castiel’s unexpected visitor—at least, he thinks she’s unexpected, because wouldn’t Cas have told him if his ex was dropping in from freaking England?—and nearly collides with her back. Castiel looks horrified, and Dean catches on immediately to what just happened. Cas hadn’t realized it was Meg coming into the kitchen, and hadn’t had time to whip his dick back into his boxers before…

“See you’re holding up nicely, Clarence,” Meg says appreciatively, as Cas’ hands fumble to cover himself.

“Hey,” Dean growls, everything snapping back into focus at the thought of Cas being ogled by anyone but him. “That’s my boyfriend!”

“Dean—” Castiel begins, his voice way too fucking calm for the situation, in Dean’s opinion.

“No, Cas, she can’t just come in here and act like she has the right to…to…”

“See the family jewels?” Meg winks at Dean and he glares at her, his eyes narrowing. When his face doesn’t soften, she looks back at Castiel. He’s thankfully tucked himself away now, but still exposed in just his boxers. His eyes keep blinking, staring between Dean and Meg. “You’ve got yourself a feisty one here, Clarence.”

“Dean is wonderful, actually,” Castiel says earnestly. “I don’t know what you’re doing here, Meg, but you’re being inappropriate and you know it. I’m thrilled to see you, but most people call ahead…”

Dean has mixed feelings about what Cas just said—mostly the “thrilled to see you” part is causing a dry lump to form in his throat—but the rest of that sentence seems pretty damn reasonable. Meg’s face goes soft for a moment, and she leaves her suitcase by the counter and uncrosses her arms. “I came to surprise you,” she says, fingers touching Cas’ elbows. “Gabriel told me you were hosting a little Christmas lunch, and said you’d be happy to see me.”

Guilt is evident on Castiel’s face as he purses his lips, wondering what to say next. Finally, he opens his arms and pulls her into a brief hug, which she lengths by wrapping her arms around his neck. Dean clears his throat and looks away, anger simmering at the thought of his boyfriend hugging his ex-girlfriend who, incidentally, just saw his dick. What the fuck…

“I am happy to see you,” Castiel confirms, pulling away. “But next time, please call?”

Or just don’t come at all, Dean thinks sullenly. Seriously, though, who the hell stays friends with their exes? And what the fuck did she mean about the two of them having phone sex but Cas saying Dean’s name?
“Whatever you want, Clarence,” Meg says toothily. She runs her hand over Cas’ bicep, and Dean is about two seconds from ripping her head off when she says, “Damn, you didn’t tell me you were bonded.”

Dean and Cas’ eyes find each other, wide and searching. “I…I’m not sure,” Castiel admits.

Meg reaches down and yanks at Dean’s hand. He flinches, but she makes contact long enough to say, “Yep, I can feel your magic flowing through him. That’s some deep shit, right there. When were you gonna introduce me to your magic boy toy?”

Dean crosses his arms, resenting the casual term when he’s definitely more than Cas’ toy. He loves this man, for god’s sake. And—shit, there it is again. The nauseous panic. He can’t afford to think about this right now, or about the fact that Meg thinks they’re bonded. He’s been pointedly avoiding that subject—it’s way too far-fetched to think Cas would hitch his horse to Dean’s wagon, conscious or not.

“I’ll introduce you right now. This is my boyfriend, Dean Winchester,” Cas says, stretching his arm out and pulling Dean to him. Dean goes unwillingly, not even trying to hide that he’s in a bad fucking mood, but just being touched by Cas eases some of the tension inside him. He tries to calm himself down by thinking: *Cas chose you even though it’s complicated, even though it’s his first time with a dude, he wants you. You’re not just anyone to him.* “He’s a master’s student specializing in Mechanical Engineering with a concentration in Spell Deconstruction. He’s quite brilliant—he can break down just about any spell you throw at him. Not to mention he’s incredibly caring and thoughtful. I’m very lucky.”

Castiel brings Dean’s hands to his lips and kisses the back of it, a reassuring little peck that he rubs in with his thumb, and some of Dean’s anger fades into the background. Cas is obviously trying to win him over again, and embarrassing as it is, Dean is putty in his hands. He kisses the corner of Cas’ mouth, not caring that Meg is watching them with raised eyebrows. If she wants to bust in on Cas unannounced, then Dean’s gonna pretend like she’s not even fucking here. Well, except for the part where Castiel is still wearing only boxers…

“Oh, babe, why don’t you go get dressed,” Dean says softly, hand on the small of Cas’ back. His eyes land back onto Meg, staring her down openly, attempting to convey that her surprise reappearance in Cas’ life doesn’t bother him in the slightest. “I’ll pour your friend some coffee.”

Castiel closes the bedroom door behind him and slumps onto the bed, his face in his hands. Meg’s visit isn’t exactly unwelcome—it’s been six months since he’s seen her, after all. It’s just for her to show up unannounced like this, and while he and Dean had been sharing their Christmas morning, nonetheless… Well, it’s the most on-brand thing he’s seen Meg do in quite a while.

He rubs at his face gingerly, then gets up to throw on jeans and a t-shirt, layering a blue sweater over the top. He dreads to think what’s going on out there between Dean and Meg, but he really hopes they’re being civil to each other or this day is going to be unbearably long.

When did Gabriel start talking to Meg, anyway? As far as he knew they’d only met a few times, when Gabriel had come to visit him in Oxford. He guesses they must have hit it off better than he’d realized.

Opening the door a crack, he can’t see any obvious signs of magical warfare, so he takes a deep
breath and heads back out into the living room. Meg stands by the bookshelf, perusing the shelves—she looks over as he walks in.

“What, no matching Christmas sweaters? I’m disappointed, Clarence,” she says, smirking.

“Meg,” he says, rolling his eyes. He smiles, saying, “I’m really am glad to see you.”

She crosses the room to him and takes one of his hands, squeezing it, her touch sending a familiar buzz through him. They hadn't cast a lot of magic together while he'd been at Oxford—they'd always shared affinity to a degree, but after having cast with Dean, what he shared with Meg was barely a candle flicker. She smiles up at him…until a cleared throat from the kitchen door startles them both and they turn to see a disgruntled Dean standing in the doorway.

“Cas, can you help me with something for a sec?” he says, then disappears out of sight.

Castiel steps away from Meg. “Be nice,” he pleads quietly.


“No, he just…he was here last night and he…” He stops, mentally regrouping. “It doesn’t matter anyway. Just stay out here for a few minutes, okay?”

“Fine,” Meg says, turning back to the bookshelf.

Castiel heads into the kitchen to see Dean standing, leaning against the counter with a thundercloud hanging over his head.

Castiel begins, "Dean, I'm sorry, I—"

"Did you know she was coming?" Dean interrupts, his hostility taking Castiel by surprise.

"No, I had no idea! I…" He checks himself as he goes through what he can remember of their last text conversation. Meg had said she'd been missing him, and had mentioned needing to come home for some reason, but surely she hadn't come all the way to California just to see him. He reaches out to take Dean's hand, sending a smooth flow of energy between them in what he hopes is a calming gesture. "I'm as surprised as you are, believe me," he murmurs.

Dean wilts slightly, leaning forward to rest his forehead on Castiel’s shoulder. "It's just so early. I didn't even get to give you your present."

The frown in his voice makes Castiel's heart melt. He brings Dean's hand up to his mouth to place a kiss on his knuckles. "I've got something for you too. Let's leave it until later tonight, okay? After everyone's gone?"

Dean lifts his head and Castiel takes the opportunity to kiss him gently. "I know it's early, but just give her a chance, okay?"

"Fine," Dean says shortly, sounding like it isn't.

Castiel eyes him as he steps away, grabbing two mugs of coffee and inclines his head to the third. "That's yours," Dean says as he heads for the door.

Castiel sighs, rolling his eyes. This really is going to be a long day.

In the living room, Dean hands Meg the coffee. “You’ve been making him watch Star Wars?” she
asks, one eyebrow arched in disdain.

“Yep. Something wrong with that?” Dean perches on the armchair on the other side of the room, as Castiel warily sits on the couch with Meg.

Meg says lightly, "Not at all. You gonna get him onto Frozen next?"

Dean bristles. "First of all, he hadn’t seen it before. Second of all, shut up? The Star Wars movies are classics."

Meg’s look is flat and unimpressed. “I’m more of a Trekkie,” she says, then sips at her coffee.

Dean throws Castiel a look that clearly says, Is she for real?

"So, Meg," he says, hurrying to fill the awkward silence, "how long are you in town for?"

"Oh, I'm moving back to the states. Guess I missed you too much." She eyes Castiel over the rim of her mug.

She… Did she just…?

Castiel is aware of Dean saying, "What?" and his own reaction isn't much different. He'd assumed that when he'd told Meg about his job at Stanford that she'd move with him, that they'd be together here. But she'd broken his heart by telling him her future was in Oxford. Did she really think that he would just welcome her back with open arms? Besides, she’s known about Dean for weeks.

"Meg, I—" he begins.

"Kidding!" Meg says, grinning widely, then rolls her eyes. "God, your face!" She sits back in the couch, delighted. "No, I'm stuck in Oxford now—I'll head back next week, after I visit my dear old dad. Besides, I would never want to ruin your little thing you've got going on." Her eyes flick between Dean and Castiel.

Castiel’s heart races in his chest, anger, sadness, and disbelief warring for a place in the front of his mind. He looks to Dean, unable to form words just yet.

Dean is staring flatly at Meg. He gets up without even looking at Castiel, muttering, "Got to get the potatoes on," as he heads back to the kitchen.

Castiel watches him go. He should follow him, make sure he's okay, but when his eyes return to Meg, the anger wins out.

He tries to keep a lid on it as he says, "Meg, what are you doing?"

Meg's gaze turns innocent. "What? Bit of teasing never hurt anyone."

Castiel grits his teeth. "I disagree. This whole thing with Dean and I? It's all still pretty new, so I'd appreciate if you could just—"

"Okay, okay!" Meg holds up her hands. "I can be civil, if he can."

"Dean is a good man. And I know you two could get along, so please…try?" Castiel really hope they can bury the hatchet because things are going to get very awkward if they don't.

"Okay, I'll try for you, Clarence." She drinks more of her coffee while Castiel considers how best to approach Dean, when Meg asks, "How long have you two been bonded?"
Castiel blinks at her. Is this her problem? That he's ditched her and ended up bonded to someone else?

"I...I don't think there was a specific time, we just sort of grew into it as we cast together. Dean isn't convinced—he thinks it's just a strong affinity."

Meg laughs. "Oh no, I've met bonded pairs, even groups, and their magic is all bound up together. You two must make quite the formidable team when you're casting together."

Castiel can't help but smile at that. "We are, yeah."

Meg's expression is odd, like she's about to say something but thinks better of it. "Tell me how I can help."

"Help?" Castiel's pretty sure he and Dean don't need help with casting—they do a pretty amazing job of it alone.

"With lunch? You got decorations to put up or anything?" Meg glances at the tiny tree on the coffee table.

Oh. Castiel fights down a blush again as he gets back to his feet. "I'll go see where Dean's up to and we can get organized. Just make yourself at home."

"Sure, I'll reacquaint myself with your shelves," Meg says, grinning.

Castiel steps into the kitchen, his magic on high alert as he senses Dean's irritation. He's seen Dean angry before, of course, but this time, the sharpness of it is almost uncomfortable against his senses. He stands at the sink, peeling potatoes with a scowl.

"Dean?" Castiel begins.

Before he can say any more, Dean says forcefully, but under his breath, "I'm sorry, Cas. I know she's been your friend for years, but if she thinks she can come in here and talk like that to you, to us, well..." he huffs, potato peels thunking into the sink with force.

"I know, I'm sorry." Castiel risks putting a hand on Dean's shoulder and sending calm into him. In return, he feels a spike of his heart rate, the irritation prickling over his skin. He snatches his hand away in surprise, and Dean turns to look at him, eyebrows raised.

"What did you do?" Dean asks. He seems calmer now, his energy less agitated.

Castiel spreads his hands, at a loss. "Nothing! It seems we...evened each other out, I guess."

Dean frowns, then says, "I'm still pissed. But maybe I don't need to punch anything anymore."

Castiel huffs a surprised laugh, then leans in to plant a kiss on Dean's cheek as he goes back to his potatoes.

Over the next two hours, Castiel drags Meg into helping set up his dining table and a folding card table that Bobby had loaned them into enough room for eight people to sit at. Castiel really hoped there wouldn't be any other surprise visitors, because Charlie and Dorothy were already bringing extra chairs and he wasn't sure if even that would be enough for everyone. They set the table with all the crockery and cutlery Castiel owns, and Meg tells him all about her students in Oxford and what her colleagues have been up to since Castiel left. He feels a pang of nostalgia as she speaks, but he doesn't regret the choices that led him here. That led him to meet Dean.
Dean, for his part, stays out of their way in the kitchen, working hard on getting lunch prepared. Castiel isn’t surprised when there’s a knock on the door and Charlie and Dorothy arrive an hour earlier than they’d said they’d come—Dean must have called Charlie to rescue him from the tension in the apartment.

Their arrival makes things a party, and soon there’s music playing and gifts changing hands, and Castiel is surrounded by more friends than he has been in years. It’s a wonderful feeling, despite the still-simmering hostility between Dean and Meg, thankfully quiet for now.

The next person he opens the door to is Gabriel, and Castiel’s heart swells to see his brother.

“Cassie! Long time no see, right?” Gabriel hugs Castiel awkwardly with his arms full of a huge bowl of candy canes and wrapped chocolates, then surveys the room as Castiel closes the door behind him. “Well hello! The party can now begin. Ahh, here’s my favorite friend,” he says, crossing to where Meg is standing and kissing her on the cheek, then hugging her warmly. “Happy holidays, and all that.”

“Gabriel, these are my friends, Charlie and Dorothy,” Castiel says, pausing as the two girls wave from their spot on the couch, “and my boyfriend, Dean.”

Gabriel turns back to Castiel in a dramatic spin, then takes a long look at Dean where he's standing at the kitchen door. "Boyfriend, huh? Guess my baby bro left out a few details…”

Castiel grimaces—he hasn’t really wanted to come out in the phone to anyone, last of all his family. "Yes, boyfriend," he repeats firmly, daring Gabriel to comment.

But he doesn't. Gabriel steps towards Dean, holding out his hand. "Nice to meet ya, Dean-o. Merry Christmas."

Dean glances towards Castiel, but shakes his hand and murmurs, "Likewise."

It’s obvious that Dean isn’t pleased with this development, and Castiel hopes he can smooth things over later. Thankfully Gabriel doesn’t seem at all startled by the news, just looks around the room and says, “So what’s there to drink in this college town?”

Castiel heads for the kitchen and comes back with beers, only to find Sam has arrived as well, Ruby standing behind him. Another round of drinks and gifts, and it’s almost time to eat.

Castiel heads back into the kitchen to pull serving dishes out of his cupboards. He had only bought these dishes last week during a pre-Christmas sale—he’s never fed so many people at once before. Good thing he got the larger size. He stands up from his crouch beside the cupboard to see Ruby standing in the kitchen, a beer in her hand.

“You’re not old enough to be drinking that, are you?” he asks, reaching for the bottle.

Ruby pulls it back out of his reach. “Come on, Doctor Novak, just one for Christmas dinner?”

Castiel frowns. “You can call me Castiel, or Cas, if you like. We’re not at the university right now.”

“Sure,” Ruby says. “Nice place you got here. I didn’t know you had any other friends.” Before Castiel can protest, she continues, “Does Dean know the kind of people you’re working with outside of the college?”

Castiel’s stomach does a swan dive. “What?”
“I saw you at Crowley’s.” Ruby’s face is impassive, but her eyes are knowing, and Castiel is disturbed to realize it’s a little creepy.

But there had been a moment at Crowley’s offices last week when he’d seen someone duck around a corner, someone roughly the same height and coloring as Ruby. He’d dismissed it as his imagination at the time. He steps closer to her, nearly whispering, “So that was you. What were you doing there? I’m not sure it’s a safe place for undergrads to be.”

“Thanks for your concern, but I’m a big girl.” She smirks. “Just watch your step. Crowley’s got plans for you.”

“What plans?” Castiel asks, but Dean walks into the kitchen, interrupting them. Castiel steps back away from Ruby, and she pushes past Dean to head back out to the table.

Dean watches her go, then turns to Castiel, his eyes curious. “Everything okay?”

Castiel hesitates, not sure what to say. He needs to tell Dean about the lay magicians, and Crowley’s classes. There’s no way out of this, especially if Ruby is involved—this is the proof Dean wanted to get Sam away from her. But it’s going to take more explaining than they have time for right now.

“It’s fine. I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Sorta like you told your brother about us?” Dean’s voice is level and cool, but his words are laced with barely concealed hurt.

“That was not on purpose, I swear,” Castiel whispers, sounding desperate. “We don’t keep in touch very well, and I wanted to tell him in person. That’s all.”

“Okay then,” Dean says, not looking convinced, but Castiel steps aside to let Dean open the oven and take out the potatoes, crisp and golden. The smell alone makes his mouth water, and he puts a reassuring hand on Dean’s shoulder. “I’ll sort those out.” The serving dishes are already out on the counter, and he makes quick work of loading them with vegetables while Dean finishes preparing the roast, not saying anything further. He wants nothing more than to kiss the troubled look from Dean’s face, but instead, he hurries out to the table to start serving their meal.

Chapter End Notes

Are you shaking your head at our boys? Who are you more angry with…Meg? Gabriel? Ruby? Cas?

Come tell us in the comments!

Then, go read TrenchcoatBaby’s latest FicFacers story, Tennessee Whiskey for some country music deliciousness.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Hey, Ellen here to welcome you to chapter 21. Thanks for all your indignation over last week's chapter! We are fueled by your rage, uh, I mean, your love for this story. Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean is humble enough to say it.

His roast is fucking awesome.

He got the temperature just right, which is half the battle in his opinion. He slices into the juicy hunk of meat and whistles appreciatively, catching an amused glance from Charlie. She and Dorothy are sitting across the table from him, next to Sam and Ruby, who are having some sort of whispered conversation that Dean’s trying not to roll his eyes at. Gabriel is at the head of the table, where Dean had planned to sit before he noticed Meg trying to plop down beside Castiel. He had swerved in then, squishing himself between them. He might be mad right now, but he has zero intention of letting Cas’ rude, imposing, scary ex-girlfriend put the moves on what’s his.

Mostly, he’s looking forward to getting Castiel alone—he’s got about a zillion grievances working their way through his head right now. Still, he stretches his arm on the back of Cas’ chair, rubbing his shoulder. Castiel smiles at him but it doesn’t light up his face, not like it usually does. He’s stressed, that much is obvious, and Dean wants to comfort him and argue with him and push him against the nearest surface and kiss him furiously.

Being in a relationship is weird, that’s for damn sure.

“Think we got enough food here for twelve Christmases,” Charlie comments, and everyone murmurs in agreement. They’re passing around each dish like a conveyor belt, Dean’s plate already filled with various casseroles and potato dishes.

But the meat—the meat is what he’s here for.

He uses a speared serving fork to section off a large chunk, and drops it onto his plate with a satisfied grin. He licks his fingers, humming in giddy appreciation, and Cas slides a hand onto his kneecap.

“You plan to pass that down here at some point?” Sam jokes in his direction, spooning roasted brussel sprouts onto his plate.

“Gimme a minute,” Dean grumbles, though he’s already picking up the platter and passing it to Cas. “And watch those greens, Sammy. You’n me both know what we’re in for in an hour. Two, tops.”

“Ew,” Ruby says, gaze split between Dean and Sam with equal disdain.

“Fart jokes at the table?” Gabriel’s plate is strangely empty—he mentioned something earlier about saving his appetite for dessert. “This is my kinda Christmas, Cassie. You should’ve started
boinking guys a long time ago.”

Dean turns to Castiel, whose face is slack, expression blank with irritation. “Gabriel, I’d appreciate if you didn’t refer to my relationship with Dean as ‘boinking.’”

Dean can’t help it—he laughs. Loudly. He doesn’t mean to, but between Meg’s surprise arrival and Gabriel’s total ignorance of Cas’ newfound gay status, Dean’s been wound tight the past few hours. The rest of the group laughs a little too, probably because they haven’t heard the word “boinking” used so much in quick succession. Dean takes a long sip of his beer, exhaling against the mouth of the bottle.

“Fine.” Gabriel crosses his arms, his mouth comically pursued. He eyes the platter of roast still in Cas’ hands, and says in a sweet voice, “Castiel, would you mind passing me your boyfriend’s meat?”

“Oh, Christ,” Dean says.

“Gabriel.” Castiel’s eyes are squinting, his cheekbones high, his neck tense. “Do you plan to do this all day?”

“Depends…what’s for dessert?” Gabriel grins impishly, winking at Dean.

“Cas, it’s okay. It’s funny.” Dean nudges his boyfriend’s elbow, and Castiel rolls his eyes. “Gabriel said something funny? I must’ve missed it,” he says dryly.

“We all know the funniest Novak is your cousin, Duma,” Meg comments, inserting herself into the conversation. “Well, wait, maybe we don’t all know… You haven’t met any of the Novaks, have you, Dean-o?”

Dean’s jaw tightens. He downs the rest of his beer before answering. “Nope.”

“What am I? Chopped liver?” Gabriel takes a large gulp of some alcoholic drink that’s a dangerous shade of pink. Dean’s pretty sure one sip of that would put him in a diabetic coma.

“Yes,” Castiel deadpans at his brother. He looks back at Dean, his gaze softening. “I’d love for you to meet my family one day, but you know they aren’t the type to stay in touch. They only visited me at Oxford once.”

“Mom and Pop aren’t what you would call…well, ‘parents,’” Gabriel says bluntly. “Think their paternal and maternal instincts got lost in the mail.”

Dean leans forward, interested as he slides a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth. He’s never heard Cas talk about his family, not quite like this, and Dean wonders what sort of things he could learn just from hanging around Gabriel for a few hours.

“Well, they liked me,” Meg brags.

“Don’t we all,” Dean grumbles sarcastically, clearing his throat and picking up his fork again.

“At least your parents are still kicking,” Charlie points out, looking at Gabriel and Castiel with a shrug. “The rest of us have formed a little orphan club.”

Dean frowns into his beer—Charlie’s mom has been in a coma for as long as he’s known her. Her dad was just another missing deadbeat, his track record dangerously similar to the late John
“Oh…” Castiel tilts his head, looking shamefaced at this development. “I apologize if we—ow!”

“Sorry, but I have a strict ‘don’t pity me’ policy,” Charlie says with a grin, while Cas reaches down to rub at his kicked shin. Dean had half-expected this reaction, though, and chuckles under his breath. Still grinning, Charlie continues, “So, your parents are MIA, Dorothy’s were in a car crash, mine’s in a coma, and Sam and Dean…”

There’s an awkward pause where, apparently, they’re supposed to fill in the gap of their tragic little backstory. Sam and Dean exchange an unhappy glance, neither wanting to launch into that right now even though half of the table already knows.

“Shit.” Dean scratches the back of his neck. “I’ll be needing another beer if we’re havin’ this conversation.”

“This is getting depressing,” Ruby complains in Sam’s direction, just loud enough for the whole table to hear. For the first time, and probably the last time, Dean agrees with her.

“Who wants another beer?” He claps his hands together, and nearly everyone requests one (even Ruby, who he skips over immediately because, you know, drinking laws). Gabriel volunteers to help him cart beers to and from. The minute they walk through the threshold of the kitchen, Dean opens his mouth to say something small talky—maybe the weather, maybe ask about his trek from San Francisco. He’s interrupted, though, when Gabriel says suddenly, “Shame you can’t meet Anna.”

Evidently he’s continuing their group conversation from the dining room, which is cool with Dean. “Yeah,” he says in agreement. “I almost got to, but I chickened out at the last second and missed out.”

Gabriel wrinkles his eyebrows together. “Huh?”

“Our first date,” Dean says slowly, waiting for comprehension to dawn. Surely Cas has mentioned Anna’s visit to his other sibling, right? “Afterwards I walked Cas to his door, but didn’t come inside, and then Anna was—”

He shuts the fridge door with a definite thud, looking at Gabriel’s impatient expression. “Fuck, Cas wasn’t kidding, was he? You two really don’t talk.”

“We weren’t raised to.” Gabriel blinks, looking at Dean with a concentrated gaze. “Are you saying my super secretive, nomadic, AWOL sister paid Cassie a visit?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s pretty much the gist of it.”

“Great.” Gabriel sighs, eyelids fluttering. “She drag him into trouble?”

“No,” Dean says a bit too quickly, then adds, “I mean, not that I know of. She came and left. Cas was pretty shaken up about it, to be honest.”

“He would be.” Gabriel frowns, looking more serious than Dean’s seen him. “They have an affinity, you know. That makes you feel—weirdly connected.”

“Tell me about it,” Dean says with a snort. He thinks about how far he and Cas have come in just a few months—not only the spells they can cast with relative ease, but the way their magic has spun around each other, how their essence seems so closely entwined.
Dean begins popping tops off the beers, taking a sip of the closest one he decides to claim as his.

“You know much more than that,” Gabriel says smoothly.

“What’d you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” Gabriel says, an implication in his voice that Dean clearly isn’t getting. “Did you and Cassie bond before, or after, you boned?”

Dean spews beer. “What?” He’s not even gonna point out that they haven’t boned—not technically, at least. But hell if he’s gonna admit that to his boyfriend’s brother.

Gabriel rolls his eyes. “If you can’t feel the bond, you’re either dumb or insecure. Since my baby bro wouldn’t put a claim on a doofus, I’m thinking it’s the latter, right?”

Dean’s cheeks burn bright red. “I, uh…” He takes another sip of beer, this one long and measured. Finally, he says in a rush, “Cas is way too good for me.”

Gabriel takes a step back, looking floored. “Really?”

“Really,” Dean says firmly. “He’s…god, I don’t even know how to explain it.” He puts his beer back down, somehow needing both hands for this conversation. “Listen, have you ever looked at someone when they don’t know you’re looking? I don’t mean like, creeper status or something, but like—I dunno. Really looked at them. Say you get to the library and you see them reshelving books super carefully, with a nerdy sort of reverence that makes you smile. Or the look on their face when they pretend not to want any pie after dinner just so you can have the last slice. The way they don’t give you shit for snoring even though you know it wakes them up sometimes. How good it feels when they put their hand on your back when you’re walking in a crowd, like they can’t stand the thought of losing you…”

Dean trails off, his eyes glued to the floor with a wistfulness he can’t quite pinpoint. When he glances back up, Gabriel’s eyes are wide, and Dean clears his throat. “Jesus, sorry, I’m a lightweight today apparently. No idea what the fuck I’m rambling about.”

Silence passes between them that feels weighty and significant. Dean feels like he’s on the edge of admitting some things to Cas’ brother that he hasn’t even fully admitted to himself yet—but then Meg lets out a yell, something along the lines of you two better stop making out or Clarence might get jealous! The moment between them breaks, though Gabriel is still looking at Dean like he’s an organism he wants to slide under a microscope.

“You should tell him,” Gabriel says. He scoops up a handful of beers, and Dean doesn’t even have time to respond—all he’s looking at now is Gabriel’s back growing smaller as he walks away. He bites his lip, a nervous energy rippling through his veins, before following him back into the dining room.

The remainder of lunch passes more smoothly than it began, with Charlie and Dean leading the conversation by swapping embarrassing stories about each other from the first year of grad school. It’s only when Charlie tells her third, Dean-got-super-drunk-and-made-a-spectacle-of-himself story, that he leans into his chair, squirming uncomfortably. Sometimes he forgets how much he’s grown up this semester, how good of an influence Cas has been on making him a more responsible human. At first he was just a better student, trying to impress his thesis advisor. Now he naturally wants and expects better of himself so he can feel worthy of his boyfriend. It’s a peculiar thing to realize.
After lunch, Dean casts a quick hover charm and all the dirty plates float into the kitchen. There are plenty of spells to cast for cleaning, but putting away leftovers is still something Dean prefers to do by-hand. Castiel heads into the kitchen with him, opening a messy tupperware cabinet that reminds Dean of those cheesy infomercials him and Sammyn used to watch on basic cable. Do bulky storage containers set off an avalanche in your kitchen? Is finding a lid almost impossible? With Wow!Storage, turn any disaster into an organized master!

“What’s so funny?” Castiel asks, fumbling with a stack of lids with a frustrated glare.

“Nothing,” Dean says, looking around for a suitable spoon to scoop up the hominy casserole. Castiel gives him a curious head-tilt, though, and he says, “Just thinking about infomercials. Sammyn me watched a lot of bad TV back in the day.”

“Hmm. It’s nice that you have such fond memories with your brother,” Castiel says with a quiet nod. He abandons his task, eyeing the empty kitchen, and slides a hand in the dip of Dean’s back. Dean’s hands still instantly, feeling Cas’ magic buzzing under his skin. He experiences a warm rush of affection, and he’s not sure if it’s his feelings for Cas or Cas’ feelings for him. “Are you still angry with me?”

“It’s not fair to ask me that while you’re touching me,” Dean grumbles, and Castiel withdraws his hand and places it onto the counter instead. Dean misses the weight of his touch immediately, but he’s too proud to retract his statement.

“How about now?” Castiel says softly, staring down at the countertop. “Same question.”

“Sorta,” Dean admits. He listens for their guests—they seem to have gathered in the living room, likely sitting around the Christmas tree. Dean and Cas have a moment alone, but who knows how long that’ll last.

Castiel hovers closer to him, lips brushing his ear. “Too angry to kiss me?”

Dean’s heart pounds, conflicted. He wants very much to kiss him, and wants very much to stay self-righteously angry. He’s not sure which part of him will win out, but when Castiel pulls away and turns back to the useless pile of tupperware, Dean reaches for his wrist and tugs him backwards. Their lips meet with urgency that makes Castiel breathe out heavily, hands twisting in the back of Dean’s flannel as he pulls their bodies closer.

“Meg is a grade A bitch, y’know,” Dean says between kisses.

“She certainly has been today,” Castiel agrees, Dean pushing him against the edge of the countertop.

“You should’ve told your brother about me.” He sucks Cas’ lower lip into his mouth and his boyfriend shudders.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” Castiel lips his tongue between Dean’s parted lips and they both moan quietly.

“And—”

“Can we not talk about my ex and brother while making out?” Castiel grumbles out, seeking out his lips again, and it makes Dean chuckle, smiling against Cas’ mouth.

“Fine,” Dean whispers, lips traveling to Cas’ neck and nipping on his ear. “Would you rather talk about how, a few hours ago in this very spot, you put me up on the counter while I stroked your
“Cock?”

“Shit,” Castiel mutters, and Dean feels a growing hardness brush his thigh. Cas takes a step back, breathing laboriously, eyes pinched closed. It’s obvious that Cas wants to finish what they started hours ago, but with an apartment full of company, that’s not exactly an option. “That was a dirty play, Dean Winchester.”

“All’s fair in love and war,” Dean replies cheekily, enjoying seeing his buttoned-up boyfriend so hot and bothered. He feels immeasurably better, having gotten those irritations off his chest. Plus, being kissed by Cas always puts him in an excellent mood. He bends over and begins to load the dishwasher, putting his ass on display while he knows Cas is staying watching him closely, and he feels a hand groping his backside.

“You are infuriating,” Castiel whispers grumpily, and Dean laughs softly, pleased with himself. “I need to leave the kitchen before we end up in a compromising position.”

Dean pulls himself back up to his full height. He eyes Cas’ mouth, licks his lips, and flutters his eyelashes. “No idea what you mean.”

Castiel glares at him with open lust before turning slowly, walking stiffly back into the living room. Dean smiles smugly to himself as he continues to put away the leftovers.

They spend the rest of the afternoon drinking, chatting, and exchanging gifts. Dean watches Charlie unwrap her limited edition Star Wars Pez Dispensers, Sam a tome on the history of magical law-making, and Cas a card that just says Later. It’s not a promise for sex, or at least, that’s not what Dean had in mind when he sealed the envelope yesterday. Castiel flushes all the same, and Dean knocks their knees together and winks.

Dean and Dorothy are instructed to open a book together, which instantly makes Dean suspicious. He moves to sit beside her on the couch and they unwrap the box carefully, pulling out strange items—a canister of gourmet hot chocolate, fluffy socks, a pair of mittens.

“Someone gifted us…winter?” Dorothy jokes, and Dean shrugs, equally confused.

“Those are things you might want soon,” Charlie offers, looking at Cas and nodding in a conspiratorial way.

“Uh…” Dean looks at Cas, interest officially piqued. “You two wanna cut the foreplay?”

“Men,” Charlie sighs jokingly, with an eye roll. “Foreplay is the best part.”

Castiel’s voice is even, but Dean can hear the excitement simmering beneath his words as he announces, “You and me, and Charlie and Dorothy, will be spending a few nights on Big Bear Lake.”

“Separate cabins, obviously,” Charlie adds with a smirk as Dorothy blushes.

“What?” Dean says lamely, still processing. “Wait, Cas, you and Charlie…booked us a…?”

“Romantic getaway,” Charlie supplies, “over New Year’s.”

Dean grins, wide and awed. The San Bernardino National Forest has been on his California bucket list—he’s pretty sure Alpine Lake will be totally frozen, but even if he can’t go fishing, it counts—and he’s probably gonna suck at skiing, but he’ll be damned if he doesn’t try. His best friend will be nearby to hang out with, but most importantly, he’ll have a private cabin to wrap himself around
his boyfriend anytime he wants.

“Damn, this is…sorta the best gift ever.” He stands and walks to Castiel, who’s sitting in a spare chair pulled up from the dining room table. He tucks a hand under his chin and kisses him, short but sweet, trying to en fuse his gratitude into this kiss. “Thanks, babe.”

He’s never traveled with anyone but Sammy, but this is more of a vacation—a thing couples do, he realizes, his heart fluttering.

“You’re welcome,” Castiel says simply, hand squeezing Dean’s wrist as they stare at each other, smiling.

“Couples,” Gabriel grumbles.

“Hear hear,” Meg says, clinking their bottles of beer together. “Clarence, you’ve upped your game. We dated for a long time, and I’m pretty sure you only got me scarves.”

Dean’s been simmering with annoyance all day with Meg’s constant mentioning of their old relationship… but he’s so happy right now, he just snorts and grins gleefully. “Sorry for your luck,” he tells her, not even trying to keep the smugness out of his voice. Despite everything, today’s been a mostly good day, and Cas has been the biggest factor in that.

After presents, it takes no time for Charlie to seek out Castiel’s stack of board games, and they spend the rest of the afternoon engaged in a surprisingly cutthroat round of Monopoly. Three hours in, during a quick game-time intermission, Dean is closing the bathroom door behind him when he spots Castiel and Meg alone in the hallway, bodies tense as they trade angry whispers. Dean’s tempted to eavesdrop or interrupt, but he heads in the opposite direction instead, willing himself to trust Cas even when it’s difficult.

Eventually, Sam destroys them all in Monopoly… to absolutely no one’s surprise. Dean blames the combo of puppy dog eyes and a freaky smart math brain. When the sun starts setting, everyone heads for their shoes and coats, hugging Dean and Castiel goodbye with a litany of Merry Christmases on their lips. Gabriel and Meg leave together, which Dean quirks his eyebrows up at, but tries not to read too much into. Charlie and Dorothy stay the latest, excitedly plotting out their joint trip to the lake, down to the breakfast feasts Dean plans to serve each morning. It’s well-past eight o’clock by the time they leave, and when the door shuts for the last time, Dean and Castiel are holding each other instantly.

“Hi,” Dean whispers against his boyfriend’s skin, kissing his chin.

“Hello, Dean,” Castiel mumbles, hands low on Dean’s hips, lips brushing Dean’s neck. “How was your day?”

“Uh, you were here for all of it, weirdo,” Dean muses. “You should know.”

“I know, it’s just… You were upset earlier, and rightfully so. I feel terrible. I’m so sorry about Meg, and Gabriel, and—”

Dean interrupts the apology with a warm, wet kiss, brushing their lips together in a way he hopes is reassuring. He’s exhausted, socially worn-out, and the last thing he wants to do is rehash today’s events. He knows Cas is sorry, and staying mad at him takes more energy than just forgiving him.

When they break apart, Cas is a little breathless, chest panting. “Okay then,” he says, smiling shyly. “What shall we do now?”
“Now,” Dean begins, threading their fingers together and leading Cas backwards, “it’s time for your present.”

They head towards the bedroom without speaking, Dean’s stomach fluttering with nerves.

Castiel has to admit, it’s been a wild day.

Between Meg showing up unexpectedly, to Ruby’s cryptic comments, to Gabriel being his usual inappropriate self—it’s been a rollercoaster of a day, and he’s still not sure if Dean has forgiven him for not telling Gabriel about him already, although their kisses just now were a pretty good indication that they’re okay.

He’s still kind of furious with Meg, even if he was glad to see her this morning. She may have thought they’d parted friends when he left Oxford, but he’d been nursing his broken heart at the time, reluctant to burn bridges. That phone sex they’d had was a terrible idea, in hindsight, because it seems she’s had the wrong idea about their relationship. Before she’d left today, he’d had a quiet conversation with her where he’d told her to back off. She hadn’t taken it well, and he feels like they’ve got some work to do if they’re going to remain friends. Even so, it seems she’s still friendly enough with Gabriel to leave with him, so who knows what she’ll get up to next?

For now at least, Dean seems excited about the prospect of going away for the new year with Charlie and Dorothy, and as he leads Castiel into his bedroom, he’s certainly full of nervous excitement for whatever his gift is—he’s practically glowing with it.

"So, I got reading the *Profound Bond* book."

Castiel's heart skips a beat as Dean continues, "I know I was skeptical at first, but the book talks about a lot of things that we've been experiencing—y'know, casting affinity, the dreams…” He trails off, a shy smile joining a hint of color high on his cheeks. "It feels real, what we have."

A tightness in Castiel's throat prevents him from replying, but he nods as he reaches out to squeeze Dean's hand.

"The book has a whole section on talismans, like, objects that can channel another mage's power. Or your own, even." He leaned down to pull something out of the front pocket of the knapsack he’d brought clothes over in. "I know you said you could feel it when we're apart, so I figured we could try something out."

Castiel can barely breathe as Dean opens his fist to let something dangle from a leather cord. It's a metal pendant, maybe bronze, a horned head of some kind. As Castiel takes it in his palm, Dean says, "I found the attunement spell in one of your books, actually. The one you'd scribbled in?"

"Ah," Castiel says, sheepish. "The Peyersen Grimoire is outdated. I've found better methods for most of his stuff—"

"I noticed," Dean says, grinning. "He says you need a specially crafted metal object, but your note said anything with a connection to the caster would work. This thing—my dad gave it to me for one Christmas when I was just a kid and he was sober, for once." He gave a wry chuckle. "He said his dad had given it to him, like some kind of family heirloom or something."
Castiel looks down at the pendant, the metal gleaming. He closes his fingers over it and passes it back to Dean. "Dean, thank you, but if this is a family heirloom, I can't accept it."

"Sure you can. It's a gift—you keep those," he says, pushing Cas' fist back towards him. "Sides, it shows you I'm in this for the long game," he adds, looking down and fiddling with the edge of his shirt, color still in his cheeks.

Heart melting, Castiel puts his empty palm on Dean's cheek to lift his face. "Thank you," he murmurs, leaning in to place a soft kiss on Dean's lips. Dean leans into it, pulling Castiel closer by the shoulders. They trade long, sweet kisses to start with, but when Castiel pulls Dean to him, licking into his mouth, Dean stops him with a hand on his chest.

"Wait, don't you want to try the spell?" he asks, gasping.

Castiel just wants to taste Dean again. "No," he says, diving back in to kiss hungrily along Dean's jaw. He's already hard in his jeans, desperate to get out of them.

Dean moans, but pushes Castiel away with two hands this time. "Stop. Cas, I've been preparing for this all week. Let me do it now, okay?"

Castiel lets out a disappointed grunt. "Okay."

Dean grins, straightening his shirt. "Okay. Thank you."

Castiel holds the amulet out to Dean, but he just moves Castiel's hand so that the amulet is lying flat on his palm. Castiel says, “What can I do to help? It’s been a while since I read that grimoire.”

“Nothing, just hold still and lend me strength if I need it. I haven’t actually tried casting it yet,” Dean replies, sounding slightly nervous.

Castiel can’t help the apprehension that settles in his own stomach at Dean's admission. Thaumatechnology is a dangerous practice—he has faith that Dean can cast Castiel's own spells, but he’s learned from experience that things can go unexpectedly wrong.

He feels Dean drawing energy—it's like a crackling in the air, an itching in his own fingers to join in, surprising him with the compulsion.

Dean moves his fingers to create a container for the magic, then pours magic into it, his hands moving in a complex pattern that Castiel only vaguely recognizes. He moves his hand not holding the amulet, drawing a stream of his own magic and releasing it in the visualization spell he hasn't cast since they were last in the maze illusion.

Dean's spell lights up in a glowing, pulsing matrix, the container faint and silvery around the outside, but the attunement spell within is bright and golden. Dean gasps, his eyes meeting Castiel's briefly in delight.

But Castiel doesn't linger in Dean's gaze. He's drawn to the amulet—there's something there, whispers at the edges of his hearing. He wonders if he could draw the weird vibration out, or amplify it, perhaps.

Curious, he pulls together the elements with his left hand, trying to draw out the whispers.

A voice, barely a murmur, says, "Mary, I have something for you…"

Dean's spell collapses, and as Castiel looks up at his now white face, Dean says, "Dad?"
Castiel's eyes widen. He tries to strengthen his spell, but he's off-book here—he's never learned a spell to pull manifestations out of an inanimate object before. The voices are slippery and he struggles to hold onto the one they'd just heard, but then Dean lifts his hands and magic slams into Castiel's, and with a disorienting lurch, they're surrounded by a shifting, grey fog. He can't even see the walls of his bedroom anymore, or the bed that should be just behind where Dean is standing.

Incorporeal shapes move past Castiel and he looks behind him, trying to make out what he saw on the edge of his vision. "What…?" he murmurs, lost for words. Dean still stands in front of him, solid and real—Castiel wants to reach out to touch him, but he doesn't want to drop this new spell now, especially when Dean is staring at something over his shoulder, a heartbroken look on his face.

"What is it?" he asks Dean, continuing to move his hand, grasping the threads of magic between his thumb and middle finger to maintain the spell. When he turns to look behind him, he sees a man standing there—or at least the impression of a man.

"What is it?" a woman's voice echoes, the faint outline of her smiling face, the curve of a shoulder, appear facing the man.

"Mom…" Dean whispers, and Castiel glances back at him as a tear spills over and runs down Dean's cheek.

The man replies, "My dad gave it to me when I was a kid. Said it would bring me luck."

A movement in the mist shows the woman—Mary Winchester—move a hand to take the pendant from him. "Oh, thank you!" She pauses, then says, "This enchantment, it's—"

But whatever might have come after that is wrenched away as the illusion shifts, and Dean lets out a choked kind of sob.

Castiel longs to reach out to comfort Dean, but he can now see another man in Dean's father's place—a little shorter, the sharp lines of a suit taking form and shifting away again. He seems upset, angry even. "I can't believe they asked us to do it! How dare they? Continuing to restrict magic to just the university is ludicrous!"

"I know, but we have no choice!" A woman says nearby, her face invisible but her voice tight with worry. "They'll cut us all off if we don't put a Seal in place."

As Castiel turned to look at Dean in shock, Dean had just been wiping his face with one sleeve before continuing to mirror Castiel's casting. Dean says, "The Seal?" just as Castiel does, and they turn to look back at the indistinct man as he continues to speak.

"We can't let them, Josie. I'm going to add a back door."

The woman's face becomes visible for just a few moments as she says, "A what?"

"A way in to break this thing. Then you and I are going to create an illusion over the top that'll look impossible to any but us, and I'll come back once this has all blown over and break it all down."

Castiel watches as the man pulls up a shirt sleeve and cuts his forearm deeply with a knife, the dark, shadowy blood dripping out of sight.

The man and the knife swirl away into the mist, and before any other whispers can appear, Dean puts his hands around Castiel’s, saying, "Stop, Cas. I need…need to stop."
Castiel stills his hands, releasing the spell from around the amulet. The mist dissipates, and Dean collapses back onto the edge of the bed behind him.

Castiel moves forward, desperate to pull Dean into his arms, but unsure if Dean wants that right now.

Dean looks up, his eyes still wet. "I'm sorry… Cas, that was my mom and dad. How…how did you know to do that?"

Castiel sits down carefully on the bed beside him, putting his arm around Dean's shoulders when Dean leans into him. "I didn't really mean to, I just heard whispering. The amulet must be storing memories, I guess. I've heard it was possible, but I've never seen it done before."

Dean nods, wiping at his face again. "Fuck, sorry. I just…my mom died when I was four, and Christmas has always been a little rough on us."

Castiel winces. Today has already been so hard on Dean, and now he's made it worse? What the hell kind of a useless boyfriend is he? "Dean, I'm—"

"Don't apologize, it's fine. I was just surprised. And that was fucking incredible," he says, pulling back to look at Castiel. "Who were those others, though? With the Seal?"

Castiel lets out a breath, relieved. "I'm not sure. He called the woman Josie, didn't he?"

Dean nodded. "Think so, yeah. They were going to cast the illusion over the well…the maze illusion?"

Castiel shifts back onto the bed, crossing his legs. "Maybe. Remember how that book said the Seal was temporary? He said they were being made to cast it. I wonder what happened to the 'back door' he was talking about. Whatever it was it obviously didn’t work."

Dean looks down at the amulet, still cradled in Castiel's palm. "I didn’t get to finish casting the first spell. Should we try again?"

"Let's have a little break, okay?" Castiel still isn't sure he should be accepting an enchanted family heirloom as a Christmas gift, but as he thinks back over the illusion, something ticks over in his mind. "Your grandfather," he says. "What was his name?"

"Adam," Dean says, looking confused at the question.

"Oh, not Henry?" Castiel asks.

"Henry? I think that was Adam’s father’s name—my great-grandfather, I guess. How did you know that?"

Castiel pauses. Great-grandfather would fit the timeline for the Seal to be cast in 1912, actually. He’d only held back from telling Dean about Henry’s name in the book to not distract him from his thesis. But even with Ruby’s warning, he finds he’s still reluctant to reveal everything and get Dean involved with the lay magicians. If Ruby’s right, and Crowley is planning something, he needs to keep Dean as far away from it as he can. He’ll have to try to warn Sam away from Ruby some other way.

He says, "The 20th Century Magical Regulation book—when it spoke about the Seal, there was a list of names of the team involved in the research and design. One of the names was Henry Winchester."
Dean opens and closes his mouth, then says, “A Winchester was involved? And you’re only just telling me this now?” He frowns, looking hurt.

Castiel ducks his head. He has to start telling Dean the truth, but how much can he tell without drawing him into trouble? “I...you were in the middle of working on your thesis, and I didn’t want to distract you.”

Dean stares at him in disbelief. He says flatly, “Really. Anything else you’d like to share with me now that my thesis is written?”

Castiel pauses, mild panic flitting across his thoughts. He can’t reveal the lay magicians yet. Not until he works out what the hell Ruby was talking about. He shakes his head. “No. There are things happening—things that I don’t want to get anyone else mixed up in, especially you.” He drops his gaze, bracing for whatever reaction Dean might have.

Dean huffs. "Especially me? Cas, you don't have to protect me."

"I know, but—" he glances up again, "—I want to."

Dean is still for a moment, looking at Castiel, then glancing away. "I don't like that you're doing that, but I can respect it. I'd do the same."

This was…not what Castiel expected. He narrows his eyes slightly. Dean would do the same, or was he already doing the same? Was Dean also keeping something from him?

He began, "Dean, I—"

"Nope, It's fine, Cas. Your guy with the book, right?" When Castiel doesn't reply he continues, "Can we not fight about this now? At least we know something more about the Seal now, thanks to this." He taps Castiel's hand where he's still clutching the amulet.

Castiel looks down at the object in his palm as he opens his fist. He can let it slide for now. "I wonder if the maze illusion was Henry and Josie’s handiwork,” he murmurs.

“Yeah well, I guess we’ll never know. Unless there are more memories bound to this thing,” Dean huffs, gazing down at the amulet.

“We could try again?” Castiel asks, leaning over and placing a kiss on Dean's temple.

Dean shakes his head. "No, I don't think I can go through that again today." He takes in a shaky breath and lets it out again. "It was good to see them. Just...a lot."

He runs his hand down Castiel’s arm, linking their fingers together when he reaches Castiel’s hand.

Castiel picks up their joined hands and kisses the back of Dean's. "Thanks for spending Christmas with me, Dean."

"I enjoyed it, sweetheart," Dean replies, "even if everyone else did their best to fuck it up." They share a chuckle, and Dean adds, "Did...did you really say my name during phone sex?"

Castiel can feel himself flushing bright red. "Ugh, Meg. She's always been an oversharer. Yes, not long after we met, I was feeling frustrated and she, um...helped me out. I may have been thinking of someone other than her."

Dean grins, delighted. “You were thinking of me, huh?”
Now they’re back on firmer ground. Castiel leans in again to kiss just under Dean’s ear, murmuring, “I’ve been dreaming of getting you naked since we met. Literally.”

“Let’s make up for lost time, then,” Dean says, somewhat hoarsely. He lifts his shirt over his head, then stands up to unbuckle his jeans, while Castiel watches, appreciating the lean lines of Dean’s body. Dean turns to him, pants still around his ankles, and says, “Come on, aren’t you gonna join me?”

“No.” At Dean’s confused look, he adds, “Let me make it up to you for this morning’s interruption.” He gets up off the bed, stepping forward to press a heated kiss to Dean’s lips. “Lie down,” he says, stepping aside and placing the amulet on the nightstand.

Dean lies on Castiel’s bed, piling up the pillows behind his head. Castiel kneels above him once he’s settled and leans down to kiss him again, followed by a trail of kisses down to his collarbone. Dean gasps when he moves lower and licks teasingly at a nipple, then lets out another moan as Castiel moves lower, sucking marks into his skin as he goes.

He avoids Dean’s rapidly hardening erection at first, licking instead across his left hip and down his thigh, coaxing him to open his legs so he can get at the soft skin between them. He licks upwards, then, until he’s licking at Dean’s balls, and Dean breathes, “Casss,” sounding wrecked already.

When Dean pushes his knees further up and out of the way, Castiel finds himself curious about how far Dean might be willing to go with him. How far might he go himself? He carefully reaches up and runs a finger along the line of Dean’s asscrack, as he also runs the flat of his tongue up the underside of his cock, now hard and leaking. Dean nearly convulses on the bed, before letting out a filthy moan and saying, “Yes, yes, please, Cas!”

Castiel wraps one hand around Dean’s cock and takes him into his throat in one gulp, teasing his finger over Dean’s ass as he moves up and down.

Dean gasps out, “Cas, if you’re gonna do that, have you got any lube?”

Castiel pops off the end of Dean’s dick, making him draw a sharp breath again. “In the drawer, there.” He gestures to the nightstand, and Dean opens the drawer, pulling out a tube of gel. Castiel squeezes some onto his fingers. He’s never actually touched anyone else like this, let alone another man, only tried it on himself. The idea makes him a little nervous, but he’s heard it can be very pleasurable so he’s willing to give it a try. He rubs his fingers across Dean’s rim again, smoother this time, then dips his index finger past the tight muscle.

Dean pants out, “That’s the way. So good, Cas.”

Castiel takes Dean back into his mouth as he spears his finger in a little further, enjoying the breathy gasps Dean makes between moans. He crooks his finger upwards as he’s seen done in porn, and Dean bucks his hips, stuttering out, “F-fuck! Cas...so good, I’m gonna...gonna…”

Dean comes deep in Castiel’s throat, before he has a chance to pull back. He swallows reflexively, pulling a deep groan from Dean that almost sends him over the edge as well, and he realizes he’s now uncomfortably hard in his own jeans. He sits up on his heels, pulling his finger out of Dean and unbuckling his belt and button. He slides his jeans down enough to pull out his cock and pumps it a few times, desperate to chase his own release.

As Dean lies back, boneless and spent, he watches Castiel fucking his own fist with a lazy sort of hunger. Castiel wonders what it might be like to fill Dean up with his cock, instead of his fingers.
To slam his hips forward and fuck him hard and fast, to spill inside and hear him cry out for more. Castiel almost doubles over as he comes, an “Oh, oh, oh,” falling from his lips as he covers Dean’s stomach with sticky white. He leans down to rest his forehead on Dean’s chest, catching his breath with panting gasps, and Dean kisses his hair and murmurs, “I’ve got you, baby. You’re so fucking hot when you do that, you know that?”

As they lie together, Castiel traces a pattern on Dean’s shoulder with a light finger, and hopes that he can keep them both safe through whatever storm might be ahead. Dean deserves that.

Chapter End Notes

Plot! Smut! Fluff! We've got it all here, folks! Which part of this week's update was your favorite?
Evening! We are very excited to share this sweet little chapter with you all. Honestly, we weren't sure a new chapter would happen this week—TCBaby is sick and Ellen has been traveling—but we managed to make it work! Only the best for our amazing readers. <3

Sparks whoosh upwards as Castiel adds another block of wood to the fireplace. He pushes it into place with a gentle magical nudge and sits back on his heels, enjoying the warmth on his face and hands.

Behind him, Charlie drops into one of the soft couches with a soft groan. "Oh man, I think I have bruises on my bruises," she complains. "Where's your parabatai?"

Castiel gets to his feet, his knees creaking until he slumps into the other couch. "My what?"

Charlie blinks at him in disbelief. "Mortal Instruments? Don’t tell me you’ve never read it, with all those books at your place."

"No, I haven't." He rubs at his left calf, trying to loosen the muscle.

She huffs. “Well, they’re a bonded pair of warriors, just like you and Dean, apparently.”

“Okay?” he replies, not really sure what to do with that information as he stretches his legs out in front of him. He’s sore, and tomorrow might be worse, but on the whole he thinks he's come out of today better than the others have.

Big Bear Lake and the surrounding snowy hills are just as beautiful in the winter as Charlie had enthusiastically showed him a few weeks ago before they'd booked. They’d arrived two days ago to see the two cabins nestled among trees laden with fluffy white, about a hundred feet from each other. The small living and dining space had been freezing when they’d got inside, but Castiel and Dean had made short work of insulating the walls with a charm that should last for their stay here. The fire has kept the room warm and cozy since, with the insulation spell keeping the heat in well enough that even the bedroom with its four-poster bed is warm.

They’d explored the local area on the first day, and spent most of the second day huddling in Charlie and Dorothy’s cabin by the fire while a blizzard blew in.

Today, though, is New Year’s Eve. In the morning, the sky had been bright and clear, the hills deep with white powder. Castiel and Dean had spent a lazy morning in bed before being chased out by the girls, who wanted them to come up the mountain. Eventually they’d decided to head up into the hills behind the cabin to try snowtubing, taking a non-magical chairlift laughingly called the "Magic Carpet." The way down again on big, round tubes had been a lot of fun, and they'd been up and down a few times. Charlie and Dorothy, on the other hand, had both been skiing before and had decided to try renting snowboards. From what Charlie says, it sounds like she spent a lot of her time hitting the ground.
"I'll bring the books over to you next time," Charlie says, as Dean wanders in from the kitchen, passing a glass of whiskey to Castiel before he drops into the couch beside him.

"Ten minutes to midnight. You wanna go outside?"

Charlie laughs. "You're kidding, right? It's like twenty degrees out there!" She sips at her Bailey's, ice clinking in the glass.

She and Dorothy had nursed their injuries while Dean had been busy in the kitchen. He wouldn't even let Castiel in to help him, so Castiel had spent a relaxing few hours by the roaring fire, reading—something he hasn't done since his college days at Oxford, and that hadn't been the fun kind of reading.

When the girls had come over, stomping the snow off their boots on the landing, Dean had finally emerged with a feast—honey-bourbon-seared ribs, and a huge platter of cheese, salami, bread, fruit and crackers. They’d popped the champagne and devoured the lot, needing a big meal after a busy day in the snow, and then spent the next few hours waiting for midnight by playing Exploding Kittens—a game that Castiel found incomprehensible to start with, but warmed up to. He and Meg had played countless games of Cards Against Humanity over the years, so it was nice to play something new.

Dorothy joins them, walking over to the couch in front of Charlie and holding out a hand. "We’ll have to go out there eventually. Come on, we'll be able to see them from the front window."

Charlie smiles up at her, putting her hand in Dorothy's and allowing her to pull her to her feet.

Dean puts his hand on Castiel's knee with a small squeeze, leaning his head on Castiel's shoulder as the girls move towards the window. "Can you believe it's New Year already, Cas? Seems just yesterday you were sassing me in your office on that first day."

Castiel nearly chokes on the sip of whiskey he's just taken. "Excuse me? As I recall, you were the one who called me a dick."

"I did not," Dean retorts, frowning. Castiel just smirks at him until he shrugs, adding, "I guess things were a little rocky to start with."

"Mm-hm," Castiel agrees. "And here we are."

"Here we are," Dean murmurs, smiling into Castiel's gaze as they lean in towards each other and gently kiss.

"Hey, lovebirds!" Dorothy calls from where she and Charlie stand by the window. "It's starting."

Dean checks his watch as he and Castiel help each other to their feet. A combination of exhaustion and a little too much alcohol makes Castiel's head spin slightly, but he totters over to the window in time to see a bright blue explosion burst over the lake, the pattern reflected in the still surface.

"Is my watch wrong, or are they a few minutes early?" Dean asks.

"Nope, they're early," Charlie says. "The old dude organizing it probably got tired and wanted it over with."

Dean wraps his arms around Castiel from behind as the fireworks burst over the lake in greens and blues, and Castiel leans back into him, glad for the warmth against his back. The fireworks over the lake don’t last for too long, and once they’re done there’s less than a minute until the real new year.
"Five, four, three, two, one… Happy New Year!" Castiel turns around to kiss Dean long and sweet, as Charlie and Dorothy do the same.

Charlie shoves at Dorothy playfully. "Come on, Dee, I think I need to get you home. These two look like they need some privacy."

"Hey we could use a little as well!" Dorothy says, laughing and putting a sloppy kiss on Charlie’s cheek.

“All right, all right you two, get outta here,” Dean says, shooing them over to the doorway. They layer up with their warm coats, scarves and gloves, even though it's only a short walk to their cabin.

"Night Charlie," Castiel says, kissing her cheek and hugging her tightly. "Happy New Year."

"Night Cas," she says, grinning at him. “Enjoy your evening.”

He throws her a wink, then turns to say goodnight to Dorothy as well.

As they step outside into the crisp air, Dorothy points a finger upwards and sends up a shower of magical sparks in an electrical discharge. Charlie joins her, firing a string of witch lights that dance around each other, spinning as they rise into the freezing air. The girls walk down into the snow, laughing in delight.

Castiel pulls forth a surge of magic, forming it into an illusion. He sends a dragon made of fiery sparks flying upwards, then exploding above the cabin in a burst of embers.

"Goodnight, Gandalf!" Charlie calls with a wide smile, then they turn to trudge down the snowy path to the other cabin.

"I hope they're not too cold over there," Castiel says they both head back into the warmth. Dean follows Castiel to the fireplace, where he wraps his arms around Castiel’s waist, pulling him in and pressing a kiss to the side of his neck. "I'm sure they'll find some way of warming up,” he murmurs, then continues his trail of kisses downwards.

Castiel tilts his head to the side with a contented hum, lacing his fingers with Dean's where his right hand rests just above the waistband of Castiel's pants.

Dean grasps the cord around Castiel’s neck, pulling it out from under his shirt and grabbing it to rest in his palm. Castiel has been wearing the amulet all week, finding the buzz of its enchantment soothing. They’d tried drawing the memories from it again, with the same result—even keeping the spell moving for longer didn’t reveal any additional memories. The sight of Dean’s parents had been difficult for him once again, so Castiel hasn’t suggested they try it a third time, even though he has a few ideas for making the memories more distinct.

“Cas, could we try the spell again?” Dean says.

Castiel turns to looks at Dean, wondering if their bond is extending to mind reading now. “I thought you’d seen enough of the memories?”

Dean blinks, then shakes his head. “No, I meant the talisman spell. Make this into a real thing.” He looks down at the amulet, letting it go to rest against Castiel’s chest again.

“Okay,” he replies, his chest tight with apprehension as he pulls the cord over his head and holds the amulet out in his hand between them. “You sure this is a good idea after we’ve been drinking?”
Dean levels him with a flat look. “Come on, man, it’s not like we’re hammered. Besides, a little greasing helps things flow better, right?”

Castiel feels the familiar surge of Dean’s magic as he draws the elements, carefully not disturbing the fire still burning near where they’re standing, and weaves them into a container around the amulet once again. The magic that fills it is potent, and Castiel wonders if Dean has altered Castiel’s own suggestions for improvement to Peyerson’s spell.

The memory enchantment on the amulet awakens with Dean’s magic, but Castiel resists pulling at it this time. As the spell’s structure grows, the container expands with it, then when Dean swings his right hand around the outside of it and closes his fingers into a fist, the container contracts again until it pulls tightly around the metal. Castiel hasn’t cast the visualisation spell this time so it doesn’t actually glow, but Castiel can feel the magic bound to the amulet now—it’s almost vibrating with the strength of the power within it, and it feels like Dean—like home.

“You did it,” he says quietly, as Dean shakes out his hands.

Dean glances up at him in surprise. “Really? How can you be sure?”

“You didn’t feel it?” Castiel stares. “Dean, you poured your magic into this. It’s practically screaming your name—I might actually cast a masking spell on it so that I can walk around the university without attracting unwanted attention. I’ll be arrested for stealing magical artifacts!”

Dean laughs, and Castiel loves the sound of it. He shrugs one shoulder, moving his hand near the amulet. “I can’t sense it at all. But I literally bound my magic to it, so I guess it must have worked.” He looks back up at Castiel. “Merry Christmas,” he adds with a smile.

Castiel reaches up the hand not holding the amulet, to cup Dean’s cheek and pull him in for a kiss. “Are you sure you want me to take it? It’s...a lot.”

“Course I do. The book was pretty clear that talismans could be used by bonded people, and not just those who were also lovers, lover.” He steps back with a cheeky grin.

Affection floods Castiel at Dean’s use of the epithet, but he’s right. They are lovers, bound in every way. He can’t help loving Dean now even if he tries.

Castiel kisses him, slowly at first, and everything fades into the background. The sound of crackling flames in the fireplace is the only thing he can hear above his own breathing, and Dean weaves a hand into Cas’ hair, deepening their kiss. Cas’ lips are slightly dry and cold from saying goodbye to the girls earlier, but Dean licks into his mouth and warms him up easily. They begin to gravitate naturally into the bedroom, and when Dean’s back hits the mattress with Cas straddling his hips, they give their lips a brief reprieve and stare at each other.

Dean’s hand comes up to touch every part of Cas’ face—his forehead, his cheeks, his mouth. Cas leans his lips in and kisses Dean’s palm, and the energy between them is electric, every touch sending intense waves of shared longing that makes Dean gasp.

He drops his hand for a moment and does a quick casting motion, then every candle in their bedroom is lit and glowing, Castiel’s face painted in gorgeous yellow light.
“Just look at you,” Dean whispers, hand returning to trace the lines on Cas’ face. “God, Cas, I just can’t get enough of you.”

“Dean…” Castiel eyelids flutter closed as he exhales, Dean’s hands still caressing his cheek. “I can’t imagine my life without you. You’ve become—you are…I…”

Castiel pauses, at an obvious loss. Dean is overwhelmed by a feeling he can’t quite put into words. This whole trip, it’s hit him in the most unexpected moments—in the middle of a snowball fight with Cas that turns into a lazy trade of kisses. Cooking at the stove and peeking over the counter to watch his boyfriend content by the fire, tranquil as he reads. Waking up in the morning and reaching for him, holding each other in the early morning with a sleepy sort of warmth. He can’t get enough of these quiet, simple moments, and it’s not because they’re at a gorgeous lake or in a snowy cabin or on holiday.

It’s because of Cas. It’s always been Cas.

“You said it once,” Dean whispers, his heart racing fast. “The night you got drunk at the D and I took you home.”

“I told you…” Castiel’s eyes open wide, and he slumps sideways and hits the bed, their legs still tangled up together. “That I…?”

“That you love me,” Dean breathes, unable to blink as he watches Cas process this development. His boyfriend looks shocked, and hopeful, and in absolute and utter love.

“And you said…what back?” Cas looks like he’s holding his breath.

“Nothing.” Dean admits, and Castiel frowns a little, so he weaves a hand into Cas’ shirt and pulls him close. “Only because you passed out right after, babe. Call me old-fashioned, but I think a guy oughta be conscious when you tell him you love him.”

Castiel’s face widens into a smile, his eyes full of affection. “You do?”

“Duh.” Dean chuckles a little and Castiel follows suit. “I tried not to, because we haven’t been dating that long, but I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you. And I knew I might fall for you when—”

Dean looks away, not sure why he’s going down this road…but if you’re gonna exchange love confessions, you might as well go all in. “When I looked into that mirror.”

Castiel’s forehead crinkles with confusion. “What mirror?”

“Halloween, at the festival we went to.”

“The Samhain? You night you got into a fist fight?”

Dean rolls eyes his dramatically. “Trust you to remember that part.”

“Of course I do,” Castiel replies seriously. “It was very brave what you did, standing up for Garth, but I was worried about you.” He brings his thumb to Dean’s lower lip, humming softly as Dean’s breath hitches. “Afterwards I healed your lip, just like this. Remember? I wanted very badly to kiss you.”

“Wish you had,” Dean admits, kissing the pad of Cas’ thumb. His hand fists the front of Cas’ shirt, wanting suddenly to make up for lost time, but Castiel backs away minutely.
“This mirror,” he says firmly, using his professor voice in such an authoritative way that it makes Dean’s cock twitch, “tell me about it.”

“Ugh,” Dean grumbles, though he knows he can’t be annoyed, since he got himself into this mess. “Fine. I stood in front of this dumb mirror that was supposed to tell you who your, uh, person is.” Dean refuses to use the word *spouse* for fear of making his boyfriend run for the fucking hills. “And I saw you.”

Castiel’s eyes gleam in the candle light. “You sure it wasn’t just *me*, me? I was with you that night.”

“That’s what I thought too. But the you I saw in the mirror had on your usual getup—the suit and trenchcoat. But you weren’t wearing that at the festival.”

“I wasn’t?”

“Nope. You were wearing a hoodie and these insanely tight jeans.” Dean tightens his hand around Cas’ hip, dipping his hand lower, past his back, until he’s groping his ass with a firm squeeze. “Such a tease.”

“Not with you,” Castiel says, his voice deep and sultry. He moves his head until they’re sharing the same pillow. “I always deliver.”

“I know that’s right,” Dean jokes with a wink. He throws a hand up above his head, sinking into the mattress. “I’m sure the mirror thing was a dumb hoax. But just the fact that I wanted it to be you made me realize it was way more than a crush.”

Castiel’s eyes flitter down, looking thoughtful. “Dean?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you,” he says easily, as if he’s not the first person to say that to Dean and truly mean it. As if this isn’t the biggest moment in Dean Winchester’s weird, wild, magical little life.

“Cas…” They stare at each other for a moment more before Dean closes the space between them, sighing as their lips brush. He can feel love radiating off of Castiel’s skin, the bond putting their emotions in a nonstop loop of affection and adoration. “I love you too.”

Cas slips a hand under Dean’s shirt, his hand large and explorative, and their kisses turn more frantic as their bodies collide. Dean teases his tongue at the seams of Cas’ lips, but Cas apparently had the same idea, because their tongues graze each other, wet and eager, and suddenly their kisses are downright filthy. Dean moans into Cas’ mouth, fisting at the collar of his shirt to touch more skin. Cas pulls his hands up, and Dean guesses right away the spell he’s priming to cast. He covers Cas’ hands with his own, squeezing tight, their cheeks rubbing together as he whispers, “Let me. I wanna take care of you.”

They haven’t undressed each other, not like this, and Dean pulls them to their feet. Cas seems pliant enough, arms high as Dean slips his shirt off and over his head. Next, his jeans—which Dean unbuttons deliberately, dragging down the teeth of the zipper excruciatingly slow.

“Dean,” Cas rasps, bucking his hips up until Dean’s fingers collide with the hard bulge in his jeans.

“Patience, sweetheart.” Dean says softly, shocked that he’s the one saying this. Though he hasn’t exactly shared his end goal with Cas yet. “I was thinking, maybe…maybe tonight…”
The jeans drop to his ankles and Castiel stomps out of them gracefully, until he’s just standing in front of Dean in only a pair of tight gray boxers. He’s still wearing the amulet, though, and a flurry of emotions begin fluttering inside of Dean. He brings his hands down, wandering from Cas’ chest to his abdomen before swooping further and cupping Cas’ clothed erection. “You could fuck me?”

“Oh, Dean.” Castiel’s eyelids flutter closed, and Dean can feel his boyfriend’s cock stiffening against his palm.

“Is that a ‘yes’?”

“Yes.” Castiel’s hands are all over him them—unbuttoning the front of his flannel, unzipping his jeans. “You’ve seen my dreams,” he says, flinging Dean’s undershirt up and over, “you’ve been in my dreams. Do you have any idea how badly I want you?”

Dean shivers when Cas’ lips trail along his chin, nearly stumbling to get his jeans and socks off as Cas continues to suck marks onto his skin. He falls backwards against the mattress, the familiar weight of Cas covering him, kissing him, grinding against him, making his boxers tent. They writhe around, all tongues and teeth and desperate kisses, before Cas finally pulls away, breathing heavy. He scoots back, stripping Dean’s boxers off, staring greedily at his nakedness.

“How do you…” He looks at Dean’s face with reverence, his pupils blown wide. “You’ve done this before—can you tell me what to do? I’ve looked it up, of course, but theoretical knowledge and firsthand experience are two very different things.”

“I really gotta love you, if you can use words like ‘theoretical knowledge’ before sex and it somehow turns me on,” Dean says, chuckling as Cas joins in, shaking his head ruefully. “Just follow my lead. I’m takin’ care of you tonight, remember?”

He lays Cas flat out on the bed, admiring him like a damn buffet—the muscular thighs, the tight abdomen, the cockhead red and glistening at the tip. His body moves of its own accord when he dips his head down low, licking the precome away with a satisfied hum. Taken off-guard, Castiel’s hips buck up and moans—the sound heady and desperate. Dean pulls back, Cas’ cock nearly shoved down his throat. “S-Sorry,” Cas mutters, fisting his hands into the comforter. “That felt amazing.”

Dean pumps Cas’ cock in his hand a few times, appreciating the length and girth. Jesus, he thinks, Cas is pretty damn hung. “It’s okay. If you wanna fuck my face, baby, we can do that later. You should let me practice my deep-throating first, though.”

“Oh god,” Castiel exhales, “you are going to be the death of me, Dean Winchester.”

“I can’t think of a better way to go,” Dean says flirtily, leaning over Cas’ chest and licking a flat tongue over his nipple. Cas hums, entwining his fingers into Dean’s hair and angling his head up to kiss him deeply. Dean goes willingly, wondering if Cas can taste his own salty precome on Dean’s tongue. A few minutes later, he goes to the corner of the room, searching for his bag. Cas whines impatiently until he returns.

“Oh god,” Castiel exhales, “you are going to be the death of me, Dean Winchester.”

“Can’t fuck me without lube, sweetheart,” Dean admonishes, his cock hanging thick and heavy between his legs. He wants to give it a good stroke, but he’s so on-edge and turned on already, and he’s already got it in his head that he’s coming on Cas’ cock tonight. He spreads lube on his pointer finger, then situates himself to an upright position on his knees, spreading his cheeks and searching for his entrance. It’s been nearly six months since he’s had anything up there that’s not a finger or two, so fitting Castiel’s dick seems like it might be a challenge. He’s just glad he took some time in the shower this afternoon, while Cas was napping on the couch, to get himself good
and cleaned.

He gets the first knuckle past the rim of tight muscle, breathing through it steadily, concentrating on the fascinated expression on Cas’ face. He lets himself adjust as best he can, but he doesn’t want to waste a shred of time, and adds in another finger. It’s uncomfortable and he hisses, Castiel sitting up and rubbing his forearms gently.

“Take your time,” he murmurs, kissing Dean’s cheeks, his chin, his collarbone. Dean nods, soothed by the feeling of Cas’ lips all over him, and eventually he’s fitting two fingers up to the second knuckle easily enough. He reaches for the lube again when Cas whispers, “Could I…?”

“Fuck yeah,” Dean says, whimpering a little as he removes his fingers. He squirts a generously amount of lube on Cas’ middle and pointer finger, waiting with anticipation as he feels his boyfriend’s fingers slipping into his crack. It takes a little bit of guidance, but then Castiel is circling Dean’s rim. He pushes a finger in and Dean pushes himself against it, gripping Castiel’s neck with both hands.

“Second finger,” he says, and Castiel obliges, filling him up.

“You’re so tight.” Cas’ breathing is erratic, his chest rising and falling. “How will I fit?”

“You’re big, sure, but you’ll fit. No need to get cocky,” Dean says, smirking. He loses some of his smugness, though, after Cas gains confidence. He adds a third finger, Dean’s muscle widening to accommodating the thickness, and then the pads of fingers are exploring Dean’s insides before he skitters around— “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“So that is true—the prostate thing,” Castiel breathes, fucking Dean mercilessly now with his fingers. “It feels good?”

“Incredible,” Dean sighs, arms shaking. It feels like sparks of electricity are shooting up his spine, itching a scratch that feels impossibly satisfying. “Fuck, Cas, you better stop or…”

“Or what? You might come?” Castiel has a mischievous glint in his eye as his fingers brush Dean’s prostate again, using his free hand to stroke Dean’s cock. He uses precome to slick the way, his hand tight and steady, and Dean whimpers, his head falling forward against Castiel’s shoulder. “I want you to.”

“Wanna—wanna come on your cock—”

“You’ll do that too,” Castiel says, with way too much confidence for someone who’s never even had anal before. But Dean knows he’s right, knows he can get it back up for Cas in about two-point-five seconds, so he lets his boyfriend’s fingers and hands bring him to orgasm. It takes practically no time at all before he’s crying out and shooting come between them, dirt ing up Cas’ stomach and hand.

“Jesus, that was…” Dean sighs, blissed out and shaking. “That was not part of the plan.”

“Which, arguably, makes it even better,” Castiel murmurs against his ear. “I love watching you fall apart.”

“It’s hard not to, with you,” Dean says, blushing and grinning, lowering Cas down to the mattress. He uses his shirt to clean the come up between them, and when he discovers the lube is lost somewhere in the sheets, he casts a quick summoning charm until it flies into his hand. He pours the contents right onto Cas’ cock, stroking him enough just to distribute the lube. He knows they’re both clean—having a smarty pants boyfriend who can do medical magic has its perks—and he
straddles Cas’ lap, his stance wide and his hands on either asscheek. He sinks himself slowly onto Cas’ cock, and despite all the foreplay, he feels split open by the time Cas bottoms out.

“Dean.” Cas’ voice is husky and low, and he’s gripping the top of Dean’s thighs so firmly it turns Dean’s skin white. “God, this…this feels…”

“I know.” Dean breathes, feeling so fucking full that he fights the urge to cry out. Touching Cas like this, their skin meeting at thighs and hips, hands on each other’s arms and chest, Castiel literally inside of him… Dean can feel their bond glowing and bright, held back by a dam but on the verge of bursting with powerful energy. He moves his hips experimentally, his body a little tender, but the sensation of pleasure far outweighs the pain. He pulls up higher and then slams back down on Cas’ cock, and they both moan with want. Dean’s starting to get hard again, but he’s more concerned with making their first time memorable for Cas, and he rides his boyfriend’s cock sensual and slow. The pace he sets is apparently too slow, though, because Cas tucks his hands under Dean’s knees and rolls them over. Being manhandled like this has always been a big turn-on for Dean, and he just stares at Cas with amazement and arousal as Cas pulls out long enough to situate a pillow beneath his hips. He leans over, kissing Dean fervently with an opened-mouth kiss, before entering him again.

The rhythm is faster now, Cas kissing every part of his face, arms wrapped around Dean’s shoulders as he fucks into him rapidly. All Dean can hear is the sound of skin slapping skin, his own breathing labored, Castiel’s huffs and moans and growls driving him wild.

“Gonna come for me, baby?” he rasps out, reaching down to pump his own dick. “Gonna come inside of me?”

“Fuck…yes…Dean…”

Dean tightens his grip on Castiel’s hips, Cas’ hips still pistoning against him, and the shift in angle makes Cas’ cockhead brush his prostate. Dean swears and pants, screams out, “Right there, right there!” and Castiel doesn’t let him down, doubling down on his efforts to get them off. Dean strokes himself faster, head leaned back, and it occurs to him abruptly that he doesn’t feel the sheets clinging to his sweaty skin. His body feels light and airy, his insides zinging with something that feels cosmic and powerful. The amulet glows golden and bright, and then Cas comes inside of him with a shout. Dean follows moments later, his hole feeling wet and raw and used, body boneless as he slumps against the mattress.

Except—they’re no longer on the mattress. Dean opens his eyes, his vision much closer to the ceiling than anyone should ever be. He looks down and they’re suspended in the air, two feet off the bed, still clutching each other tightly.

“Cas,” he says, feeling panicked. “Cas, we’re, uh…”

“What?” Castiel murmurs, eyes shut tight and lips trailing on Dean’s collarbone.

“We’re in the air,” Dean says, and Castiel finally opens his eyes, gazing past Dean’s shoulders to examine the situation.

“It seems we are,” Castiel says evenly. “Have you ever…?”

“Nope, this is new.” Dean bites his lip, eyes locked on Castiel’s. “Wait—” He feels his body lowering slightly, an incredibly slow descend. “Did you feel that?”

Castiel nods, and they’re quiet as they’re delivered back down to the mattress. Castiel slides off
him, legs still tangled up. Dean grasps the solidness immediately, feeling immediately at ease now that they’re back. Well, he feels a little gross—come in him and on him—but it’s nothing a quick shower can’t fix. He shuffles in bed, turning sideways to face Cas. “God, I need a long, hot—”

He stops when he sees his boyfriend’s serious expression. “What’s wrong?”

The lines on Cas’ face are creased, thoughtful and pondering. It’s the same look Dean’s seen him have at school, when he’s trying to figure out a complicated problem and isn’t sure how to put it into words.

“Nothing,” Castiel says, giving him a small smile. He’s clasping the amulet between his fingers, and Dean thinks about how it had glowed just moments ago. All these weird things that happened—floating in mid-air, feeling ripples of energy…it has something to do with him and Cas. Is their bond growing stronger?

“I think you were about to suggest a shower?” Castiel take his hand, kissing his knuckles. “May I suggest the jacuzzi instead?”

“Like you’ve done the last two nights?” Dean says cheekily.

“Haven’t heard you complaining,” Castiel says, his voice a sultry rumble. Which, yeah, Dean has already been stroked and kissed and edged within an inch of his life in that tub. Cas is probably the most generous lover he’s ever had, not that he’d ever say something so sappy out loud.

“Yeah, yeah.” Dean stands, stretching his back as Cas watches him with appreciating eyes. “I’ll get the wine?”

“I’ll start the bath.” Castiel leaps off the bed excitedly, kissing Dean’s cheek as he passes. Dean laughs and pats into the kitchen, stark naked, searching for the wine opener. He admires their cozy little cabin with a pleasant sigh, hit with a wave of remorse that they have to leave tomorrow. Classes don’t start for a few weeks, but as professors, they both have to be back on-campus for various meetings and lesson planning. He doesn’t know what this semester holds for them, but Dean is hoping for some time to relax and enjoy each other’s company. It’s his final semester, and apart from his thesis defense, there’s nothing standing between him and graduation. After everything they’ve been through lately, surely they deserve some peace.

Anna leans against the rough brick exterior, bringing her rain jacket close to her neck. Her hair is frizzing wildly, and she ducks behind an alley and tosses it in a quick bun. It’s raining hard in Seattle, Washington, and the spell allowing her to transport here won’t last long. She’s stronger with her coven behind her, but this is one of those spells she had to cast alone.

Behind her, she hears a throat clear. A stranger is standing deep in the alleyway, wearing a tattered jacket and trucker hat. The man looks gruff and dangerous, and Anna immediately puts up her protective charms, probing the air for unpleasant spells.

“You showed,” the man says casually, coming closer. He holds his hand out and offers her a lopsided smile, one she supposes should charm her. It doesn’t. “Rosco.”

“You work for Crowley?” Anna asks directly.
The man—Rosco—smiles ruefully, adjusting just his hat absently. He ignores the question. “This is usually when you tell me your name, gorgeous.”

Anna chuckles, taking a step closer. “Maybe. Or maybe this is when I cast a fireball and knock you on your ass.”

“Feisty? Hmm, I like that in a redhead.”

Anna exhales, turning on her heels. Evidently she wasted her energy casting this spell, then stood in the rain for ten minutes, for absolutely nothing. She hasn’t worked this hard and lived a life this dangerous to let men talk down to her.

“I work for Crowley,” Rosco calls loudly. Her steps falter, but she doesn’t turn around. “He wants to make a deal.”

Anna crosses her arms, jaw tight. She’s been in the game long enough to know who the big players are—and Fergus Crowley is certainly one of them. He’s a ruthless lawyer and son of the president of Stanford’s School of the Occult. Surprisingly, Anna and Crowley have something in common. They were both rejected by the school’s ultra selective filtering process. But Crowley is known now for being conniving, untrustworthy, selfish. Still, she's cautiously curious.

“I don’t make deals with men like Crowley.”

“Not even if he can open the Seal?”

Anna turns around, forcing her face to remain neutral. “You’re bluffing.”

Rosco slides his hands into his jacket pockets, whistling. Anna narrows her eyes, walking back towards him.

“If he can open the Seal, what do you need me for?”

“He’s got all the pieces, he just needs the power of your coven behind him to carry it out.”

“Pieces?” The rain is coming down in sheets now, and they’re both forced to yell. “What pieces?”

“People on the inside. A guy who can write spells. And he’s figuring out a way around the Seal.”

Anna tries not to show it, but she’s surprised. She never expected Crowley to get this far, or work this hard to bring his mother’s legacy crashing down. Anna had been trying to find out more information about the Seal for months now, but Crowley had kept his copy of 20th Century Magical Regulation on lockdown. She had been desperate enough to even ask her brother, a professor at Stanford, to help her locate a copy. She had very nearly gotten him involved in this whole mess, something she would’ve never forgiven herself for. Keeping her distance, though, means she barely knows Castiel…someone she felt so connected to during childhood.

“A thaumatech? Who?”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Rosco says, smiling gleefully. “Crowley’s got a guy in his back pocket.”

“And this person is willing to risk everything to help us?” Anna asks skeptically.

Rosco shrugs. “We’ll see. Crowley just needs you and your coven open to meeting with him sometime soon. We can work out the details later.”
Anna opens and closes her mouth, pursing her lips. She doesn’t trust the demons—they claim to want free magic available for all gifted magic-users, but everything she knows about Crowley says he’s all about profit, status, and power. Odds are, he’s planning to monetize magic the moment he has access to it.

Still, if she plays this right, maybe she can access the Seal *and* stop Crowley in one fell swoop. Regulating Stanford’s magic in a fairer way is the only way to move forward. She’ll have to devise her own plan to achieve that, which starts with asking her new recruit, Dean, what he discovered behind Stanford’s closed doors.

“Schedule the meeting,” she says dismissively, throwing the hood of her rain jacket over her head. She doesn’t wait for his reply. She steps back into the thunderous rain, walking two blocks before she feels strong enough to teleport back to Palo Alto.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! As always, we’d love to hear what you’re thinking.

Next week: Back to school!

Don’t forget to check out TCB’s new WIP, *Cover to Cover* for more boys in magical libraries.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Ellen: Hey! Welcome back. The boys are back at school this week after their fluffy holidays. We can't have them getting too comfy now, can we TCB?

TCB: Oh, definitely not. Things are really gearing up now. The plot is about to reach a tipping point, and we can’t wait to see all dominos that are about to fall.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first couple of weeks back for the new year feels like reality is crashing back down around Castiel. He and Dean only got back into town late on New Year’s Day, but he’d been back at work first thing on the second.

He’s had to dive head-first back into lesson plans for his first-year classes for the coming semester, while Dean supposedly gets back into working on his thesis when he isn’t over at Castiel’s place—although he’s started staying over more nights in the week to save himself the commute. Castiel is perfectly happy with this arrangement—he loves having Dean in bed beside him early in the morning, warm and inviting, more often than not with a hard length pressing against him and sleepy kisses to his skin. They haven’t replicated their levitation act, but not for lack of trying. Yes, he could get used to this.

Coming to the office had put a dampener on his mood, though, when he’d seen an email from Dr. Moseley requesting that he bring in the surveillance cameras they’d worn on their shirts while in the library as soon as possible. He’d called Charlie right away, and when he and Dean had picked them up from her, she’d been a little worried.

“I didn’t have time to completely wipe the sections of the video,” she’d said, “but I did put a block on them. They shouldn’t even notice it, and if they do, it’ll look like the footage got corrupted or something. Sorry, Cas.”

Castiel had taken the tiny cameras to the faculty office on Wednesday morning of the second week back, and had waited with bated breath for the rest of the day and into Thursday. By the middle of Friday, he still hadn’t heard anything, and allowed himself to relax just a fraction. No news was good news, after all.

That is, until Castiel had received a message from Dr. Moseley, summoning him to a meeting in her office at three. Dean isn't on campus today—he had to do something for Bobby this afternoon, he'd said, so Castiel has spent most of the day alone.

He trudges along the corridor, anxiety sitting low in his gut. Forcing in a deep breath to center himself, he places a hand over Dean's amulet tucked beneath his shirt and vest. He's been wearing it all week, and the thrum of Dean's magic pulsing in it has kept the gnawing sensation away when they've been apart.

The spell Dean had cast on it last week had been incredible, using elements from the original talisman spell Dean had found, plus incorporating his own flair that would make any Thaumatech proud. The amulet itself now pulses with energy, and Castiel has been refreshing a suppressing
spell on it every few hours to hide it from the other mages in the building.

Thinking of the talisman spell also brings to mind what had happened after that, which in turn brings a flush to his cheeks. Castiel suspects the mind-blowing, gravity-defying sex was caused by the magic that had been flowing through both of them and the talisman, but whatever it had been, their bond is stronger than ever.

For now, at least, the feeling of Dean’s magic close to his heart brings him reassurance. No reason to worry about the camera footage. Charlie had seemed confident.

As he approaches Dr. Moseley's office, he hears a voice that makes him grit his teeth. Adler.

"He's a loose cannon, Missouri. We should never have hired him in the first place."

"Zachariah, please," Dr. Moseley's voice was quieter, but firm. "We're here to discuss this, that's all."

Castiel swallows down his trepidation and knocks on the half-open door.

"Doctor Novak? Come in." Dr. Adler smiles as Castiel enters, almost like a shark welcoming a meal.

"Doctor Adler, good afternoon. And Doctor Moseley," he says, nodding to each of them.

Missouri nods from her position sitting behind her desk. "Castiel, good to see you. Please have a seat." She waves towards one of the chairs in front of her desk, but Castiel looks to where Adler is standing by the window, not wanting to sit while the guy looms over him.

Missouri's eyes flick up to Adler in annoyance. "You too, Zachariah. Let's get right into it." She waits until both of them are seated, and Castiel shifts uncomfortably, trying to will himself not to clutch at the amulet again. "I wanted to commend you on the work that you and Dean have done on his thesis project, Castiel. It’s fascinating."

Feeling momentarily relieved, Castiel says, "Thank you. I’ll tell Dean—he sends his apologies."

"That’s okay, I'll congratulate him another time. Perhaps I’ll ask him a few pointed questions to direct his revisions, but on the whole his draft is looking great. No, I wanted you here alone so we could discuss other matters."

Castiel glances at Adler, who smirks. He suddenly remembers that as his direct superior, Missouri is the only one who can directly have him fired, but Adler could certainly make his life here difficult. Alder speaks up, "We've heard a few reports—you've been seen casting lay magic in public, Castiel. It's not a great look for our university—especially for a new professor. We are in the business of teaching the use of pure, safe elemental—"

"That's not quite the reason, Zachariah," Missouri interrupts, giving him a stern look.

Castiel's blood had started running cold at Adler’s words, but at Missouri’s interruption, he looks back to the older professor to see him bite back his words, looking chastened. Castiel schools his face into stillness to avoid laughing out loud, as Missouri continues.

"While it's true that we do have patrons and some staff—" she glances back at Adler briefly, "—who disapprove of lay magic use, and only ever draw energy only from the Well, what you cast in your own time is your business. There's no rule against it. But it might be best not to do it on campus, okay?"
Castiel looks between the two professors, trying to keep his cool despite his hammering heartbeat. "Where exactly was I seen to use lay magic?"

"The Samhain faire," Adler says, practically gloating. "And worse, in classes."

Castiel is torn between disappointment at being chastised for such a small thing, and relief that his work with Crowley's magicians is still a secret. He can't even remember a time where he used lay magic in a class, but he supposes he could have. Or Adler is making it up to make him look bad.

"Very well, I'll be more careful in the future."

Missouri gives him a reassuring smile. "Good, thank you. It’s for your own benefit more than the university’s, y’know. Anyway, now that's done with, I have a proposal for you."

Castiel huffs a small, incredulous laugh. What could possibly be next? "A proposal?"

Missouri nods. "We've been impressed with how far you and Dean got with unravelling the structure of the Seal. We'd like you to keep studying it."

When Castiel doesn’t say anything, not sure how to respond, Adler continues. "The murders that have been going on? We believe there are some undesirable elements of society trying to gain access to the Well. Controlled access to elemental magic is the foundation of our society as it is today. Stanford needs—no, the world needs—the Seal to be secure."

Castiel's mind flies back to Crowley and his students. Surely that isn't his plan—to attack the university? Break the seal? Crowley has told Castiel himself that he believes magic should be for everyone, and he’s obviously done research into the Seal, but would he be so bold as to plot an actual coup? Feeling a little unsettled by the idea, he asks, "What exactly are you asking us to do?"

Missouri’s face is serious. “Take a closer look at the Seal, and the protections on the Well. With Dean’s mechanical skills and your—” she pauses, and Castiel knows she’s referring to his Thaumatechnology, “—affinity, we’d like you to report back on any weaknesses the current defences may have. They’re a hundred years old, after all.”

Castiel nods, thinking it through. Another memory surfaces of someone asking for the book relating to the history of the Seal—Anna. Castiel wouldn’t be surprised at all to hear that she’s involved in whatever this is as well. But driven as she is, he’s fairly sure kidnapping, torture and murder would never be in her playbook.

He and Dean could easily get back down to the Well, given the appropriate clearance. Dean doesn’t really need to revisit it for his thesis, but if the university wants them down there, they’ll go. “We can do that.”

“Thank you, Castiel,” Missouri says, getting to her feet. Adler and Castiel follow suit, as she adds, “I’ll arrange for access to the library basement again. We’ll expect to hear back before the end of the semester, okay?"

Castiel agrees and makes his goodbyes, but as he’s heading back out into the corridor, Missouri chases after him for a few steps down the hallway.

Missouri stops Castiel with a hand on his arm. "One more thing, Castiel?"

"Of course."

Missouri checks over her shoulder, then leads Castiel a little further down the hall, away from her
"Don't let Adler's blustering worry you. He's a dinosaur. I knew you boys would be perfect together," she adds with a wide smile.

Castiel blinks at her. Does she mean..."You knew?"

Missouri pauses, considering her words. “Well, I didn’t know, I just...I feel hunches. Strong feelings about people, or places. I knew you and Dean would have a strong affinity. It makes me so happy to know that was right.”

“Hunches, huh?” While there are plenty of people claiming to be psychic, Castiel has heard of only a handful of people throughout history that have ever been confirmed as true seers—Nostradamus, Da Vinci, Matt Groening to name a few. Still, she hadn’t been wrong about his and Dean’s affinity.

“I also saw the footage in the cameras. I was the first to review it—some of the footage was a little corrupt at the end but I managed to recover it. You boys sure know how to have an argument!”

Castiel feels himself flushing scarlet, and wonders if it’s possible to die of embarrassment. “Missouri, I’m sorry, it—”

“Oh, heavens no, don’t apologize, sugar. What you do in your own time is your business,” she chuckles. “I deleted that part before I passed the recording to Zachariah. He’s a little...backward about such things. You might like to keep it in your pants while you’re in the library, though. Okay?”

Castiel clears his throat, his cheeks aflame. So much for Charlie’s block. “Of course. My apologies.”

"Like I said, that’s your business, no one else’s. But listen, that’s not the only thing I’ve had hunches about. Something dark is coming, Castiel. Dark dealings, a betrayal—perhaps more than one. Make sure you watch your back.”

Castiel’s blood suddenly ran a little cooler. Surely she didn’t mean... "No, Dean would never—"

"Not Dean. You can, and you should trust Dean. It’s others around you that shouldn’t be trusted. I'm sorry I can't be more specific—it’s just a feeling, and sometimes I don’t even know what the feelings are about until after it happens.”

Castiel nods slowly. "Thank you." The warning, if true, could refer to any number of people around Castiel that he already doesn’t trust, but it’s nice to hear that Missouri trusts Dean.

As Missouri turns back towards her office, Castiel heads down the stairs of the Mechanikos Hall. He needs to talk to Dean about this, but perhaps later, when they’re both at home. He pulls out his phone and dials Dean, keen to find out what time he thinks he’ll be back.

The phone rings for twenty seconds, before going to voicemail. “Dean, it’s me. Just wondering if you’re coming back to my place tonight, and what time? Could you give me a call when you get this?”

He pulls on his gloves and steps out into the frigid air, worry once again clutching at him.
Dean pulls his leather jacket closer to him, shivering in the icy afternoon breeze. He secretly wishes he’d let Cas pile on a scarf and hat on him this morning—his boyfriend is adorably thoughtful like that—but he was already running late to meet Bobby at the magic shop. It’s been hours, but still, he can touch his lips and feel the lingering brush of Castiel’s goodbye kiss this morning. They haven’t spent a night apart since their cabin getaway, and he can’t help but think that something changed after that trip. They went to Big Bear Lake as two people, and came back to Palo Alto as…one. He’s not sure how to describe it, but when they’re separated, he’s constantly missing Castiel.

“Dean?” Anael says, her voice an amused rumble. She runs her hand over Dean’s arm, breaking the spot on the concrete where he was staring. “You still with me?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry,” Dean mutters unconvincingly. After vacation, it’s been hard to get back into the swing of things. Today he’s canvassing with the Captain and her resistance group, and he got paired with Anael. Being alone with an attractive person in the Impala who’s not Castiel makes him feel a little uncomfortable, and he knows he really oughta come clean soon about his extracurricular activities. He’s kept it secret mostly because he’s not sure how dangerous this crew is, and if he brings Castiel in on something, he wants to make sure it’s a good and worthy group. Plus, he knows for a fact that his boyfriend is keeping something from him, too—that mysterious friend who works in the financial district and owns super obscure magical books—so he’s not hurting Cas by keeping this group to himself. Right?

At least, that’s what he told himself before he spent the afternoon alone with Anael, the gorgeous redhead who knows (and doesn’t care) that he’s taken. Not that Dean can blame her—he was a serial flirt with anyone and everyone before he found the right person to commit to. But all afternoon, he’s imagined them running into Cas somehow, and how bad this might look. The thought makes his stomach twist. He needs to tell Cas, and needs to tell him soon.

“You’ve done well today,” Anael comments, hands tucked inside her pockets as they cross the street. “The kids really like you.”

“Thanks,” Dean says, scratching the back of his neck. He’s not great at taking compliments, but truth is, he has kinda nailed it today. They’ve knocked on five doors, talked to four new lay magicians teenagers (the fifth wasn’t home), and they were all receptive to the support system Dean and Anael offered them through the resistance. Sammy knows how to get someone to open up, but Dean’s good at leveling with people—telling them how it is, but in a way that makes them feel less alone. At least, that’s what Cas told him offhandedly one night in bed. When Dean asked him where he got an idea like this, Castiel had replied, “Well, because you’ve always made me feel less alone.”

Yeah, his sweet boyfriend definitely got a blowjob that night.

“Car’s right around the corner.” Dean shivers, thinking he ought to spell his pockets like he used to do for Cas.

“We have one more stop,” Anael says offhandedly, and Dean wrinkles his brow. They had split up into four groups, each group getting five houses—a total of twenty local kids just rejected from Stanford.

“Who? We were only supposed to—”

“Just…trust me. It’s important,” Anael loops her arm through Dean’s, and they step behind a particular wide tree in an abandoned backyard. She transports them, Dean pouring his magic in for extra strength, and he closes his eyes tight. The ground beneath him shifts, and then they’re on the
outskirts of town, standing outside an unassuming shotgun style house. There’s a mailbox with chipped paint that says “Chambers” and a front porch in desperate need of sweeping.

Anael starts walking immediately, and though Dean doesn’t love going in somewhere blind, he reckons he’s a strong enough mage to get himself out of trouble. So he shrugs, thinks what the hell, and stands on the top stair as she knocks. There’s a few beats of chilly silence before the door opens wide, and standing in front of them is a pale girl with long brown hair, swallowed up by a sweatshirt. She blinks at Anael rapidly, running a hand nervously through her curls.

“Oh, uh, hey,” she mumbles to Anael. Her eyes flutter over to Dean, eyes narrowing. “Who’s the guy?”

“He’s cool,” Anael says lightly. She throws a hand behind Dean’s back, propelling him closer, his boots creaking on the loose floorboards. “This is Dean. Dean, meet Krissy.”

“Hey,” Krissy mumbles, looking down at her feet. “No offense, but I’m kinda busy.” Her hand grips the doorknob, her hand shaking. Is she…afraid of them? Dean dismisses the thought almost immediately. She doesn’t seem scared, just annoyed in that way teenagers seem perpetually stuck in.

But there’s something else, a fizzing electricity in the air. Dean makes a quick decision then, holding out his bare hand for her to shake. “Nice to meet you,” he says, as if she hasn’t already tried to dismiss them.

Krissy looks perturbed again but gives his hand a limp shake. That’s when Dean’s suspicions are confirmed—there’s a racing stream of lay magic flowing through her veins, way too much for anyone to safely contain.

“You usually spend the afternoon overdosing on magic, Krissy?” he asks bluntly.

She gasps, jerking her hand away. “Who the hell are you?” she snipes, crossing her arms against her chest.

“The guy who doesn’t want to see you six feet under,” Dean retorts, his neck beginning to feel hot despite the chill outside.

“You can’t tell me and my friends what to do. Not in my house,” she says.

“Oh, there’s more of you in there? Awesome.” Dean narrows his eyes, trying to peer behind her shoulder. What the hell have these kids gotten themselves into?

“It’s not just your house, Krissy. Your dad is still here and he worries about you,” Anael says gently. Dean wonders how much the Anael knows about this girl, but it seems to be a lot.

“He doesn’t have to worry about me,” Krissy argues, some of her attitude softening. “And neither do you. So you can stop coming around here, thinking you’re going to convince me to come back.”

“Listen,” Anael says, taking a half-step closer, “being a lay magician without help is going to put you, Josephine, Aiden, and Seth in danger—”

“We have help,” Krissy interrupts, her tone indignant again. “And it’s way more than I ever learned from the Captain. They bring in a mage, a teacher, and he’s helping us control our magic.”

Dean has a sudden headache. “Who?” he demands.
Krissy’s mouth clamps shut. After a tense silence, Anael says, “Whoever it is, haven’t they told you how dangerous this stuff is?”

Krissy shrugs, tucking her hair behind her ear. “We know what we’re doing.”

“No, you don’t,” Dean says firmly. He looks between Anael and Krissy, his voice level. “Look, I don’t know you. I get that. But Anael is a nice person trying to help you out, and you’re basically slamming the door in her face. So maybe get your head out of your…uh, you-know-what…and accept help when it’s offered to you.”

They both look back at him with wide looks—Anael appreciative, Krissy disgruntled. She glares at him before looking away, a deep sigh heaving off her chest.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? I know the Captain helped me out last year when I was rejected from Stanford, and we spent a few months together before I quit your club or whatever. I’m grateful to her, and to you.”

“Then why did you leave?” Anael asks.

“Because…” Krissy chews on her bottom lip. “Crowley told us that the Captain couldn’t help us, not like he could. He made us choose.”

“Crowley?” Dean repeats, nose wrinkled up, face slightly contorted. “Who’s that?”

“He’s one of the good guys,” Krissy replies.

Dean’s about to point that “good guys” don’t make you choose one source of help over the other, but Anael says, “I’m glad to hear that. But you can’t keep abusing magic like this.” She reaches her hand, cautiously touching the sliver of skin on Krissy’s wrist. She closes her eyes, clearly concentrating, and Dean watches as she draws some of the lay magic out… Just like he and Cas did for Benny on Thanksgiving. Anael drops her hand lifelessly, taking a shaky step back, and Dean steadies her from behind.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Krissy says, though her voice sounds much clearer now, her expression breaking into something that resembles gratitude.

“Feel better, huh?” Dean says, and Krissy nods slowly. “Well, that came at a price. So next time you wanna get hopped up, remember that.”

Krissy swallows, looking at Anael with somber eyes. “We were just practicing.”

“Practice less.” Even with all the snipping, he thinks Krissy has potential—she’s tough and brave. If she had access to the Well protected by Stanford, she wouldn’t have to risk her life just to practice magic. Dean shakes his head and checks on Anael, who’s swaying but otherwise seems all right. Then a thought occurs to him, and he looks back at Krissy. “Your friends need help too?”

That’s how Dean finds himself inside, siphoning off lay magic from two other blissed-out teenagers. By then, Dean is feeling nauseous and Anael helps another kid, a skinny brown-haired guy who seems to be Krissy’s boyfriend. All four of them seem clear-headed instantly, but Dean and Anael are stumbling off their feet by the time it’s all over. Dean feels borderline drunk when they’re leaving the house, tripping down the stairs. Transporting themselves back to the resistance meeting spot takes more concentration than it should. They’re back in the barn in Indiana…or is it Illonis? Or are they at a whole different barn altogether? Dean can’t stop giggling.

By a struck of luck he has cell phone service, and sees that it’s nearly dinnertime. He has a missed
call from Cas and a voicemail. He hits the play button, jamming the receiver to his ear, and hears, *Dean, it’s me. Just wondering if you’re coming back to my place tonight, and what time? Could you give me a call when you get this?*

He looks around at the people beside him—Anael, Neil, Benjamin, Rachel. Everyone waiting for the Captain to return, and even though he’s not exactly feeling sober, he doesn’t think it’d be a great idea to call Cas in the middle of all this. But he misses Cas, misses him something awful, so he pulls up his text messages.

**Dean 6:11 PM >> hey, in a meeting, but I’ll come over after**

“Who’re texting?” Anael asks, coming to lean next to Dean on his bale of hay.

“My hotass boyfriend,” Dean brags, slurring his words a little. He hopes this excess magic leaves his system soon.

**Castiel 6:12 PM << Sounds good.**

**Castiel 6:12 PM << Or we could do dinner at the D?**

**Dean 6:13 PM >> sure. and afterwards I can get your d**

**Dean 6:13 PM >> [eggplant emoji]**

“Are you seriously sexting in a room full of people?” Anael looks over his shoulder, eyebrows raised. He pulls the screen away from her prying eyes.

**Castiel 6:14 PM << If you’re lucky…**

Dean grins. He feels great—there’s magic practically dripping off his fingertips. The rush feels amazing, and as much as he hates to admit it, he can understand why people risk everything just to get a taste of this. He’s never been flooded with lay magic on purpose, but once it happens, he’s never regretted it in the moment. The next day, though…

“Welcome back, everyone,” says a familiar, crisp voice, and the Captain walks, her cheeks flushed red with cold. “Everyone have a productive time canvassing?”

“Just peachy,” Dean says, grinning and giving a big thumbs up. “We met Krissy. She’s a ball.” He tucks his phone back into the pocket of his jacket, trying to pay attention, but he’s squirming around uncomfortably and wishing he could teleport back already. The next twenty minutes passes in a slow haze, and he thinks the lay magic might finally be dissipating a little by the time Anna dismisses them.

“Dean,” she calls out, as smaller groups begin to gather and chat, “can we talk for a minute?”

“Sure,” he mutters, hands fidgeting in front of him. “I gotta head out soon, though…”

“This won’t take long,” she says, smiling warmly. She scoots back a few steps into they’re in the corner, then drops her voice low. “I was wondering if you could tell me what you’ve uncovered in your research.”

“My research?” Dean repeats blankly.

“On the Seal,” she adds.
“Oh, uh…” He clears his throat, searching for the right words. This is classified information, but he trusts the Captain, he always has. There’s something about the pull of her magic that feels familiar and warm. “Well, the Seal is a well-crafted illusion—a sort of puzzle you have to solve before it opens.”

“And you solved it?” The Captain’s eyes are gleaming with interest, and Dean’s not sure what to make of it.

“Yeah,” he answers, trying to sound nonchalant. “Got right up to the Well, but there was…a forcefield, some sort of super charged-up protective spell. I haven’t gotten closer.”

“Interesting,” she says, nodding evenly. “But you probably could?”

Dean shifts his weight from one foot, then the other. “Why? You asking me to?”

The Captain inhales sharply, evidently surprised by his upfront approach. “I don’t know, Dean. What I do know is, I’d like to know more about the layers of enchantments Stanford has in place to systematically oppress magic users they consider lower class. Magic users like me, and my friends, and hundreds of others.”

Dean nods, running a hand through his hair and letting his guard down a little. The Captain isn’t the enemy here, far as he can tell. It’s society’s broken system that’s to blame. “Fair enough.”

The Captain looks at him openly, as if she’s trying to decipher a hidden message, then gives him a small, tight smile. “Thanks for your time. I really appreciate it.”

She begins walking past him, and Dean calls out, “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Okay,” she says cautiously.

“I don’t know what you’re up to, but…don’t do anything stupid. Okay?”

The Captain chuckles and straightens up tall, looking every inch the formidable leader Dean now knows her to be.

“Despite what Stanford might think, Dean,” she says, “the last thing I am is stupid.”

Rosco stands near the windows, looking down over downtown Palo Alto. The lights of the nightclub downstairs flash their multicolored patterns across the building across the road—red, blue, green.

He turns around in time to see the boss slam his hand down on the desk, making Inias flinch where he stands in front of it.

“I pay you well to tell me what you find out, Inias. Why haven’t you got anything?”

Inias pulls himself together to stammer out, “I-I’m sorry, sir, but he went away with his new partner last week. A grad student.”

Crowley stares at him, blinking a few times, before he says, “Our professor, sleeping with one of his students? How salacious. Who is it? Anyone we know?”
“His name’s Dean Winchester. A master’s student.”

“Winchester.” Crowley looks over to Rosco for a moment, his brow furrowed. “Why does that name ring a bell?”

Rosco shrugs. “Ruby brought in a Winchester a week or two back. Sam?” The kid hadn’t actually introduced himself with his full name, but Rosco had done a little digging before bringing him into any other secrets.

“That’s Dean’s brother,” Inias says, looking back to Crowley with a pathetic, desperate-to-please look on his face.

“Is he now? You say you brought him in?” he asks Rosco, and at his nod, continues. “I’ve seen the name elsewhere, but…” He trails off, considering, then shakes his head. “No matter. So, Inias, what use could this Dean Winchester be to us? Should we just be rid of him? Or use him as blackmail material for our dear Doctor Novak? Never suspected him a switch-hitter.”

“They’re bonded,” Inias says, sweat beading on his forehead.

Crowley peers at him again. "They’re what?"

Inias shuffles nervously. “Novak and Winchester have a high affinity—so high that they’ve formed a profound bond. It’s very rare, only a handful of powerful—”

“Yes, I’m aware of what a profound bond is,” Crowley interrupts. He pauses, a broad grin appearing on his face. “Gentlemen, if we play this right, we could end up with quite the battering ram on our side. You,” he says, pointing at Inias. “Make our professor comfortable at this meeting next week. Let’s see if we can bring him and his boy-toy properly into the fold, shall we?”

“Yes sir,” Inias agrees quietly.

“And Inias?” the boss says quietly, picking up the perennial bottle of scotch from his desk and pouring into a glass. “Don’t disappoint me again.”

“Y-yes sir,” Inias replies, turning to make his way to the door.

Rosco follows to make sure he’s out and to the elevator, before he re-enters the office, closing the door behind him. Inias hasn’t revealed anything new to him—he’d had Novak’s brother and ex-girlfriend followed at Christmas and Inias has just more or less confirmed what his informant had told him. He hadn’t thought the information important enough to the boss to pass on, but it seems he has a bee in his bonnet about this Winchester guy after all.

Crowley glances up at him from where he’s pulled out the History of Magic book again. His brow furrows in annoyance as he asks, “What the hell is a profound bond?”

Chapter End Notes

On seers: Nostradamus lived in the 16th century, and Da Vinci the 15th, but Matt Groening has been asked several times by the Magical Council to tone down the prophecy inserted into The Simpsons. Only time will tell if he's done so.

Next week: Meetings (again)
Evening, friends.

So…you know how we said to hang on to your hats?

Castiel wakes to discordant singing from somewhere outside his room. He squints at the light coming through the crack in his door, and it takes him a few moments to connect the noise with the empty side of the bed. He turns his gaze to his nightstand and picks up his phone to check the time. What the fuck is Dean doing up before seven?

He drops his head back onto his pillow and lies there for a few minutes listening to Dean. He can’t hear any actual music—Dean must be wearing earphones or something.

How quickly his whole life has turned around, he muses. One moment, his girlfriend dumps him and he moves from another country to a strange city, and the next, his gorgeous boyfriend is singing what sounds a lot like Metallica in the kitchen.

He should probably get up and moving, though. They’d discussed Missouri’s request to revisit the Seal after Castiel had met Dean at the D for dinner that night, his aura full of the crackle of lay magic. When Castiel had commented on it, surprised, Dean had told him he’d just had a few test shots with Jo.

Castiel had let it slide, not wanting to stir the pot, but the way Dean’s eyes had been lit with lay magic residue, his touch like static shocks—it worried Castiel. He knew Dean was keeping something from him, but he didn’t want to push while he was drunk on magic.

The following week had been quiet, anyway. They haven’t had a chance to revisit the Seal, and there has been no further lay magic on Dean. As well, Castiel's trip to see Crowley and his students had been encouraging. They had all been practicing over the holidays and were keen to get stuck back into learning, so Castiel had started teaching them the mechanics of casting together as a group, just for fun. Crowley was delighted, which set Castiel’s alarm bells ringing.

But the alarms had really gone off when Crowley then invited him to come along to a meeting with the mysterious "Captain" on Thursday evening—later today. Crowley has been pretty cagey about other lay magician groups since day one, but the Captain has been mentioned with reverence by some of his magician students, and Castiel has to admit, he’s desperately curious.

At least if he goes along to the meeting, he might be able to suss out just what the intentions of the group are and step away from them if they turn out to be too far outside his comfort zone. Either way, he’ll have an answer he can share with Dean and Bobby. The fact he's still keeping it all from them is sitting uneasily in his gut.

In the meantime… He gets up, throwing on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, and uses the bathroom before he wanders into the kitchen.
Dean is standing at the stove in just a pair of rumpled sweatpants, swaying his hips and humming as he cooks.

The curve of Dean’s bare back, his skin dusted with freckles, is enough to send a reviving jolt to Castiel’s morning wood. He swallows hard as he crosses the small room, then feels Dean become still as he slides his hands around Dean’s bare middle and hooks his chin over Dean’s shoulder. He barely spares the frying pancakes a glance before planting a kiss on Dean’s cheek.

“Morning, sunshine,” Dean murmurs, smiling as he removes one earbud from his ear. “You hungry?”

“Mm,” Castiel replies, finding now that he has his lips on Dean, he doesn’t really want to stop. He kisses a line behind Dean’s ear and down his neck, sucking gently where it meets his shoulder.

“Hey, no hickeys, man. Gotta go out in public today,” Dean says, his voice now a breathy gasp.

Castiel keeps nipping and kissing at Dean’s shoulders, as he trails his hands under the waistband of Dean’s pants. He pushes his hips forward so Dean can feel his hard length pressing against his ass.

Dean sighs, switching the stove off with a beep and placing his earphones and phone on the counter. “Pancakes aren’t gonna happen, are they?” he says, turning in Castiel’s arms and capturing Castiel’s cheek with one warm hand.

“Later,” Castiel says, his voice rough. He kisses Dean deeply, tasting the coffee on his tongue. They kiss, Dean leaning back against the counter, and Castiel presses one knee between Dean’s, and Dean gasps as Castiel’s thigh pushes against his cock. Castiel lets out a low moan and digs his hand under Dean’s waistband to take him in hand, his length filling out rapidly after only a few strokes.

Dean lifts a hand and puts it on Castiel’s chest, pushing him back a few steps until the back of his knees hit one of the dining chairs. He sits down on the sideways-facing chair and looks up at Dean, who has just turned around again and now looking back over his shoulder at Castiel. Slowly, he puts his hands on his hips and slides his pants down over the curve of his ass.

Castiel has to swallow the extra saliva pooling in his mouth as he quickly shuffles his own sweats down, letting his flushed cock stand to attention. He shuffles the chair around until the hard, wooden back is behind him, and sits again, reaching forward to pull Dean towards him by the hips. He plants kisses on as much skin as he can reach, but Dean shies away, instead straddling Castiel and sitting in his lap. Their cocks line up again, and Dean grinds down into Castiel, making them both gasp.

Dean threads his fingers into Castiel’s hair and pulls gently, tilting Castiel’s face up to kiss him again. “Can I ride you, Cas?” Dean murmurs against his lips.

Castiel moves his hands from Dean's hips to grab his ass, pulling him forward again. “Please,” he growls, capturing Dean’s lips again. He’s never going to get enough of this—of Dean being so eager, so hot, and all for him.

Dean frees his hands and leans back, touching his fingers together then drawing magic to cast a summoning spell. A few seconds later, their tube of lube flies through the bedroom door, over their heads, and slams into the wall above the table, clattering to the wooden surface.

Dean looks sheepish. “Sorry, got a little over eager,” he says.
A short laugh escapes Castiel, but he reaches over behind him to retrieve the tube. He makes quick work of reaching around behind Dean, trailing his fingers down his crack and circling his hole. He pushes one finger past his rim, then two, soothing the way with a gentle wash of lay magic, until Dean is moaning against his mouth.

"Caaas…feels so good, just like that…" he mutters, then bats Castiel's fingers away and lifts himself up, lining Castiel's cock up beneath him.

Castiel isn't sure he's had enough time to stretch—this could be uncomfortable, but Dean impales himself on Castiel with a drawn-out groan, sliding on shaky legs to the hilt.

Castiel sends more soothing magic into Dean as he stares up in awe at the look on Dean's face—his eyes shut tight, his mouth open as the filthy groan escapes him. The sight alone sends tightness to Castiel's core, but when Dean twists his hips slightly, Castiel has to close his eyes and hold on tight to his orgasm to keep it at bay.

"Dean…Dean, I—" he begins, his voice gruff.

"I know, baby," Dean murmurs. "So good. So good..." He begins to rock back and forward, gentle, but sending shockwaves through Castiel with every movement. As Castiel clutches Dean's hips as he moves them faster and harder, Dean leans forward and kisses Castiel deeply, desperately, his hands back in Castiel's hair.

The orgasm builds again, slowly, then all at once, and as a white-hot blast of magic rips through him he cries out, sharing the ecstasy with Dean as he comes deep inside him.

They come down, both gasping for breath as Dean leans his forehead on Cas'.

Castiel smiles, feeling like every atom in his body is full of light. "I love you," he murmurs, and places a sweet kiss on Dean's lips.

"Love you too," Dean says, with a smile like sunrise. They stare into each other's eyes for a few more moments, until Dean looks down and his eyes widen. "What the fuck?" he asks holding his hand up between them.

At first, Castiel thinks he's looking at the cum on his hand—Dean must have spilled between them—but then he sees that under the sticky mess and around Dean's fingers is a shimmering glow. "You're…you're glowing?" he asks, not sure what he's seeing. He can feel their combined magic, swirling around them, but he hasn't cast any sort of manifestation.

"You are too!" Dean says, looking back at Castiel's face and trailing his clean hand over his cheek.

"Mmm, I could stay here all day," Castiel says, pulling Dean in again to kiss him with a hand to his cheek, relishing the raw magic brushing his skin.

"Wish we could," Dean whispers, but then adds, "but I really need to get up." He shifts uncomfortably on Castiel's lap. "Haven't you got a meeting to go to?"

Castiel chuckles and grabs Dean around his back, holding him close to squish the drying cum between them. "Do we have to? I like you just here."
"Gross! Let me get up, asshole," Dean chides, making Castiel laugh even more.

It's a while before they're showered and cleaned up enough to get back to the pancakes, but Castiel doesn't mind if he's a little late for his office hours this morning if it means he gets to enjoy breakfast with Dean.

At five PM, Castiel leaves campus for downtown Palo Alto. Crowley has arranged the meeting to be held in what he said was "neutral ground," the Mana Bar, where Inias works, and where Dean had taken Castiel for their first date.

Castiel turns down two wrong alleys before he finally feels the edges of the concealment spell, like a tickle along the edge of his consciousness. He waves his hand over the wall, testing the depth of the spell before he pushes it away. He's not sure, but he thinks he's getting better at feeling the shape of existing spells. Dean had showed him just last week, when he'd helped Cas to find and fix one of their insulation spells in the cabin that was letting a cool draught in through a window.

Stepping through the door into the warmth of the bar, he shrugs off his too-warm trench coat as he checks the room. He can't see anyone he knows from here, but as he walks through the dining area, he nods a hello to Inias behind the bar.

The place is nearly empty this early on a Thursday evening. The wall behind the bar is pulsing with a soft blue, ripples like water moving across it. Castiel allows it to soothe him until Inias comes over.

"Hello, Castiel. Can I interest you in a beer?"

"Thanks, Inias. I'll just take your house pale ale." Castiel sits on a stool, scanning the room again while Inias fetches his drink. Where's Crowley?

When Inias brings it over, he waves Castiel's credit card away. "It's on Crowley tonight," he says, smiling. "He should be here any moment." Castiel must have let his apprehension show on his face, because Inias adds, "Don't worry, he wants what's best for us, Castiel."

"Sure," Castiel replies, trying to relax. "Just not really sure what it's all about, though."

"Crowley will explain. Look, here they are."

Castiel turns towards the door to see a small group crossing the room towards him. Crowley, dressed to the nines as usual, and behind him Rosco, in his usual dark suit and inscrutable expression.

And behind them, Castiel is shocked and a little horrified to see Ruby and Sam. When Sam catches sight of Castiel, his eyes widen in shock as well. Ruby looks even more smug than usual.

The group approaches the bar, and Crowley nods to Castiel. "Glad you could make it, Novak. I'm sure you know some of my colleagues here—Rosco of course, but this is Ruby, Sam," he says, gesturing to them in turn. "This is Doctor Novak, an expert from Stanford who has been doing some consulting for me."

Castiel casts his eyes back to Sam, who is shifting uncomfortably. "Actually," Castiel says, "we've
"Excellent!" Crowley exclaims, looking to Inias. "In that case, we'll have a round of drinks and talk shop before the others arrive, shall we?"

As Inias busily pours drinks for everyone, Sam sidles over to Castiel.

"Cas, what are you doing here?" he asks tightly. "Is Dean here?"

"I could ask you the same question!" Castiel replies quietly, but with no less intensity. "And no, Dean is not here."

"Gentlemen? Could I just have your attention for a few moments?" Crowley asks, obviously delighted. He hands a beer to Sam, raising his own glass of whiskey in a toast. "To the Demons," he says, and Castiel's eyes widen. Who or what on earth are the Demons?

Crowley throws back his drink, slamming the glass down on the bar for Inias to refill. "Now," he continues, "we've got a few stragglers from our group, but most of them have already been briefed. When the others arrive, just let me do the talking, all right? Our aim here is simple—find out what they know, and if the Coven will lend us their power. Everything else after that will be negotiating, and that's my area of expertise."

Castiel is completely lost. Coven? That sounds dangerous—elemental covens were used during wars long ago, but this must be related to lay magic. Although the idea of a coven of lay magicians is terrifying, Castiel finds himself fascinated. Is this Coven run by the Captain?

He's about to ask what on earth Crowley is talking about when Crowley looks over Castiel's shoulder across the dining room, where they'd just come from a moment ago.

"Ahh, here they are," he says with an effusive smile. "Welcome."

Castiel eyes the group of four or five magicians who have just come in. He can feel the magic playing about them—it's strong enough to make the magic in Dean's amulet pulse steadily under his shirt. When his eyes land on the person in front, he can't believe his eyes.

Anna.

Crowley steps forward, holding out his hand. "My dear Captain," he says, shaking her hand, "allow me to introduce—"

"Doctor Novak," she says, her expression guarded. She's keeping her identity secret, then? Castiel isn't sure whether he wants to play along. She says, "It's a pleasure to see you again."

As she steps forward to shake his hand, the magicians behind her scowl at him, as though they don't approve of her already knowing someone like him.

The sooner he can get Sam out of this mess and to Dean to explain the whole thing, the better, honestly. He has no idea what Anna's playing at here, but he has a bad feeling about it.

“Come, let’s sit down and get started,” Crowley says, gesturing to the back section of the bar.
Dean slings his messenger bag off his shoulder, closing his apartment door with a tired exhale. He’s had a great day, for all intents and purposes—he woke up in Cas’ bed, ended up riding him right there at the kitchen table, and then refueled with some pancakes. He headed to the library for the rest of the day, a binder full of nearly finished lesson plans weighing him down. The whole walk home, he’s tried to get a hold of Cas or Sam, to meet one of them (or both of them) for dinner at the D. But they’re apparently both in meetings, weirdly late in Dean’s opinion, so he’s flying solo tonight. He heads to the bathroom, then comes back into the kitchen whistling, ready to rifle through his cabinets to see if there’s something quick and starchy he can whip up.

That’s when he sees a ripple of energy, hazy and opaque, right in the middle of his apartment. Another curtain of energy, another secret doorway from the Captain requesting his presence. How long has it been there? Since the moment he walked in?

“Uh, not now,” he grumbles, his stomach growling, every ounce of energy feeling zapped from his body. Does she really think that Dean is at her beck and call all the time? That he’s just another puppet she’s pulling the strings for?

“Thanks, but no thanks,” he tells the doorway, not really in the mood to teleport anywhere but his bed. Or maybe his boyfriend’s, though it’s empty. He groans in frustration, at a loss of what to do. He’s not sure what he was expecting—it’s not like a curtain of energy would just vanish because he wants it to—but he’s hoping if he ignores it it’ll just go away. He has a sudden, sharp longing for Cas, and he gets goosebumps on his forearms even though his sleeves are rolled down and buttoned. It feels like something is wrong, and he pulls his phone out and fires off a quick text before he can help himself.

Dean 5:36 PM >> hey, you okay?

He stares back at his message thread with Cas, willing him to answer, but there’s no indication that he’s texting back right now. Jesus, he needs to get a grip. Castiel is probably in the middle of some boring faculty meeting. Dean is just being clingy, and things have been going so good between them, the last thing he wants to do is mess it up.

Dean 5:37 PM >> sorry, know you’re in a meeting, just had a bad feeling. call me when you’re done?

Dean 5:37 PM >> I love you

He sighs, sliding his phone into his back pocket and scrubbing a hand over his face. Well, if his two favorite people are out of pocket tonight, why not see what the Captain is up to? Maybe he can even check in on Krissy and her friends. He takes a deep breath and walks through, staring down at his feet as the floor transitions from creaky hardwood to black asphalt. He’s outside now, seemingly in downtown Palo Alto, and it’s fucking freezing. The sun is already on the verge of setting and he wishes he had his coat.

“Is that what you took you so long?” Anael asks, leaned against the brick wall of an empty alleyway. She’s bundled up in a long suede coat with a yellow dress underneath, and she smirks at Dean as he shivers. “Couldn’t find your cute little leather jacket?”

“Something like that,” he says grumpily, shoving his hands into his pockets. He turns his head back and forth, searching for a street sign. Huh, they’re only a few blocks away from Cas’ apartment. Maybe he can head there tonight, wake up warm and sated with his sleepy boyfriend tucked under his chin. “Where are we headed tonight? More canvassing?”

“No, not tonight.” Anael starts walking quickly, taking a sharp left as Dean struggles to keep up.
“Tonight we’re meeting someone.”

Anael chews on her lip, looking nervous, and Dean jokes, “Well, based off that look I’m guessing it ain’t the tooth fairy?”

“Definitely not,” she says. She lowers her voice down to a whisper. “We’re meeting Crowley and his group. Some sort of negotiation meeting.”

“What?” Dean asks, eyebrows raised. He only just heard about this guy from Krissy, but anyone who manipulates a kid isn’t on his list of allies. “Why?”

Anael shrugs, leading them down another alleyway. “The Captain seems to think it might be beneficial to our cause.”

Dean snorts, hands still grasping his denim pockets for warmth. “Yeah, that’s likely,” he says. “Why am I even invited? As Uriel loves to remind me, I’m not exactly in the inner circle.”

“It was his idea to bring you along, actually,” Anael says lightly. “He said we might need the muscle if things get out of hand.”

“Muscle?” Dean shoots her a skeptical look, though he is pretty damn fit for a guy who wouldn’t be caught dead in the gym.

“Magical muscle,” she clarifies with an eye roll. “Apparently some of Crowley’s guys are pretty powerful.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve got a whole coven,” Dean says protectively. There are moments when he doesn’t trust his little group of lay magicians one bit, and moments when he’d do anything to keep them safe. Most days, it’s some combination of the two.

Anael stops beside a familiar dumpster, and it occurs to Dean way too slowly that they’re standing in front of an entrance. One he’s seen before.

“Mana Bar?” He had taken Cas here a while ago, when they first started going out. That seemed like a whole lifetime ago—in a way, he barely knew Castiel then. Now he knows what he looks like when he’s sleeping, how he tucks his feet under Dean’s thighs when he’s cold, what it sounds like when he laughs so hard he turns away and gasps for air.

“A public place is safest,” Anael explains, as a bright blue door outline appears in the wall. They walk through the threshold, instantly standing inside the drafty interior. That guy Cas knows, Ian or Edgar or something, is still the bartender, wiping glasses and looking nervous when he spots Dean. Behind him is a wall with glowing blue waves, some sort of conjured spell that reminds Dean of the ocean. He gives the bartender a little half-wave, wondering if he’ll tell Castiel about seeing Dean here tonight. His stomach does a little nervous flip at the thought. That’s what he’ll do tonight—he’ll sit Cas on the couch, wrap his arms around him, and tell him everything.

“Where is everybody?” Anael asks curiously.

“Let’s check the back,” Dean answers stiffly, trying to catch a glimpse of the Captain’s red hair. He begins walking, though not before he feels Anael’s hands on his back and shoulder, pouring warmth into his skin. It feels nice because he’s shivering, but it reminds him too much of the flirting he and Cas used to do before they became an item. “You, uh, don’t have to do that,” he mutters. He walks a little quicker, noticing a long string of tables pushed together in the back. He feels an overwhelming surge of familiar magic drawing him in closer, and though it could just be the Captain, it feels too intimate to be anyone but Cas. This isn’t the first time Dean has felt his
boyfriend’s magic just from pure longing—their profound bond tends to make itself known, even when they’re apart.

“Come on, you’re freezing,” she protests, pushing herself closer against him as they approach the table. There are some other guys taking seats too, though Dean doesn’t recognize them. On the back row facing them, he sees the Captain in the middle, with Hester, Rachel, Uriel, Neil, and Benjamin flanking her on either side. He’s about to open his mouth and say hello when he spots Ruby’s black leather jacket, and she turns around, her expression turning from smug to shocked.

“Well, I’d say I’m surprised, but I’m not,” he says, glaring at her. “You wanna tell me what you’re doing here?”

“We’re just—” Her eyes widen, her face breaking into a twisted grin. “Wait, same question, hot shot. What are you doing here?”

That’s when he sees it—the recognizable mop of brown hair, the wide shoulders, the look of absolute and utter disbelief on his brother’s face. “Dean?”

Before Dean can even process what he’s seeing, another head whips around, Castiel’s blue eyes looking round and filled with pure incredulity. Dean staggers backwards, Anael’s hands falling from his chest.

“Dean,” she whispers into his ear, muffled and low, “those are Crowley’s goons. You know them?”

Dean’s heart is pounding so fast he’s worried he might be having a heart attack. He doesn’t know where to glare, so he alternates between them—his brother and his boyfriend, wondering if it’s possible to accidentally stare a hole through their thick skulls. Or purposefully, actually, because he’s pissed as hell right now, adrenaline surging through his veins. What the fuck is up with this shit? The two most important people in his life are not only involved in the resistance without telling him, they’re working for some shady piece of crap like Crowley?

“I thought I did,” he says coldly. Sam exhales a huff and Castiel just stares back at him, looking small and remorseful.

“Dean, it’s not—”

“No need to explain yourself, Cas. Looks like you’n Sammy are two peas in a pod, huh? That’s just…great,” he grouses. There are so many questions so many accusations, so many lies—he’s not sure where to start.

“We didn’t know—” Castiel begins, but his explanation is interrupted.

“Like you have any room to talk,” Sam snaps. “It’s not like you’re just here to grab a beer, Dean.”

He has a point, but Dean wants to explain that he’s clearly on the right side of this meeting—the Captain is mysterious, sure, but she’s a good person. Here he was, torturing himself for months over not coming clean to them, especially Cas, when they’ve been keeping the same secret. Only at least they had each other in this…for whatever reason, they excluded Dean. He’s been carrying this all alone.

“So it’s true. You’re…you’re here for the meeting?” Castiel asks, his voice cool. His eyes flicker from Dean to Anael, eyes narrowing. “And you’ve made new friends.”

Dean opens his mouth to point out that he could say the same damn thing, but someone coughs
loudly and clears his throat.

“Not that I don’t love the melodrama,” says a man in the center, sporting a black suit and a trim beard, “but can we wrap up this domestic dispute? As enjoyable as it is to watch, I’ve got Keeping Up With the Kardashians recorded on the DVR, and I tend to get testy when my schedule is disrupted.” The man’s accent is thick, British or maybe Scottish, and Dean narrows his eyes at him.

“Crowley, I’m guessing?”

“You guess correctly,” Crowley says, with a wave of his hand. “I would ask your name, but it seems your brother and your lover introduced you just fine.” He turns to Castiel, an overly dramatic frown deepening on his face. “Trouble in paradise, darling?”

“That’s not really any of your business,” Castiel says through gritted teeth.

“Can we just get on with this?” the Captain asks, her voice level, her face a perfectly emotionless mask. “Dean, Anael, come sit.”

Dean feels frozen in place, jaw wound tight, still eyeing Castiel and Sam with a stunned sort of fury. But the Captain is right—they need to get this meeting over with, so Dean can drag his traitorous brother and boyfriend into the back alley and ask them what the hell is going on. He stuffs his hands in his pocket, finally breaking icy eye contact with Cas long enough to walk around the edge of the table. Anael sits beside Hester and Dean sits on her other side, at the end of the table and across from Ruby. He really can’t tell who he’s madder at right now, but he knows deep within his bones that he absolutely loathes Ruby. He balls his hands into fists, staring straight ahead at the wall.

“Well, wasn’t that exciting,” Crowley says, something in his tone sounding dry and sarcastic. “Now that we’re all here, formal introductions are in order.” There’s a group of intimidating looking guys gathered on Crowley’s left, but they look don’t look too sharp. The guy sitting on the other side of Ruby, wearing a dark suit and looking prickly as a cactus, is called Rosco. He introduces Sam, Ruby, and Castiel last, going on about how they’re well-connected because of their ties to Stanford’s students and staff.

“We have a Stanford representative as well,” the Captain says airily, eyes flickering to Dean. “Are these your ‘people on the inside’? Because I have to say, one adjunct professor and two underclassmen does not an army make.”

“Who said anything about an army?” Crowley picks up his glass of scotch, swirling the contents. Dean could really use a drink right about now, but the bartender is nowhere in sight. “I’d argue for quality over quantity. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I’m afraid we may not agree on much.” The Captain looks away aloofly, sounding bored. “I want access to the Seal to provide equal magic for all. From what I hear, you’re more interested in selling magic to the highest bidder.”

Dean can’t help but risk quick glances at Sam and Cas, watching their expressions go slack at the accusation. Did they really have no idea who they were supporting?

“Your intel is… Well, what does that inconceivable oaf of a US president call it again? Fake news?”

“What an awesome guy to quote. Now we really trust you,” Anael mumbles, and Dean fights back
“The Boss is doing good things for the community now,” Rosco pipes up eagerly. “He has a group of kids he helps.”

“Yeah, a group he’s helping right into the grave,” Dean argues bitterly. “Or did you not know that Krissy and her friends get hopped up on lay magic still?”

“Krissy did what?” Castiel demands in utter horror. “She knows better! I’ve told her every consequence, made them all read every case study—”

“You know her, too?” Dean throws his hands up, feeling disgusted at himself and Cas and this whole fucked-up situation.

“Can’t all be A-plus students, professor,” Crowley interrupts tonelessly, looking annoyed at Cas’ interruption. “Point is, whatever you think about me, dear Captain, my crew cares about this cause.”

Sam is looking at the Captain with wide and pleading eyes, nodding his head. “We just want magic available for all magic-users. I don’t like the society I’ve grown up in, and I want to help change it.”

The pure sincerity of Sam’s words thaws some of the tough neutrality from the Captain’s face, Dean can tell. “The problem is, Sam,” she says calmly, “if we broach the Seal, or we overpower it or alter it, we’re legally committing an act of magical terrorism. There’s a lot more at risk than your degree. As a mage, why would you want to risk it?”

“Because this affects mages, too. This affects us all,” Castiel answers somberly. The Captain adjusts her gaze, her expression returning to its careful facade in a way Dean finds interesting. Does she not trust Cas? Why is she so closed off?

“My own si—my own family has suffered because of this.” Castiel’s voice breaks and the Captain sucks in a deep breath, looking away with a blank stare. “I don’t know if I want to be a part of this or not—I didn’t even know this was a possibility until I walked through the door tonight. But if there’s any way to change things for the better, and save the lives of people like Krissy, then it’s a conversation worth having.”

Dean can’t help it—part of his aggravation towards Cas dissipates. His heart really was, and always has been, in the right place.

“Well, look at that, you’ve heard it from my best men,” Crowley says cheerfully. Sam looks confused by that comment, but Crowley doesn’t notice, dropping his empty glass on the table sharply. A guy in his group stands up to get him a fresh scotch. “Question is, why would I want to work with you? I already have the resources to make this happen. I’m a well-connected and pragmatic lawman, and no offense darling, but you’re just a magician with a vague title and an excellent poker face.”

Dean feels ready to blast this guy into next week, his fingers itching to cast. But the Captain just smiles mildly. “I’d be mindful of what you say to me, Fergus. There are few things stronger than a coven, and that’s the kind of backup you’ll need to storm Stanford.”

Fergus? Dean hums quietly to himself, thinking about why that name sounds so familiar…

“You’re the president’s son,” he blurts out. “Of Stanford, I mean. Rowena MacLeod is your mom.”
“Genius detective you’ve got here, Novak,” Crowley says, and Rosco snickers. “What’s your point?”

“My point is... why would you wanna stick it to your mom if there’s nothing in it for you?” Dean pries, as Rosco’s laughter dies quietly. “I don’t trust a guy who turns his back on his own family.”

“Lucky for me, then, that I don’t need your trust,” Crowley says bluntly, “just your respect. I can get this done, and I will get this done. I’m simply inviting your little faction to be a part of that.”

There’s an awkward silence, the only sounds clinking glass and the shuffle of clothing. Finally, the Captain says, “Dean, would you be willing to share the information you’ve gathered about the Seal during your thesis research?”

Dean’s mouth runs dry, and Castiel’s head snaps up.

“No,” Castiel says vehemently.

Part of Dean knows Cas is right, but a much larger (and more petty) part of him just wants to argue. “So you can’t leak info we fought tooth and nail to uncover, but you’ll help take down the Seal as long as... what, Cas? Your hands don’t get dirty?” Dean laughs without humor, amazed at his boyfriend’s ability to compartmentalize like that.

“That’s not it and you know it,” Castiel snaps back. “I just think you and I need to talk about this before—”

“You and I, talk? Now you’re joking,” Dean says angrily, his heart thumping in his chest. “The only thing we’re good at is keeping secrets, babe. If not, we wouldn’t be here.”

Castiel’s fists are balled up and white, his mouth open and ready for a retort, when the building suddenly shakes. It’s just a slight tremor, but Dean feels the tell-tale presence of elemental magic rising in the air. He’s on his feet before he knows quite what he’s doing, following a hunch and taking wide steps towards the exit. The bartender is MIA and the rest of the bar is eerily vacant. He hears several voices behind him calling his name, but he keeps walking, pretty certain that he’s pissed off with about half of the people trying to get his attention. He reaches for the door handle and then he’s knocked backwards, only touching air—his body flying into the air, legs kicking up as he’s thrown back several yards. He lands roughly onto the floor, his back aching, with members of both factions standing above him.

“Dean!” Castiel shouts, scrambling to help him. Dean accepts Cas’ hand more out of habit than anything, but just touching his skin has an immediate impact. Even corrupted with anger and confusion, the bond flows between them in a way that makes Dean feel more clear-headed. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he says distantly, the wheels of his mind turning. “What’s going on? Why can’t we leave?”

There’s a sound of commotion outside, and then a voice, like it’s hooked up to loudspeaker, rings out, “Members of the resistance, do not be alarmed. We are the enforcers of the council, and we are entering the premise for peaceful discussions.”

“‘Peaceful’ my ass,” Dean retorts, wondering what the hell sort of trouble they’re about to find themselves in if they don’t escape somehow. He looks at the Captain expectantly. “This would be a good time to have an idea.”

“We have the Coven,” the Captain mutters.
“We don’t have any of our usual supplies,” Hester complains, but the lay magicians are already gathering. They begin to do a synchronized defensive spell, like a rubber band of electric energy stretching out and pushing against the barrier. It’s good, but it could be stronger, and Dean can see on their faces how their energy begins to wane.

“It’s not enough, is it?” Sam whispers, sounding scared now.

*There are few things stronger than a coven.* That’s what the Captain had said, and it sticks out in Dean’s mind like the resounding of a bell. But that means that there is something stronger than a coven…

“Dean,” Castiel says gravely, clutching Dean’s wrist, “I think we should—”

“I know,” Dean says softly, feeling calm now it’s come to this. Either they have the strength to do this or they don’t. They can save everyone or they’ll all be caught and questioned, maybe even kicked out of Stanford, their whole future ruined. It seems fitting that it all depends on them, their bond, their magic.

They cast a Delambre container without even discussing it, hands moving in perfect tandem. Despite the high stakes and the simmering anger, casting with Cas feels like it always does. Envirotating and calming—like a brisk morning walk.

“Protection charm? Translocation?” Castiel asks, eyes locked with Dean’s in concentration. Dean thinks over the options, but neither are ideal—a protection charm would keep the enforcers out, true, but everyone inside would still be trapped. Teleporting would be ideal, but way more complicated to organize and pull off with so many people.

“Neither. We’re on the offensive,” Dean mutters, trying to remember the exact casting of the spell.

“What are you thinking?”

“Let’s blow a fucking hole in the wall.”

There’s a flash of mischievous excitement in Castiel’s eyes, and he watches the movements of Dean’s hands, mirroring them. Their fingers divide in two units between ring and middle, crossed in an X, with hands held out with an abrupt jerk. As they grow more confident in the rhythm, Dean feels the magnetism of their magic drawing together, more entwined with every passing moment.

“Come on,” Sam prods when the building shakes again. “We’re running out of time.”

“We’re trying,” Dean grits out of his teeth, feeling the pressure of the barrier spell pushing against them. “I…I’m not sure we can do this.” Distantly, he can feel everyone watching them now. Even the coven has stopped casting and chanting, just watching the spectacle of a profound bond at work.

“Look at me, Dean,” Castiel says, incredibly calm considering the circumstances. “It’s just you and me. You and me and our magic—that’s all we need.”

Dean swallows, his throat tight, and nods. That’s when he hears it—an explosion, like a grenade left on the back wall. Dozens of bricks splinter off, flying with a gust of grimy wind, rubble landing at their feet. Everyone moves immediately, running towards the unexpected exit. Dean begins to sprint between Cas and Sam, but then falls behind intentionally, making sure everyone else has made it out first. There are a few council enforcers, men and women in matching black suits, and they dodge several stunning spells sent their way. Crowley and Rosco slip inside a black SUV idling nearby, and many of the lay magicians begin teleporting away to god knows where.
Dean sees a few of the enforcers move quickly enough to tap into the magical residue leftover from the teleportations, but following a trail like that is unpredictable at best. He hopes his friends make a safe getaway.

“The resistance lives!” the Captain shouts, both for her followers and the enforcers tracking her movements. And then she disappears into thin air.

“We should separate,” Dean says to Sam and Cas, breathing heavy as they continue running.

“No, let’s just teleport to the same place,” Sam insists.

“You two don’t need to go debrief with your underlord first?” Dean says snippily, all the resentment he’s bottled up in the past hour bubbling back up to the surface.

“You’re oddly self-righteous for someone who’s been having clandestine meetings with my sister,” Castiel snipes, his voice a deep and unyielding rumble.

“What?” Dean shouts. “Your…who…?”

“The Captain? Is that—” Sam takes a sharp corner and they follow on his heels. “That’s your sister?”

Castiel nods gravely and Dean huffs out a sound of disbelief, of humor, of rage. Really, how much is one person supposed to take?

“Fuck this,” Dean mumbles, slowing his run to a jog. He looks at them both, mouth set in a hard line, and says, “Don’t follow me.”

Then he teleports to the only place he feels safe. His hands are gripping the steering wheel of his Impala instantly, eyes heavy with unshed tears the moment he’s alone. He pulls the keys from his pocket and starts the engine, looking into the rearview mirror warily. All he wants now is miles of empty highway.

Chapter End Notes

dun dun dunnnnnn!

I’m sure you’re feeling…well, feelings. So come share them in the comments!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

EllenOfOz: Well, here we are, well over the 150k mark and some serious shit is finally going down. Hang in there!

TrenchcoatBaby: Haha, and by "shit" we mean our vision is coming together and the story's climax is on the horizon! Speaking of, quick disclaimer that there are some heavy emotions in this chapter. This is likely the most angsty the story will get, so keep that in mind. This is also a fun chapter in many ways, too, not just gloom and doom—but we wanted to give you a full warning in case season 15 is making your little Destiel hearts drained!

Ellen: Don't ask us how we managed to post all this just as things were also going down in the show.

TCbaby: We're prophetic, honestly. We might be legit magic…

Ellen: But we hope you're all okay, and hope this puts some salve on those wounds.

TCbaby: Exactly. Oh, and one more thing. We want to give an extra huge shout-out to our betas, who are always awesome, but had some extra thoughtful advice and feedback about the first draft of this chapter. Our work is a thousand percent better with such smart and insightful friends, and we appreciate you so!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Dean, wait!” Castiel calls, but Dean has already teleported away. Desperate to follow him despite his request not to, he raises his hands to cast a teleportation—surely Dean would have gone home?—when he feels Sam’s hand on his elbow.

“Wait, Cas. Just let him go.”

When Castiel turns to him, Sam’s eyes are worried. Sam doesn’t understand how it rips at his magic to have Dean disappear away from him like that. “No, I need to go after him—”

“No,” Sam says, still gripping his arm, but drops it when there’s a shout from somewhere behind them. Two council enforcers have rounded the corner and have almost certainly spotted them.

It's too late to teleport, and the enforcers might be able to trace where they go from the residue anyway. Castiel pushes Sam towards a dark doorway nearby, crossing two fingers then swinging one palm around the other in a semicircle to cast a misdirection over them. He adds to it, using lay magic to create an illusion to mask his magic, similar to what he’d put on Dean’s talisman.

Dean...the extra strength the talisman lends to Castiel as he casts soothes him, but it also creates a hollow feeling in his stomach as the realization hits him—he’s lost Dean, hasn’t he? He’s kept his work with Crowley a secret for too long, and now…

The enforcers come stalking down the street, checking the side alleys and holding magic detector spells up in front of them. Castiel hopes their cloaking holds, even as he’s quietly freaking out. Will
Dean ever speak to him again? He can’t lose him—he just can’t.

The enforcers walk right past them without even blinking, although he feels Sam draw a sharp breath in behind him when one of them looks their way, squinting through the gap made by his forefingers and thumbs.

He only realizes he’s shaking when Sam puts a hand on his shoulder, leaning down to murmur, “They’re gone. What did you cast, Cas? I thought we were cooked, but they didn’t even notice anything!”

"Just a misdirection, nothing fancy," he replies. He's glad the extra cloaking seems to have worked—he's never really sure why his created spells work, just that they do. The technical side is Dean's forte.

And, there's the mild nausea again. He has to catch up with Dean.

He watches the enforcers head around the corner at the far end of the lane, and exhales. He turns to Sam. "Where would Dean have gone?"

"Seriously, Cas, he's pissed. Better to let him cool down. Besides, you've probably got more of an idea than I have. I haven't exactly seen him much lately." A frown creases his forehead.

Castiel stares at him, knowing he's right. Dean could be anywhere, and nowhere is particularly safe. He and Sam should separate and go home, but first…

"Sam, why were you at that meeting? Did Ruby put you up to this?"

Sam looks affronted. "No! Well, she introduced me to Rosco a few weeks ago, but I came when they invited me. I'm interested in the lay magicians’ cause, Cas! I want to help them, like Crowley does."

Castiel flinches—he's sure he doesn't know half of the way Crowley "helps" magicians, but he's completely sure he can't let Sam go down that path. Before he can say anything, Sam continues. "What's your story anyway? Are you really involved with teaching lay magicians?"

Castiel glances around again. "Not really the best place to discuss it. We can talk about it later, okay?"

Sam nods, although Castiel can see that he's bursting with curiosity. Castiel can't blame him—he's the same. How long has Dean been working with Anna? Since she'd appeared in his apartment? Or earlier? Dean has even asked him about the resistance, about helping lay magicians—Castiel should have seen this coming, really. Should have told him about Crowley from the start.

He pushes his painful thoughts aside and casts a teleport, pulling himself and Sam through to just outside the door to the university dorms.

When Sam sees where they are, he steps away. "Thanks, Cas. I'll…catch up with you."

Castiel nods. "Keep your head down for a few days, okay?" He steps back and teleports himself back to Palo Alto, to the hallway outside the door of his apartment.

He opens the door cautiously, holding a slim hope to find Dean there, but the apartment is dark, empty.

An image comes to him of Dean standing at the table at the Mana Bar, that magician's hands all
over him. He knows Dean has a reputation at the university as a player, that he’s had plenty of partners before Castiel came along. But he’d been so sure that what they have—what they had—was something special. Has he been wrong all this time?

He slumps onto the couch, head in his hands. What has he done?

Castiel Thu 10:44 pm >> **Dean, please pick up. I just need to know you're okay.**

Castiel Fri 6:32 am >> **I think we both deserve an explanation**

Castiel Fri 6:35 am >> **Please don’t ignore me**

Castiel sighs as he checks his messages again, the list of unanswered texts and calls stretching back through the last few days.

He’d shown up for work as usual on Friday, but he hadn't seen Dean or Sam anywhere, even at the Witch's Brew, Dean's usual first port of call in the mornings, or at the D later, around lunch time. Things had been calm around the university—no one seemed unusually worried or given him any kind of suspicious glance. Even so, Castiel had felt compelled to check over his shoulder to check for enforcers now and then.

At least yesterday, on Saturday, he'd heard from Sam and had a brief text conversation with him. Sam had seen Dean—he was still upset, and Sam had suggested giving him space.

So, here Castiel is, sitting in his empty apartment, giving Dean space and feeling sorry for himself. He's tried watching a couple of different things on Netflix but all it did was remind him of Christmas Eve, when he and Dean had watched *Star Wars* together. When he'd gone into the kitchen to get another beer (the ones Dean had brought over), the kitchen chair was still backwards in the position it had been in when they'd had the best sex of Castiel's life so far, and he'd had to turn the chair around and hurry out before he either ended up in tears or broke something.

He'd woken up late on Sunday morning, hung over and miserable. He has no way of contacting Anna to demand an explanation from her, and he doesn't dare try to talk to Crowley’s people or go to his offices until he hears from them. Dean's ignoring him, and if anyone else speaks to him he may well snap. So he's sat at home, slumped on his couch for most of the day, trying to get into a book but finding himself reading the same page over and over.

And tomorrow, on Monday morning, he'll have to go into their usual faculty meeting in preparation for the new semester. And this time, all staff have been invited. He finds himself nervous about how Dean might react to seeing him, if he even shows up.

If he could just talk to Dean, just to explain himself, they might still be able to work things out. He palms the amulet beneath his shirt, Dean's magic making his heart ache. He can still feel the bond—he has no idea what the circumstances would be that would cause it to break, but it seems they aren't there yet.

He slumps over sideways on the couch, his throat aching with his despair. Another time he might call Meg, unload on her, but they haven’t spoken past a few polite texts since Christmas, and he has no desire to reveal any of this to her. Instead he pulls a cushion over his head and closes his eyes.
Castiel stands in the wooden cabin, warming his hands by the fire. He's aware that he's dreaming, but in a lazy way, knowing that if he tries too hard to influence the direction of the dream, he'll wake up.

Arms circle him from behind, and he leans back into the warm embrace, his magic singing at the contact. "Hello, Dean," he says, smiling.

Dean places kisses on Castiel's skin, pressing his lips along his jaw and up to nibble at his earlobe.

Castiel sighs at the pleasant sensation running through him. This is how any number of their shared dreams have started, but this time, he needs to make it count. He turns in Dean's arms, but Dean pounces on him, crushing their mouths together in a desperate kiss. Castiel leans into it, his heart breaking all over again at how much he misses this.

But he needs to get a grip. He grips Dean's jacket and pushes him away, looking into his eyes. The fire is reflected there, and Castiel’s chest constricts as he watches sadness creep into them.

"This is a dream," Dean says quietly. "We're not really here."

"No." Castiel watches as Dean's face falls, then when he looks up again, there's anger in his gaze. Before Dean can speak, Castiel says, "Give me a chance to explain, please—"

Dean steps back, away from him. "There's nothing to say, Cas. You lied to me, even when I asked you specifically about helping lay magicians."

Castiel gapes at him. While what he says is true, it's not like Dean can exactly take the moral high ground here. Castiel mentally regroups, then retorts with, "You did the same. When were you planning on telling me about…whatever you've been doing with Anna? Getting high?"

"What? No, the coven does not just 'get high'." Dean scoffs, turning away to pace across the dream-room.

Castiel huffs. "What about last week, when you—"

"They go to kids' houses, Cas. Kids who've been rejected from Stanford, and offer them support." Dean's glaring at him from the other side of the room, but he lowers his voice as he says, "That night I'd been to see Krissy, because Anael was worried about her. She and her friends were vibrating out of their fucking skin." He raises a finger to point it at Castiel, punctuating his words. "We saved those kids' lives, so don't accuse me of just gettin' high."

Castiel looks down at his feet. The words "Why didn't you tell me?" die on his lips. It's not like he's been particularly forthcoming either.

Dean continues, "How are you in with Crowley, anyway? I wouldn't trust that slime ball as far as I could throw him."

Castiel shrugs, stepping closer to Dean. "At first I hoped he had good intentions." When Dean snorts in derision, Castiel says defensively, "I only kept it from you initially because I didn't want you to get involved while you're still studying. These people are dangerous!"

Dean says, "Yeah, well, I could have told you that from the start."
A knot of sarcasm lodges itself in Castiel’s chest. "Oh, well thanks. Where were you when I needed to hear it?"

"I was there." Dean’s gaze burns into Castiel’s, and it feels like it drills right through to his soul. "Where were you?"

Castiel laughs, a humorless sound. “You weren’t there. You were with Anna and...and Anael.”

Dean pauses, faltering slightly in his conviction, then says, “I had to make sure it was safe before dragging you into it. I can’t lose you—I can’t.” Dean’s voice breaks a little at the end, and he mutters, “Fuck, I wish to hell this whole thing was a dream. That I could wake up back on Thursday morning in your bed and none of this had happened.”

He looks pained as he turns abruptly to leave, and Castiel realizes that Dean is trying to jolt himself out of their dream.

“No, wait, Dean,” Castiel pleads, his frustration making his voice harsher than he intends. “Don’t walk away from this when—”

But Dean ignores his protests, opening the door and vanishing out into the snow.

A gust of freezing air blows in, dispersing the dream.

Castiel wakes up with a gasp. He’s lying on his side on his couch, tears streaming down his face.

Dean’s heart aches the moment his eyes flutter open, his eyelashes wet. He swears he can still feel the cold air from inside the cabin, can picture the look on Cas’ face as he turned away and left. Fuck...he’s not even exempt from their bond in his own goddamn subconscious. Existing anywhere sucks right now—even his dreams—because Cas isn’t here.

Dean sighs, his neck stiff from his tense sleeping position on the couch. Even though they had spent most of their time arguing, the first few moments had made Dean feel like he was flying. Holding Cas, kissing him...he’ll never not crave Castiel, not love him with a fierceness that surprises him sometimes. He can’t imagine his life without him—but how the hell are they supposed to trust each other after all this?

“You’re awake?” Sam says, walking in through the kitchen. His eyes have circles under them, the pupils bloodshot. Apart from Dean’s half-hour nap—that might’ve done more harm than good—neither of them have slept much. They alternate between fighting and drinking and sitting in silence, but Dean can’t seem to get rid of the kid, so they might as well work through their issues.

“Thanks, Captain Obvious,” he says grumpily, his head still pounding. His phone’s been turned off for most of the weekend—he had spent all of Friday driving, holing up in a rundown motel, thinking and drinking and staring up at the ceiling. By the next night, Dean was feeling grubby in Thursday’s clothes, and he couldn’t in good conscience keep buying whiskey shots when he had a fifth in his kitchen at home. He’d come back to Palo Alto, halfway expecting Castiel to be sleeping on his bed, waiting for him to return. When that hadn’t been the case, Dean had stripped off his dirty clothes, grabbed a case of El Sol and chugged three beers in the shower.

That’s when Sam had arrived, with Bobby as a surprise guest, acting as a mediator between the
two. Dean had slipped on a pair of sweatpants and done an unsettlingly good impression of John Winchester when he demanded they get the hell out, but his family is just as stubborn as he is, and they camped out for the rest of the night forcing him to talk. It had been a hard few days, and the only person Dean wants to comfort him is the main person who’s done the damage. Cas.

Dean swallows, a heavy lump forming in his throat anytime he thinks about him.

“He misses you too,” Sam says softly—completely out of nowhere. Dean shoots him a glare and stands up, grumbling something about going to hit the head. He takes his time in the bathroom, washing his hands and staring up at his reflection in the mirror. God, he looks fucking awful. When’s the last time he drank something that wasn’t whiskey, or ate something that couldn’t be bought in a vending machine?

As if reading his mind, when Dean comes back in Sam’s at the stove boiling water. He sits on the couch, just watching his brother work around his kitchen, not having the energy to argue with him anymore. They eat buttered noodles and watch TV, and things could almost be back to normal apart from the lingering tension between them, and the Cas-shaped hole in Dean’s heart pounding its way through his body.

“Dean,” Sam says quietly, after the dishes are done and the sunlight is fading through the window, “what else can I say to make this okay?”

He leans against the kitchen counter, looking so miserable that Dean’s head falls into his hands. “I don’t know, man,” he admits, his voice shaking. “Look…we’ve talked about this for hours already. I know you were doing what you thought was right. I know you claim that you and Cas didn’t know the other was involved—”

“We didn’t,” Sam pleads for the hundredth time.

“How the hell is that possible? You’re both in the same secret anarchy group, and, what? You don’t run into each other at the water cooler?”

“I told you, I was recruited by Rosco. I had never met Crowley until three days ago,” Sam insists, hands moving animatedly as he speaks. “Listen, if you and Cas can keep a secret like this from each other—and still be attached at the hip—then isn’t it possible that Crowley and Rosco kept us apart that whole time, too?”

Dean scrubs a hand over his face, feeling exhausted all over again. They keep talking in circles, which means Dean keeps not being able to let this whole thing go. “I guess.”

“Well…okay then,” Sam says mildly. He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes, his tone shifting into something calmer. “I know you’re still pissed at him, but if you can forgive me, why can’t you forgive him?”

“Who says I’ve forgiven you?” Dean grumbles, though it’s obvious to them both that he has. In fact, he’s been asking himself the same question all day. He’s still irritated as hell that Sam has been so reckless lately, and thinks trusting Ruby is about the dumbest thing his brother’s ever done. But there’s something about this betrayal that feels worse coming from his boyfriend.

“You’re my little brother, you’re supposed to make dumb mistakes. It’s my job to help you out of them.” Dean sighs, looking down at the floor, Sam’s gaze palpable on him. “But, Cas…” We’re supposed to be partners. We’re supposed to help each other. We’re supposed to be honest and open and trusting. And we failed.
Sam comes and sits down beside him on the couch, his expression soft. “I’m grateful for you, okay? I really am. You’re always there for me, even when I…uh, don’t return the favor.” He frowns, and Dean wants to reach out and put his arm on his brother’s shoulder, but something keeps him rooted in place. “So let me return the favor now. You and Castiel belong together—”

“Dude, no chick flick—”

“I don’t care if this is a ‘chick flick moment,’ Dean. You need to get your head out of your ass or you’ll lose the best damn thing that’s ever happened to you,” Sam says fiercely, the abrupt change in tone making Dean’s face turn red.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replies coolly, though a part of his brain unhelpfully thinks, well, it is true, Cas is the best thing that’s ever happened to you.

“I don’t? Seriously?” Sam laughs with humor, his expression hollow and disappointment evident. He stands up, fists balled tightly. “Fine, do whatever you want, but Cas is my friend too and I don’t think he deserves all the blame for this. Honesty is a two-way street, you know.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Dean shouts, standing to his feet as well. “That’s the problem, dumbass. We both love each other so much that we keep shit from each other just to keep the other safe, and I don’t—I don’t know—I can’t lose him, okay? I’d rather break up then watch him in danger, or watch him—I can’t—Sam, what if he died—”

Sam’s tight expression drops, some of the anger leaving his eyes. His hand falls on Dean’s shoulder. “This is about Mom?” he whispers, and it’s such a startling revelation that Dean can barely move.

“I…” He clears his throat, looking away. After their mom’s death their dad became hollow, a shell of a person. Dean and Cas have only been dating a few months, and already Dean knows that would be his fate, too, should anything happen to Cas.

“We haven’t visited her grave in a while,” Sam continues, the corners of his eyes watery, “and we should do that soon. But you know Mom would’ve loved Cas. And she wouldn’t want you to ruin your relationship just because you’re afraid.”

Dean feels something inside him shudder, like his heart is being ripped from his chest, and then he’s crying for the first time in a long time, his brother’s arm wrapped around him. “I just love him,” Dean cries, knowing soon enough he’ll be embarrassed for blubbery like this. Right now though, it feels amazing to let go. “Sam, I just…I just love him.”

“I know,” Sam mutters sympathetically, patting his back. “I know you do.”

Afterwards, Dean feels drained—inside, outside, in every possible sense of the word. At two a.m. he rifles around the counters of the magic shop until he finds a sleeping potion, leaving Bobby a crisp twenty on the cash register. Back in bed, he downs half the bottle. As much as he yearns to see Cas again, to touch him and talk to him, he doesn’t think he’ll get any rest if he keeps dreaming.

The potion does its job, thankfully, and he manages to get six hours of uninterrupted sleep. Much better than the Winchester four, but thanks to the potion he wakes up groggy. After a hot shower
and a cup of coffee, though, his mind is buzzing with more than just resentment and exhaustion. Those feelings are still there, and might be for a while—his entire life has been turned upside down—but he’s more focused now on what he has to do next. If they have any chance of surviving this whole Crowley-versus-the-Captain-versus-Stanford thing unscathed, and implement real change for the lay magicians, then the three of them need to stop fighting each other.

It’s easier said than done, though, because Dean’s heart is hammering in his chest the entire walk to the faculty meeting. It’s optional for the grad students to attend, and Dean doubts it would even be noticed if he’s not there. Still, he has to get back into the swing of things somehow. He turns his phone back on finally, seeing a slew of old and new texts and missed calls from Castiel, his stomach flipping nervously. Charlie meets him halfway to Mechanikos Hall and fills the silence easily enough, but eventually she gets suspicious and Dean’s forced to admit that he’s fighting with Cas. He doesn’t have much choice—Charlie is invited to the meeting too, and she’ll definitely notice if they’re not sitting together.

“You’ll work it out,” she says lightly, once Dean explains he doesn’t want to get into the particulars, not right now. “You and Cas are basically married, in a magical sense at least.”

That stops Dean in his tracks, practically tripping over the sidewalk. “Huh?”

“You’re bonded, dummy. In a crazy intense way, too. I’ve never seen anything like it.” She swings the front door open widely, and they’re welcomed in by a gust of warm air. “Somebody should really do a case study on you guys.”

Dean snorts, a fleeting moment of lightness passing through him for the first time in days. A moment later they’re stopped by Lisa, explaining to Charlie that the computer lab is down, but Dean can’t concentrate on the conversation. He shivers as he feels Cas’ magic drawing him in. He’s moving before he can even excuse himself from Lisa or Charlie, following the tender feeling of longing that overwhelms his senses, and then…he’s four flights of stairs up. He has no idea where he’s going—he’s never spent much time on this floor, having never had classes scheduled up here—and he takes a sharp turn to the left. That’s when he spots Castiel at the end of the floor, walking forward.

His steps halt the moment he sees Dean, and they stare at each other openly, feet planted on the floor. It’s deserted, thank god, because having an audience witnessing this moment would be excruciating. Cas doesn’t look good—dark circles under his eyes, his shoulders hunched. There’s sadness coming off of him in waves, and Dean sucks in a breath, the impact of it making his eyes water. And then he’s walking again, steps more confident than before, and Castiel’s eyes just widen the closer Dean comes. A million things are floating through Dean’s mind—

I love you, I’m still pissed at you, I can’t believe we’re in this mess.

Instead, his bag swings down to his feet, all his responsibilities momentarily forgotten, and he gathers Castiel into his arms and kisses him. It feels like it always does. Castiel responds instantly, gasping beautifully under his breath. Dean licks into the seam of his lips and Castiel’s hands slide into the parted front of Dean’s leather jacket, hands pawing at Dean’s back, grasping him with a desperation that makes Dean dizzy. He hadn’t expected this, hadn’t known this was going to be their version of conflict resolution, but it’s the best he’s felt in days.

"God, I’ve been an idiot," Dean sighs, speaking between kisses. He’s addicted to all things Cas, had literally felt off-balance in the time they spent apart, and he’s kicking himself mentally for not going to him the moment he wanted to.

“I won’t argue with that assessment,” Castiel says, fingers skating around his hips, lips traveling to Dean’s neck. “You’re infuriating, you know that? You can’t just push me away when things get
“Difficult”? We’re twenty goddamn lightyears from ‘difficult.’” Dean doesn’t quite understand it, but their shared anger is really turning him on. He thinks about their first fight months ago, when they had just been strangers shouting at each other in Cas’ office. They both get off on this, the fury and the passion. “Try to see things from my perspective. You’n Sammy had aligned yourself with Crowley. What the hell was I supposed to think?” Dean growls, digging his hands into Cas’ back pockets roughly.

“And the Captain is so much better? My sister isn’t exactly innocent, Dean,” Castiel says sharply, pausing to suck a mark on the side of Dean’s neck. “But I’d really rather not talk about her when your erection is pressed against my thigh.”

Dean moans, realizing that he has, in fact, gotten hard in his jeans. This is about to get very voyeuristic very quickly if they don’t find some privacy. He pulls back, panting. He spots a door nearby that he’s pretty sure is a supply closet, and grabs his bag with one hand and Castiel’s trenchcoat with the other.

“Dean,” Castiel says, a question in his voice, but Dean closes and locks the door and he swallows visibly. He pulls the string of an overhead light, Cas’ face painted in a yellow glow. “I’m still very angry with you.”

“I don’t blame you for needing time to process everything. I don’t even blame you for being upset that I wasn’t forthcoming about all of this, because I also felt betrayed.” Castiel runs a hand through his hair and tugs, obviously frustrated, but the sight just turns Dean on. “But you could’ve told me you were safe and that you needed time to think. I thought…Dean, I thought had lost you forever. It wasn’t fair to push me away without explanation.”

Dean feels guilt curling its way into his stomach, his heart actually aching from the intensity of it. “Okay, fuck…I’m sorry, okay? I really am.”

Castiel shakes his head, sighing in exasperation. “Those words aren’t some spell, Dean. They don’t magically make everything better.”

“What else can I say?” Dean yells, hands up at his side, feeling fully flustered. “That I’m shit at this kind of thing? That I’m fucked-up? That this is what I’m best at, Cas—screwing things up and making a mess of everything?”

“No, I don’t want to hear that, because none of it is true,” Castiel replies sharply. “You’re not the only one at fault. Even when we’re angry or irritated or upset, we carry this burden together. We’re on the same team.”

Dean stares at him in the low light, heart beating out of his chest. “Your team is the only one I wanna be on, Cas. You are… How I feel about you… You’re like family to me.” The scowl of Cas’ face drops slightly, lips smoothing into a hint of a smile. Dean swallows, panicking at the sudden intimacy of what he’s admitting, and shoots his boyfriend a cocky grin. “Family that I also really wanna bone, which is a weird thing to say, but it’s true.”

Castiel chuckles softly. “You can’t fix everything with humor and sex, Dean.”

“No, but I can sure as hell try.”

Castiel gives him a full smile this time. It’s such a welcome sight that Dean wants badly to get his
hands back on Castiel, to grip his neck and kiss him.

“There are still a lot of things we need to talk about.”

Dean cups his hand around Cas’ cheek. “I know we got shit to work through, but could we just—
can I kiss you? Please, baby?”

Castiel seems to be deliberating, so Dean whispers, “I need you,” a borderline beg in Cas’ ear. That
seems to be enough, because Cas presses their lips together in a heated rush, a small gasp of
surprise stuck in Dean’s throat. Cas crowds against him, Dean’s back knocking into a dusty shelf.
They pick up right where they left off in the hallway, hands groping for each other in the near
darkness, Dean’s tongue slipping into Castiel’s mouth with a ravenous sort of desire. Dean leans
into it, heat rising around his collar. He strips off his leather jacket and flings it to the floor, doing
the same with Cas’ trenchcoat, and their shirts are ruffled and strewn as they kiss deeper and more
desperate.

After a frenzied make-out session that Dean’s ninety-nine percent sure will guarantee blue balls for
the rest of the day, Castiel takes a step back, examining his face for something Dean can’t identify.
Then he drops to his knees. His fingers are deft and quick, unbuttoning Dean’s jeans, and Dean can
hardly contain a gasp.

“Cas, I only expected a kiss, but uh…’m not complaining…” He exhales, cock growing harder at
the thought of Cas sucking him off right here, right now, in this messy supply closet. Castiel pulls
his jeans down to his kneecaps, then scoots closer, lips mouthing at Dean’s erection through his
boxers. Every little sensation makes Dean shudder, and when Cas’ hand finally reaches into the
front flap and pulls out Dean’s dick, he whimpers at the touch. There are small kitten licks placed
at the head of his cock, Castiel teasing him, ramping him up, and Dean’s hands weave into Cas’
messy bedhead.

“Missed you,” Dean breathes, feeling turned on and emotional and needy. “So much, sweetheart.”

Castiel hums in agreement before taking Dean into the wet, hot heat of his mouth. Dean moans,
clasping a hand over his mouth to silence himself better, then a thought occurs to him—is he a
mage or not? He casts a silencing charm quickly, hoping it’s strong enough because Cas is doing
some downright sinful things with his tongue and he can’t hold himself together anymore. He
moans and bucks his hips up accidentally, too eager to fight his impulses, and he scoots back and
mutters, “Sorry, sorry,” but Castiel’s expression doesn’t change. If anything, his pupils are dilated
like crazy and he’s taking Dean further and further into the back of his throat, nodding his head for
Dean to continue.

“You…you want me to fuck your mouth?” Dean whispers, because in what universe is this really
happening? Castiel can’t answer, his lips wrapped wide around Dean’s dick. As much as it pains
him, he pulls out and cards a gentle hand through Castiel’s hair, tucking a strand behind his ear.

“I would know it if you’re not into this, but I need to hear you say it, Cas,” he whispers, voice a
low and steady rumble. Castiel’s hands are still on his hips, holding himself steady.

“Dean,” he begins evenly, blue eyes staring up at him, “considering the circumstances, that seems
rather arbitrary.”

“Consent is sexy, babe,” Dean jokes, trying to lighten the mood. Castiel looks at him with pure
mischief in his eyes.

“Okay, fine.” He bites his lip, his voice dropping. “Dean, fuck my mouth. Be rough, baby, I want
you to. Let me make you feel good, so good. Let me swallow down every drop until I have you screaming.”

Dean moans unabashedly, rubbing his cock against Castiel’s plump, wet lips and thrusting into his opened mouth. He tightens his fingers in Cas’ hair, his grip strong and eager, and Castiel whines at the sharp tug. Dean tries to hold himself back a little, watching to make sure Cas isn’t too uncomfortable, but his boyfriend just blinks up at him hungrily, mouth pilant and wet, and Dean loses what little control he has. He propels his hips forward and back, forward and back, setting a breakneck rhythm that progressively gets deeper.

“Fuck,” he moans, his cockhead hitting the back of Castiel’s throat. Cas swallows reflectively and coughs, making a clear effort to breathe through his nose, his eyes watering. Dean thrusts once, twice, three times, warns, “Cas, I’m—” and then he’s shooting his load straight down Cas’ throat. He pants and breathes through it, his clutch on Cas’ hair loosening as he smoothes out his ruffled strands. He pulls out gingerly, Castiel licking him clean as he breathes through it, feeling oversensitive. Cas helps him tuck his spent cock back into his boxers, and Dean pulls his pants back around his hips, getting distracted by the come he sees dribbling off the corner of Castiel’s mouth. He swipes his thumb into the mess and Castiel sucks the digit into his mouth, maintaining eye contact with Dean all the while, and Dean suddenly wishes his recovery period was much, much shorter.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he breathes, buttoning up his jeans, eyes filled with adoration and wonder. He glances down at the tent in Castiel’s jeans, thinking of all the creative way he wants to get him off. He helps Cas to his feet, holding him around the waist, admiring his lips all pink and puffy. He’s about to close the distance between them, wondering if he’ll be able to taste himself on Cas’ tongue, when the doorknob begins to turn.

Everything happens much too quickly after that: Dean and Castiel have a half-second to separate, smoothing over their clothes. Then the door is thrown open wide.

And Zachariah Alder is standing in the threshold, gaping at them with disdain.

Chapter End Notes

*laughs maniacally*

How will our boys get out of this one?

Drop your predictions below!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Hey, friends! We could write a chatty little note, but really, you guys just wanna know how this cliffhanger resolves…right? Hehe.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few frozen moments pass, Castiel staring at Adler, Adler’s jaw dropping open. He looks between Castiel and Dean, and down at their rumpled clothes. Castiel can only imagine how it must look—he’s got to get on top of this, and fast.

Adler frowns as he takes in the scene. “What...what are you—?”

Castiel interrupts, “We’re just here to grab some cables for Charlie, aren’t we, Dean.”

He looks at Dean, and as Dean nods, he realizes this story is never going to work. Dean looks wrecked, his face flushed, his eyes bright. He’s so beautiful when freshly fucked. The thought sends fire down to his toes—he desperately wants to get his mouth back on Dean. He needs to get rid of Adler, and quickly.

Adler huffs. “I’m willing to overlook whatever it is that you get up to off-campus, but if you’ve been using this room for your clandestine...hook-ups, then I’m going to have to—”

Castiel steps forward until he’s right in Adler’s face. “No. You didn’t see anything here. In fact, whatever you’re here for, you can forget all about it and go about your business.” He raises one hand and pulls a strong current into it until there’s a bright ball of electricity crackling in his palm.

Adler eyes the witchlight warily, but stands firm. “Are you trying to threaten me, Novak? Because it doesn’t seem to be working.”

“No, that would be against university rules, Adler. I’m just suggesting that it might be good for you to forget you saw us here. You’ve seen us casting together—do you really want to get on our bad side?” He can see the uncertainty in Adler’s face, barely a flash before his sneer returns. Castiel allows himself a small smirk, even though his heart feels like it’s trying to escape his chest.

Adler’s eyes flick behind Castiel, to where Dean is standing, with what Castiel hopes is a similarly threatening expression. He steps away from Castiel, bringing his hands up, palms out. “Okay, okay. But it would be a shame if the university were to hear—”

Castiel steps forward again, allowing the witchlight to grow slightly. “I don’t think you realize how serious I am about this, Adler,” he growls.

“Fine! I’m going!” Adler backs out of the room, walking quickly away up the corridor without looking back.

“Should we cast a memory charm on him anyway?” Dean murmurs from behind Castiel, as they watch him leave.
“No, let him go. He’s not bold enough to do anything about it.” Castiel shuts the door again, locking it once more both manually and with a locking spell. He feels Dean’s silencing charm slip back into place, so he turns, allowing the magic of the witchlight to disperse.

He takes Dean’s wide, dark eyes and hungry expression in. “Now,” he says, “where were we?”

“No, let him go. He’s not bold enough to do anything about it.” Castiel shuts the door again, locking it once more both manually and with a locking spell. He feels Dean’s silencing charm slip back into place, so he turns, allowing the magic of the witchlight to disperse.

Cas, I dunno if you’re aware, but that was all kinds of hot,” Dean says, his voice rough.

“You liked that, did you?” Castiel takes a step towards Dean, noting his quickened breath. He crowds Dean into the shelf behind him, grabbing his neck with one hand as he kisses him deeply. The taste of Dean is still in his mouth, on his tongue, and the adrenaline of the last few minutes makes his blood rush into his groin and his cock strains against his jeans.

“Turn around,” he says roughly, his hands going to his belt.

Dean’s eyes widen again. “You just wanna…like right here?”

Dean lets out a strangled noise and hurriedly unbuckles his own pants again as he turns around, sliding them down off his hips until his ass is bare.

Momentarily wishing for lube, he trails his hand around Dean’s neck, his jaw, his cheek, until he’s rubbing at Dean’s lower lip. “Let me in, Dean,” he says quietly, and sighs as Dean’s lips part to take two of Castiel’s fingers inside him. He sucks at them roughly until Castiel pulls them back, trailing them down until he’s rubbing against Dean’s ass with his wet fingertips.

“Is this okay?” he breathes against Dean’s ear.

Dean thrusts his hips backwards against Castiel’s hand. “Just do it, I can take it.”

Castiel can feel Dean gathering lay magic within him as he breaches Dean with his fingers, groaning a little at the tightness of his hole. He pumps in and out, and feels Dean relax with the lay magic running through him. Prepping this way may not be comfortable, but at least it’s efficient, and soon, Castiel is able to push his cock past Dean’s rim and slowly fill him up, the idea that Adler could be back any moment to bring the university down on their heads only adding to his arousal.

“Fuck, yes, Cas,” Dean gasps as he takes it all, and Castiel is sure he’s not going to last long. He shares more of his own magic with Dean, sending him all the heat and desperation he feels as he starts slowly driving in and out. Dean grabs onto the shelves in front of him as Castiel picks up the pace, letting out a shout as Castiel angles his thrust just right. Castiel feels the orgasm building almost right away, and it only takes Dean moaning, “That’s it, baby, give it to me,” and a few more hard thrusts before he comes hard, filling Dean up.

As Castiel becomes aware of his surroundings once more, the dim realization hits him that he’s just fucked someone in a closet, and he lets out a small, almost manic laugh into Dean’s back.

Dean turns his head. “What’s funny?”

“No, let him go. He’s not bold enough to do anything about it.” Castiel shuts the door again, locking it once more both manually and with a locking spell. He feels Dean’s silencing charm slip back into place, so he turns, allowing the magic of the witchlight to disperse.

He takes Dean’s wide, dark eyes and hungry expression in. “Now,” he says, “where were we?”

Dean turns his head. “What’s funny?”

“Oh, I’m just never going to be able to look at this closet the same way again, I guess.” He kisses the back of Dean’s shoulder as he laughs too. He takes a few deep breaths, rubbing his hands down Dean’s sides. “I’m sorry, this is going to be messy.”
“I was going to give today up and go home, anyway. I don’t have to be there, right?” Dean winces as Castiel pulls out and tucks himself away. “That stings a little.”

Castiel places a kiss on Dean’s lips, sending a little healing into him as he does so, and Dean smiles against his mouth. “Cas? Thank you. I’m sorry I didn’t answer your calls, or—”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Castiel interrupts, his heart full. “I just...wish you’d told me about things sooner. But then, I should have as well.” He shakes his head. “Let’s talk about things later, okay? Come over to my place for dinner? We should probably invite Sam as well, he’s been worried sick about both of us.”

Dean chuckles again. “Don’t I know it. Sure you don’t want to come with me now?”

“I should really go to the meeting, make sure Adler doesn’t say anything incriminating,” Castiel says, rolling his eyes. "But, Dean? I’m proud of you for wanting to help them."

Dean throws him a grin. “We’ll help them together, ‘kay?”

Castiel nods, and they both leave the closet quietly, Dean quickly slipping away downstairs, and Castiel heading for the bathroom to clean up before the meeting.

Castiel buzzes around his apartment, cleaning up the clutter from three anxious days at home. He’s nervous to see Dean after their adventures in the supply closet, especially since that had been mostly brought on by the frustration of the last few days. The memory of that encounter is still tingling in his veins, hours later.

The meeting had gone on just as mind-numbingly long as he’d expected, and thankfully Adler only gave him a few death-stares and didn’t make any comments. Castiel would never normally have outright threatened anyone, but the adrenaline of the moment combined with the stress of the previous week had made him bold, desperate. He really hopes it won’t come back to bite him, but he’s also secretly pleased that Dean had been so impressed with the display. He chuckles to himself, feeling warm all over at the memory of Dean’s hungry expression.

When Castiel hears a knock on his door, he opens it to both Dean and Sam. Sam smiles widely, clapping Castiel on the shoulder as he walks past him into the apartment, saying, “Hey, Cas.”

Dean lingers outside the door, looking uncertain until Castiel pulls him into a deep kiss.

“Are you okay?” Castiel murmurs, when they finally separate, his hand lingering on Dean’s scruffy cheek.

“Yeah, I just wasn’t sure how things were going to be after…well, after this morning.”

Castiel smiles, and plants another kiss on Dean. “I still want to hear everything, but I think we’re okay for now, aren’t we?”

“Yeah, I guess we are,” Dean says, smiling. His gaze travels across Castiel’s face, and his tongue darts out to lick his bottom lip.

Sam calls from inside the apartment, “Oh God, is this how it’s gonna be tonight? Because I can leave again if you two are gonna be gross the whole time.”
Castiel chuckles, then grabs Dean’s hand and leads him into the apartment.

“Okay, okay, keep your hair on,” Dean says in Sam’s direction, already heading towards the kitchen.

Sam’s standing by the bookshelves—he must have been checking out Castiel’s library already. He grins. “It’s good to see you two together again, though. No offense Dean, but your magic was starting to get rank.”

Castiel knows emotions can affect the way magic feels all too well—he’d borne the brunt of Meg’s magical grief after she’d had a nasty breakup one time. But it sounds like Sam has stuck by Dean over the weekend, and for that he’s grateful.

Dean seems less grateful, though, as he throws Sam a withering look. “Shut up, bitch,” he calls as he opens the fridge, pulling out three beers.

“Jerk!” Sam replies with a grin.

Castiel rolls his eyes as he unloads a paper bag of plastic take-out boxes. “If you’re finished, could we eat? I got Chinese—I hope that’s acceptable?”

“Hell, yes!” Dean says, swooping in to plant a kiss on Castiel’s cheek, then takes his beer to the table.

The three of them spend an hour passing the food around and sharing how they came into their individual lay magician groups. Dean tells them how he met Anna at Bobby’s, then about the portal that had opened for him in the university grounds.

Sam stares at him incredulously. “Wait, wait, wait. A magic portal appeared in the air in front of you, and you just…walked through it? Do you have a death wish?”

Dean shrugs. “She told me there would be a sign, okay?”

Castiel shakes his head, wondering how his sister had got so powerful. “And this is how she contacts you? Or do you have a phone number?”

“No, I don’t have any contact details,” Dean replies, looking uncomfortable at this admission.

Castiel has to admit, he’s disappointed. He’d dearly like to chat with his sister. “I still can’t believe you didn’t tell me about this, after you knew I’d been involved with lay magicians before.”

Dean throws him a glare. “I told you already, I didn’t want to get you involved. Either of you. If Stanford had found out about it—”

“Okay, okay,” Castiel stops his tirade. They had to try to be constructive, or they’d end up in a brawl again. “So what do they do, this…coven? Apart from helping stray kids.”

“They help a lot of people,” Dean explains. “I told you about the kids already, but the first meeting I went to there was this woman there—she had brain cancer or something. I helped them try to heal her, added my magic to theirs. It felt good to do something. But it was too much—I’m still getting used to casting lay magic without support, I guess, and I, uh…I burned out. That’s why I was late meeting you at the D that night.”

Castiel stares at him. “You cast healing magic? Do you have any idea how dangerous that is for untrained mages? You could have killed her! Or each other, if you went too far.” Castiel can’t
believe Anna would be so reckless.

“Uh, yeah, I was aware, after Thanksgiving and all that. But they’d done it a few times for this lady already,” Dean says defensively. “You try turning someone down who’s obviously sick, when you’ve got the ability to heal her!”

“I thought Anna would be more responsible… You should have told me, Dean.” He shakes his head, angry with his sister for putting so many in danger, not to mention Dean, or even herself.

“Hey, I tried, but that night you were drunk, and there was no good opportunity. Besides, I was kinda… embarrassed.” Dean scowls.

“Okay, okay,” Sam says, “we’re here to stop fighting, aren’t we? How about I go next?” He pauses for a moment, as Dean and Castiel both turn expectant faces to him. He spreads his hands. “Actually, there’s not much to tell. I’ve had an interest in lay magicians since first hearing about your work at Oxford, Cas. Ruby’s involved because of her dad—I think he died of a burnout when she was a teenager. She told me about the resistance, and I agreed to go along. I’ve only met up with her and Rosco two other times before the meeting last week, though. And that was the first time I’d met Crowley.”

“And what did Rosco and Ruby tell you?” Castiel asks, getting up to get a new round of drinks.

“No much. They help Crowley to reach out to lay magicians who want to use their magic, and help those who get in trouble when they do. It’s what I want to do as well when I’m finished with Magical Law. I had no idea Crowley was thinking of actually taking the Seal down!”

Dean nods. “Speaking of which, Cas, how long have you known Crowley? Old buddy of yours from Oxford?”

“No, not at all. In fact, I’m not even sure he can use magic at all,” Castiel says, then sits back at the table, looking down at his beer bottle. He doesn’t want to see the heartbreak again in Dean’s eyes when he tells him how long he’s been working with Crowley.

He takes a breath. “Crowley first approached me back near the start of first semester, at that party at Doctor MacLeod’s house. He only said he had a project he needed my expertise on—and when I met the other lay magicians in his little group, I couldn’t turn away. Krissy you already know, Dean. But there are more, maybe about twenty?” When Dean and Sam both look surprised, he continues, “They’re so keen to learn more. I knew Crowley was up to something, but until I knew more about what he had planned, I didn’t want to bring you into the group, either. I’m sorry.”

Sam sighs. “Okay, can we just agree that we’ve all been dumbasses, and move on? What do we do now?”

Castiel also lets out a long sigh. That’s the real question, isn’t it? “Well, I guess we have two options. We either expose them all to the council, get them all arrested before they pull anything stupid.”

Dean nods slowly. “Or?”

“Or we help them.”

Sam stares at Castiel, his eyes wide. “You’re suggesting we help the Resistance bring down our society?”

Castiel shrugs. “I don’t know about ‘bring down,’ but I think we all agree that we’re interested in
making magic more available to lay magicians, right? Perhaps there doesn’t have to be some big revolution for that to happen.”

Dean shakes his head. “After the thing at the Mana Bar, I’m not sure I trust any of them anymore.”

“They all want you guys to use your Seal research as well,” Sam adds. “There’s no getting away from any of them.”

Castiel nods. “I think we’ve got the advantage here. Crowley may have the *History of 20th Century Magic* book, but we know a lot more about the Seal than he does. And we have access to Stanford’s library that none of the lay magicians do.”

Dean eyes him. “So you’re suggesting we...what? Sell our services to the highest bidder?”

“No, I’m saying let’s keep working with each group, see how things pan out. Missouri wants us to keep looking at the Seal’s defenses as well, right? So we keep going down there, see what we can find out about it.”

Sam nods, looking more enthusiastic now. “And I can keep researching to find out more about the history of the Seal. D’you think we could get another look at that book, Cas?”

“I’ll ask Crowley,” Castiel says. He’s not sure if Crowley will be interested in letting Sam near his library, but it’s worth a try.

Dean nods, looking satisfied. “Right. And as soon as we hear from any of them, we let each other know, right? No more secrets.”

“No more secrets,” Castiel repeats, smiling at Dean. He feels as though a huge weight has been lifted from his shoulders. Now that they’re standing together, united, things feel like they’re finally on the right track. They’re done being manipulated.

Anna wraps a heavy scarf around her neck, surprised by how cloudy and chilly it is in Kansas. She’s never spent much time in this state—in fact, she can’t remember if she’s ever set foot in Lebanon before. Everywhere is flat and gray, and she follows the coordinates she was sent two nights ago, nothing but a date and time to accompany the location. She has a sneaking suspicion of who’s requesting her presence, and after the attack at the Mana Bar, she’s all the more willing to find a long-term solution for a decades-old problem.

She wants to start a revolution.

It’s not at all surprising when the coordinates lead her into a graveyard, old and unattended by the looks of it. Her eyes are watering as she searches the gravestones, wanting to spot him before he spots her—but no such luck. She walks down a small dirt path, and when she turns around, there’s Crowley. He’s wearing what she’s come to see as his trademark black suit, a welcome smirk stretched across his face.

“Oh Captain, My Captain,” he says lavishly, hand on his heart. “I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see you here.”

“Yes, well...our previous meeting was interrupted,” she says vaguely. “I like to finish what I start.”
“What an excellent moral compass,” Crowley says, oily and sardonic. “Well, come along. I need to show you something.”

Anna narrows her eyes, wondering if Crowley is leading her into a trap. Luckily, Uriel is locked onto her location, and he and the rest of the coven are ready to teleport the moment she sends the signal. She doesn’t notice any of Crowley’s lackeys milling around, not even Rosco, and she wonders if they’re hiding or…well, perhaps he doesn’t trust them completely. Surely a man like Crowley has deep-seated trust issues.

She follows him down a more secluded route, neither of them speaking, until they’re standing in front of a weathered gravestone.

“How do you know whose grave this is?” Crowley asks.

“You mean, other than the name carved in stone?” Anna says dryly. She bends over, brushing stray leaves and dirt from the front. “Henry Winchester,” she reads.

“Ringing any bells?”

Anna stands up, her expression carefully concealed. She has no clue who this is and what connection he might have to Crowley and the Seal, but she refuses to admit this aloud. “I wouldn’t tell you if it did.”

Crowley chuckles, shaking his head ruefully. “I can see how you’ve gotten where you are—and I mean that as a compliment. It takes a real leader to bullshit as well as you do, darling.”

Anna doesn’t react in the slightest, just waits patiently for him to continue.

“Well, here’s the history lesson, if you need it,” Crowley begins with a wink, clapping his hands together. “Years ago, when the Seal was just an itty bitty idea in the mind of some self-important mages, there was a man named Henry Winchester. Unremarkable mage, by and large, apart from one important detail.” He pauses, watching to see if Anna is listening closely. He grins when he sees he has her undivided attention. “His blood was used in the binding of the spell that created the Seal. This means that—”

“Anyone in his bloodline would be useful in passing the Seal,” Anna mumbles, thinking out loud while her brain attempts to suss out the mystery. Where did Crowley retrieve all this information? She’s suspected for a while that 20th Century Magical Regulation would hold many of these answers, but her attempts to find a copy had been thwarted. She clears her throat and glances up. “You have one? A Winchester?”

“Sam, the moose that Ruby recruited using her womanly wiles. She had no idea how useful it might prove to be.”

Anna slips her hands into her pockets, trying to appear passive. “And mine?”

Crowley shakes his head, his dress shoes making imprints into the soft ground. “The handsome one in your group, who happens to be bedding the professor on my payroll.”

A gust of wind comes through, making Anna shiver. Dean. Dean Winchester? How is that possible? The mention of her brother makes her stomach twist with guilt, but she swallows it down instantly. “Dean. He never gave us his last name.”

He lets her process this information with a smug lift of his eyebrows. She takes a deep breath, narrowing her eyes at him. “So we both have Winchester blood. That doesn’t guarantee us entrance
beyond the Seal. Unless…” She stares down at the ground, thinking—as she has been for days—about her brother’s involvement. Why was Crowley so keen on recruiting Cas? What had Rosco said to her weeks ago…something about Crowley having all the pieces?

“Rosco mentioned you have a thaumatech,” she says cautiously. Speaking about Castiel in this way is challenging, but she’s spent years navigating dangerous negotiations. “Is that the professor?”

“One and the same.” Crowley clasps his hands together, looking truly pleased with himself. “So, Love Interest Number One spills his gorgeous little Winchester blood. Love Interest Number Two writes up the spell. And you and I orchestrate it all, deciding what happens next once the Seal is nothing more than a detail in a history book. It’s a win-win for us both.”

She doesn’t answer, just asks, “And you need the coven to perform the spell?”

“Ah, I thought I did, but then I heard that Winchester and Novak have a ‘profound bond.’” Anna inhales sharply, looking away—she really hadn’t thought that Crowley knew about that, though she supposes it’s pretty obvious to anyone who sees them together. “Being a gambling man myself, I put them in a situation to witness their skills firsthand. And they bested you and your coven, my dear, even on your best day.”

“You…” Anna huffs, unable to hide her disbelief. “You’re the reason the enforcers trapped us at the bar?” Crowley’s silence is practically an admission, and she feels herself growing flustered. “How reckless are you? We were nearly all captured!”

“Ah, you’ll find that many employed by the magical law enforcement team are friends of mine,” he says brightly. “We were never in any serious danger.”

“One of my lay magicians was attacked,” Anna says sharply, remembering the wound Neil had been nursing on his shoulder from an enforcer who followed his teleportation. “And all for what? To see how powerful a bond is between two mages?”

“Precisely. Because that show of strength made me wonder—” Crowley takes a step closer, crowding into her personal space. “I already need them both for the spell. Why not kill two birds with one stone? Blood, plus a brand-new spell, plus a juicy profound bond…what would I need you and your coven for?”

Anna swallows, refusing to admit that she had just been asking herself the same question. And then it dawns on her…

"Dean doesn’t graduate until May. He won’t be at max power until then, when he’s granted access to the Well. You need me because Dean doesn’t trust you one bit, and won’t work for you willingly.”

Crowley smirks, tucking his hands into his pockets. “And Rosco said you were just a pretty face.”

“This pretty face has enough magic to send you straight to hell,” she says evenly.

“Sure, you could do that. But we need each other, my dear, if we have any chance of succeeding. Plus, I wouldn’t mind having your coven waiting in the wings, in case this profound bond isn’t as formidable as it seems. But with or without you, this plan will be executed.”

“Dean won’t do it for you,” she says defiantly.

“Then I’ll use baby Winchester’s blood instead,” Crowley says breezily.
“And the profound bond? What’s your Plan B? What if that’s not at your disposal and my coven isn’t willing to follow your orders?” She’s playing with fire now, she knows it, but she needs to hear how far Crowley is willing to go to get what he wants. More than anything, she needs to see beneath the charming, charismatic mask to see how much danger they’re all in.

“Then I’ll lock Dean Winchester in a tower until his Prince Charming comes to save him, and then I’ll force them to do my bidding when they see a gun pointed at Sam Winchester’s head,” Crowley says, some of his patience fading into a snarl. “They have no shortages of loved ones. They’re each others’ weaknesses, and I have no trouble exploiting that for the greater good.”

If Anna wasn’t in such a precarious situation, she would laugh. Crowley is still arguing that he’s doing this for the greater good? Has he heard himself talk?

“But with you along, whispering encouragement into his pretty ear, Dean will fall right into his role without me forcing his hand.” Crowley seems to have regained some of his poise, and he smiles calmly, taking a step backwards. “I need your allegiance here and now. Graduation day, the Seal falls.”

Anna’s struck by a sudden memory—the day her baby brother was born. She had stared down at his crib, all tiny and pink, and when he cried from hunger, from exhaustion, from fear, she decided she would do anything to prevent his tears from falling. Refusing Crowley now would ensure the exact opposite. Their connection is the one thing Crowley doesn’t know, the only ace up her sleeve, and it’s the secret she has to keep hidden at all costs. She either aligns herself with an untrustworthy ally, or she leaves her brother, the Winchesters, and the fate of all lay magicians, in the hands of Crowley.

“Graduation day,” she repeats, looking him straight in the eye without blinking, “the Seal falls.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up: a timehop! The end is nigh!
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Hey hey, TCBaby here. So thanks to Daylight Savings time, Ellen and I are now a full sixteen hours apart (in terms of time zones) so the hours where neither of us are working or sleeping or somehow busy—and can actually discuss fun but deeply complicated things like this fanfic—is very limited. *cries*

Anyways, all that to say we are knee-deep in the final planning phase for these climax chapters. We really want to give you guys the satisfying and heart-racing ending you deserve! Were we able to organize and brainstorm in person (I wish), we would look a lot like this.

So, disclaimer for all you academics out there: for this chapter, I tried to write Dean's thesis defense as accurately as I could (using my own experiences and my friends' experiences). But at the end of the day, every university is different, and this is fiction, so Stanford's School of the Occult can do things however they want, right? Right. Haha.

Okay, okay, I know what you're thinking. Enough of your jabbering, TCBaby, let's get on with the chapter!!!! To which I say: all right, I can take a hint. Come along, friends.

On the day of his thesis presentation, Dean spends a disproportionate amount of time in bed, not sure he’s ready to face the day. Castiel had left early in the morning, passing him a cup of coffee and smothering his face in kisses before heading to campus. “You’re going to do amazing,” he promised, a hand smoothing down Dean’s bedhead. “No one knows more about the Stanford Seal than you do.”

True or not, Dean is uneasy and nervous, and he promptly went back to sleep after Cas left. By lunchtime Dean’s empty stomach demands attention, so he heats up a bowl of soup—the spelled variety that’s supposed to eliminate spring allergies. Dean spent the entire month of April sneezing, eyes rimmed red, but now that it’s May his congestion is finally clearing up. Which is lucky, really, because it would suck to sound all stuffed-up for his thesis defense.

He eventually showers, then stands in front of his closet, nothing seeming quite nice enough for today. He postpones the decision a little longer when he lies back down in bed, reimagining the A-plus fucking he’d received just last night, and whoops…now he’s hard. Maybe he should’ve rubbed one out in the shower instead, but whatever. He’ll do anything he can for stress relief today, and even just thinking about Cas gives him a boner most days.

After one very successful solo-session and another cup of coffee, he’s finally dressed, feeling utterly stupid in dress slacks and a button-up. At least that’s one thing to mark off the to-do list, which is currently: 1) Stop by the Witch’s Brew for more coffee. 2) Print off copies of his outline for his presentation. 3) Explicate a century-old, super complicated, structural spellcasting design to a panel of professors who have the power to fail him, and ultimately, postpone his college graduation in two weeks.
At Stanford, grad students have the right to make their defense presentation public or private. Dean had decided weeks ago that a public defense would actually calm him down a little, because Sam and all his friends could attend. *Past-me was a fucking moron,* he thinks sourly as the small auditorium begins to fill up before his eyes. It is nice to see familiar faces, but there are also a bunch of randos, too—apparently the news of his subject matter has spread across campus. Dean sets up his materials on a podium, his panel’s rectangular table directly in front of him, the audience seated behind them. Castiel is one of the first to arrive, giving Dean a thousand-watt smile that he hopes to god he earns. The crowd is still pretty thin, so Castiel puts his hand in the curve of Dean’s back, the flow of soothing magic making Dean shiver.

“Thanks,” Dean whispers, eyes fixated on the floor. “Wish you could stand up here with me.” He’s been thinking about this a lot lately—the few hours they spend apart each day are starting to make him anxious, nervous.

“Me too,” Castiel replies quietly, still pressing the palm of his hand against Dean’s back. “But I’ll be right over there, with you the whole time.”

After the fiasco in January about the whole Captain-and-Crowley thing, Dean and Castiel have been more open and honest with each other than ever. On the resistance front it seems like both factions are treading water, waiting for something that Dean can’t quite name. Sure, he still helps the coven try and heal Layla—and he’s even invited Castiel along to teach them all medical magic. They’ve canvassed more houses as Stanford rejection letters trickle in, bringing more kids into the fold. And he’s visited Crowley’s little magic school a time or two, helping teach Krissy and the other young lay magicians how to control their magic.

But after the dramatics of their first meeting together and the subsequent danger, everything has been mostly quiet. For Dean, talk of a revolution has been put on the backburner in favor of grading papers, keeping Sammy on the straight and narrow, and falling more in love with Cas every day. They’re only approaching their six month anniversary… But with how close they feel most days, it’s like they’ve been together for years. He could spend his whole lifetime with Castiel and still feel like it wasn’t enough.

And *woah,* time to put that sappy line of thought on pause. At least while they’re in public.

“Okay, but no distracting me with any of *those looks,*” Dean says.

Castiel, the most adorable badass around, tilts his head in confusion. “What looks?”

“Those, ‘I’m two seconds from tying you to a bed and having my way with you’ looks,” Dean mutters, blushing a little.

“I do not have those looks,” Castiel argues, narrowing his eyes goodnaturedly. “Besides, even if I did, it’s nearly graduation. In two weeks, I’ll be shooting that ’look’ to my very graduated boyfriend.”

“So you admit it! There *is* a look!” Dean whisper-shouts triumphantly, and Castiel rolls his eyes. After Dean’s chuckles die down, his face smothes into something more serious, his lips pursed as he considers his next words. “Seriously, though, babe… We gotta be careful. Adler might be a coward, but he has blackmail on us, on you.”

Having closet sex in the middle of the day in the academic building where they’re both employed—just to resolve an argument—had been highly enjoyable at the time. But as the months have
stretched on, Dean’s grown increasingly apprehensive about the whole situation. He hates that Adler knows just how intimate their relationship is, hates that Castiel is teaching here for the foreseeable future, hates that Zachariah will be Cas’ coworker for a long, long time.

Castiel clears his throat, adjusting Dean’s collar with a quick flick of the wrist. “Don’t you worry about him, especially not today, okay?”

“Today? Oh, right…” Dean swallows, eyes rising to scan the steady influx of people entering the auditorium. Seriously, who the hell are these people? “Almost forgot what I’m about to do. Shit.”

“Dean,” Castiel begins, his voice firm, “you could give this presentation with your eyes closed. You are incredibly bright, impressively resourceful, and very well-spoken. You are going to do so well.”

Dean doubts all of these compliments immediately—well, he supposes he is resourceful, but only because he had to be scrappy as hell to survive a childhood with John Winchester. But it’s Castiel saying these things, it’s Castiel beaming back at him, so Dean mumbles softly, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Castiel slips his hand down, squeezing Dean’s wrist before taking a step back. “I would say ‘good luck,’ but you don’t need it.”

“Smooth talker,” Dean teases, fluttering his eyelashes and giving his boyfriend a quick wink.

Castiel sits down right at the center of the table, parallel to Dean’s podium, and he ruffles his papers around nervously, trying to look busy as the other professors arrive. In a few minutes’ time, the panel is fully populated by nearly half the staff of Mechanikos Hall, including Dr. Moseley, Dr. Barnes, Dr. Milton, and Dr. Adler. Of course there’s still Cas in the center, anchoring Dean to the here and now, shooting him encouraging smiles anytime he starts to frown. Sam, Charlie, Jo, Ash, and Garth are doing the same, shooting him waves and thumbs-up from the front row. Even Bobby’s here, wearing his trademark ball cap and flannel, and Ellen is sitting beside him, grinning at Dean like a proud mother hen. Whatever happens today, Dean is one lucky son of a bitch to have all these people in his life.

And then, all too quickly, the auditorium grows quiet. Dean casts a magnifying charm on his vocal chords, adjusting the sound so it’s less like a loudspeaker and more like a mic, and then he mutters, “Oh, uh, morning. Or afternoon, I guess.” He chuckles awkwardly, heart beating out of his chest. “I’m Dean Winchester, and today I’ll be sharing my research on the spell mechanics and reconstruction of the Stanford Seal.”

Anna slips in through the double doors during Dean’s opening remarks. It’s been over ten years since her rejection letter arrived from Stanford’s School of the Occult, and standing in these halls finally—and for the first time ever—feels momentous in a way she can’t explain. Still, she’s a leader of the resistance, not a student or invited guest, so she skulks in the dark corner of the auditorium, drawing no attention to herself. Even with the hood of her jacket up and a pair of glasses obscuring her face, she feels entirely too conspicuous, just hiding in plain sight.

“My speciality is Mechanical Engineering with a concentration in Spell Deconstruction. That means a century-old Seal obscuring the elemental Well really caught my attention,” Dean explains to the room, his voice light. Only the slight shake in his hands gives away how nervous he truly is. Anna spots the back of her brother’s head in the center of the front table—some sort of judges’
table, she assumes. “Generally this area is out-of-bounds and heavily protected, even for students and faculty. But everyone who knows me knows I don’t care much about rules—uh, y’know… sorry, professors.” Dean flushes in the direction of the long table, some of the faculty seated there shaking their heads and laughing quietly. “Anyways, I wrote a proposal requesting access to the Seal. It was granted with a few conditions—my visits were recorded, my analysis of the Seal had to be a theoretical one, and I needed a chaperone…who turned out to be my brilliant thesis advisor, Doctor Castiel Novak.”

From all the way in the back, Anna can feel the glow of Dean’s joy just from mentioning Castiel’s name. No one else seems to notice, which could just be because Anna has a familial affinity with Castiel, and now Dean by extension. As Cas’ sister, watching their bond grow has been incredibly gratifying to watch. And also deeply unsettling, considering the lengths some would go to harness the power of a profound bond between two powerful mages.

“The Seal was cast almost a hundred years ago, so I thought it was time to study its formation and suggest possible improvements. I’ve spent over six months experiencing the Seal firsthand and trying to understand its design. Some of the things Doctor Novak and I learned about the Seal are highly classified and can’t be discussed here, but I can tell you that the Seal is an illusion that presents itself as a maze. It contains some of the most complex structures I’ve ever seen, and I’ve seen tons. Together, we managed to cre—” Dean pauses here suddenly, significant enough that Anna wonders what he would’ve said otherwise. Was he about to reveal Cas’ thaumatech abilities? “—uh, find a spell that helped us manifest the spell composition. To make things even harder, there are tamper-proof alarms in place to prevent changes to the spell structure, so we had to be careful anytime we cast magic.”

“That’s good to know,” Anna thinks immediately, wishing she could take notes without looking suspicious. How is Crowley planning to neutralize those alarms? Does he even know they exist?

“Anyways, the physical structure of the spell eventually materialized. The construct glowed and the various shapes spelled out Enochian words. Put them all together and that formed an incantation. And that’s when things got really interesting…”

Anna can’t deny it—she’s absolutely fascinated, impressed with the level of expertise Dean has and the easy way he explains such difficult concepts. He really is a teacher, that much is clear. Even though Dean and Castiel trust her—at least, as much as they can in these circumstances—learning about the Seal like this is too enticing to resist. She shouldn’t be here for a variety of reasons, the first being that the admission of lay magicians is usually blocked by protective measures. But Anna—or, rather, the Captain—has a clandestine meeting here later today. One she never expected to land, and one that granted her access through the protective wards.

Anna had never thought to ally herself with someone from Stanford, but in the cause to better regulate the Seal, there are sympathizers everywhere—even in the most surprising places. Besides, any backup she can gather to combat the power and influence of Fergus Crowley is a worthy cause.

“After talking things over with Doctor Moseley, I can’t get into many details about the space around the Well. But there’s a powerfulward around the perimeter with these weird runes and symbols—” Dean pauses, a woman clearing her throat loudly at the table in the front, “—and that’s also not something I can say here. Got it, Professor.”

There’s a scattering of easy chuckles, and after a moment, Dean continues. “Okay, so everyone here knows what the Well is, right? A container of arcane energy, distributed by the Earth’s elements?” All around the room, there are rows and rows of nodding heads. “Right. Well, as mages, we’re really only conduits for such massive power—and it’s a natural and simple
relationship. But structurally speaking, the Well is incredibly intricate. The encasing is built by harnessing the innate magnetism of the moon, the planets, and the gravitational alignment of other celestial events. This is where elemental magic shines the brightest. I’m referencing, of course, Cardano’s theory of magnetic alignment, which holds a spell together like subatomic particles form an atom. Now, fringe theories of Gauss’s law shown through the lens of Weinberg’s theory of electroweak interactions suggests that…”

Anna blinks, zoning out as Dean’s presentation progresses. She realizes with a sharp clarity that makes her stomach twist that she actually knows very little about magic. Not like Dean or Castiel or anyone else who graduates from Stanford seems to know it. The things she’s learned are all practical, hands-on, useful but crude. Even if she helps all lay magicians gain access to the Well, what would be the point without gaining an education along with all that power?

“Well, that’s it then—my deconstruction of what’s arguably the most intricate spell in the country. I wouldn’t say I have an ace in the hole, but I’d like to think my analysis has most things pegged,” Dean mumbles out casually, hands fidgeting at this side. “So, uh, this is the part where the panel tears me to shreds, right?”

Again, more laughter is sprinkled through the crowd. On the panel, Castiel speaks first—complimenting Dean’s studious breakdown, and asking him to elaborate more on his research process and which texts aided him the most. Afterwards, the row of professors seem to take turns asking him questions, increasing in difficulty until a bald man wearing a suit asks snidely, “And how would you explain Faraday’s law of induction, which contests the majority of the argument you’ve just spent thirty minutes outlining?”

A tension grows thick in the auditorium as Dean offers his counterargument, speaking in an astoundingly level voice considering how rude that guy is. Anna spots Castiel jiggling his leg, hands wringing in his lap, and it’s pretty obvious that he’s dying to turn and curse that bald man on the spot. But he keeps it together as Dean answers the question, only barely. Once all the professors seem satisfied, they begin to whisper among themselves, a hum of conversation settling inside the auditorium before Castiel clears his throat.

“After a brief assessment, the committee would like to congratulate Dean Winchester on the successful defense of his graduate-level thesis,” Castiel says, his voice full of excitement and pride. “Dean, you have passed with distinguished marks, and are invited to the commencement ceremony in two weeks’ time. Again, congratulations! You should be proud!”

The audience begins to applaud the news. Anna joins in as heartily as she dares, not wanting to draw anyone’s attention. Dean looks genuinely elated, blushing and grinning, and people begin to rush towards him, offering handshakes and hugs. It’s a cause for celebration, that goes without saying, and Anna wishes more than anything that she could join in on the fun. Could be a normal person, sister, friend.

But she checks her watch, knowing she should clear out now before the auditorium begins to empty. She slips out the exterior doors as quickly as she entered them, taking long, stealthy strides across the courtyard. She has an important meeting, one she cannot miss.

Castiel’s back slams against the wall as Dean pushes him into it, kissing him roughly. He gasps as Dean’s hands travel up his sides, pushing his suit jacket out of the way and threading around to his
As Castiel licks his way into Dean’s mouth, he’s aware that they really should keep going towards his office. The corridor here is deserted for now, since it’s late in the afternoon and most students are off campus, studying for their exams. But after Dean’s performance today in front of all those people, and his knowledgeable defense of his thesis and their project, Castiel is willing to indulge his boyfriend in just about anything. He can understand the adrenaline that must still be coursing through him—can feel it buzzing in Dean’s magic, in fact. He’s high as a kite right now, and Castiel couldn’t be prouder.

He runs his own hands up Dean’s back to the back of his head, where he scratches his fingertips in the short hair there. Dean groans against Castiel’s mouth, and pushes his hips forward to grind their crotches together.

A gasp stops them both, making them spring apart like guilty teenagers. Hannah is standing in the hallway, staring at them with a bright red face.

Castiel hasn’t spoken to his colleague for a while—they’d hung out together for lunch and things early in the university year, but after he’d started spending more time with Dean...they’ve drifted apart.

“Hannah?” Castiel asks, licking his lips. “Did you need something?”

Hannah shakes her head, then seems to recover from her shock. “I’m sorry, Castiel. I heard noises, I…my apologies.” She turns abruptly and heads back up the corridor, not looking back.

Castiel turns to share a look with Dean, murmuring, “I’ll be right back.”

When Dean nods, Castiel hurries after Hannah, his heart still racing from Dean's fervor. He catches her just around the corner.

"Hannah, wait,” he says, trying to keep his voice light.

“It’s fine, Castiel,” Hannah says. “I was just surprised, that’s all.”

“I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.” Since that altercation with Adler earlier in the year, he's tried to be careful with how he's seen with Dean while on campus. He doesn't think Hannah would be one to be bothered by he and Dean as a couple, but he needs to be sure.

"No, I—I wasn't uncomfortable." They reach her office door and she stops, her hand on the handle. "Okay, maybe a little." She turns to face him. "Castiel, I honestly want you both to be happy, but —" she looks behind him down the empty corridor, "—maybe keep the PDA to behind closed doors? People are watching.”

Castiel frowns as she opens her door and closes it behind her with an apologetic wince. He heads back to where Dean is still standing around the corner, leaning against the wall as he types something on his phone.

Dean looks up. "She okay?"

Castiel shrugs one shoulder as he runs his hand down Dean's arm, lacing their fingers together when he reaches Dean's hand. "We're a bit shocking, apparently."

Dean huffs, then looks back at his phone. "Going out with A tomorrow afternoon. You in?"
They've been very careful over the last few months to keep any mention of the resistance magicians in code and as vague as possible. "A" usually refers to Anael, which means they will probably be canvassing.

Castiel sighs. "No, I'll have a mountain of grading to do from the exam this afternoon."

Dean gives him a sympathetic grimace. “Guess we should just head down to the D.”

They’re supposed to be meeting Sam and Charlie there soon anyway, and Castiel is disappointed that their plan to take a slight detour to Castiel’s office after the presentation has been ruined, but he agrees, and they head back down to leave Mechanikos Hall.

The Dionysus is busy when they walk in, shedding their coats and wiping the May rain off their shoes.

Castiel spots Sam right away—he's hard to miss in a crowd, being head and shoulders taller than anyone else in the place. With him are Charlie and Dorothy, and when Sam looks up to wave them over they all get up and congratulate Dean with hugs and shoulder claps.

Castiel heads to the bar to get them drinks while Dean sits down, and Ellen smiles at him as he approaches.

“Your boy did good today, Cas,” she says, turning to grab a couple of beer bottles out of the fridge behind her.

“He really did,” Castiel agrees, beaming. “Did you make it along after all?”

Ellen nods as she pushes the bottles towards him. “Sure did. These’re on me. Don’t tell Dean, but I didn’t understand half of what he said up there. Sure sounded like he knew what he was talking about.”

"He nailed it," Castiel agrees, looking back over his shoulder at his boyfriend, laughing with their friends. If his heart grows any bigger, it's going to crack right out of his ribs.

Ellen is smiling softly when he turns back. "He'll make the world a better place—you both will."

Castiel had thought Ellen wasn't involved with the resistance, and didn't know of their involvement either, but now…he's not so sure.

He smiles and thanks her anyway and carries them to the table, where he catches the end of whatever story Dean is telling.

“...and then fucking Adler pokes his head in the door. Thank god I’d already zipped up—”

“—ew, Dean, I told you we didn’t need to hear the details!” Charlie interrupts him, covering her ears.

Dorothy looks concerned, though. “That’s really dangerous though. If he says anything…”

Dean looks to Castiel as he sits down, taking one of the beers from him. “Thanks. Nope, Cas here told him to fuck off, and he did. He can be pretty intimidating—it’s hot.” He gives Castiel a sultry
“You guys are so gross,” Charlie says, abruptly standing. “Well, sorry to love you and leave you, but we have to get going.”

“Aw, but we just got here!” Dean protests.

Dorothy shrugs. “We told you we had dinner plans with my parents tonight, Dean. Not our fault you two took so long to get down here.”

Charlie leans down to kiss Dean’s cheek. “Proud of you, dude.”

“Thanks, Red,” Dean says with a fond look.

The girls head off arm in arm, and Sam waits until they’re out the door before he leans over and says, “So, you’re definitely graduating? Have you told the Captain?”

“You say that like there was any doubt,” Dean says, preening a little. “I haven't spoken to the Captain for a couple of weeks, actually.”

Castiel doesn’t blame Sam for asking. They’ve heard precious little about anything either the resistance or Crowley's group are planning, and as the weeks have gone by, the lack of communication has been a background anxiety for Castiel. Front of mind has been supporting all his students through their exams, and most of all, Dean through his thesis presentation and submission, but he still worries about what will happen after graduation. They’ve only spoken about Dean’s post-graduation plans in vague terms, but Castiel wants more than anything for him to stay in Palo Alto—to move in with him. They practically live together anyway, spending most nights together at one apartment or the other, but Castiel would love to move to a more permanent arrangement. He just needs to work up the nerve to ask.

“What about the book, Cas?” Sam asks.

Castiel looks at him, startled out of his thoughts. "Book?"

"Yeah, you know, did you ask Crowley about the History of Magic book again?"

“Oh, that book. Yes, I asked him about it on Monday night when Dean and I were there. He seems reluctant to let us near it again, but I have no idea why. We might have to try to source another copy, or find the information some other way.”

Castiel has asked Crowley for the History of 20th Century Magic Regulation in the US over and over in the last few months, and each time he's given some vague, cagey answer—and there's still no sign of the book. Castiel is getting more annoyed with him every week, especially with how hard the lawyer has been flirting with Dean lately. Every week Castiel tries to talk Dean out of coming along to his class there, but Dean has insisted. He loves teaching the kids in the group as much as Castiel does, and it warms Castiel's heart that Dean wants to be so involved. But the way Crowley stands so close to Dean when he speaks to him makes Castiel’s skin crawl.

“There’s no other way,” Sam says, frowning. “I’ve searched every book in the library that I thought might relate to the Seal and its history, but the books with the real information have to have been removed from the library. They’re just not there.” Sam runs a hand through his hair in frustration. “Do you think he even still has the book?”

“Yes, I doubt he’d part with it. He keeps it locked in a cupboard in his office.” Castiel just wishes Anna would contact him outside of the coven meetings he goes to occasionally with Dean. They're
still keeping her identity a secret, and she doesn’t seem to want to speak to him alone to explain why. He wishes more than anything that he or Dean had a way to contact her, but he has no choice but to wait until she's ready to talk to him, and it's driving him crazy.

Sam nods, still frowning. “I'll ask Charlie later—maybe she'll have an idea. We’ll think of something.”

"Charlie's not part of this, remember?" Dean replies firmly. "Don't bring her into this, Sam. And don't go doing anything dangerous, either. We'll work it out without that damn book."

"Whatever," Sam says, his frustration clear. He picks up his beer bottle, raising it in a toast. “Here’s to Dean’s thesis, anyway. Congrats.”

They all raise their bottles and toast, Sam draining the end of his beer. "Next round's on me," he says, getting up and heading for the bar.

Castiel puts his bottle down and reaches over to rest his hand on Dean's forearm, stroking along his skin.

Dean smiles at him, then says, “Crowley has been cagey as hell lately though, hasn't he?”

"You mean more than usual? Trust me, he's always like that."

“No, he's just said some weird things recently. Like on Monday night, I was handing out sheets of paper for your folding exercises and I got a papercut. Crowley took one look at the blood on my hand and said something like, ‘keep that precious commodity safe.’"

Castiel narrows his eyes, wondering what on earth that could mean. “Commodity…your blood?”

“Maybe? Who the fuck knows, man. The guy’s unhinged.”

Castiel sighs. He’s not wrong there. The sooner they get past graduation and done with whatever plan Crowley and Anna are cooking up, the faster they can get away from these people and back to normal.

Sam returns with fresh beers and talk turns to other matters for a while, until Sam gets a text and heads out to meet up with Ruby.

Once he’s gone, Dean sighs. “I can’t believe he’s still with her. Chick’s bad news—I’ve said that from the start.”

Castiel nods, taking a swig of his beer. “You have, and I agree. But love is blind, as they say.”

“Must be, if you’re still hanging with me,” Dean says, giving him a fond look.

“Ha,” Castiel says, rolling his eyes. Dean and his thinly veiled self-worth issues—Castiel has been trying to build him up lately, especially with the thesis presentation approaching, but now that’s over he’ll have to find some other reason to remind Dean of how much he means to him.

The week before graduation passes in a blur of assessment and grading. Castiel spends most of his time either in the library or enjoying some peace and quiet in his office, since Dean is now at a
loose end after submitting his thesis and more prone to distracting him with kisses or food. Castiel simply can't get any work done at home, so he leaves Dean to spend time with Charlie, mostly. Sam is deep in assessment as well, making himself scarce.

Castiel is currently sitting in his office, not enjoying his discovery that his first-year students apparently haven’t grasped much of the philosophy behind elemental casting of wards and barriers. The syllabus has been much too advanced for them.

Huffing in frustration, he throws his red pen to the desk and runs his hands through his hair. How are they going to be able to grasp the more advanced concepts in second year, when so many of them are struggling with this easy material?

He wakes up his laptop for a brief break and sees, among the other usual staff emails that can be deleted right away, a meeting invitation from Missouri. It’s for this afternoon, and as he checks his watch, he realizes she’s set it for five minutes from now. The description is empty, and for some reason that sets the moths clamoring in his stomach.

Cursing under his breath, he shuts the laptop and heads out into the corridor, wondering what Missouri could be after, and why she couldn’t just email him. His thoughts flick to Dean, hoping his latest canvassing trip with the coven is going well—now that his thesis is completed, Dean suddenly has more free time on his hands, and he’s been spending more of it with Anna and her magicians while Castiel is busy at work. He hopes no word of the lay magician’s “resistance” has reached the university—especially not his involvement, or that of Dean or Sam.

The door of Missouri’s office stands open as always. Castiel approaches it warily, but as he steps into the doorway and knocks awkwardly on the frame, he sees that there’s more than just Missouri present, standing behind her desk. Adler is standing next to her, a smug grin appearing on his face as he turns to see Castiel at the door. And on his other side, looking regal in a rich, purple dress, is Professor MacLeod.

“Doctor Novak,” she says as he steps into the room. “Nice to see you again. Now Doctor Moseley, what’s all this fuss about?”

Alarm bells start to ring in the back of Castiel’s mind. What “fuss”? Missouri takes a breath and looks at Castiel, sadness in her expression. “Doctor Novak, I’m afraid we’ve had reports of inappropriate behavior.”

Relief flows through his tense limbs. Nothing to do with the resistance, then. “Oh? Between some of my students?”

Missouri pauses for a brief second before she says, “In a way.” She glances down at something on her desk—a piece of paper Castiel can’t quite see from where he stands. “Between one of your students and yourself, Castiel.”

The relief drains out of Castiel, much like the sensation of blood draining out of his face. “I’m sorry?”

“There has been more than one complaint from other members of our university community regarding public and indecent displays between you and Dean Winchester.”

The blood in Castiel’s face seems to have been replaced with fire. “You mean my boyfriend? Last I checked it wasn’t against the rules for colleagues to be romantically involved.”

“Not only that, Doctor Novak,” Adler says, the serious look on his face belied by the smug sound
of his voice. “We’ve had reports of you engaged in indecent acts on campus. That is certainly against the rules.”

Castiel bunches his hands into fists at his sides. “That’s completely untrue. Who would accuse us of such a thing?” he grits out, glaring at Adler. He knows exactly who’s responsible for such a complaint, although he’s trying to not also blame Hannah. He can feel his magic stirring in his core, his anger fuelling a building charge. *Get a grip, Novak,* he tells himself, trying to breathe normally.

“They elected to remain anonymous, as is always the case with complaints,” Missouri says. “I’m sorry this has happened, Castiel. We’ll have to conduct a thorough investigation, of course. Review the security footage, and so on. I have faith that your name will be cleared completely.”

“Thank you,” Castiel says tightly, still grappling with his swirling magic as he worries about how many times he and Dean have been making out in the corridors. He chances a glance at Professor MacLeod, but she’s merely standing still, watching him with fascination.

Missouri takes another deep breath, looking uncomfortable. “Unfortunately, we still need to take this matter seriously. I’m afraid I have to ask you to leave the campus immediately, and don’t return until the matter has been resolved.”

Castiel’s jaw drops. “What? What about my students still in assessment? I’m in the middle of grading papers—”

“You can take that with you, and you’ll still be reachable via email, I presume. Both you and Dean need to make yourselves scarce until after this is dealt with.”

“No, not Dean,” he says, horrified that he’s brought this down on them. He’ll never forgive himself if Dean ends up in trouble over this as well. “Graduation is only a couple of days away. He’s a brilliant student with a bright future—he shouldn’t be made to miss graduation because of this. Please, lay all blame for whatever this is on me, but leave him be!”

“Well perhaps you should have considered that before you—” Adler bites out, but is cut off by Missouri talking over him.

“Like I said, Castiel, I’m sure this will all be disproven and you’ll be allowed to return to work as normal. Professor MacLeod, are you willing to allow Dean Winchester to continue with his graduation?”

“Aye, I’ll allow it, since his supervisor here vouches for him so nicely,” the professor nods graciously.

Adler splutters, “His supervisor, who happens to be his boyfriend?”

“That’ll be enough, thank you Zachariah,” Missouri snaps at him. She turns back to Castiel, frowning deeply. “Dean may remain and graduate on Thursday, but from this afternoon, you’ll need to leave. I’m so sorry, Castiel.”

Castiel nods, relieved that Dean is safe for now, but that doesn’t stop his guts churning with worry about his own fate, and fury at Adler for orchestrating this. If he loses this job…

“I trust you’ll be looking into this right away. I don’t want to be away from my classes for too long,” he says, still battling for control over his anger.

Missouri nods. “I’ll personally look into the files. Doctor Novak,” she says, making sure he makes
eye contact with her, “it’s going to be okay.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your faith in me. I’ll look forward to hearing from you.”

He turns and heads out the door, scowling deeply. How could they be putting this on him, on them, after all they’ve been through this year? He and Dean have busted their asses visiting and studying the Seal again over the last few months, avoiding dragons, snow leopards and earth giants, not to mention writing up a report on the whole thing on top of the final copy of Dean’s thesis. It’s been a stressful few months. And now this? It’s not like they’ve been fucking on every surface of the university, although he can’t say the same thing for either of their apartments.

He walks faster as he turns the corner near his own office—possibly not his office for much longer. Quickly packing up his laptop and piling up a stack of papers still to be graded, he binds them with a thread of earth magic wound tightly around them a few times.

He's going to miss Dean's graduation. The thought makes him stop his packing and rub at his face with his hands. They've come so far, he can't miss the ceremony. Dean's going to be so upset.

A wave of anger sweeps through him again. Of course they haven't been doing anything “indecent” in public. The very idea of the accusation makes his blood boil. He desperately needs to blow off steam, and the easiest way to do that is to share it with Dean, but he won't see Dean until later tonight. Instead, he moves away from his desk and pulls magic to him. He forms a container between his palms without a second thought, coalescing a ball of water and throwing all his frustration into it.

This whole mess is definitely Adler’s doing. He refuses to believe Hannah snitched on them, although she possibly mentioned their interaction yesterday to someone, who passed it on. Who knows?

The water sphere grows, pushing at the boundaries of the container, and as he watches it starts to boil, bubbles of gas making the whole sphere wobble. He lets out a frustrated shout as the sphere explodes outwards, evaporating into steam and raining down warm droplets onto his face.

Casting hasn’t made him feel a whole lot better, but he’s not simmering with so much magical charge. For now, anyway.

He gathers his belongings and hurries along the halls, down to the Mechanikos Hall foyer, pulling on his trench coat as he goes. Stepping out into the wind chills him to the bone even though it's late spring, and he wishes his hands were free so he could put them into his spelled pockets and be comforted by the warmth of Dean’s magic. The sun is low on the horizon already, casting an orange light across the campus buildings and greens.

He steps through the translocation wards and is partway along the main road into Palo Alto when he notices a shimmering between some trees, off to his left. Looking around to make sure no one is watching, he leaves the path and moves towards the portal. The magic that has created it is warm, familiar—Anna's for sure.

His sighs through his excitement. Does she have to contact him now, when he's carrying a load of exam papers and his laptop? He looks back up the street towards his apartment—he's been getting better at translocation spells lately, and hasn't ported Dean's clothes to Bobby's shop in a few months.

He quickly puts the bundle of papers and his laptop bag on the grass and holds his hands over the top of them. Carefully keeping his apartment's kitchen table in his mind, he bends his index fingers
and turns his hands to lock his palms together. Drawing up air magic, he flicks his hands to the side, sending it all away, hopefully to his kitchen table.

He turns from the empty street and steps into the portal.

Rosco shrugs off his coat when he enters the foyer, heading straight into the security office on the ground floor. He’s pissed at being woken up by this dumb alarm—it’s been months since it went off the last time, and that had actually been someone breaking in. That meddlesome kid, Adam—he’d made short work of him in the end. It doesn’t pay to get on Crowley’s bad side, after all.

He mutters a greeting to the security guard, who points him to one of the monitors showing Crowley’s office. There’s someone there, rifling through the drawers of Crowley’s desk. Someone tall, with floppy brown hair.

The kid—the Winchester kid. What the hell is he playing at? He should know better, Rosco thinks. He curses as he gets back to his feet. There’s nothing else for it. The Boss isn’t going to like it, but it’s getting too close to endgame time for anyone to screw things up with heroics.

He takes the elevator up to the top floor, tapping his foot on the floor as he ascends. When the doors open, he walks as quietly as he’s able to the door of Crowley’s office.

The kid is sitting at the desk, the History of Magic book spread open before him. He’s so absorbed in it that he only realizes Rosco is there when he’s nearly across the office, and he looks up with a start.

“Oh, Rosco. This isn’t what it looks like—I was just, uh…” His eyes dart around, obviously trying to come up with some story. Did he think he could just waltz in here in the middle of the night? The kid was fucked in the head.

He sighs. “Sorry, Sam. I didn’t want to get you involved in the first place, but now it’s too late. You’re gonna have to come with me.”

Sam holds up a hand to stop Rosco coming closer. “Wait! Have you seen what's in here? The Seal—it's not—just please, let me tell my brother about this. Then I’ll do whatever you want.”

“It’s too late for that. Sorry.” Rosco walks over to Sam, drawing up the magic he’s been gradually gathering.

"But they're in danger—everyone could be if they—"

Rosco whammys the magical charge into Sam’s temple, and the kid slumps to the floor.

"I know," he says, and closes the book.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: the beginning of the end.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Oh, well hello. Welcome to graduation day—something we've been discussing and daydreaming about and fine-tuning for what feels like forever now.


While beta-reading this chapter a few days ago, WaywardAF67 put this as a comment in our google doc. It was so devastatingly funny that I had to share: *I'm going to stop reading here. I don't fucking trust you monsters. I'm too fragile for this.*

Seriously, guys, I (TrenchcoatBaby) laughed for SO LONG.

But WaywardAF67 did, in fact, make it through. And so will you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wherever Anna's portal has brought Castiel, it's already dark. There's grass underfoot and a pleasant smell on the warm air, and he's sure Dean is nearby, if the pull in his chest is any indication.

As Castiel turns he sees Anna standing under a large tree, full of blossoms. He can just make out her smile as he walks towards her.

She pulls him into a hug. "Thanks for coming, Cas."

He pulls back, not really able to see her face, but he can sense her concern like a sharp note in the magic surrounding her.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

He shakes his head. "It's nothing. Just a rough day at work." He steps back, already looking past her to where a light shines through the trees.

Anna stops him with a hand on his arm. "No, you're upset about something. Tell me, maybe I can help."

Castiel looks at her, wondering how much he can really trust her. As children, she'd always be the one to take care of him when he'd been in trouble or hurt, and although she's almost a stranger to him now, he finds it easy to slip back into their old roles.

"I…I won't be able to be there for Dean's graduation on Thursday." He grits his teeth as Adler's smirk surfaces in his memory.

"What? Why?" Anna sounds a little more concerned about the revelation than Castiel had expected.

He glances back to her. "They're investigating me for misconduct. I've been asked to stay away from the campus until it's been resolved."
Anna's eyes widen. "Misconduct in what way? Not your involvement with the resistance?"

"No, with…with Dean. There have been complaints—"

"Oh," Anna interrupts, relief now clear in her voice as she steps back. "Is that all? What are a few kisses in the corridors going to do?"

When Castiel huffs a tiny laugh, she gasps, then adds, "Castiel, you didn't. On campus?"

"No! Not like they're accusing us, anyway," Castiel tries to recover his composure, but his frustration from the afternoon bubbles back to the surface. "I can't lose this job, Anna. All I want is to ask Dean to move in with me after he graduates, but if I lose my apartment…" He trails off, unable to even finish the thought. Dean is going to be so pissed.

"Ah, Cas," Anna says, pulling him back into a hug. "He loves you, you know that. I'm sure he'll follow you anywhere. You should still tell him about this, though. Tonight."

Castiel nods, stepping back. The knot in his chest has loosened a little, but not all the way gone. "I'll still miss graduation, though."

"You can still go. Just illusion yourself up and go to the ceremony anyway." Anna smiles, like it's a piece of cake to just walk back into Stanford as someone else.

Castiel blinks at her. "I'll never be able to pull off an illusion like that in front of my colleagues."

"Yes you will. It's not the first time you've cast something like that at a graduation ceremony, is it?"

When Castiel only stares at her, she continues, "What, you didn't think I'd miss my baby brother's graduation, did you?"

Anna had been there, at Oxford? Somewhere hiding in the crowd of mages, when she should have been front and center? Something tightens again in Castiel's throat and he struggles to answer, but croaks out, "Why didn't you…?"

"It doesn't matter now. I'm sorry I didn't come to see you there—I was in a bad place back then. But what's done is done. Dean needs you to be there. And so do I."

"You do?" Castiel can't hide his surprise, but they're both interrupted by someone walking towards them from behind Anna.

"You guys coming inside or what?"

Dean. Castiel smiles as he sees him. “Hello, Dean.”

“There you are. I felt you arrive, so I thought I’d better come see. You keeping him out in the cold for a reason, Cap?” Dean grabs Castiel and plants a firm kiss on his lips, then pulls him into a tight hug.

Castiel sighs as he relaxes into Dean, his pent-up magical charge calming at Dean’s touch. Dean pulls back to look him in the face, his expression barely visible in the dim light. “Whoa, what’s up with you?"

Castiel glances at Anna for a moment, then moves so that Dean turns to walk beside him towards the edge of the orchard. “I’ll tell you later. I assume you’ve called me here for a reason, Anna?”
“Yes,” Anna agrees. “Before we go inside, could I just have a word with both of you?”

Castiel stops and turns, Dean still standing curiously beside him. “Something else wrong?” Castiel asks.

“Possibly,” she says, as Castiel and Dean share a glance. “Crowley’s been missing, out of contact for a couple weeks. This afternoon I got message from him, just saying that Thursday is the day.”

“The day…?” Dean asks, his brow furrowing. “Something’s going to happen at graduation?”

“I believe so,” Anna replies, nodding. “I just wanted to make sure you were prepared.”

Castiel feels the frustration rise all over again. Enough with the secrets. He grits his teeth, trying to keep his words calm. “What exactly should we be prepared for? Please, tell us what’s going on—don’t we deserve to know the plan after all this time in the dark?”

Anna sighs, looking towards the building where the light shines. “I really don’t trust Crowley—in fact, I don’t believe for a second that he intends to stick to the plan we originally agreed to.” She looks back to Castiel and Dean, her expression serious. “We need you two to alter the Seal spell.”

“Alter it?” Dean asks, glancing at Castiel.

Anna continues, her voice low. "The Seal was cast using blood magic, which means it's tied to those who originally cast it—" her eyes flick to Dean, "—or their descendents."

Castiel nods slowly. They already knew about Henry's involvement in the spell—they even know about the structure of the blood magic, thanks to hours of research in the library basement. But for Anna to have this information—Dean hadn't even mentioned it in his thesis.

"How do you know about that?” he asks. "Crowley told you, didn't he? Dean, the book—"

"Look, it doesn't matter how I know, I just know it has to be you, Dean.” She stares at Dean, who shifts uncomfortably.

"We can do it," he says, sounding confident even though Castiel can feel his trepidation. “Why alter the Seal, though? We thought you wanted to get rid of it.”

Anna’s eyes are wide as she continues. “I would much prefer this revolution to happen without the notice of the Magical Council, if possible. We don’t want trouble, we just want access to the well—if the Seal suddenly falls, there might be more trouble than we are prepared to handle.”

Castiel turns this plan over in his mind. He and Dean have been studying the Seal for months now, but so far haven’t tried to get past its protections. Besides, there’s a good chance his access to the library has now been revoked, after this afternoon’s meeting. He carefully doesn’t look at Dean when he says, "I may not be able to get back through the library door.”


Before Castiel can reply, Anna says, “I’m hoping some of those protections will no longer be an issue.”

Castiel frowns, shakes his head. “I don’t—”

Dean interrupts him, insistent. “Cas, why can’t we get back into the library?”

Castiel takes a deep breath. “Missouri called me to her office this afternoon. Adler must have said
They fired you?” Dean asks, incredulous.

“No! No, but they’re investigating me—us. It’ll be fine, it’s not like we’ve broken any actual rules, but she asked me not to return until they’ve resolved it.” Castiel’s heart breaks at the way anger blooms on Dean’s face as he speaks, the way his magic arcs up. “I’m sorry, Dean.”

“No, stop that. This is all on Adler. When I see him next, he’s getting a piece of—”

“No, Dean.” Anna reaches out a hand to calm him. “Cas will be there on Thursday, one way or another. Just lie low and be ready for whatever might happen, okay? I have faith in both of you—you should do the same.”

Castiel looks back at Dean, and feels a rush of affection, of love. Their bond holds them together, strong and united, and he can feel the same sentiment radiating from Dean.

“Okay, Yoda,” Dean says, his mouth quirking back towards a grin. “So can we go inside now? This orchard is creepy as fuck.”

Anna chuckles and she turns to walk away through the trees, and Castiel and Dean follow. Dean snakes his arm around Castiel’s back, and Castiel leans into him.

Dean murmurs into his ear, “We should have fucked in the classrooms. Give them something to find in their investigation.”

Castiel chokes out a laugh. “I don’t actually want to lose my job, you know. Even if some of my coworkers are assholes.”

The house next to the orchard is a small cottage, but the lights are welcoming and the members of the coven seem pleased to see the Captain return. Cas is still keeping Anna’s identity a secret, and he hasn’t yet asked her why she doesn’t reveal herself, but there’s safety in anonymity and he wants to keep that for her.

Anna, back in her Captain persona, claps her hands a few times to get the attention of the room then says brightly, “Okay, what’s left on the agenda for tonight?”

Castiel trails after Dean as he moves to sit next to Anael, exchanging a few words with her. If he’s honest, he’s a little jealous at how easily Dean seems to have made friends here—he’s still not sure how he fits into this group. Not all of the coven members are as welcoming as Anael is, and some of them are still downright hostile towards him.

The space inside the cottage isn’t huge, but there are comfortable armchairs and wooden dining chairs around the edges of the room. The coven crowds into the corners, some people standing. Castiel wonders whose house this is, but chances are Anael doesn’t know—the coven move from location to location for their group meetings.

The Captain calls out to get the attention of the whole room. “Listen up, everyone. I’ve got some important information to share.” She looks around the group as she speaks, making sure to look people in the eye. “In a few days, the time we’ve been waiting for will finally be here. A group of us will infiltrate Stanford, and with the help of our friends—” she nods to Castiel and Dean, “—we’ll attempt to bring elemental magic to all of us.”

There are gasps from around the room, and there are few uncertain murmurs. Castiel hears Neil, sitting nearby, say, “You really think we’re ready to take on the mages?”
Castiel has had a few conversations with him recently, comparing notes on their lay magician classes. He's right to be worried—how many of the lay magicians are really prepared to stand up to coordinated elemental magic if things go wrong? The tightness in his chest cranks up a notch.

“I do, Neil,” the Captain says, strength and surety in her tone. “I need you all to be ready for whatever happens. My team have already been briefed. The rest of you will be sent a signal if you’re needed. Otherwise the meeting in two weeks should take place no matter what the outcome.”

Castiel wonders who she’s picked for her “team,” but it’s probably best he doesn’t know before Thursday. More secrets, more risks. He desperately wishes it could all be over already, but whatever is coming will come, and all he can hope to do is protect Dean and himself from whatever the outcome might be.

The Captain looks around the group carefully. “Are there any questions?”

“How will we know if you’ve been successful?” someone across the room asks.

The Captain hesitates, turning to seek out Castiel. “I’m not actually sure you will, Hester. Doctor Novak, can you suggest whether we’ll feel any effect?”

Castiel swallows down his surprise at being called on, and speaks up. “I...I’m not sure. Casting should be easier, certainly. We won’t know for sure until it happens.”

Unhappy murmurs start up around the room again, and The Captain speaks over them, her voice raised slightly. “We’ll meet again in two weeks and decide how to proceed from there, okay?” She turns to someone in the crowd to her left. “Layla? Can we help you tonight?”

Layla, the tall, thin woman the group has been treating for cancer, steps forward. Castiel had been asked to help heal her from the first time he’d joined Dean at the coven meetings, and he’d been reluctant to join their casting. Medical magic is dangerous, as he’d reminded Dean when he’d found out about it, and he’d only had very basic training during his doctorate—enough to heal scrapes and bruises, perhaps dry up a cold. But cancer?

From what he’d been able to tell, the coven had previously held the tumor at bay by filling Layla’s body with magic, giving her the energetic boost she needed to fight the cancerous cells. Over the last few months, he’s had three opportunities to try out some alternative approaches, but pulled back each time, unwilling to risk hurting Layla instead of helping her. At least Layla is looking a little more healthy this month, with more meat on her bones and color in her cheeks.

This time, though, he might just have the spell tuned enough to shrink the tumor. At least, he thinks so. And with Dean here to help him with structure…

The Captain steps forward, smiling at Layla as she takes her hands. "You're looking better," she says, echoing Castiel's own thoughts.

"I feel better, thanks to all of you," Layla says, looking around until her gaze lands on Castiel, then she abruptly turns away.

Castiel's smile drops. Layla is one of the coven who distrusts mages, who has never warmed to him, despite her acceptance of Dean's help. But then, Dean has a way of charming people that Castiel can't seem to replicate.

"But the headaches," Layla continues, "they're still there. I haven't had any convulsions for a while, but..." she looks down.
"Would you like us to try again? Perhaps Doctor Novak could try his—"

"No." Layla’s interruption doesn’t just take Castiel and Anna by surprise—others in the room stop their chatter and turn to look at her.

"No, just…just the coven, please." She turns her flushed face to the floor.

"We don't need his kind in here, anyway," someone murmurs from across the room, and when Castiel looks over, he sees the big, dark-skinned magician smirking at him. Uriel is his name, Castiel thinks.

Dean drops his hand to rest reassuringly on Castiel’s thigh, but his heart still sinks like lead in his chest. Even if whatever is going to happen tomorrow turns out, even if they manage to alter the Seal and bring elemental magic to all, there’s still a divide there. A deep distrust from either side. How can they ever hope to mend that?

A few days later, Dean wakes up before his alarm. He’s just had a nightmare, one he can’t seem to remember. There’s no sunlight filtering in through the window, which either means it’s ungodly early, or it’s another stormy day in Palo Alto. Maybe both.

Today is his graduation day.

A lightly snoring Castiel has his back turned to him, flailing a little in his sleep. Dean’s arms are still wrapped around his waist, and he plants a kiss on the back of his neck before rising from the mattress. He walks to the bathroom stiffly, yawning the entire time he’s relieving his bladder, wondering if he got a wink of sleep. He’s been trying to keep a brave face on for Cas, but his insides are bound up in a half-dozen knots. He washes his hands and stares at himself in the mirror, trying to prioritize his list of concerns. The university’s bullshit investigation of them, which might end with Cas getting kicked to the curb? The fact that Cas plans to sneak back on campus today using some form of illusion magic, an absurd idea that Dean can thank Anna for? Maybe how Dean has no real plans after graduation, beyond staying with Castiel—wherever that might be?

No, those are just worries, he tells himself—important in the moment but trivial in the end. They’ll work themselves out, he has to believe that somehow. He sighs, running some water over his face before swishing it around in his mouth. What’s really eating at him is the danger they’re apparently getting into tonight. It’s a good cause that Dean believes in wholeheartedly, but he trusts Crowley about as much as a snail trusts a salt shaker. After their meeting with the resistance, Castiel spent the next few days buckling down and writing a spell that just might work in revising the Seal.

Dean's glad Cas has had something to keep him busy—getting booted off campus at the end of assessment is bothering him, Dean can tell. It's a relief that Cas has something else to do to keep himself preoccupied, because he hates seeing his boyfriend mopey and sad.

But writing this spell—and using Dean’s research and their many trips into the maze to inform his writing—it puts a sour taste in Dean’s mouth. Something bad is gonna happen, that’s a fucking fact. At this point it’s just a matter of hoping he can see it comin’ before it comes for them.

He crawls back into bed just as the sound of rain begins to hit the window. He checks his phone, frowning when he sees there’s been no word from Sam. Where the hell has that kid been all week? He hasn’t answered the phone once, and has just sent a bunch of one word answers to all of Dean’s
texts. Dean even stopped by his dorm room yesterday, following a hunch that he’d gotten mixed up in something bad, but the room was packed up for the summer—nearly empty already. That douchebag Brady had all but slammed the door in Dean’s face, which he wasn’t really surprised by, considering he had given the guy a firm right-hook last fall. Dean had texted Sam immediately about stopping by and finding him gone, but Sam had just replied something about being “busy with finals” and “catching up with him later.”

Dean frowns now thinking about it, his fingers flying over his screen.

**Dean 6:04 a.m. >> Dude, I know exams are crazy, but they’re over now. You better drag your ass to graduation today. Gotta take baby for a ride**

He drops the phone back onto the nightstand, staring up at the ceiling. Taking “baby for a ride” is one of the many code phrases the three of them have added to their vocabulary lately, which is basically a shorthand for saying *we need to fucking talk about you-know-what*. He can’t exactly text Sam and tell him that the resistance is getting down and dirty with the Seal tonight, not if they want to keep their involvement in all this anonymous. Dean’ll be damned before he lets Crowley ruin Sam’s future. He wishes the kid would just take a beach vacation and whisk away a nice girl, someone like Jessica Moore, and drive off into the freaking sunset. Him and Cas are too entrenched in this whole thing, too implicated—but Sam could still slip out before shit hits the fan.

“Dean?” Castiel murmurs, voice heavy with sleep. He rolls over, head seeking the warmth of Dean’s chest, and Dean welcomes him with arms open wide.

“Mornin’,” he says softly, a hand stroking Cas’ hair. Castiel groans in his typical, grouchy-morning way, and Dean chuckles. “Get some more sleep. We got time.”

Castiel shakes his head against Dean’s t-shirt. “Can’t. Bad dream.”

Huh, Dean thinks, me too. Though he still can’t remember the details. “Yeah?”

“We were there, at the Seal,” Castiel mumbles quietly, his still closed, expression still sleepy but equally pained. “There was a blast, and it was dark, and someone…someone died.”

Castiel shivers suddenly, fistimg the cotton of Dean’s shirt with an urgency that makes Dean gasp. The nightmare that woke him up—the one he had forgotten—it can’t be—

“Who was it?” Dean rasps, frozen in bed. Castiel doesn’t stir, halfway to falling back asleep, and Dean shakes him gently. “Baby, who was it? Who died?”

“Can’t remember,” Castiel sighs sleepily, though his voice is still laced with slight panic. “But I was sad… Really sad.”

“Yeah,” Dean says tonelessly, falling back against his pillow and holding Castiel closer to him. He’s pretty sure Cas can’t hear him by now—he’s drifting back off. “I was too.”

Dean’s mind is buzzing, stuffed so full of apprehension he can’t find room for anything else. It can’t be a coincidence, can it, the two of them sharing yet another dream? But this one didn’t unfold like they usually do—it didn’t feature a sexy rendezvous, for one thing. It felt grim and real and terrifying, and Dean’s blinded by the overwhelming fear that it was prophetic in some way. If the dream is right, someone they love just might die today.
Dean’s filled with tension when he wakes up for the second time. It’s still dark and stormy outside, and he has a pit in his stomach, so practically nothing’s changed—except for his bed. It’s empty.

He tosses a hand over to what he’s started to consider Cas’ side of his memory foam mattress, feeling the cool sheets. Cas hasn’t been here, not for a while. The thought jolts him awake like a bucket of ice water, and he flings the comforter off him and shouts, “Cas?”

He tears through his studio, eyes cast down through his living room and kitchen. Nothing, no one. He checks the bathroom—empty. What the fuck?

“Cas?” He paces around his apartment as if Castiel is going to materialize in an empty corner. Which, they’re fucking mages, so that could happen? Right?

Then his front door cracks open, and a soggy Castiel wearing Dean’s sweatshirt comes in holding two coffees from the Witches’ Brew. “Oh good, you’re up,” Castiel says lightly, shutting the door with his foot and kissing Dean’s cheek. He seems to have not noticed yet Dean’s expression of panic, to relief, to lingering fear, and he drops their to-go cups on the kitchen table. “They were out of bagels, can you believe that? Of course, I had to go to the off-campus one, because… Well anyways, this location always sells out of everything so fast, even though it’s barely nine in the morning—”

Dean interrupts Castiel with an urgent, frantic kiss, pushing their mouths together with more desperation than finesse. Cas sucks in a breath of surprise as his back hits the wall, but his arms wrap around Dean’s torso quickly enough, his mouth opening up in invitation. Dean takes advantage of his boyfriend’s seemingly compliant state and flicks his tongue into his mouth, diving headfirst and doling out all the moves he knows drives Cas crazy—grabbing his ass, sucking his lower lip, practically tongue fucking his mouth.

“Dean,” Castiel gasps between kisses, “what…what’s gotten into you?”

“I love you,” Dean says, hoping to god his voice doesn’t quiver. He pops the button on Cas’ jeans, realizing belatedly that they’re his. Fuck, if that doesn’t get his motor revving even more. He kisses his neck, lips wet and insistent, and Castiel moans quietly beneath him.

“I love you too,” Castiel breathes, kicking off his shoes as Dean strips him of his jeans.

“Want you so much.” Dean takes the edges of Cas’ borrowed sweatshirt and flings it over his head, laying Cas out on his sleep-rumpled sheets in just his boxers and a t-shirt.

“I always want you, Dean.” Castiel sits up carefully on his elbows. “But can we talk? I can tell that something’s wrong.”

The statement hangs in the air, with Dean just blinking, unwilling to confirm his boyfriend’s correct observation. Castiel sighs, waiting him out, until Dean finally shakes his head and mutters, “What isn’t wrong about today, Cas?”

Castiel’s face softens a little. “You’re worried?”

Dean looks at him incredulously. It’s obvious that Cas has forgotten their ominous dream, which Dean only remembers because Cas was mumbling in his sleep. Even though they don’t keep
secrets now, not after what happened in January, Dean can’t help but bury this knowledge deep inside his chest. He’s hoping beyond hope that whatever death they witnessed will never come true. “Aren’t you?”

“I am,” Castiel admits quietly. “But I also believe in us. When you and I work to accomplish something, we always beat the odds.”

“Yeah, but…”

Castiel reaches his arm up, stretching for Dean to take his hand. Dean goes willingly, as he always does with Cas, dropping a knee on the mattress before his head is cradled on Cas’ chest.

“Good things do happen, Dean.” Dean bites back the response that rises to his tongue—not in my experience—because that isn’t true anymore, is it? Castiel’s hands are wandering around his back, soothing and strong, and Dean is surrounded by a tight embrace.

“Just kiss me,” he says instead, almost a plea, tilting his head backwards and searching Castiel’s face for signs of relenting. They’ve worked hard the past few months to communicate more, so much so that Dean feels like they’re having chick flick moments regularly now, but fuck it. Usually it makes them feel better afterwards, and their relationship is just as passionate as it’s ever been, but a lot more healthy. Still, Dean’s anxiety about everything that’s unfolding today is like a pit in his stomach that he can’t get rid of—he needs a distraction, a way to forget.

Castiel runs a hand through Dean’s hair, nails digging into his scalp in a comforting way, and he angles Dean’s lips towards him. He kisses Dean in the way he does sometimes, all slow and settled and sweet, every brush of lips infused with love, the profound bond glowing between them. Beneath him Castiel shivers, goosebumps traveling down his exposed skin, and Dean runs his hands over Cas’ arms and chest and stomach, pouring a stream of warmth into him with each touch. The fact that they’re able to do magic together without casting has only gotten more pronounced with the passing months. Dean drops the spell when he feels the temperature of Castiel’s skin is back to normal, his arms wrapped around Dean’s back.

“So, say this was our last night on earth,” Dean says into Cas’ ear, trying to keep his voice light. Inside, though, he’s wondering if that just might be the case. “Is there anything that you…uh, want, that we’ve never…?”

He’s not sure if Cas understands his question, but then Castiel replies in a hushed sort of whisper, “Would you maybe want to…”

Dean waits for him to finish, one elbow planted on the mattress while his other hand caresses Castiel’s collarbones. “Anything, baby. Whatever it is, it’s yours.”

Castiel’s eyelashes flutter for a moment, seeming coy in a way Dean rarely sees him. “Dean, would you fuck me?”

Their eyes meet, hooded and fierce and full of yearning. They’ve been together for nearly six months, but have never talked about switching—Castiel was barely out of the closet when they started hooking up, so he naturally fell into topping. But Dean, he’s always considered himself the occasional switch, and he mutters, “Oh, fuck yeah.” He covers Castiel with kisses, his cheeks and chin and neck, before Castiel casts his favorite spell—the relocation charm—and zaps their remaining clothes to the dirty clothes hamper.

“Damn, you’ve gotten good at that,” Dean comments with a small chuckle, but then he remembers he has miles of tight, smooth, naked Cas beneath him. Their hands return to familiar terrain, and
Dean bends over long enough to press their lips together again, his tongue seeking entrance into Cas’ mouth. They kiss almost instinctively at this point, knowing exactly how to rile each other up, and they make out for what feels like hours…rolling around in the bedsheets, panting for air when their lips momentarily separate. Their cocks begin to fill out quickly as they rut against each other, hips rolling with increased pressure. It takes all of Dean’s willpower to break apart long enough to rummage in his drawer and retrieve the lube—the bottle is nearly empty at this point, their desire for each other never seeming to dwindle—and he slicks up his pointer finger heavily before spreading Cas’ legs wide. He falls into the space between them, situating a pillow beneath his boyfriend’s hips, and then kisses him fully on the mouth. It’s still good, still heady and dizzying, each and every time they’re together like this. But this is more than their usual morning sex—this is Cas’ first time catching instead of pitching, and Dean will be damned if it’s not a homerun.

He tries to soothe Castiel completely, kissing him all over and using his free hand to caress his skin. Still, the moment his finger slips between his boyfriend’s cheeks, he feels a nervous clenching engulf his finger.

“I got you, baby,” he whispers, mouth currently tugging on Castiel’s earlobe. “I’ll make this good for you, I swear.”

Castiel nods and exhales. Dean can feel his boyfriend’s heart pounding against his chest as he slips the first finger in, watching Cas’ face for signs of discomfort. It’s a process, prepping someone for the first time—it’s all about timing, and patience, and comfort, and a hell of a lot of lube. Thankfully for Dean, though, he’s been gifted with magic—so he eases the burn of the second finger, Castiel humming in the back of his throat, seeming pleased with this development.

“More,” Castiel demands, a little breathless, but Dean just kisses him in response.

“Patience, sweetheart,” he mumbles against Castiel’s skin, rubbing his own face against Cas’ stubble. “You’re crazy fucking tight. Have you ever had…anything else…?”

Castiel shakes his head, though doesn’t seem deterred by this admission at all, if his dilated pupils are anything to judge by.

“Even more of a reason to take it slow,” Dean says, trying to be reasonable so Cas’ first time is memorable in the right ways.

“Dean,” Castiel says impatiently. “I assure you, I know my limits, and you are nowhere near them. Now, come on.”

“Shoulda known you be a bossy bottom,” Dean jokes with a grin. Castiel rolls his eyes, opening his mouth to likely argue, when Dean adds a third finger. Instead of words Castiel lets out a puff of air, and then a groan as their magic flows between them, hot and stirring underneath their skin.

“Feeling full? Stretched?”

Castiel nods, his mouth still agape, and Dean uses his free hand to stroke his cock—just once. It sends a shiver of pleasure rippling up his spine, and he holds back a moan. “Just wait until I’m inside you, baby.” He hooks his pointer finger around, searching for the spot he personally knows well but has never explored in Cas’ body before. He knows the second he skids across Cas’ prostate, though, because his boyfriend’s legs begin to shake and he whimpers, “Dean! Dean, fuck… Oh god, right there.”

“Jesus, you’re hot.” Dean strokes himself again, clumsily since his dominant hand is buried in Cas’ hole, but it’s enough to make his self-control evaporate into thin air. He pulls his fingers out, Castiel shifting on the mattress and looking disappointed by the loss of stimulation…but once
Dean begins to lube up his cock it’s a whole different story. He stares right into Cas’ eyes as his cockhead circles his rim, still not believing that something that tight will be able to fit him, and Castiel’s eyelashes flutter as the head breaches him.

“Fuck, you weren’t kidding,” Dean says through gritted teeth. Thank god he’s got their profound bond working double-time to pour magic into Cas’ aches, because Dean’s never felt such tight, velvet heat wrapped around his cock. “Cas, you’re so tight, baby. Feel so fucking good.”

“Keep going,” Cas breathes, gasping as Dean continues to push forward, bottoming out as slowly and measured as he can.

“You okay?” Dean pants, gritting his teeth because oh god, oh god, oh god, he hasn’t topped in a long fucking time and his cock is about ready to burst. Castiel nods, sweat gathering on his brow, and Dean leans over to kiss him, frantic and needy and sloppy. He moves tentatively, a slight pull and push, and they both moan into each other’s mouths. Hearing Cas react to the way his body moves, seeing his mouth hanging open with pleasure, his eyes half-dazed and dilated with lust—it turns Dean on more than he can say. “You’re gorgeous, baby. Doing so well.”

“Dean,” Castiel rasps, hands coming around to Dean’s back and pulling hard, “please, faster, I need more, please…”

Dean thrusts again, this time more quickly and with more purpose, and Castiel shudders beneath him. Another push of his hips—Castiel swears under his breath. Dean grasps his hips tightly and goes to work, setting a pace that’s unhurried at first. They breathe through it, the feeling of skin against skin, Dean’s cock wet and pumping in and out, in and out. He folds Castiel’s legs up against his chest, thinking he’ll have a better range of motion this way, and he’s right—his first push grazes Castiel’s prostate, and the reaction is just as lively as before, full of moans and pleas and sweats. Dean wants nothing more than to make Castiel come, right the fuck now, so he picks up the speed and nails that spot—over and over again—before reaching his hand down and stroking Castiel’s hard and leaking cock, no longer just pressed between them.

“Dean—Dean—” Castiel begins to warn, but it’s unnecessary, because he comes with such an ardent cry that his back arches and his eyes are watery. Dean strokes him through the orgasm, transfixed by the look of bliss of Castiel’s face, before grabbing his hips again and returning to his breakneck speed. He could really draw it out if he wanted, but Cas has already come, and besides—he just looks so damn good lying there, taking everything that Dean is giving him, whispering sweet nothings as Dean’s orgasm begins to crest. The stimulation is almost too much, but he keeps pushing, keeps racing forward, embracing the feeling, the fire burning in his belly, and then—

“Cas, fuck, Cas,” he shouts as he comes, really fucking thankful that they’ve put a silencing charm on his apartment, because shit. That was good. He pumps Cas’ hole full of come and it feels intimate and dirty and right. Then he falls on top of him with a shaky exhale, kissing his neck lazily as he comes down.

When they finally speak again, it’s Cas who recovers first, asking softly, “Was that…was it good? For you?”

Dean chuckles into his boyfriend’s clavicle. “Dude, understatement of the fucking century.” He props himself up on his elbow, knowing he needs to pull his softening dick out and clean them up, but he has to ask a question first. “Was it good for you?”

“Understatement of the fucking century,” Castiel repeats, with a mischievous grin, and Dean laughs and kisses him again. “Thanks for using your magic to ease things along. Now I won’t be walking funny at graduation.”
The reality of their upcoming day hits Dean in the stomach, his mouth turning dry. God, lying in bed with Cas, he almost convinced himself that nothing bad can happen. That they’ll always be safe, that everyone they love will be safe, too…

“Dean?” Castiel’s fingers touch Dean cheeks, and Dean forces a thin smile.

“Come on,” he says briskly, his mind whirling, “let’s get showered, babe. It’s gonna be a long day.”

Castiel says goodbye to Dean at his apartment door with a lingering kiss. Dean has to be there an hour before the ceremony to pick up his cap and gown, and Castiel does his best to soothe the nerves he can still feel humming in Dean’s magic.

“Everything’s going to be fine, Dean. We’ve got this,” he murmurs into Dean’s shoulder, enjoying the calm that being so close brings.

Dean’s obviously not feeling the calm, though. “Do we, though? We still don’t know if you can even get through the library, let alone whether the spell you’ve created is gonna—”

Castiel interrupts him gently. “Dean, come on. We’ve been over this a hundred times. It’s going to work, or we’ll keep trying until it does.”

Dean sighs, resting his forehead against Castiel’s. “You sure you don’t want me to help cast your illusion?”

“I’m sure. The less time I have to hold it in place, the better.” Castiel smooths his thumb over Dean’s cheek.

Dean leans into his touch. “How will I know it’s you, though?”

“You really think you won’t recognize me?” Castiel asks, amused. There’s no way he could ever lose Dean in a crowd—he’s sure the same will be true when he’s in disguise.

Dean nods his head to the side, as if to say that was true enough. He looks into Castiel’s eyes again—the simmering worry is still there.

“Keep an eye out for Sam when you get there, okay? Still can’t get hold of the little bitch.”

Castiel nods. “I’ll find him. Go on, you’d better go.” He leans forward to press his lips to Dean’s, and Dean opens, licking along Castiel’s bottom lip. He pulls back with a grin. “Stop that!”

Dean lets out a little whine, but steps back. “I love you,” he says, his eyes full of a sweet hope that momentarily eclipses his nerves.

Castiel lets the bubbling joy he feels overflow into a bright pulse of his magic that travels down his arm and into Dean’s hand where they’re touching, to settle in the silver ring that he’d given Dean for his birthday—the talisman that Dean wears to keep Castiel’s magic close.

“I’m so proud of you, Dean,” he says, his voice breaking a little as he smiles through the prickling in his eyes.
Dean’s face breaks for barely a second before he takes a deep breath and says, “All right, enough with the chick flick moment. I’ll see you there.” He steps backward, squeezing Castiel’s hand before letting it drop and heading down the stairs.

Castiel swallows, not wanting to get choked up. He’s got work to do. Heading back inside his apartment, he looks around. He hadn’t wanted to get Dean involved in the casting of his illusion for a simple reason—he doesn’t want Dean to recognize him until after the danger is well and truly past and they’re out of the public eye, and if Dean doesn’t know what the illusion will look like, the less chance there is of that happening. The only trouble now is that he’s still not sure who the illusion should look like. He could just alter his hair, his face a little, but to properly maintain an illusion he needs to have a firm image in his mind—someone he knows well. Someone who definitely won’t already be at the graduation ceremony.

His mind runs through options. Gabriel, perhaps? He’s significantly shorter than Castiel, but no one there apart from Sam, Charlie, and Dorothy should know him so that won’t be a problem. But something about borrowing his brother’s face feels wrong. Gabriel might even turn up at the ceremony—he has a tendency to appear in places without warning. He sits on his couch, staring up at his bookshelves. Maybe he could use one of his friends from Oxford, although there are none he knows well enough to…

The thought hits him, and he grins. Standing up and already gathering lay magic to him, he heads into his bathroom to begin casting.

The Stanford University School of the Occult holds its commencement ceremony in one of its largest theaters, inside Archimedes Hall. It’s not a part of the campus Castiel often visits, the area mostly used by students studying the practical applications of magic in industry and science, but he admires the high arches of the foyer as he enters the building. Electric witch lights are suspended in the air, casting a dim flickering glow over the space.

He’s purposely arriving late, hoping that he won’t be noticed slipping into the back of the theater after the keynote speech is over, and thankfully he arrives just as the speaker leaves the stage to loud applause. Castiel isn’t sure who the older gentleman was, but the audience has an excited buzz about it that covers Castiel as he finds an empty seat at the back of the hall.

He hasn’t had a reason to visit this theater in the months since he started at Stanford. Gazing around at the large room with its tall windows filled with colorful stained glass, he muses that only a magical university could have stained glass that produces its own glow so that the images depicted would be seen at all times.

Professor MacLeod takes the podium and declares how proud she is of all the students who are graduating this year. Her speech is short and to-the-point, and Castiel is grateful that she’s getting on with it—his illusion is holding but he isn’t really sure how long he might be able to keep it stable for, even with Dean’s amulet around his neck lending him extra magic.

As the professor calls the name of each student, they walk across the stage to her and she bestows the attunement on them, then hands over their diploma. The ceremony and casting isn’t so different to the one that Castiel himself went through on three occasions in Oxford, once for each level of his education.
When Dean walks across to his applause, Castiel’s chest swells with pride for him. He’s worked so hard for this, and he smiles as he hears Jo’s whoop from somewhere in the crowd. He’s glad she’s made it after all—she and Ellen had been busy earlier preparing a surprise party for Dean and Charlie at the D, and he just hopes that whatever Anna and Crowley have planned for tonight can wait until later, after they’ve had a chance to celebrate.

He feels the moment of Dean’s attunement, like a sharp pain in his chest that makes him draw in a sharp breath, and a burst of warmth around him. Dean’s eyes sweep across the crowd as he descends the stairs on the other side of the stage. He grins and points two finger-guns at one of his fellow graduates, clutching his diploma in one hand—possibly Charlie. Castiel hopes Sam is with Ellen and Bobby and Jo, wherever they might be.

The rest of the graduating class are attuned and awarded, and the audience gives an enthusiastic final round of applause before Castiel’s academic colleagues parade out of the theater. The rest of the students and audience are then free to follow them out. This is the point where Castiel should really be getting the hell out of here before his illusion falters, but he can’t resist trying to find Dean in the crowd, just to see what his reaction is when he sees him.

He searches the faces in the crowd of students, and sees Dean on the far side of the theater, looking over the crowd himself with a frown on his face. Castiel begins to head over towards him, but someone jostles him from behind. He apologizes and steps away, only to have the person catch hold of his arm. “Meg?”

Castiel startles and curses internally, turning to look into a face he wasn’t expecting to see here at all. Mick Davies—a classmate and friend of his and Meg’s.

“Mick! Hey, what are you doing here?” Meg’s voice coming from his own mouth will never fail to be strange for him, but Castiel has to pull this off just long enough to get rid of Mick so that he can get away. He needs to find Dean, and quickly.

“I could ask you the same thing!” Mick says, leaning in to hug the person he thinks is Meg, and Castiel tries not to seize up with panic. Physical contact is the easiest way to detect an illusion spell, and even though in Oxford, Mick’s speciality had not been in actual spellcraft but in management, there’s still every chance he can feel that Castiel isn’t actually Meg.

“Friend of mine is graduating,” he tells Mick with a wave towards the milling students. God, had that sounded enough like her?

“Ah,” Mick nods. “I was in town on business and thought I’d come hear Cain Milton speak. Hey, are you busy now? We should catch up. I heard Castiel Novak was teaching here—have you seen him around?”

Castiel’s chest starts constricting again, but he manages to squeak out, “Uh, sure. He’s around here somewhere.” Now’s his chance. He needs to get to Dean. “Sorry, Mick, but I actually have plans. Maybe I can catch up with you back in Oxford sometime.”

He takes his leave as quickly as he can, leaving Mick looking puzzled behind him, but Dean is gone from where he was standing earlier. Castiel looks around for him in the thinning crowds, but he’s nowhere to be seen, so he hurries back out into the foyer. He’s only just turned around a large supporting pillar to head for the door when he runs into a large person standing behind it—and as Castiel looks up, he’s surprised to find that it’s Rosco, wearing his usual suit and deep scowl.

A flicker of annoyance passes across his face, but is replaced once more by his cool mask. “Watch it, lady.”
Castiel murmurs an apology and backs away, but not far enough to lose sight of Rosco in the crowded foyer. Rosco doesn’t recognize him, but the fact that he’s here means that the plan is finally going ahead. Chances are that someone has already found Dean—his best bet is to stick with Rosco, and drop his illusion somewhere out of the public eye.

Castiel watches Rosco until he slips out of the building, then he quickly follows him across campus towards the library.

Dean cranes his neck with a hand on his forehead. He’s holding his ridiculous cap in one hand, the arms of his gown billowing as he walks. The sooner he can get this dumb thing off, the better, but a few days ago Ellen threatened him within an inch of his life if he didn’t keep the getup on long enough for pictures.

“There they are,” Charlie says beside him. Dean spots the back of Ellen’s head and moves across the theater, working his way through the heavy crowd.

“You guys did it!” Jo says when they’re finally in reaching distance, and then he’s pulled into every kind of hug imaginable—a tight one from Ellen, a light squeeze from Dorothy, a somewhat awkward clap on the back from Bobby. Jo punches him on the arm in typical Jo-fashion, and everyone is congratulating him, asking to see his diploma even though it’s just a fake, empty scroll. He looks at everyone’s faces, happy to see them, but then…

“Where’s Sam?” he asks, cutting through about three different conversations. His gawky little brother is impossible to miss. Where the hell is he?

“Figured he was with Cas,” Bobby grumbles out.

“Maybe,” Dean says, though already filled with doubt. Castiel is wearing some sort of disguise, which would make it harder for them to find each other. Plus, Sam would wanna sit with their whole crew, right? “But I doubt it. And apart from a few texts, I haven’t heard from the kid in days.”

He searches the faces of his family, all who are frowning now, and it becomes obvious then—none of them have seen Sam lately, either. Dean had been too preoccupied this week with Cas and Anna and the Seal, and even though Sam’s texts insisted that he’s fine, just busy, Dean should’ve followed his big brother instincts days ago. If something has happened to Sam after everything they’ve been through, he’ll never forgive himself.

“Maybe finals just kicked his ass,” Charlie suggests hopefully.

“Enough to miss Dean’s graduation? No way—” Jo begins.

“We don’t know that he’s not here,” Ellen interrupts in a firm voice, as if she can feel the tension begin to mount. “Has anyone called him?”

“Rinin’ now,” Bobby says, an ancient flip phone pressed to his ear. After a few moments, he shakes his head. “Nothing. Mailbox’s full.”

“Shit,” Dean says sharply, gripping his diploma so tightly the paper begins to bend. “We gotta go look for him.”
“I’ll go back to the D and see if he shows up,” Ellen volunteers, and Dean’s eyes wrinkle in confusion, so she adds, “He knew we were throwing you two a surprise graduation party at the bar. **Surprise**, by the way.”

“Wow.” Dean huffs out a breath, hands on his hips. “Thanks, Ellen. Hope we make it there eventually.”

“I’ll look around campus,” Jo says.

“I can come with you,” Dorothy offers, and Jo nods appreciatively.

“I’ll go back to the magic shop,” Bobby suggests.

Everyone looks at Dean, as if expecting him to contribute a plan, so he vaguely mumbles, “I’ll follow a few leads.” Really, that just means he’s gonna call Cas and maybe send up a smoke signal to Anna or some shit, because his brother missing just before the Seal strike is suspicious as hell.

“You coming with us, babe?” Dorothy asks, pointing to herself and Jo and looking at her girlfriend questioningly.

“I’ll stick with Dean,” Charlie says, looking at him with determined eyes.

“I got it,” Dean says, trying not to sound defensive, but the last thing he needs in Charlie getting involved in all this during the eleventh hour. “Go check his dorm. Bet he’s just holed up with Ruby or something.”

“Didn’t you tell me a few days ago it was empty?” she says, eyeing him curiously. Fuck, trust Charlie and her annoyingly good memory to catch him in a lie.

“Oh yeah,” he mumbles lamely. Everyone is casting him wary glances now, but they eventually all separate, heading to their perspective spots except for Charlie, who’s rooted to his side.

“So,” she leans in, her voice a loud whisper over the crowd, “are you going to tell me what’s going on, or do I have to drag it out of you?”

“Just call Cas, tell him to get his illusioned ass over here,” he grumbles. Charlie is the only one who knows about Castiel’s on-campus suspension—not to mention his dumb plan to still show up today. Dean didn’t want to worry anyone else, but he knows Cas came to the ceremony because he felt the familiar stir of magic deep within his chest. Now that feeling is distant, gone.

“Not until you tell me what’s going on,” Charlie says insistently. “You’re obviously scared, Dean. Who do you think has Sam?”

Dean gives her a sharp glare. “I know you’re just trying to help, Char, but this ain’t the time to play Nancy Drew. The less you know, the better.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” someone says in a deep British accent behind him. Dean feels tension rising to his shoulders, his body stiff as he turns to see Crowley grinning and wearing his trademark black suit.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than crash a college graduation?” Dean demands, heat rising to his cheeks.

“Dean,” Charlie says quietly, looking between the two men with wide eyes, “who is this guy?”
Dean’s throat is dry as a bone. “You’ve seen him before. The faculty potluck at the beginning of
the year, remember?”

Recognition flitters over Charlie’s face. “You’re Doctor MacLeod’s son.”

Crowley’s smile slips minutely off his face. “In Palo Alto I’m known by much better titles, believe
me.”

“You still haven’t explained why the hell you’re here,” Dean says fiercely.

“Heard you were looking for someone, darling,” Crowley says smoothly, hands running over his
suit jacket.

Dean takes a step closer, chest to chest with Crowley. “Where’s my brother?”

“Oh, don’t worry about Sam,” Crowley says, with a casual wave of his hand.

“I’m sorry, have you met me?” Dean’s fists tighten, a wave of overwhelming power coursing
through his veins. Wow, that’s…new. He hasn’t even had time to appreciate the fact that, now that
he’s graduated, he has greater access to the elemental power of the Well. He could seriously fuck
Crowley up if he wanted, and the knowledge makes him simmer with rage. “If you hurt him, I
swear to god—”

“Come with me and you’ll see him,” Crowley says lightly, taking a step back for Dean to follow
him. His eyes land on Charlie, and he adds, “You can come too.”

“Like hell she is,” Dean barks.

Crowley gives them both a small smile. “What do they always say in those dreadful, American
action films? ‘She knows too much’?”

“She doesn’t know squat, and she’s not coming,” Dean says firmly. Charlie’s arms are crossed
beside him, her mouth agape. Crowley doesn’t look unsettled—just amused.

“Dean,” he says, a little too fondly, “I have every exit of this theater surrounded. I also have your
brother. Would you like to come with me now, and see him? Or would you rather make a scene in
front of all these people?”

As if on cue, the theater sounds louder in Dean’s ears—graduates lined up with their families
taking pictures, friends hugging, choruses of congratulations exchanged. For a fleeting moment,
Dean wonders what it would be like to be them—to have a normal life, a normal graduation day,
just his brother and his boyfriend by his side as he decides what to do with his future.

If he even has one.

He nods his head and grunts, not dignifying Crowley with a response, and they follow him out the
nearest exit. Charlie is biting her lip and sending Dean worried glances, but he tries to send her
back a reassuring smile—he’ll get her out of this. He’ll find Sam. Cas’ll come and back him up.
Anna and her coven will help them take control of the situation. Everything will be fine.
Everything will be fine.

He repeats this in his head like a mantra, an incantation, willing it to be true. But no matter how
many times he thinks it, Sam is still kidnapped and Cas is still MIA and the shit is really hitting the
fan. Cas, he thinks desperately, almost like a prayer, Cas, where are you?
What can we get you, friends? Tissues? Hugs? Anxiety meds?

So, here's the thing: our regularly scheduled Monday posting schedule is now caput. The next few chapters are going to be intense y'all, so we want to take some extra time together and make sure the climax is everything you guys deserve. The bad part of this new schedule means that we might not update for a few weeks—but the good part is, we'll very likely post more than one chapter at a time and minimize the amount of cliffhangers you have to endure. Sound fair?

It'll be worth the wait, we promise. <3
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Welcome back! Apologies for the delay, but it was much-needed—those extra few weeks really allowed us to get all our ducks in a row. We're happy to say that we've got two extra long, juicy chapters for your reading pleasure…

Aannnd away we go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel follows Rosco out the door of Archimedes Hall, the cool evening air whipping Meg's hair around his face. He's starting to struggle to hold on to the illusion, but he draws on Dean's magic as well as his own to keep it in place until he works out where Rosco is going.

Rosco doesn't go far, though, stopping just near the exit to cast his eyes around the crowd milling around outside. He puts his phone to his ear, and Castiel casts a quick charm to amplify his hearing. The buzzing of the crowd makes it difficult to make out Rosco’s words, but he hears, “Boss? That’s a negative on Novak. He’s not here.” Rosco pauses, listening. “You’ve got eyes on Winchester? Okay…”

Castiel shuffles closer, trying to hear more clearly, just as Rosco continues, “I checked on the other one. He’s okay, little more roughed-up than we specified, but he’ll live.”

He’ll live? Who on earth is he talking about? Castiel stares down at his phone, trying to look nonchalant when his guts are churning.

“Yes, boss. I’ll have them bring him to the library. Then they’ll do whatever we want. See you there.” Rosco hangs up and heads away from the crowds, along the path between buildings that leads to the library.

Castiel hesitates. On one hand, it sounds like whoever Rosco was talking to is with Dean, and Rosco had called them boss, so it has to be Crowley. How did Rosco get through Stanford’s wards?

But who the hell was the other one he’d been talking about, being roughed up? Whoever it was, they’re being brought to the library, and he’s guessing Crowley will also be taking Dean there, wherever they are at the moment. Castiel keeps his illusion up as he walks purposefully away from the crowds, at a safe distance behind Rosco.

As soon as he walks around the corner of a building away from sight of Archimedes Hall, he melts into shadows, also casting the fading spell he'd first cast to hide himself and Sam back on the night of the raid at Mana Bar. Mercifully the students heading around campus—and most importantly, Rosco himself—don't seem to have noticed him following.

As Rosco approaches the portico in front of the library entrance, Castiel moves to the wall of the building, concealing himself in a shadowed alcove. Rosco nods to someone standing near the door—Uriel. Looks like the coven are already here, but how have they all got through the wards? He’d been so surprised to see Rosco earlier that he hadn’t even considered that—had the coven finally worked out some way to get into the university?
He amplifies his hearing again so he can listen in on the two lay magicians. Should he drop the
ilusions and let them know he's here?

He watches as Rosco murmurs to Uriel, "Have you seen Novak around?"

Uriel shakes his head. "That useless mage hasn't shown his face. We'll have to move forward
without him."

Castiel nearly steps forward to reveal himself and give Uriel a piece of his mind, but what Rosco
says next stops him in his tracks. "He'll show up soon enough once we start hurting people. I'll get
the kid 'round, we'll take him in too."

Rosco puts his phone to his ear again, then steps past the library door and out of Castiel's sight.

A crunch on the path behind him makes him glance back, to see Dean walking towards him, with
Crowley and someone else. As they approach, Castiel prepares to step out of the shadows and drop
the illusions when he hesitates again, his relief giving way to dread. The other person is Charlie,
who Dean insisted they keep well away from this. There's every chance Charlie forced her way
into coming along, but Castiel still wishes she was far away from the present danger.

As the group passes his hiding spot, he stays as still as possible and keeps the fading charm as tight
as he can. Even so, Dean turns to peer right at him as he walks past, confusion clear on his face.

Don't worry, Castiel thinks, not knowing if he can hear, but hoping. I'm here. Don't react.
Something's not right about this.

Dean's brows shoot up, but he doesn't make a sound, turning instead to say to Charlie, "Stay close
to me, okay?"

So, the telepathy is working. Castiel can't help marveling at this development—is there no end to
their bond's effects?

"Dean, I'm not five. I'll be fine," Charlie replies tightly. Castiel grins. Knowing Charlie, she's
probably loving the adventure, although she does sound a little worried.

He leaves his corner to creep closer behind the little group, and finds a shadow to melt into when
Crowley stops by the door to exchange a few words with Rosco. His words are too low to hear, but
he turns to Dean and Charlie and says, "Come along. The Captain and her crew are already waiting
for us inside."

"What about Sam?" Dean says, not moving from where he stands outside the door.

"I told you," Crowley says, smooth and calm. "Don't worry about him. He'll be along."

Sam? So he wasn't with Bobby and Ellen. Had he been at the graduation at all? Castiel's worry
suddenly feels like a cold stone in his stomach. Rosco had mentioned "the other one"...

Dean still stands unmoving near the door, with Charlie shifting awkwardly beside him. Dean asks,
"What about Cas, then? Is he here already as well?"

"I hoped you'd be able to tell me that, Winchester." Crowley takes in the way Dean stands, his
arms crossed over his chest. "What, he didn't come to your little ceremony…thing? That seems
uncommonly disloyal of him."

Dean scoffs, and Castiel knows he's rolling his eyes even though Dean's back is towards him.
"Perhaps he is already down in the library with our friends? Shall we?" Crowley continues, gesturing to the library door.

*Go, Dean*, Castiel thinks at him. *I'll follow.*

*Be careful*, comes the reply. Castiel smiles grimly at Dean’s back as he says, “Fine,” and enters the library.

Charlie follows him, and Crowley hangs back to look at Rosco. “Well?”

“They’re on their way. I’ll bring him inside when they arrive.” Rosco speaks so quietly that Castiel struggles to hear him. “If Novak shows up, what do you want me to do with him?”

“Bring him in as well, of course. We need both of them.”

“Yes, boss.”

Crowley disappears after Dean and Charlie, and Rosco stands by the door, checking his phone and blocking the entrance. Castiel wonders how he can sneak past, whether it’s worth trying to find another unlocked door, when a car drives around the corner of the building and comes to a stop out the front of the library. He watches as Rosco opens the side door to drag someone out of the car—someone tall, with a long mop of hair and hands bound behind their back.

*Sam.*

It has to be Sam. The next person out of the car is undoubtedly Ruby, following after Rosco as he leads Sam to stumble into the building without resisting. Castiel watches helplessly, wondering what the hell has happened—Sam has been kidnapped? Has he been drugged or something? Ruby’s face is unreadable as she passes under the portico light.

Castiel needs to move, to get inside. He’s got to see where they’re taking Sam. He steps forward, waiting until Rosco and Ruby are inside the door before he follows, and nearly runs right into someone standing in the doorway. It’s Inias.

Without allowing himself to think twice, Castiel brushes past Inias, heading into the library. When Inias calls out, “Hey, who’re you?” Castiel doesn’t stop.

“I’m with the Captain,” he replies, not even looking back at Inias. Castiel walks further into the library, who must buy it because he lets Castiel head further into the library.

Inside, the emergency lighting is the only illumination as he makes his way across the library foyer and into the stacks. He slows down as he approaches the back wall—he can hear talking, but there’s no one between the shelves themselves. He slows when he reaches a junction in the walkway between shelves, and sees the usually closed and locked “Staff Only” door around the corner standing wide open.

The dim hallway beyond is full of people.

Anna stands at the end of the hallway, facing off with Crowley. Dean and Charlie are standing behind Anna, Dean looking beside himself with worry and Charlie more than a little terrified. Other members of the coven are gathered in the corridor—Anael, Neil and Rachel, plus Krissy, Aiden, and Seth from his own class. Who had let those kids come along?

But Sam is not down here, and neither is—
Strong arms grab him from behind, and he gasps as a large elbow hooks around his throat.

“Rosco?” Crowley calls from the other end of the hall. “Who is it?”

Dean squints towards Castiel and says, his voice full of disbelief, “Meg?”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Dean can’t seem to keep the disdain out of his voice, because, seriously? What else could possibly go wrong? At least Cas is running around somewhere nearby, probably concealed underneath a powerful fading charm, because Dean can feel his presence as steady as a heartbeat.

Meg is struggling under Rosco’s grasp, brown hair swinging in front of her face. She’s wearing a bright blue dress, unusual for someone who, from what Dean has seen of her, usually favors black leather and tank tops. She says in a stilted voice, “I’m not sure restraining me is quite necessary.”

Charlie is still next to him, and every instinct in Dean’s body is begging him to cast some sort of distraction spell so his friend can get away safely. But based on the stubborn look her face, he doubts she would leave him—even if he did risk his neck to give her an escape window. Most concerning, though, is the lack of Sam he spots in this hallway—there’s a few coven members, and Crowley and Rosco and some goons. There’s even Krissy and the other kids, probably invited as a way to keep Dean and Cas in line.

But no Sam.

“Who are you?” Rosco asks pointedly, but Meg remains silent, so he casts his question on Dean. “Who is she?”

“Uh…” Dean clears his throat, wishing he’d kept his mouth shut. He doesn’t particularly like Meg or know why she’s here, but he doesn’t think Cas would want her to become collateral damage. He has no idea how to respond to Rosco, and he’s worried Crowley’s going to force him into it somehow. But he’s worrying for nothing, because Crowley has pulled his cell phone from his pocket and is scrolling through his text messages. He doesn’t even look concerned about Meg, or Dean for that matter, and mutters, “Sort this out, Rosco. Do whatever’s necessary. Something has come to my attention that I must see to.”

He turns a shiny black dress shoe in the opposite direction, a hoard of intimidating lay magicians following him, but Anna calls, “Where are you going, Fergus?”

It’s a total boss move to call Crowley by his first name, in Dean’s opinion, and despite their current circumstances, he feels proud to be friends with someone like Anna.

“Nothing, my dear Captain. Just minor housekeeping before we can begin.” Crowley’s voice is oily and sweet and entirely suspicious.

“Might some of my coven be of assistance?” Anna asks, matching Crowley’s tone but coming off way more sarcastic.

“I’ll join them,” someone says, leaned against a stretch of wall, and…great. Uriel. Dean doesn’t fully trust that guy and never has—he seems to be of the “to make an omelette you gotta break a
few eggs” school of thinking—but he’s not sure if Anna shares his concerns. She nods in Uriel’s
direction, though her lips tighten slightly, and that’s enough of a confirmation to Dean that she’s
not fully on-board with this, either. But she can’t exactly admit to not trusting one of her own
magicians, not this late in the game.

“I’ll come along, too,” Anael says lightly, as if they’re going for a beer run. Dean relaxes minutely
—he trusts Anael a thousand percent more than freaking Uriel—and the three of them head down
the hallway and towards the backroom. What they’re about to get up to is anyone’s guess, but
Dean suspects it might have something to do with Sam.

Which means he needs to get away from Rosco right the fuck now.

“We’ll just…see if they need some extra hands,” Dean mumbles, grabbing Charlie by the sleeve
and tugging on her to follow. And hey, while they’re at it, maybe he can even insist that Charlie
transport herself somewhere safe.

“Stay where you’re at,” Rosco says sharply, still clutching Meg in his arms. “You’re not going
anywhere until you tell me who this woman is.”

“He doesn’t have to tell you anything,” Meg says angrily, sounding way more protective of Dean
than she has any right to be. Dean raises his eyebrows, surprised. He still feels Cas near him, can
feel his boyfriend skirting around the edge of his consciousness, trying to reach out. But his head is
full of too much information, too much worry. He tries concentrating again, following that echo in
his head that feels welcoming and calm, like a hand cupping his cheek, and then he hears—

It’s me.

“Sounds like you have yourself a new girlfriend, Winchester,” Rosco says with a smirk, grinning in
the dim light. Dean only stares at him blankly, too preoccupied trying to decipher Cas’ latest
message. Dean, I’m looking right at you!

“Huh? Oh, uh, whatever. She wishes,” he mutters, searching the area for signs of his covert
boyfriend. He prays for probably the thousandth time that Cas would show himself already. This is
like playing a high-stakes version of Where’s Waldo.

“Stop skirting the truth and just tell me,” Rosco growls impatiently.

“Listen, she’s no one, okay?” Dean snaps. “A friend of a friend. She wandered in here on her own,
probably by accident. Just let her go.”

Instead of the expected attitude from Rosco, it’s Meg who glares at him this time. “Seriously,
Dean?” she says, exasperated, sounding so much like—

Cas?

There’s a beat of silence in his head, then: Took you long enough.

“Oh, shit,” Dean says with exhale. The reality of their situation dawns on him suddenly, and
despite all the present danger they’re in, he chuckles. Anna looks at him curiously, Charlie peers
up at him like he’s lost his mind, but Dean doesn’t pay either of them attention. He centers in on
the energy in the center of his chest, the bond that’s tethering him to Cas’ essence, and asks—Why
the fuck are you wearing your ex-girlfriend like a prom dress?

Meg—no, fuck, Cas with Meg illusioned over him—shifts from foot to foot, looking guilty.
“Okay, somebody better start talking,” Rosco barks, tightening his grip on Meg-Cas. The realization that that’s his boyfriend being manhandled makes Dean insides fill with rage.

“Get the fuck off of hi—her!” he shouts, taking a sudden step forward and invading Rosco’s personal space. He looks intimidated for a split second before putting back on his cocky facade, and Dean feels Charlie’s hand on his shoulders, urging him to back off. But no way that’s gonna happen, not while Cas needs him. “I said,” he says slowly, staring Rosco in the eye with an unwavering glare, “let her go.”

Dean sees it for a moment, the flicker of doubt on Rosco’s face. Then he loosens his hold and finally pushes Cas away harshly, Meg’s petite hands resting on Dean’s chest. It’s bizarre, looking down at Castiel—suddenly a whopping eight inches shorter than him, and wearing his ex’s face. But then they’re hugging, holding each other fiercely, the bond surging between them with a fervor that makes Dean gasp.

“Thank god you’re okay,” he mutters, squeezing Cas tighter.

“Dean,” Charlie says cautiously, sounding like she might spook either of them by interrupting. “When did you and Meg get so, um…close?”

It occurs to Dean how weird this must look, how unsettling for his friends. The person in front of him feels like Cas, but looks like Meg… “Uh, no offense babe, but I’d really like you to be you again.”

“I would be offended if you didn’t,” Meg-Cas says with a small smile, and then the illusion flickers once, twice, before the spell fades and Cas’ body is in his arms again. Dean half expected him to be wearing Meg’s short little floral dress—if that isn’t a pretty mental image—but it was only illusion magic, not an actual transformation spell. Cas is in the same clothes he was wearing this afternoon—a comfortable pair of jeans and his maroon hoodie.

“Hey you,” Dean mumbles, rubbing Castiel’s arms and adjusting the zipper of his hoodie to keep him warm. “Been missing you. Or, uh, your face I guess.”

“What…the hell just happened,” Charlie says, eyes wide, staring at them like her mind is on the verge of collapsing.

“Castiel,” Rosco says reproachfully. “I would say ‘nice of you to join us,’ but turns out you’ve been here all along.”

“Yes, I heard you were looking for me,” Castiel replies, a little tersely, and Dean wonders what Cas has witnessed up until this point. Will they even get a chance to fill each other in—not to mention Anna and Charlie and the coven—without Rosco eavesdropping?

“Mages and their theatrics,” Neil mutters darkly, rolling his eyes.

“Castiel wasn’t allowed on campus, so the illusion was necessary for him to attend graduation,” Anna explains, her voice measured.

“Cool,” Krissy says with an appreciative nod, and Dean frowns, wondering what sort of example they’re setting for the younger generation. Though, to be honest, that’s the last of his freaking problems today.

“Yeah, well…” Neil crosses his arms against his chest, looking bored. “Can we get started now?
Where are the others?"

“I’d like to know the same thing.” Dean looks over Cas’ shoulder, dropping a sideways glare at Rosco. “Like where my brother is. Pretty sure he’s been missing for days.”

Rosco doesn’t even flinch, but Cas goes slack jawed—as if something’s dawned on him.

“Dean, he’s here! I saw him right before Rosco grabbed me. Ruby was with him, but he didn’t look —” Castiel’s eyes go wide. “Whatever was going on didn’t look voluntary to me.”

“Where they’d go?” Dean demands, heart pounding in his ears, not believing he can even manage to form words at this point.

“They were walking around the library, heading towards the front entrance,” Castiel says in a rush. That’s all he manages to get out before Dean is running, Castiel a half-step behind him. Getting with the program quickly, Charlie and the Anna and the coven follow behind. Rosco is shouting at them, telling them to stay here and wait for Crowley’s permission, but Dean’s panic is overruling all his other senses. Part of him wishes Rosco would try and stop him. He’d really like to knock that guy on his ass.

He’s not sure how to navigate this part of the library, so he lets Castiel take the lead, following him down a twisted hallway. They’re taking an unfamiliar route—all they seem to be passing are a bunch of librarians’ offices, a wing of the library Dean’s never spent much time in. As worried as he is, Dean is soothed just by the reminder that Cas is ahead of him, near him, with him to see this thing through.

“Did he seem okay?” Dean says through gritted teeth.

“Depends on your definition of ‘okay,’” Castiel says vaguely. He waves a hand and the door doubles fly open.

“Not hurt,” Dean spits out, fear and rage and adrenaline pumping through him. “Did he look hurt?”

“I couldn’t tell,” Cas says with a deep frown. “He was walking, at the very least. His hands were tied. He looked sluggish…maybe drugged.”

*Jesus Christ.*

“They’re gonna regret this,” Dean growls, blood pumping, wondering if it’s possible to feel your blood pressure rise. He gets the sense that they’re close, especially when they head down a narrow staircase and enter the back section of the main library floor. It’s surreal, passing stacks where he’s made out with Cas, so carefree and recklessly in love… And now he’s running through the aisles, searching for his missing brother and praying they’re not too late.

Charlie spots them first, and shouts, “Over there!”

Apparently Crowley and company had pushed the tables aside, the chairs strewn haphazardly around the room. They’re standing in front of the red wooden door, the door guarding the Seal. There’s a sigil painted on the floor in a violent shade of red, and Sam is on his knees, head slumped down. Crowley is standing above him, a knife twirling around his hand. Uriel and Crowley’s other lay magicians are standing outside the circle and watching intently. Anael is squished between two guys, looking like she’s been held at bay for a while now. There’s a short brunette standing near the exit, and it takes every shred of self-control Dean has not to throttle Ruby where she stands.

He has bigger fish to fry.
“Crowley!” Dean shouts, already casting a charm to propel Crowley against the wall—but the sigil is strong and protects them from the outside, the spell bouncing off the walls and making Dean falter. He gets his footing again and grits his teeth, hands in fists the closer he gets to the sigil. “Look at me, you son of a bitch.”

Crowley spins around dramatically, waving the knife around as he speaks. “Hi honey, you’re home. Was wondering when you’d join us.”

“Let him go, now,” Dean demands.

“Nice to see you, Castiel. Was worried you might miss all the fun,” Crowley says with a grin, ignoring Dean’s demands.

“What’s the meaning of this, Crowley?” Castiel’s voice is a deadly rumble, a threat imbedded in his tone. “Why are you targeting Sam?”

“Sam, Sam, Sam,” Crowley mocks, tilting his head back and forth animatedly. “Why is everyone so obsessed with the moose? Is it the hair?” He points the knife down at Sam’s scalp then trails it down, flipping the hair out of Sam’s face. Dean honest to god growls, the image of a knife touching his brother’s head making him feel downright murderous. Castiel wraps a hand around his arm and shoulder, steadying him.

“Yes, must be the hair. I’ve been with him for days, and haven’t found anything else remotely interesting about him,” Crowley says with a sigh.

“Enough, Fergus,” Anna says crossly, switching easily into her Captain persona and dripping with command. “What could you possibly need him for?” She blinks, looking at the sigil, the knife, and then back up at Crowley’s face. “We’re not even at the Seal yet… Why do you need his blood?”

Crowley claps his hands together, careful of the knife. “Thank you, Captain. I knew I could trust you to ask the right questions.” He paces around the sigil, adjusting the cuffs of his suit. “Sam will be fine. We’re just halfway through a simple bond spell—nothing like you two, of course.” Crowley waves the knife in Dean and Cas’ direction. “I’m not ready for that level of commitment—you two are up each other’s arses, literally, I’m sure. This thing between Sam and I is just a physical bond, an insurance policy for yours truly.”

He steps forward, wrapping his fingers around Sam’s wrist. There’s a small bowl between them that Dean hadn’t noticed at first, and Crowley positions the knife, ready to swipe across Sam’s skin.

“Sammy!” Dean cries, feeling helpless. Even with Cas, it would take several minutes of concentrated casting to get past that protective sigil. With the spell already underway, time is a luxury they don’t have. “Do something, man! Don’t let him get your blood!”

“He’s nice and sedated, I’m afraid. Barely knows his own name.” Crowley drags the knife over, flips Sam’s wrist over, and then there’s a steady trickle of blood dripping into the bowl. Dean watches in horror as Crowley cuffs the sleeve of his suit jacket and cuts himself, their blood dripping and mixing together. “I do hate getting my hands dirty, but it seemed necessary today.”

“What…” Dean swallows, his throat unmeasurably dry. “Why are you doing this?”

“I needed to ensure that I make it out of this thing alive,” Crowley says breezily. “You and Castiel could take me out with the snap of your fingers, couldn’t you? But you wouldn’t dare if my life was tied to your baby brother’s.”
“This wasn’t the plan,” Anna says fiercely, her voice shaking. “You don’t have to use intimidation and fear tactics—we’re on the same team.”

“You can drop the whole, ‘enemy of my enemy is my friend’ bit. It’s a bit tired, darling. We both know we’re nothing to each other but a means to an end.” Crowley pulls a handkerchief from his pocket, putting pressure on his cut. “You’re all being very dramatic about this. I haven’t killed anyone, for god’s sake.”

“You kidnapped Sam, drugged him, and forced him to do a spell with you!” Dean spits out, fury coursing through him like fire. “If you think Cas’n me are doing the spell now, you’ve got another fucking thing coming.”

“Dean,” Crowley sighs, disappointment written all over his face. “Do you think Sam is the only loved one I have under my thumb? There’s Charlie, of course, who so eagerly accepted the role of hostage. But there’s also a bar full of others—Jo, Ash, Garth. Ellen, who’s like a mother to you, and Bobby, who’s like a father to you. I’ve got marks on them all. You refuse me now, and graduation day will be the day everyone you love dies.”

A cold sense of despair overwhelms Dean. He has trouble breathing, every gasp seeming too shallow, too quick. “Don’t you lay a fucking finger on them, I swear to god—”

“Follow my orders and I won’t have to,” Crowley interrupts cheerily. Then he stoops down, almost eye-level with Sam, and begins casting. Dean didn’t even know the lawyer had magic, not really, but he supposes it makes sense—Crowley was rejected by Stanford and his ego suffered, so he’s been an overcompensating asshole of a lay magician ever since. His casting is sloppy and his hands are fumbling, and it takes him longer than it should, but eventually the sigil glows a brighter shade of red before fading into black. Dean can feel the magic burning in the air, the feeling of a spell being cast.

Once it’s finished Sam slumps over, passed out cold, and Dean can’t stop himself from calling out his name. He runs to his brother, kneeling in his graduation gown, touching his sweaty forehead and slack face.

“Sam? Sam!” he shouts, shaking him by the shoulder. In the corner of his eye, he sees Castiel stoop beside him. “What can we do? Know any spells?"

Castiel frowns, his eyes narrowed as he thinks, but Crowley speaks above them.

“Oh, Rosco, there you are. Nice job, keeping them busy,” he says dryly. He looks down at Sam, Dean, and Cas with weary disdain. “He’s fine, let him sleep. My boys will guard him while we navigate the inner workings of the Seal. He should wake up eventually.”

Dean stands to his feet like he’s been prodded with a hot poker. “Fuck you. If you think I’m leaving Sam like this so I can go do your bidding, then you can kiss my ass.”

Crowley opens his mouth, as if he intends to reply, but Castiel interrupts with sudden urgence, “Dean, forget about him for a moment—I think I can draw the poison out. The drugs have the same energy as an overdose of lay magic, though there’s a medical element that’s a bit trickier to correct—”

“What’d you need from me?” Dean interrupts urgently, kneeling again, eyes locked on Cas’.

“Just touch me, it’ll be easier if I can channel you directly,” Cas whispers, already staring down at his hands in concentration. Dean obliges instantly, wrapping his arms around Castiel from behind,
watching his boyfriend’s hands as they maneuver quickly over Sam’s passed out body. Dean grasps him so tightly, he can feel Cas’ chest rising and falling against him, their breaths beginning to synchronize. Steadily, color returns to Sam’s cheeks, then his eyelids are moving and his legs are restless. When he finally opens his eyes, Castiel drops his hands and slumps down a little, momentarily drained. Dean drops his hold and scoots over to Sam, smiling in relief as he helps his brother sit up.

“Dean,” Sam says gratefully, “Cas…”

“Sammy,” Dean sighs, clapping his hand on Sam’s shoulder and squeezing. “Fuck, man, you scared us. You okay?”

Sam nods, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Pretty sure they’ve had me for days. Crowley is—”

“A big ol’ bag of dicks? Yeah, we got the memo.” Dean stands up and Castiel follows, both of them offering Sam a hand and helping him to his feet. Sam straightens out his days-old clothes, looking from Anna to the coven to Crowley to the goons, eyes finally settling on Ruby.

“You set me up,” he says bitterly, the deep betrayal in his voice making Dean gape. His brother is a freaking genius—how did he not see this coming? “You manipulative bitch.”

“Manipulative is kinda in the job description,” she answers noncommittally, and falls silent. They stare at each other, Sam’s hands in fists at his side, jaw shut tight.

“Young love…so fickle,” Crowley says with a sympathetic head shake. “Well, shall we get on with it then? Having access to the sliver of elemental magic that sweet undergrad Sam has is making me feel all…jittery.”

Great, Dean thinks with a pang of panic, now Crowley can use the bond to access the Well through Sam. It’s only a small fraction of the magic since Sam is only a junior, but still—awesome.

When no one else answers him, Anna crosses her arms and says, “Which part, exactly? You seem to have left me out of your plans, Fergus.”

“Apologies, dear, but what’s one little secret for people like us?” He shrugs, as if it can’t be helped. Rosco is beside him, gathering the knife and bowl and erasing the sigil from the floor. “We’re magicians—we can’t afford to trust.”

Dean snorts, unzipping his graduation gown and abandoning it on the floor. Charlie follows suit, and though they’re both still in formal wear, at least Dean can roll up his sleeves and have more mobility. He’s already fantasizing about the day Crowley’s bond to Sam evaporates and him and Cas can roast the son of bitch like a hunk of barbecue. He’s thankful that Sam is back on his feet, but he’ll never forget how Crowley put his brother in jeopardy for his own gain. As much as Dean wants to advocate for the lay magicians, the last person on the planet he wants to help right now is Crowley.

Anna is checking her watch though, and it occurs to Dean that they might be on some sort of timeline. “He’s right, we should go. Castiel taught us the correct spell, so the coven and I can take the lead.”

“When did…” Dean lets his question fade into the air, not wanting to draw Crowley’s attention. He looks over at Cas instead and thinks: Did you teach them the spell?

No. And even if I tried, access through the wards is complicated. Castiel’s face looks grim, hands fidgeting with his back pockets. She must have someone else from Stanford helping her.
Anna drops her hand from her watch, lips pressed together, looking determined. She and her coven begin the spell, but it’s completely different from the one Dean watched Cas do so many times over the past few months. It’s much shorter, too, as if they have special access—because it’s barely a handful of minutes before the door is creaking open, the hinges still squeaky, a foreboding sound that sets Dean’s teeth on edge.

Everything is about to change. God, what he wouldn’t give to put Charlie and Sam on a spaceship headed to fucking space right about now. Anything, really, over letting Crowley drag them into the eye of the storm.

“Gather up the troops,” Crowley says casually into the air. He looks over at Castiel and Dean with raised eyebrows, and nudges his head forward in a you two first motion. “It’s now or never.”

Castiel opens the door at the end of the white hallway, casting a nervous glance back over his shoulder at Dean just behind him. So far they had all, lay magicians included, walked right through whatever barriers and protections might have been in place. Castiel has no idea what deal Anna did to get the protections dropped like this, or who within the university would even allow such a thing, but so far, they’ve met no resistance at all.

Time is of the essence, though—they could find themselves overrun with enforcers at any stage, if they get wind of the incursion. He turns to speak to the lay magicians gathered in the corridor.

“Look, it’ll be easier if only a few people come into the Seal illusion—there’s not a lot of room, and I have no idea what kind of security we might awaken when we start trying to tamper with it.” He raises his eyebrows at Anna, who responds with a nod.

She gestures to members of her coven, barking out commands. “Anael, come with me. Uriel, guard this door. The rest of you, please head back up to the library and watch for trouble.”

Crowley, meanwhile, speaks quietly to Rosco, who nods, then turns to head back down the corridor, Ruby trailing after him.

Dean leans in towards Castiel, murmuring, “It’s weird being down here like this with all these people.”

Castiel gives him a brief nod. The space feels so crowded—every time they’ve been down here it’s only been the two of them.

When Castiel glances over at Dean, he’s turned to Sam. “You okay?” he says quietly.

Sam shrugs. “I’ve been better,” he says, flicking his hair out of his face. He still looks tired, drained, and the grisly red stain on his shirt reminds Castiel of the stakes here. What the hell is Crowley playing at, binding Sam in such an awful blood spell? The other night when Anna had explained things to them, she’d made it sound like both sides were more or less on the same page, but he’d been right to be suspicious—Crowley should never have been trusted. But it’s too late—they’re here now, and all they can do is go along with the plan and look for an opportunity to free Sam from the binding.

Anna and Anael step forward, and Castiel ushers them, Crowley, Sam, Charlie and Dean through the door and into the grassy field on the other side. It’s been a few weeks since he and Dean were
last inside the Seal’s maze illusion, and Castiel had forgotten how disconcerting it can be to step through a door deep inside the library, and end up in the warm sun. Thank goodness it’s a fire day, rather than the drenching rain or freezing wind.

“What’s this? Teleport?” Crowley spins around, taking in the door standing in the field, and the hill down to the start of the maze.

Anna, however, takes it in stride, gazing out over the maze, unflustered. “It’s an illusion—it’s got to be the biggest I’ve ever seen. How do we get through?”

Castiel peers into the distance over the maze, seeing the largest dragon circling around and heading in their direction. “Might like to hurry it up, Dean. We’ve been noticed.”

Dean’s gaze follows Castiel’s pointing finger and he frowns, then curses. He lifts his hands quickly, performing the unlocking spell, and rotates his hand sideways saying “Fotiá.”

The pause after Dean releases the spell is long enough that Crowley says in disbelief, “Is that it?”

Dean just smirks at him as the ground begins to shake beneath their feet, and the magic rises. Dean and Castiel have done this part enough times now that the rumbling, swirling magic that lifts them as the illusion dissolves doesn’t faze them, but the others are obviously terrified. Anna and Anael cling to each other as the magical current whines and pulls around them, and when the illusion is replaced by the blackness of the space where the Well resides, he sees that Sam has gripped Dean’s arm to steady himself as well. Sam, Crowley, Anna, and Anael wear matching looks of surprise and awe, illuminated in the glow of the Seal runes.

Anna is the first one to recover her senses. “What...what is it? The magic—it’s so loud!”

The space is actually completely silent to his ears, but Castiel gets what she means, and the others nod—the magic roars around them. The last time Castiel was in here with Dean, they’d begun to see flickering energy running over their clothes and faces, like the magic was manifesting on their skin. It had left them elated and charged, and they had gone home to have mindblowing sex afterwards. This time the energy lights all of them up, and even moves the air around physically, blowing the girls’ and Sam’s hair around and lifting their clothes as it moves around them.

Crowley moves forward, inspecting the glowing runes on the floor. The Well itself is dark and depthless as always, somehow contrasting with the black nothingness that they stand on. Castiel steps forward to put a hand on Crowley’s arm, stopping him from moving any further forward.

Crowley shrugs him off. “I’m not going to touch anything,” he says, irritated. “Get on with it. This is giving me a headache.”

Castiel turns to look at Dean, who comes forward to stand so they’re facing each other. He catches Dean’s eye, sending him a thought—*You okay?*

*No, but... Sam is okay and you’re here now.* Dean smiles tightly, still looking anxious, and Castiel’s heart flip-flops in his chest. He can’t wait until this is all over so he can kiss his boyfriend silly, but for now, he raises his hands and waits for Dean to do the same. They begin with the hand movements for their original manifestation spell—Castiel’s palms facing each other, then moving together and rotating at the wrist while his fingers interlock. He and Dean move their palms apart again and the lay magic is released, manifesting the magic above the Seal warding runes.

Their plan for this spell is simple, although the actual casting will be tricky—manifest the spell so they can study the Seal’s structure visually, then attempt to alter it to allow magic to reach
everyone, not just those attuned by Stanford. Castiel has the basics of a spell in mind based on what they’ve seen already, but he won’t know exactly what will work until they try.

The first time they’d attempted to touch the Seal warding, they’d both been blasted back into the library. Admittedly they’d been making out at the time, but subsequent tries had also proved that the warding was strong, no matter how many attempts to unlock it. They’ve based Dean's entire study of the Well on the little they could sense through the structure of the wards, and it had seemed to be different each time.

Castiel doubts the result will be any different if they try to force their way through now, but that’s just what they’re about to do. They’ve manifested the structure of the warding first, and it glows in wispy, intricate lattice all the way around the Well.

Dean steps closer to the warding, looking closely at the pattern. Before Castiel can stop him, he lifts a hand and pushes it into the structure. Castiel grabs him, expecting him to be thrown back off his feet, but he just sways in place, his hand still pushing through the warding like it’s just made of smoke.

“What…” Castiel says, aghast.

“Hey, check this out!” Dean says, turning to Castiel in wonder.

Crowley steps forward again, lifting his hand like Dean had, but when he touches the glowing structure he’s thrown backwards off his feet. He lands hard on his back, and Sam also stumbles backwards, although he keeps his feet. The sooner they can figure out a way to break that bond, the better.

Dean turns to share a wide-eyed look with Castiel. “Just me then?”

As Crowley clambers back to his feet, cursing, Castiel looks back to the Well. There’s a ledge between the warding and the edge of the black hole, and Dean steps through cautiously so that he’s standing on the other side of the warding. Castiel wonders whether he should try to go through as well, but he doesn’t want to risk being thrown out of here.

He hesitates, unsure what to do. “Can you feel the structure of the Seal, Dean?” he asks, moving closer so he can see Dean’s face, while also keeping the manifestation spell live so he can see the warding.

Dean nods, deep in concentration. He moves his palms together and apart to cast the manifestation again, alone, and another column of wispy light appears inside the warding.

Even from here, through the light already dancing in front of his eyes, Castiel can see how complex the Seal spell is—intricate patterns and weaves, interlocking and—and shifting.

"Dean?” he murmurs.

"Yeah, I see it. The patterns are changing. This is…it's like it's alive. I've never seen anything like it." Dean's voice is strained—Castiel can feel just how much Dean's magic is being battered from standing so close to the Well.

The barrier pushes against Castiel’s magic and he leans as close to Dean as he dares—the warding is strong, but he can still feel Dean’s magic through it like a beacon. He takes a deep breath and, drawing as much energy into his hand as he can, he reaches out and grabs Dean’s elbow. His forearm goes right through the warding and Dean’s magic floods into him, making him release his breath again in relief.
Dean turns to him, delighted, but his face falls when he sees Castiel stepping forwards through the barrier to join him. “Cas, no, this is too dangerous.”

“We need to cast together, Dean. Can you see how the magic is blocked?”

Dean doesn’t look convinced, but turns back to the spellwork, his eyes following the glowing lines of the manifestation. “I think so, though it keeps moving—it’s gonna be impossible to hit it.”

Castiel lets his own manifestation spell drop and picks up the casting of Dean’s. He bites his lip as the Seal structure glows brightly, and watches Dean as he brings his hands to either side of the spell column. Bringing his thumbs and fingers together in each hand, Dean twists his wrists slightly, then starts moving his hands with the shifting of the spell. He only moves for a few seconds before he drops the spell and shakes his hands out, cursing.

“It’s moving, but it’s going all in random directions—nearly impossible to keep a hold on it,” Dean says, shaking his head.

Castiel frowns. “Maybe we could slow it down, or try—”

“Could you two please hurry it up?” Crowley interrupts, looking pointedly at his watch when Castiel throws him a flat look.

When he turns his gaze back to Dean, Dean’s also giving Crowley a bitchface. Castiel says, gritting his teeth, “Let’s just try it again and I’ll try to slow things down.” He’s not exactly sure how he’s going to do that, but he’ll be damned if he won’t at least try to be useful while Dean tinkers with the Seal.

Dean centers himself and pulls his magic into his hands again. As he searches for the part of the Seal that controls the flow of magic, Castiel attempts to find some way to slow the movement of the spell. He should be able to draw some of the energy out of it—but as he pulls the energy and streams it down and away through his feet, he feels his grip on the spell slipping. There’s just too much of it, and it’s not slowing.

He glances at Dean to see him deep in concentration once again, his hands moving over the spell and following the movement. Maybe he could direct the energy towards Dean instead? He pushes his palms out towards Dean and the Seal slows suddenly, its movement now a lazy whirl instead of the chaotic dance of before.

Dean glances at him in surprise, then out at the rest of the group. Castiel follows his gaze to see Sam, Anna and Crowley staring at them, open-mouthed and unmoving.

“What did you do?” Dean asks, his gaze falling back to the Seal.

Castiel grits his teeth and holds tight to the spell. “Just do it—I don’t know how long I can hold it for!”

Dean moves his hands with the spell once again and throws a burst of fire into the middle of it. He holds the spell for just a moment longer, pausing for some reason before he drops the spell. Castiel releases his energy pull and the Seal speeds back into its frantic dance, and Castiel steps backwards, panting.

There’s a gasp from behind them, and when Castiel turns back to look at Anna, she, Anael, and Crowley are looking at their hands, flexing their fingers. Anna’s face is a mask of surprise and wonder, and Castiel smiles to see her finally come into the elemental power she should have had all along. She deserves this, more than any of them.
His smile drops again, though, when he sees that Crowley is grinning like he’s won the lottery.

“That’s it, boys, you’ve done it,” Crowley says, clapping his palms together and rubbing them with glee. “Now, if you wouldn’t mind adding a little something extra for me, that would be perfect.”

“For you? The fuck are you talking about, Crowley?” Dean asks, putting his hand on Castiel’s arm to steady himself. Castiel glances at him, worried—the spell took more out of both of them than he expected.

“Yes, for me,” Crowley says, his grin still in place. "The lay folk have had their taste, now, and I must say, it's an excellent vintage—" he pauses, sending a flurry of white sparks up when he snaps his fingers, "—but to get to it, they're going to come through me."

"No, Crowley," Anna says, starting towards him. "That wasn't part of the plan!" She gives a strangled sort of gasp as her feet leave whatever passes for a floor in this space, and Castiel is horrified to see Crowley holding her up and in place from ten feet away, his hand outstretched like a claw like he’s gripped her neck with. She moves her hands to her throat, her eyes wide and panicked.

Sam and Anael both step forward, but before either of them can touch her, Crowley holds up his other hand. "No, I don't think so. Go." He flicks his hand and Anael is flung backwards, disappearing into thin air and tossed out of the illusion completely. "Stay," he adds, and Sam abruptly stops, unable to move, and out of reach of Anna's dangling feet.

"Let her go, Crowley," Castiel says, his voice sounding more desperate than he’d like.

Crowley chuckles, sounding slightly unhinged. It’s obvious that this isn’t his first time torturing someone, and the thought fills Castiel with dread. Crowley lifts his hand and points to Anna, and a line of blood appears on her cheek. She flinches, but doesn't scream. "Oh, this is so much easier than when I had to use my own juice."

Castiel watches helplessly as Anna tries to wriggle free of his invisible grasp. Dean makes a little gasping sound from beside him, and when Castiel turns to him, Dean looks horrified. "The murders —Jess’ dad, the campus security staff. That was you?"

Castiel's stomach turns to lead. Of course—the torture, the blood...

A memory hits him—someone falling to the ground, dead—crushing sadness—their dream! No, not her…

"I've been trying to get in here for a very long time. Not my fault if no one wanted to tell me anything." He draws another line in the air, splitting Anna's skin on her arm so that blood seeps through the long sleeve of her shirt. She draws in a sharp breath this time.

"Stop hurting her!" Castiel growls. He can't let her die, not now, after all they’ve been through to get this far.

"I suggest you get a move on, then!" Crowley shouts, glaring at him.

Castiel turns to Dean, desperate. Even if they can somehow come up with a way to let Crowley grant access to the Well, he'll take magic away from everyone—it’s the exact opposite of everything they’ve been working towards all this year. For years, in Anna’s case.

But Crowley has everything over them. Anna being hurt, Sam blood-bound. Their friends at the D, in some unknown danger.
What choice do they have but to follow Crowley’s orders?

Chapter End Notes

*dramatic pause*

Go on, read the next one!
Well hello again. Shall we see how this wild ride ends?

Dean feels nauseous at the sight of blood seeping on Anna’s shirt, her red hair tossed and messy as she struggles against Crowley’s hold. *Shit, shit, shit!* He could blast Crowley on his ass right the fuck now, but what would that mean for Sam? Does their bond only work for magical blows, or would Sam feel every kick and punch Crowley experiences between now and whenever the bond is broken?

Dean’s gotta know, and quickly. It’s not like he can trust Crowley to give him a straight answer, so he does the only thing he can think of and crosses out of the protective ward, beckoning Sam to him, then reaches up and punches his brother’s bicep.

“Hey!” Sam says, flinching, but Dean’s eyes are trained on Crowley. Crowley drops his casting hand and rubs his arm in the same spot Sam is, wincing irritably.

“Well, that’s not good,” Sam mutters, mouth titled down into a deep frown. Anna slumps to the floor, hands fumbling to apply pressure to her wound. Sam looks between Dean and Cas, eyes wide. He drops his voice to a whisper and asks, “How are we supposed to stop him?”

Dean looks down at his dress shoes, now scuffed from all the activity, and tries to block out the noise around him—Sam’s questions, Anna’s panting, even Cas’ thoughts. A few minutes ago he had felt something, something unusual, when him and Cas altered the Seal. Together they had adjusted the mechanics enough to allow lay magicians access to the elemental magic, but the Well itself had felt—unstable. Unbalanced. For a moment there, when he was rooting inside the nuts and bolts of the spell’s latticework, a feeling of déjà vu had overcome him. Like he was missing something important, and only needed time to dig a little deeper to solve everything.

Time he doesn’t have.

“Haven’t you been paying attention? You *can’t* stop me,” Crowley answers, somehow hearing Sam despite his hushed tone. He glares openly at Cas and Dean. “Now get a move on. I’m not sure what would’ve given you this impression, but I am not a patient man.”

Castiel scoffs, and Dean feel his emotions wafting over through the bond. Frustration, disbelief, fear, anger. “What you’re suggesting—giving you a monopoly over the Seal—it would take days…weeks of preparations to create a spell like that,” Castiel argues, looking down at his sister with wide, worried eyes.

“Nice try, Castiel, but no dice.” Crowley produces a glowing black plasma bubble between his hands, passing it from palm to palm as he paces around the outer ward. “You two are the only people in the world who wouldn’t need days or weeks to solve this quandary. You and Winchester are experts on the Seal, your bond is more profound than a thousand-page philosophy book, and you’re uniquely motivated to do what I want.”
As if proving his point, he grasps the bubble in his hand more aggressively. It glows on the edges with electric energy, and it looks like he’s going to cast it in Anna’s direction, but changes his direction at the last moment and hurls it towards Charlie. But he’s no match for her—Charlie is a brilliant caster and a highly educated one to boot—and her reflexes are impressive as she casts a rebounding charm. It’s instinct to protect herself, Dean knows that, but he still cries out when the ball of energy hits Crowley—and by extension, Sam—right in the chest. They both stagger to the ground, clutching at the impact point, and Charlie cries, “Sam! Sam, are you okay?”

“Fine,” Sam says through gritted teeth, giving her a weak smile. Crowley gets back to his feet, brushing off his suit angrily, standing up to his full height and looking at Charlie with disdain.

“Interesting choice,” he grumbles, pulling at the cuffs of his ruffled suit jacket. “Seeing as I can inflict any manner of pain onto you that I wish, and the only thing you can risk sending my way is a friendly hug. What do you think, Red?” He sends her a wide, sardonic smile. “Shall we have a little fun? Give the boys here some motivation?”

“Just—stop!” Dean shouts, his heart pounding in his ears. “Cas’n me can’t exactly focus when you keep threatening everyone, can we? Seriously, just chill the fuck out for five minutes.”

The silence that follows is tense, heavy with significance as Crowley stares at Dean heatedly. Dean doesn’t back down, though, not even when he feels a rush of Cas’ anxiety when he brushes Dean’s hand and squeezes. After what feels like an hour-long face-off, Crowley blinks and looks away.

“Fine,” he says briskly, all business now, “you have ten minutes. If you don’t know how to give me control over the Seal by then—so I can run this archaic Well like a proper business—then someone will pay for it dearly.”

Dean exhales, his hands feeling clammy. Sam calls his name and leans in close, whispering urgently in Dean’s ear. Dean blinks, processing what his brother is saying while trying to mask his expression so Crowley doesn’t see. Then, without speaking he tugs on Castiel’s sleeve and pulls him a short distance away, casting a quick muffling charm around them for added privacy. He wishes they could pool resources and talk things over with Charlie, Sam, and Anna, but he doesn’t want Crowley to hear what he’s about to say. Bringing everyone but him over would look too suspicious.

“Okay, so—” Castiel begins, his eyes focused and peering straight ahead. But Dean interrupts him.

“How do we break that bond?” he hisses, hands moving as he speaks. Castiel’s eyebrows shoot up, surprised.

“You… you want to break the bond between Sam and Crowley, instead of giving him control of the Seal?”

“Don’t you?” Dean retorts, pumped full of adrenaline. “If we break that bond now, it solves all our problems. We can tell Crowley to go fuck himself, he doesn’t get to charge people money to access the Well like some creepy ass bouncer, and if we need to, well, we can…” Kill him hangs on the edge of Dean’s lips, but he can’t make himself say the words. Crowley deserves it, that much is obvious. He’s a ruthless, murderous psycho scrambling for power—but is that enough to make him a monster worth killing? What gives Dean or Cas the right to make that kind of decision?

“It’s too risky,” Castiel says with a deep frown. “That spell—it’s old magic, rare. The countercurse is probably locked away in Crowley’s library somewhere.”

“Cas, you literally write spells,” Dean says impatiently. “Write your own!”
“Dean, it’s not that easy—"

“None of this is fucking easy,” Dean huffs, hands in fists at his side. “Either we make Crowley the goddamn king of magic, or we try and stand up to him—"

“And risk your brother’s life in the process?” Castiel retorts, his tone turning incredulous. That stops Dean dead in his tracks, and he takes a step back, sighing into his hands.

“Fuck, no, I wouldn’t…we couldn’t…” He removes his hands, his eyes blinking, moisture slipping out the corners of his eyes. “I couldn’t risk that, not even to save magic, Cas.”

Castiel’s hand comes to his arm, his shoulder, his cheek. “You shouldn’t have to,” he says softly. He blinks, as if he’s just remembered something. “Hey, what did Sam say to you? When he whispered to you just now?”

Dean scratches the back of his neck. “He said he got kidnapped ‘cause he broke into Crowley’s library to read the 20th Century magic book. But before Rosco caught him, he read something—something about the Well being unstable.” He scrubs a hand over his face. “He said we need to be really careful.”

Castiel nods somberly. “I’m thinking the same thing. Earlier, the spellwork felt too…fragile.”

Dean groans in irritation, his head pounding around his temples. “Cool, so we’re just gonna hand Crowley exclusive access to a flimsy fucking Well that contains every ounce of elemental magic we got. Awesome.”

Castiel comes forward, hands wrapping around his back. “If Crowley wins now, that doesn’t mean he wins forever. We write a spell for him, we give him the power, but then, once the bond with Sam is broken, we gather our strength again and—”

“And take him on when he’s hopped up on magic?” Dean says skeptically, nerves returning to his stomach with a vengeance. “He wouldn’t let us access a drop of it.”

“We don’t need it anyways,” Castiel says dismissively. “Our bond—it’s rooted in our relationship, our hearts and souls. He can never take away that power, and he’ll never be able to defeat us because of it.”

He squeezes Dean’s wrist, and Dean offers him a weak, lopsided smile. He’s really not sure if their bond is more powerful than all the elemental magic in the country—fuck if that isn’t a hugely overconfident statement for Cas to make—but he’s not sure what other choice they have. Although, there’s a nagging in the corner of his brain, something he felt earlier that he still can’t make sense of…

But they’re running out of time, so they set to work after that—even though all of Dean’s instincts are telling him this is the wrong call. He doesn’t know much, but he’s watched enough Scooby Doo to know that you don’t give the bad guy what he’s after. You don’t let him win. But life isn’t a cartoon—the threat here is real and everyone they love is in danger.

“So, what do we do?” Dean asks Cas, watching him intently. Even though they’re in dire circumstances, he can’t help but notice the way Cas’ eyelashes flutter against his cheek, how he bites his lip, how he tilts his head. He loves everything about this man, and if he had to pick someone to try and make the impossible possible, he’d pick Cas every time.

“I was thinking that it wouldn’t be too complicated, actually,” Castiel says a bit guiltily, probably thinking about how he told Crowley it would take a lot more preparations. “When we manifested
the spell earlier, I realized it was created as a sort of road system, with access to the Well in the center.”

“And all avenues were closed off, ‘cept for Stanford’s one,” Dean tosses in, following the metaphor. Cas nods eagerly, reminiscent of the early days when he was just Dean’s enthusiastic thesis advisor. Less than a year ago they were arguing at every turn, each interaction chock full of sexual tension, while Dean was forced to reread basic texts on Euclidean geometry and Isaac Newton’s magical laws.

They’ve come so far from where they were.

“Exactly. Right now, we’ve opened all the lanes—everyone who can do magic can tap into it.” Castiel casts his eyes in the direction of the Well, peering at it nervously. “All we have to do is revert it back to the way it was, but instead of Stanford-only access, it’s…”

“Crowley-only access,” Dean finishes, focusing again and feeling sick to his stomach. There’s absolutely no part of this that doesn’t really fucking suck.

“Problem is, I don’t know how to create Crowley’s ‘road,’ for lack of a better term.” Castiel frowns, hand tucked under his chin. “The Seal spell now has two settings—Stanford or everyone—creating a third option might be tricky.”

Dean hums low in his throat, eyes cast down, thinking. “What if we channeled him? We insert his energy directly into the spell?”

Five minutes later, Dean ends up holding Crowley’s tie between his fingers, a paisley patterned in a dark shade of gray. His tie was the most personal item on Crowley, apparently, which tells Dean all he needs to know about how empty the guy’s life is.

“Dean, Cas,” Anna pleads, immobilized on the ground, “please, you don’t have to do this.”

Dean and Castiel exchange a worried glance—does Anna know something they don’t know?

“Get on with it,” Crowley interrupts irritably. “Time’s run out. If this fails, one of your favorite redheads might end up on the other end of a rather nasty spell.”

Dean glares at him, so full of hatred that his eyes begin to water.

Reluctantly they begin the spell, succinct and in unison, a little bit weaker than they were last time. The spell is manifested in front of them and glowing evanescently. Dean hates the sensation of someone else’s magic funneled itself through his body, especially someone as messed up as Crowley. He can’t pinpoint the emotions there, not like he can with Cas, but there’s a general feeling of disconcertment and uneasiness deep within his skin. He wonders if this sensation is what lay magic addicts feel when they’re going through withdrawals—like they could literally rip their own veins out and be better off for it.

“Cas,” Dean whines quietly, grasping the tie so hard his knuckles turn white, “I’m about to lose it.”

Castiel’s face is slightly sweaty and his eyes are pleading. “Hold on for another minute. We’re almost there.”

“I can feel it—his magic.” Dean grits his teeth, exhaling sharply. “It’s so fucking…dark. Like it’s tainted.”

Cas takes a step closer, pushing his body against Dean’s until their hips are aligned and their thighs
are brushing. The result of the contact is immediate—some of Crowley’s magic flows into Cas, and some of Cas’ magic follows into Dean. It’s like aloe vera soothing a sunburn and Dean sighs in relief, their hands still casting. But then he feels something else…a tug at the edge of his consciousness. There’s something within this spell that he needs to find, but can’t seem to locate, and for some reason he thinks of the amulet he gave Cas. What had they seen in that memory, back at Christmas time? His great-grandfather Henry had mentioned…a back door…an illusion over the top, a way to break it all down.

Before Dean can fully decipher his thoughts, though, the spell locks into place. The latitude and longitude lines glow a vivid white, and a coldness settles onto Dean as his access to the elemental magic is stripped from him. He gasps and falls to his knees, feeling like someone has punched him right in the gut. Eyes watering, he looks up at Cas and sees him kneeled over in a similar position, looking slack jawed and sickly.

“C’m’here,” Dean whispers, reaching his hands out and cupping Cas’ face. He kisses him, just a chaste brush of lips. The warmth of the kiss fills them, the power of the bond renewing their strength, and Castiel kisses him more insistently afterwards, the tear tracks on their cheeks smudging against each other. Finally, Dean feels like he has some clarity, some peace of mind. There is another option that they haven’t tried yet, even if it’s not a great one, and he thinks in Cas’ direction…There’s a back door to the spell, one I can access and break the Seal. I felt it.

Castiel pulls away, blue eyes blown wide with shock. If you’re right, that should be our last resort, okay? Sam said it was unstable—we have no real idea what the consequences will be. He embraces Dean again, holding him close. Dean feels much better now that he’s holding onto Cas, but even still, he feels empty and fatigued, like he just ran twelve miles on an empty stomach. He shivers, arms wrapping around Cas tighter, seeking the solace that only their bond can bring.

No one else is doing much better. He looks around and sees Charlie horizontal on the floor, gasping for air. Even Anna, who had access to elemental magic for less than twenty minutes, looks pale and drawn where she still lies on the ground. Crowley—Dean swallows when their eyes meet—Crowley is grinning more sinisterly than he ever has before.

“Thanks, boys,” he says cheerily, eyes gleaming. “You know, my original plan was to sell access to the Well at, frankly, astronomical prices. Really solidify my standing in society, show my mother what she missed out on when her snooty little school rejected me. But now that I’m the only one with all this power—” He rubs his hands together, electric sparks shooting off around them, static and electric white. “Perhaps I’ll just hang onto it.”

“Oh, Fergus,” comes a high-pitched woman’s voice, her Scottish accent slightly shrill as she steps from the shadows. Dr. MacLeod is still wearing her thick black graduation robes, frowning intensely as she walks closer to her son. Dean’s heart momentarily stops—what is she doing here? Rowena drops her hand down to Anna, and she takes it gratefully, dusting off her shoulders as she stands. She’s still bleeding though, clutching her stomach and wincing.

“What the hell is this?” Crowley snarls at his mother, looking between the two. “In cahoots with a criminal anarchist, were you?”

“Dramatic as always, aren’t you, dear?” Rowena says, her voice a light chirp. “Turns out, colluding with the leader of the resistance was still a better option than trying to talk sense into my son.” She pats Anna sweetly on the cheek. “Plus, when she mentioned she was the sister of our very own Castiel Novak, I knew the Captain would be a formidable ally.”

The color drains from Castiel’s face at the same moment Crowley’s turns beet red.
“Sister?” he shouts incredulously, practically braying. “Well, can’t say I’m not impressed. You managed to keep one thing from me, at least.”

Castiel tightens his grip in Dean’s shirt, hands balling into fists. “You’re not the only player on the board, Crowley.”

“Aren’t I though?” Crowley says giddily. “Your grand plan, your hail Mary, was my mother?”

“Excuse me, Fergus,” Rowena retorts, offended. “I’ve paved the way for your little incursion to happen! How d’you think you got past the wards? I’ve given our own Mister Winchester here special privileges to get near the Well just a few hours ago!”

Huh, Dean thinks, so that’s how we got so close to the Well when we never could before. Crowley just snorts, waving a dismissive hand in her direction as if he’s intending to ignore everything she’s just said.

“Without the Well, she’s nothing. None of you are. Except maybe Novak and Winchester, but they’re at my mercy still, because they can’t hurt me while the bond is active. I’m untouchable, unstoppable.” He grins wickedly, spreading his hands out wide. “I’ve won.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Sam steps forward then, shoulders thrown back, standing tall. His face is unreadable, a mask of internal control. “Your plan was good, I’ll give you that. You seemed to think of everything. You even kidnapped me, drugged me, forced me to bond with you. But there’s one flaw you overlooked, one that may prove fatal.”

He holds his hands apart, drawing out energy between his palms, a light glowing so bright that Dean is forced to look away. “We’re bonded now, remember? What you feel, I feel. What you can tap into, I can tap into. And right now, I’m feeling all the power you’re feeling. Only difference is, I’ve been taught by the very best—I know what to do with it.” He steps right into Crowley’s personal space, crowding against his shoulder. “You never did worry much about me, did you, Crowley? Just kept me distracted with Ruby while you spent all your time fixated on Dean.” He smiles, a shiver running down Dean’s back as he gapes at his brother. “Big mistake.”

Castiel gets to his feet, his knees shaky as he hauls Dean up beside him. He attempts to catch his breath as he surveys the standoff.

In front of him, across the Well and outside of the protective warding, Sam is squaring up with Crowley. Anna, Charlie, and Dr. MacLeod watch from a short distance away, Anna swaying on her feet and holding one arm to her stomach. While Charlie looks terrified, Dr. MacLeod looks mostly confused—Castiel is desperate to find out exactly what her connection to Anna is, but he remembers Anna saying something a few days ago in that orchard about “protections no longer being an issue.” If Rowena has been easing their way, it explains how they got onto campus in the first place, not to mention into the library.

He has only moments to gape before Sam draws the energy between his hands into one ball, and fires it at Crowley. The lightning ball flies across the dark space, narrowly missing Crowley as he dodges sideways, disbelief on his face. Crowley asks, “What’re you doing, you daft idiot?” just as Dean shouts, “Sam, no!” Castiel grabs his sleeve to hold him back, as Sam fires up another energy ball.
Dean looks down at where Castiel’s hand is gripping him. “Let go of me! He’s gonna get himself killed!”

Castiel doesn’t release him. “Look at him, Dean. Does he look like you’re going to be able to stop him?”

Dean stops struggling and watches as Sam throws the second energy ball at Crowley. This time, Crowley powers up an elemental shield and blasts the attack away, making a burst of sparks fly out and shower around him.

How Crowley even knows these battle magic spells is news to Castiel—they’ve never included offensive spells in his training, but that doesn’t mean someone else in their group hasn’t been teaching the lay magicians. How has Crowley been able to keep his magic undetectable for so long?

Dean pulls his arm away from Castiel as he moves back towards the edge of the Well.

“Come on, Cas. We’ve gotta do something,” he says, lifting his hands back into position around the edge of where they’d visualized the Seal spell.

Castiel glances back towards where Anna was standing, only to see her slumped over on the dark floor. His heart aches for her, but Charlie is crouched over her, and he’s sure she’ll try to help if she can.

Rowena strides towards where Crowley and Sam are standing, her robes billowing around her.

“Fergus?” she calls, shrill and self-assured. “Stop that right now. You’re going to get someone killed.”

Castiel turns quickly back to Dean. “Now’s our chance. While he’s busy.”

“That’s kind of the point, Mother,” Crowley replies through gritted teeth as he blocks another assault from Sam. “It’s my turn now. Step aside.”

Dean begins casting once again, but a shout in the background distracts Castiel’s attention away as Sam takes a blow to his arm, leaving it hanging limply at his side. Crowley is likewise affected, panting heavily as he cradles his broken arm in his other hand. “Stop, Sam. You can’t best me.”

Castiel turns back to Dean, urgently sending a thought to him, Can we shut it off completely? We’ve got to stop him. He joins his casting to Dean’s, their joint casting sending a rush and thrill along their bond once again. He attempts to slow the movement of the Seal as he did earlier, but it’s spinning faster than ever now, and the powerful stream directed at both Sam and Crowley is overpowering.

Dean grits his teeth under the strain. More shouts in the background go ignored as Castiel focuses on the Seal structure itself, trying to quickly work out how he might insert something over it to block the magic, but whatever he tries to insert, it’s blown away by the powerful energy blasting out of the focused Well.

“Stop, stop,” Dean pants, “It’s no use. We can’t stop it.” He releases his hold, and Castiel allows time to speed up again. We’ll have to break it. Dean’s thought is resigned, and Castiel looks to him, a questioning brow raised as he tries to regain his breath. He can feel his energy waning again—casting like this with only lay magic is possibly more than even their combined capacity can handle.
Break what? he asks, not sure he’s going to like the answer.

The Seal, Dean replies. Activate the back door, bring it down. If we remove it, we’ll all have elemental power and we can take him down together. He glances pointedly back towards Crowley.

Castiel nods unhappily. He wonders again what exactly Sam had meant by “unstable”—but they don’t really have any other choice. They’ve got to do something to stop this. Anna still lies motionless on the ground, while Rowena and Charlie are obviously tiring from casting battle magic with their own energy. Sam and Crowley are both now limping, blood running from their noses and marking their clothes.

Dean calls forth his magic again, and Castiel joins him, slowing the spin one more time. He can sense Dean moving along the lines of the spell this time, carefully searching for something. When he finds it, he makes a quick twist of two of his fingers and closes the loop, opening Henry Winchester’s back door.

“Ouch!” Dean lets out on an explosive breath, stepping back from the edge of the Well holding his arm. A bloom of blood appears on his forearm, seeping quickly through the fabric.

A shift in the Seal spell catches Castiel’s attention back away from Dean, as it wobbles slightly in its movement. He tries to cast the manifestation spell, but only makes the Seal structure glow faintly as it moves around. As he watches, the edges start to spread, parts of it flying off to all sides, breaking the protective warding as it goes. As the spell disintegrates and fades into nothing, Castiel can feel the rush of elemental magic pouring forth again, and he finally breathes in for what feels like the first time in hours, letting the energy fill him back up.

As he turns, Crowley and Sam, along with Dr. MacLeod and Charlie, are all looking back at him in shock.

“What...what did you do?” Dr. MacLeod asks, her voice shaky.

“Seal’s gone,” Dean says with confidence. He waves a hand at Crowley, adding, “Grab him, so we can work out how to get rid of this blood bond.”

Sam shakes his head in disbelief. “No, Dean, I told you, the Well’s unstable! The Seal was the only thing holding it together!”

Dean shares a glance with Castiel, along with a stray thought, Did you hear him say that to me?

Castiel shoots back, He said it was unstable, but—

The ground, or whatever passes for the ground in this place, moves under their feet slightly.

Rowena looks around at the group as she speaks, real fear in her voice. “The Well is merely a great container, put in place at the foundation of Stanford. If it collapses, all the arcane energy stored here will escape out, obliterating anything in its path. We’re all going to die.”

“Shit,” Dean remarks, and Castiel gives him a look that says Really? without him even having to send the thought.

Castiel works quickly. No time to waste—he can feel the elements agitated within the Well, already starting to rush to the open section of the container. If he can just work out some spell quickly that can stabilize it, they might still be able to save the Well and its contents.

Meanwhile he can hear Dean shouting at Sam in the background. “Why didn’t you say that earlier?
That might have been helpful!”

“I did say that earlier, Dean! I’ve been trying to stop you from doing that all along—”

Crowley’s voice barks over the top of the brothers’ argument, “If you would just stop bickering, let’s work out how we can get out of here!”

“No, we can fix it,” Castiel says. He tries to hold his panic at bay as he moves his hands quickly, weaving a large Delambre container of his own. He pours as much elemental magic into it as he can, along with his own energy without thinking twice. “Dean, I need you to take a look at the Well’s structure, tell me where it needs patching.” When Dean doesn’t move right away, he adds, “Now!”

Dean springs into action, casting a manifestation spell and sending it down the Well, lighting up the container as it goes. Castiel holds his new patch tightly compressed, ready to expand it where it’s needed, but Dean only shakes his head.

“I think it’s too late,” he says, looking up with wild eyes. “The container—it’s already breaking.”

The magic rises steadily from the Well now, almost painful in its rushing past where he and Dean stand. The flow is beginning to have physical effects now, pushing at their hair and clothes and shaking the floor under their feet.

“Well that’s fucking perfect, isn’t it?” Crowley says. “Thanks a lot, you useless pair of—”

“Oh, shut up, Fergus,” Dr. MacLeod says, turning her attention to Castiel. “What can we do?”

Castiel looks down at Dean’s manifestation spell, now fading out deep within the lightless black of the Well. “If we let this go, let the energy explode out, it’s going to blow a hole in the university, isn’t it?”

Dr. MacLeod nods, her eyes turned down towards the Well. “Yes, probably. Can you contain it?”

Castiel raises his eyes to Dr. MacLeod. He wants to say yes, he and Dean can contain it, hold the arcane container closed until a new Seal can be constructed, but there’s just so much of it. If it goes wrong, they’ll blow up the library in any case. He turns to Dean, who’s watching him with a wide-eyed worry.

Whatever you need, I’m here, Dean silently assures him, which makes Castiel smile. He’s grateful Dean is here with him, even as he wishes he was far away and safe.

“You should all get out while you can—teleport far away,” he says, still looking at Dean. “There’s about to be a lot of magical fallout in here.”

“No chance. I’m staying,” Dean says, and the sentiment is echoed from around the group.

Right, all in this together, then. He nods at each of them in thanks. They’re not going to be able to prevent the energy from escaping, but perhaps they can redirect it away from the library. If they manage to scatter the energy from the Well, there’s a good chance they’ll absorb so much of the scattered energy that they’ll all burn to ash anyway. He desperately hopes that’s not the case, with so many of his recently chosen family here, but hopefully they can get this just right and prevent a lot more people being killed by the blast.

He quickly pulls apart the container still held buzzing within his hands, altering it into something similar to the shield Crowley had used earlier. He flings his hands out, pushing the spell so that it
stretches across the Well.

Shouting to be heard above a rumbling that has up with the shaking ground, he says, “Hold on to this, please. We can’t contain it, but if we all work together, we should be able to deflect it away.”

Charlie nods at him when he looks over to her. She’s hurt, but not badly—a cut on her forehead sends a rivulet of blood down the side of her face. “I’m with you, Cas,” she says, holding her palms up to connect her magic to Castiel’s shielding spell.

Rowena joins in across the Well from Castiel, and Dean also takes a few steps away, grabbing the spell with his palms out.

Sam is the last to step forward, holding his broken arm gingerly. He reaches out his other hand, gripping the spell tightly, his teeth gritted.

“Sam, get out of here. You’re hurt!” Dean says urgently.

Sam shakes his head resolutely. “I’m staying.”

Castiel turns to look at Anna, still slumped on the floor, broken and silent. He hopes she’s all right—wishes he could go to her. But Crowley stands nearby.

“Crowley?” Castiel calls.

“No thanks, I’m not going anywhere near that thing,” Crowley barks, staying well back.

The floor makes a great juddering movement then, and Castiel is forced to turn and grip the shielding spell tightly as energy streams out of the Well and hits it. If this works, it’ll be a miracle. And if it doesn’t...he guesses he’ll never know.

Charlie cries out as the energy stream amplifies, her eyes wide with wonder. It is exhilarating, Castiel supposes. In a terrifying, world-ending kind of way.

“Shut your eyes!” he calls as the shield begins to scatter the pure energy being released by the Well. Shutting his own eyes tightly, Castiel realizes with relief that his plan is working, but he’s also absorbing way too much of the energy. It races up and down his limbs, burning through his body and making his head feel like it might explode.

Behind his eyelids, he can see upright forms, and is confused for a moment before he realizes they’re his friends standing around him—Dean a bright flame beside him, Rowena, Charlie and Sam making up the other points of the spell. Crowley stands some distance away, cowering beside a much darker form—flickering and indistinct, stretched out on the ground.

Anna—it’s Anna. And she’s fading. He can’t let that happen.

With great effort, he prises one hand away from the shield—at least, he thinks he has—he can’t seem to feel his hands anymore. He reaches out towards Anna, and sends a stream of pure energy towards her, funneling it into her still body until it starts to glow again, still not brightly, but more than she had been. He can’t tell if it was enough, though, because he grabs the shield again and holds on for dear life as the arcane energy pours out of the Well, and scatters into the world. He notices Dean is looking between Sam and Crowley, his own stream of energy blasted in their direction, and wonders what sort of spell he’s casting…but there’s no time to stop and ask.

The magic is exhilarating as it burns through him. He could just keep it—become a being of light, of pure power. It would be so easy. He turns again to Dean to see him burning just as brightly, their
bond glowing between them like a physical joining of their bright auras.

No. No, he can’t keep this—it’s burning him up from the inside. He and Dean will burn away to nothing, and he can’t let Dean be hurt. He releases the energy, forcing it away from him and into the ground, into the air.

He can’t tell if it’s him screaming, or one of the others, but eventually the light seems to burn itself out. He opens his eyes in time to see Dean slump to the floor, and he sends out a faint, Cas? Love you… before he closes his eyes.

Castiel stumbles a few steps to his side, dread heavy in his already aching limbs—Dean can’t be… he can’t be dead. He’d know, wouldn’t he? He drops to his knees beside Dean, pitching forward to lie across Dean’s chest. He barely registers the relief as the bright affirmation of their bond engulfs him, and feels the slow rise and fall of Dean’s chest before unconsciousness swallows him.

Dean blinks awake to warm, drowsy sunshine. His vision is blurry, his body heavy with sleep, and that’s probably why it takes him a full ten seconds to realize he has no clue where he is or how he left the library.

He sits up too quickly, wincing slightly at the head rush. He rubs his eyes, the room coming into focus—the cream-colored walls, the creaky staircase near the front door. It takes him a moment to recognize the space, since nearly everything has changed—the sofa is brown leather, not a tattered plaid. Everything is updated, from the furniture to the appliances, all hints of outdated eighties wallpaper stripped. If he hadn’t committed every inch of this house to memory, he might not recognize it. Sammy certainly wouldn’t. Thankfully, though, the bones of the place are exactly the same.

He’s home.

It hasn’t been home for a long time, of course. Not since Mom died in the fire and Dad drank himself into an early grave. The fact that Dean decided to return here in his subconsciousness, at the end of all things, is more depressing than nostalgic. He’s frozen on the couch, trying to process if he’s in limbo or heaven or hell.

And that’s when he spots them. The photos of Cas.

He’s standing suddenly after that, running before he can quite regain hold of his footing. He practically stumbles over to the mantle, eyes wide, seeing all the Winchester family photos are gone. No more Dean and John at a baseball game, young Mary with her sweepy blonde bangs, Sammy as a baby… Those are relics of the past now. Instead there’s Castiel and Dean, around the age they are now—smiling selfies, pictures snapped outside holiday lights, group photos taken at Sam’s college graduation. The latter which, Dean reminds himself with some amazement, hasn’t even happened yet.

But Dean doesn’t visibly pale, mouth hung open, until he sees a photo collage on the wall. Dean and Cas are both in suits, there are floral arrangements everywhere, Charlie and Jo are in fancy dresses, and Dean’s kissing Cas under an arch of beautiful greenery… Well fuck. If he’s gone and married Cas, and they’re living happily ever after in his childhood home, then Dean really has bit the bullet and taken up real estate in Heaven. Great.
He hears a creak at the bottom of the stairs and spins around eagerly, breaking into a relieved smile when he sees it’s Cas. He doesn’t even know if it’s his real Cas or just some imagined, heaven knockoff, but he’ll take any iteration of Castiel that he can get. Neither of them are wearing the clothes they wore to graduation, sporting loose jeans and t-shirts, and Dean runs to him before he can try and reign in his enthusiasm. The minute Castiel’s chest collides against with his, arms wrapping around each other tightly, Dean thinks it might actually be okay that he died. He’s not happy about it or anything, but he helped stop Crowley at the very least, and now he gets to be with Cas for eternity. In terms of afterlife situations, this is a best-case scenario.

“Missed you,” Dean sighs into Cas’ neck, kissing his neck lightly. Castiel chuckles, the rumble making Dean’s body vibrate.

“You just saw me,” Cas responds, but his hands are wandering now, fitting perfectly into the dip between Dean’s back and waist. In the corner of his eye, Dean spots a record player with a stack of Zeppelin vinyls, and he can’t help it. He laughs.

“Jesus,” he scoffs, chuckling softly, “well, if I wasn’t sure before…”

Castiel pulls away, head tilting, curious. “Sure about what?”

Dean bites his lip, eyelashes fluttering downward as he thinks. Is it against heaven rules to acknowledge that you’re in heaven? More importantly, does Dean really care? The angel squad—or whatever the hell they identify as—must’ve known what they were getting themselves into when they let him through the gates.

“Listen,” he says quietly, thumb stroking Cas’ cheek as he delivers the bad news. “I dunno if you’re like, heaven-Cas or real-Cas, but either way…this ain’t real, sweetheart. Pretty sure the Well did me in, and it sent my soul way, way upstairs, if you catch my drift.” He just hopes that everyone else was stronger than him and made it out alive. A world without Cas or Sam or Charlie is a dark-ass place to be, and puts a serious damper on this whole, heaven-europhia thing.

Castiel takes a step back until his back hits the staircase railing, eyes narrowed, lips parted. “Dean, you’re not dead.”

A spike of hope travels through him, since he naturally trusts just about every goddamn thing that drops from Cas’ mouth. But heaven-Cas would want him to believe that, right? To think that this is real? “It’s okay, Cas, I promise.”

“Dean Winchester,” Castiel says more sharply this time. “I need you to hear me. You are not dead—you’re passed out, in some sort of magic-induced exhaustion. We all are.” He swallows, taking a step forward again and wrapping his hands around Dean’s neck. “I would feel it if you were dead, believe me. But you’re not. I saw you pass out right before me…you were breathing.”

“But—” Dean exhales, looking around the living room again, the dining room in his peripheral vision. “We’re in my house. My old house in Lawrence.”

Castiel shakes his head, frowning a little, as if this revelation might be hard for Dean to swallow. “No, not really. We’re still there, in the illusion… Though perhaps it’s faltered by now, in which case, we’re in the library.” He pauses, then adds, “Or in jail. Who knows at this point.”

Dean searches Castiel’s face for any hint of a lie, but he can read his boyfriend like a fucking book at this point, and Cas—he believes every word of this. Dean can feel it.

“We’re…we’re really alive? You mean it?” His voice sounds small again, and he really, really
hopes this isn’t just heaven fucking with him.

“I mean it.” Castiel kisses him reassuringly, his cheeks, his nose and forehead. “Hopefully everyone else is, too. I’m pretty sure I healed Anna when I was flooded with elemental magic.” He pauses, looking at Dean curiously. “I think I saw you cast a spell, too…?”

“Oh, that,” Dean murmurs. “I dunno, it happened so fast. I remember wishing their stupid bond was broken, and then the magic flowed through me and it sorta…happened. Sam’s in the clear now.”

“Good thinking,” Castiel says thoughtfully, then adds, “The magic…it was overwhelming, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Dean says with a shrug, remembering the rush of power, the addictive quality to it. He’s never felt anything like it, and hopefully, he never will again. “Glad it’s all over, to be honest. Where are we now? If it’s not heaven…?”

“My educated guess is that we’re dreaming. Or I should say, you’re dreaming, and the bond let me join you.”

Dean’s palms begin to sweat. “What makes you think this is my dream?”

Castiel’s face is all amused looks now, pursed lips forming a handsome smirk. “Well, we’re in your childhood home. I woke up on a bed that’s simply a bigger version of the memory foam mattress you own now. There are stacks of your favorite books on the nightstand and records framed on the wall. There are pictures of us everywhere. And…” Castiel smiles a little, eyes gleaming with affection, and he brings his left hand to Dean’s gaze. There’s a ring on his third finger. “Well, there’s this.”

Dean’s eyes widen, his heart racing from nerves as he glances down to spot a matching ring on his own hand. Shit, what the hell does it say about him that he was calmer when he thought he was just dead? Now he has to deal with the fact that his personal equivalent of heaven is domestic bliss with Cas, and Cas knows that now?

“Oh,” Dean says, hating how his voice sounds so timid. “Uh, well…” He sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face and moaning in an unpleasant fashion. “Fuck, this is embarrassing.”

Castiel chuckles, grinning wider than Dean’s ever seen him, and kisses him on the lips. It’s a soothing brush of contact, but it’s enough that Dean leads them backwards, settling them side-by-side on the couch. “Don’t be embarrassed,” Castiel murmurs, smoothing Dean’s hair down with his hand. “Truthfully… Well, perhaps I shouldn’t mention this here—”

“Oh, hell no,” Dean interrupts firmly. “My white-picket-fence fantasy is playing out in 3-D for your own amusement. The least you can do is distract me.”

Castiel’s eyebrows shoot up as he laughs, but eventually he clears his throat, hand planted on Dean’s shoulder. “Fair enough. I was going to say, this peek behind your psyche makes the question I’ve been wanting to ask you much easier.”

Nervous fluttering fills Dean stomach. “The question being…?”

“If you’d move in with me,” Castiel says softly, fingers scratching at the base of Dean’s hairline in a way that makes him feel like a well-pet cat. “I realize everything is up in the air now—our safety, our magic, my career, even our freedom. We’ll likely wake up to utter chaos, so it seems irresponsible to even have this conversation right now, but…” His gaze intensifies, warm and
round and full of longing. “If you’ll have me, I can’t think of anything better than waking up beside you every morning.”

Dean answers him with what he considers the best method of communication—a kiss. He grips the back of the couch, swinging himself into Cas’ lap, hands rising to his hips as their kiss deepens. Cas is right, it’s totally irresponsible of them to be focusing on their relationship at a time like this…but who knows when they’ll get this opportunity again? Shit’s gone sideways, and whatever’s happening in the conscious world right now is likely not pleasant. Dean needs this—needs Cas’ hands on him and the promise of a future together.

Castiel’s hands travel from his hips to his thighs, and Dean licks his way into Cas’ mouth, moaning softly as their groins rub against each other. Dean is writhing on his lap and they’re both getting hard with every passing moment, the space filled with sounds of their breathing and denim rubbing against denim. Castiel’s grip tightens urgently, kissing him hard, fighting to take control of the kiss. He’s incredibly turned on, but it’s not until Cas moves his hand up, itching up to Dean’s erection and cupping him from outside his jeans, that Dean shudders and pulls away. Their foreheads still touching, Dean curses under his breath. “Fuck, I love you. Love you so much.”

“I love you too,” Castiel breathes, lips traveling to Dean’s neck and leaving trails of wet kisses. His hands fumble with the front button of Dean’s jeans, apparently ready to rub one out right here and now on the couch, and Dean is so totally on-board. But the light streaming in through the window grows brighter, and Dean squints and looks around, wondering if he should get up and draw the curtains. This is his dream—shouldn’t his subconscious be helping him get laid?

“Shit,” he thinks out loud with disappointing clarity, “Cas, I think I’m waking up.”

Castiel opens his mouth to respond, but he seems suddenly frozen. The last thing Dean sees is Castiel’s face—gorgeous and glowing, desire still in his eyes, lips pink and well-kissed. Then he’s overwhelmed by the sensation of falling, the light engulfing them from every angle, and he blinks, calls Cas’ name desperately, and—

The fluorescent lights of the library hang overhead. He’s lying on the floor while some emergency medical response person holds a tiny flashlight over his eyes.

“He’s responsive!” someone shouts, and he groans, feeling stiff and achy in all the worst places. And, he realizes with some embarrassment, he has a very obvious erection too. Awesome.

“Cas?” he moans weakly. His head is spinning and it’s difficult to keep his eyes open. “Sam? Charlie?”

But no one answers him. Instead, he hears a gruff voice and feels a serious-looking man squatting beside him, his mouth a hardset line. “Mister Winchester? I’m Victor Henriksen, head magical enforcer for Palo Alto. I need to ask you a few questions.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, folks, there you have it. These past two chapters were some of the most challenging and rewarding writing—not to mention plotting and brainstorming—either of us have ever done. We really do hope that it lived up to your expectations! We love all our readers oh so much, and can’t believe this epic journey of ours is almost at an
end.

On that note, there's only one chapter and an epilogue left… Then we'll say goodbye to our lovely, magical boys.

In the meantime, come drop your thoughts and reactions in the comments below. <3
Hello and welcome back! Thank you all so much for your kind words about this story—we've loved every theory, every comment, every squeal. You guys are amazing.

We originally thought we only had a final chapter left to write (and then the epilogue) but, uh, then we wrote A LOT OF WORDS and decided to split it into two chapters. Two chapters, by the way, that we're posting at the same time...because we love our readers oh so much. :)

So kick back, relax, and enjoy!

Rosco pushes Ruby against the wall outside the door to the Seal, gripping the front of her jacket in one fist.

Not ten minutes ago, he’d been guarding the door the boss had gone through, standing in a long, beige corridor deep in the library with Uriel and a few other demons he’d told to stay close. He’d been exhilarated to feel the full force of elemental magic raging through him, and then it had shut off again, just as he and Crowley had planned.

Then, the Captain’s red-headed friend had unexpectedly flown out of the room, past where he and Uriel were standing guard, landing in a heap on the floor. Uriel had rushed over to help her up, but before they could demand any information out of her, Ruby had waltzed in with the president of the damned university, who’d lifted one hand and held everyone in the corridor still as she swept past and entered the room behind Rosco, leaving the door open. When Rosco was released from her spell, the room beyond was completely empty.

Ruby, however, had stayed behind, as had the redheaded lay magician.

“What’re you playing at, Ruby?” Rosco growls.

She smirks up at him, looking way too smug for someone who just walked in here with their supposed enemy. “I’m not playing at anything. I just ran into my old friend, Doctor MacLeod—”

Rosco shoves her again, making her grunt as her head hits the wall. “Shut up. You’ve been playing us.” He grits his teeth, his patience wearing thin. There’s no way he has gone through the last nearly ten years of pain, leaving his non-magical family behind, built up Crowley’s underground Demon network and put up with Crowley’s shit for all this time, only for some little bitch to bring it all down around them.

“Hey, I’m not above saving the world if it gets me out of my exams,” Ruby says. “You don’t know how hard this has been, though.”

Rosco leaned into her, making her grunt a little. “What has? Betraying us all? I helped you, got your dad off the hook—”

“And I’m grateful for that, sure,” Ruby interrupts, “but Doctor MacLeod offered me a better deal.”
"What deal?" he growls.

Ruby flinches away from him, but shrugs a little. "Oh, guaranteed passes for my subjects, overlooking other stuff I might get up to…futureproofing." She takes in his disgusted expression. "And I’ve done my part perfectly—nobody knew, not even Sam. Yeah, I'm sure you're a little angry right now, but, I mean, come on, Rosco. Even you have to admit—I'm awesome!"

Rosco snarls, about to wind up to smack her one, when the floor moves under his feet. He looks around, startled, and Ruby slips from his grasp, backing away a few steps.

Rosco turns to glance at Uriel, who demands, “What’s that?”

Rosco shrugs, “I dunno.”

Uriel looks nonchalant but his voice drips with barely-concealed derision. “I thought you were the one with the plan, Rosco.”

Magic is rising—he feels it moving around him and through him, but instead of the pure energy he’d been filled with earlier, this is wild, out of control.

The library begins to shake so much that Rosco can hear the books falling off their shelves out in the stacks. The whole building is shuddering, and Rosco has to put one hand to the wall as pure elemental magic streams all around him.

While it feels amazing to have the energy rush by, Rosco has no idea how to capture any of it. He cowers behind one arm until it dies down, and a series of thumps and groans comes from the room behind him.

Bodies have appeared, and fallen to the cream carpet around the room. There’s Sam, his brother, and Novak, their little redheaded mage friend, and Dr. Macleod. The Boss appears to be the only one conscious, groaning on the carpet, and the other redhead magician rushes forward to kneel next to the prone body of the Captain.

The Boss sits up, looking around in a daze. His eyes eventually land on Rosco and Ruby, standing in the doorway.

“Boss? What happened?” Rosco asks. If Crowley has somehow fucked this up… He grits his teeth.

“Uh, the Well,” he says, rubbing at his head with one hand and gesturing to Novak and his fuckbuddy with the other. “Those two idiots broke the Seal so the bloody thing exploded. I honestly don’t know.”

“We had it.” Uriel has appeared at Rosco’s back, and he sounds pissed. “We had the magic for half a damn second.”

The redhead woman—what’s her name again? It doesn’t matter, he doesn’t care—speaks up angrily from where she crouches on the floor. “He tried to close off the Seal so he could sell access to it.”

Rosco nods. That part, they’d planned. But the rest? “Sure. But that doesn’t seem to have happened. Where’s our access, Crowley?”

“No, listen. It’s not my fault, it was them! We can regroup, we can—”

Rosco moves forward, looming over Crowley where he still sits on the floor. “You said you could
keep these mages under control.”

His face darkening, Crowley tries to shuffle backwards so he can get to his feet. “I did, I can! Grab them now while they’re still out and we’ll make them do it.”

Ruby’s voice comes from the doorway, sounding smug. “Enforcers are here.”

Rosco and Crowley both look over to her—they can hear footsteps and shouts out in the library floor. He grits his teeth again, but his rising temper won’t be tamed. Fuck Crowley and this whole shitshow. “It’s too late, boss.” Rosco snarls and stoops, hauling Crowley up by the front of his shirt. He turns to Uriel and the other demons standing outside the door. “Time to take out the trash, boys.”

Crowley spits out, "Everything we've worked for, and you turn on me now? How are you going to control the demons? I'm their king!"

Rosco drags Crowley closer, growling right in his face, "The demons are mine."

The other demons move forward, and they all teleport away, a protesting Crowley firmly in Rosco's grip.

Castiel opens his eyes and blinks a few times. He lifts his head just in time to see Rosco disappear from the small, beige-carpeted room in the library, several other people with him.

How are they able to teleport, he wonders lazily. They’re still in the library, aren’t they?

Dean shifts beside Castiel on the carpet and mutters his name, and Castiel breathes a sigh of relief that’s he’s okay.

A shadow moves over the two of them, and a low voice says, “Mister Winchester? I’m Victor Henriksen, head magical enforcer for Palo Alto. I need to ask you a few questions.”

Enforcers? They'd been expecting the authorities at some point, but how long had they been unconscious for? His joking comment about being in jail may not have been too far from the truth. He gathers the shreds of his energy and scowls up at the enforcer. "Leave him alone, he's done nothing wrong."

"Cas?" Dean breathes, reaching for him as the enforcer glances up at one of his colleagues.

Hands grip Castiel’s shoulders from behind and he’s pulled back, away from Dean. "No—" he begins, horrified. He can’t let them separate him and Dean now—not after everything they’ve just been through—not now that he knows what’s in Dean’s hopes, his dreams. He struggles against the hold, but when he tries to draw the elements to him, they’re distant, faint even. What have they done?

"Please stay back, Doctor Novak. It’ll be your turn next,” Victor says, then turns back to Dean. But Dean is now sitting up, staring across the room at Sam, who has just struggled to a sitting position with an enforcer standing over him. He holds his injured arm tightly to himself as the enforcer yells back into the corridor, “Can we get a medic in here?”

Castiel’s gaze travels past Sam to someone else still lying on the floor—Anna is still and quiet, but
there’s no sign of the blood on her clothes or face. Anael kneels beside her, looking worried. No—he’d saved her, hadn’t he? In the midst of the Well’s explosion, he’d tried to direct some energy Anna’s way. He struggles against the enforcer holding him, but the grip holds fast.

“Stop. Let them go, Victor.” Rowena MacLeod struggles to her feet, swaying suddenly and using Sam’s shoulder to brace herself. “They’ve all helped to foil a dangerous plot to bring the university down. Her, too,” she adds, gesturing towards where a struggling Ruby is being held just outside the door. “She’s one of mine.”

Castiel’s gaze darts to Ruby, his mouth open in surprise. Ruby’s been reporting to Rowena?

Dean says, "She's what?" scrambling to his feet.

“Thanks, Doc,” Ruby mutters, as she scurries away back up the hallway.

Rowena doesn’t bother to conceal her eyeroll as she turns towards Castiel and Dean.

The enforcer holding Castiel drops his hands and backs away, and Victor says, “Sorry, ma’am. Just trying to get to the bottom of this.”

Dean reaches down a hand to pull Castiel to his feet, then pulls him forward to put his arms around Castiel’s shoulders. Castiel leans into him, his face in Dean’s neck. I’m glad you’re okay. He sends the thought to Dean, who squeezes him back tightly.

Rowena speaks up impatiently. “Would you and your people please trace the teleport of the men who just left here? They’re the ones you should be after.”

“Uh, we tried, ma’am, but we’re having trouble getting the spell to work right now.” Victor frowns. “I’m guessing you guys might know why that might be the case.”

Castiel glances at Dean, who gives him a small shrug. No use hiding it. He takes a deep breath. “The Well collapsed, and the magic escaped.”

Victor's eyebrows rise. "Escaped?"

"Yeah, it freaking exploded,” Dean says, moving away from Castiel towards where Sam sits, slumped on the carpet. "Didn't you guys feel anything?"

Castiel can't help but keep looking over towards Anna, still lying unconscious. Worry starts to take over—he hears Victor speaking but the words are muffled, and a chill creeps over his arms and up his neck, making him shiver.

He watches helplessly as two enforcer medics bustle into the room, hurrying over to Anna and checking her vitals. Another woman kneels next to Sam, examining his arm while Dean looks on anxiously.

"Doctor Novak?" a voice buzzes near him. "Castiel?"

He looks at Victor standing next to him. The enforcer’s brows are furrowed in concern. "Look, I know this isn't a great time, but if you could just answer a few questions, we can follow up later."

More people enter the room, and through the crowds, Castiel’s eyes meet those of Missouri. As she stares at him, he remembers her warning—something dark is coming, Castiel. Dark dealings, a betrayal… They’ve certainly had a few of those today. But as she takes in the enforcer questioning him like she can’t quite believe what she’s seeing, he wonders if she thinks he’s the one betraying
He lifts his hand, about to call Missouri over to reassure her, when Dr. MacLeod’s voice cuts through the noise in the room. "That's enough."

She snaps her fingers.

The bright room in the heart of the library disappears, and the cold, dark walls of a different room slam into place. Castiel looks around in surprise to see the bookshelves and large desk of the president's office.

"What the…?" Dean says from where he and Sam are crouched on the floor beside him. Charlie is also here, sitting behind them and holding her head in her hands, until she also looks up in surprise.

Rowena leans forward to brace her hands on her desk, panting lightly. "Och, that is a wee bit harder now."

Castiel shakes his head, unable to believe she's just teleported them here. "Take us back, please! What about An—the Captain? The others? Where are Krissy and Seth?"

"They'll be fine. I sent them away on my way into the library." Rowena looks around at each of them. "There, this is more civilized, isn’t it?"

"Professor, what are we doing here?" Dean asks, sounding as impatient as Castiel feels.

Rowena huffs slightly. “I thought you might thank me for taking you out of that unpleasant situation. Also, I believe we owe each other an explanation.”

Dean gets to his feet, stepping towards her, his voice raised. “Damn right you do. You just—”

Castiel interrupts him with a hand on his shoulder and a quiet, “Dean,” then he speaks to Rowena. “Why are we able to teleport out of the library?”

She says primly, “The wards appear to have been blasted away. Your little stunt with the Seal has emptied our store of energy.”

Dean asks, sounding annoyed, “Well we didn’t mean for that to happen. Why the hell was the Well so unstable, anyway?”

Rowena sighs. “When the Stanford Well was cast back in the 1870s, it was meant as a container to hold all the energy from the elements, drained from across the country. It’s similar to how the Oxford Well works—a great store of pure energy to be called on by all. This university was built after that, and attached to the non-magical university at Stanford.”

Dean interrupts, “Yeah yeah, spare us the magical history lecture, we all took that class.”

Dr. MacLeod narrows her eyes at him, then continues. “Right. Well, the original casters got something wrong with their design—and within a short time it became clear that the Well contained too much energy and had started to become unstable. So, the university created a team to repair it, or design some spell to shore it up. The Seal was never originally meant to restrict access—only to keep the Well from disintegrating. One of the team was your great grandfather, Henry Winchester."

“You know about Henry?” Sam asks, sounding surprised as he struggles to his feet, grimacing as he holds his arm. Rowena must have access to another copy of the History of Magic book, or some
"Yes, he was a student here, as well as a post-doctoral fellow. That’s why I was excited when your proposal to study the Seal came across my desk, Dean. I had been told of the Seal’s purpose when I became the president of this school, and I was determined to see either the Well repaired and made strong, or the Seal altered so that access would no longer be restricted. To have you on this project was the perfect opportunity. Excellent work with the shield across the Well's opening, by the way, Castiel. You've saved many lives today."

Castiel nods. "Thank you. I wasn't sure it would work."

Dean sounds defeated as he says, "What did we actually do, Cas? We didn't save any of it."

"We couldn't have. The energy would have blasted out of it, taking out whatever was in its path, and the shield would never be able to hold all of it back. I hoped it would at least scatter some of it, kind of like light through an opaque window."

Rowena nods. "When you destroyed the Seal—and I'm still not sure how you did that—the Well couldn't hold together."

Castiel still has so many questions simmering, he doesn't know where to start. He watches as Dean steps over to the window and looks out into the night, then looks back to Rowena, still leaning on her desk. "Why did the Seal restrict magic in the first place, if it was only meant to be temporary?"

Rowena shrugs slightly. "The university leaders decided that it was better for the future of the university if they only allowed students and alumni to access elemental magic. They knew that those not qualified might choose to turn to lay magic, but hoped they would use it responsibly. Many have not, and I have seen first hand what the use of lay magic does to people." She shakes her head sadly. "Those poor souls. My own son, driven to heinous acts by his own instability brought on by the lay magic’s effects..."

Castiel just stares at her, his dismay like a lead weight in his stomach. She doesn't seriously think using lay magic is to blame for Crowley's megalomania?

"Professor, lay magic is only the use of your own personal energy. There's nothing inherently dangerous or—"

"No, Doctor Novak. I know what happens to those people. They get a taste for it, and it pushes them into using more and more until it drives them mad." She glares at him, a fire in her eyes.

Castiel opens his mouth to protest, but bites it back. Her mind won't be changed.

Dean doesn’t hold back, though. "There are plenty of people doing good with their lay magic out there, professor. Healers, artists... plenty of people not chosen for your precious school who get by just fine on their own."

“And their fate would have been their own choice as well, Mister Winchester.” Rowena’s voice is hard. She continues, quieter now, "At least they now also have access to some ambient elemental magic. I only agreed to work with your Captain because I could see that we were both after the same goal—that she wanted elemental magic available to all once again.” She starts to pace back and forth a few steps behind her desk as she speaks. Castiel has never seen her teach a class, but he’s pretty sure this is how she goes about it. "The university would never agree to a sanctioned alteration—far too much bureaucracy. But an incursion from a group of rebels might just do the trick, especially once I learned the two of you were involved. Your young friend Ruby arranged a
meeting with the Captain, and I agreed to help with relaxing the wards and spells."

"Ruby," Sam spits out, his eyes dark. "She was working for you all this time?"

The wards had been relaxed for the lay magicians to come onto campus, but Castiel's eyes narrow as he remembers he saw Ruby arrive in the car with Sam.

He speaks up before Dr. MacLeod can reply to Sam. "Ruby was involved in Sam's kidnapping, though. She must have known about it, and never told us. I saw her arrive at the library—"

The professor holds up her hands innocently. "The first I heard about Samuel's abduction was just a few hours ago when Ruby told me. She seemed distraught, but it also seems she played all sides against each other. She's worked for me for many months, yes, but I was not prepared for that."

Castiel shakes his head, looking over at Sam's disgusted expression. Another betrayal, but this time not so surprising, he guesses. He notices Charlie behind Sam. She's still sitting on the floor, her head back in her hands, but he's distracted from worrying about her when Rowena continues talking.

"Neither was I prepared for my son's own plan to seize control, or indeed for all this to come to a head so soon. I had to scramble to include a new section of the spell to get Dean past the warding at the Seal as part of the graduation attunement, and pray that no one else tried to change the seal before Dean did."

The attunement! No wonder Castiel had felt it so strongly through their bond, if it had been supercharged. Great idea on the professor's part, he has to admit.

"Okay, so what happens now? The elemental magic is still around." Dean conjures a small flame into one palm, then closes his hand around it.

"It blasted out of the Well and out into the world," Castiel says, feeling weariness settle in his limbs. He guesses the adrenaline had to wear off sometime. "Everyone can use it now, but it might just require a little extra effort to cast with."

"The arcane energy escaped, yes—it'll go back into the elements across America." Dr. MacLeod looks annoyed at this. "I'd rather it not have happened this way, but what's by is by. The university will still always provide training in how to use elemental magic."

Sam huffs, bitterness in his voice. "All this time, you've been granting access to magic in return for tuition fees—it's not so different to Crowley's scheme after all, is it?"

Castiel turns to Sam again, his eyes wide. The university...of course that's what they're doing. How can he, an advocate of equal access to magic, also work for an organization aiming to control it? Keeping it from those who they feel aren't worthy? A sick feeling makes its way up into his chest.

"Excuse me, Samuel, the University has a much more noble purpose than just collecting tuition fees." She spits the final words as though they are poison. "We train mages in magical professions. It's essential for our society!"

"So it's business as usual for you?" Dean asks, sounding disgusted.

"Yes, of course." She shifts her gaze to Castiel. "Doctor Novak, I'll expect to see you bright and early in my office tomorrow morning so we can work on getting this mess all fixed. I'd like to create a new container for a focused store of energy as soon as possible." She starts shuffling papers around on her desk, looking for something.
Castiel glances at Dean, his chest tightening further. He can’t—can’t be part of the construction of a new Well, ready for the next person to decide who gets access to it. How could he continue to be part of that, after all they've just been through?

But to ruin his career, just to make his point? He may regret this for the rest of his life.

There's no choice, really. To go back to the way things were before all this—he won’t do that.

He takes a deep breath, gathering his resolve. “Actually, no.”

Rowena looks up at him. “Pardon?”

Castiel grits his teeth. “I think my own interests lie on a different path than the university’s. I’m sorry, but please accept my resignation.”

He hears a sharp intake of breath from Dean beside him. “Cas, what’re you doing?”

Castiel keeps his eyes on Rowena, saying nothing.

Rowena narrows her eyes again, then shrugs lightly, looking back at the paperwork on her desk. “I see. I’m sorry to hear that. Well, I expect you’ll all need some rest. Come back to make arrangements when you can, Castiel.”

He nods. "Thank you." He's not entirely sure what he's thanking her for, but he guesses she helped the Resistance through the wards and orchestrated most of what happened today.

Dean offers Charlie a hand up and they file out of the president's office. Castiel feels as though he's been beaten to a pulp, but he makes it downstairs and out of the administration building with the others. They head down to path towards the D, across campus.

“Wait up, Cas, what the hell was that all about?” Dean asks, jogging a few steps to catch up with him. “Did you really just quit your job?”

Castiel turns to look at him, this man who means so much to him. He’s just given up his future, their future, for his ideals, and the realization that he hadn’t had time to discuss this with Dean terrifies him. “I had to, Dean. She wanted me to go back there and create a new Well, to start this all over again, and I just...I…”

Behind them, Sam cries out as Charlie stumbles on the uneven path, but he catches her by the arm with his uninjured hand. Dean moves his concerned expression from Castiel to Charlie. "You okay, Red?" he asks. “You were quiet in there.”

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," she says. "Just a headache."

Castiel exchanges worried glances with Dean and Sam, then he thinks towards Dean, Keep an eye on her. We took in a lot of magic.

Dean's eyes widen, then he turns back to Charlie. "Come on, let's get to the D and we can regroup, okay?" Castiel catches his thought afterwards, We can talk about this later, okay? But I'll support whatever you decide to do next.

Castiel’s heart expands, as all his love and gratitude for this man fill him. So much is uncertain right now, but at least Dean is with him. He smiles gratefully at him, sending his thanks through a lingering touch to Dean’s arm.
Behind them, Sam complains, "I really wish the professor had let me go with those enforcer medics."

Dean falls back to put his arm around Charlie as they continue towards the D. "Yeah, all right, Sammy. We’ll call for help when we get there, okay?"

They make their way across the campus, Dean supporting Charlie while she holds one hand to her forehead. Castiel knows they should all be heading to a hospital, but he’s not sure he’s got enough in him to teleport them anywhere right now.

The lights are still on in the D, the recently graduated students partying the night away, most likely oblivious to the magical upheavals. There’s no sign of either Crowley’s goons or enforcers, but as they follow the path along the outside wall of the building, Castiel hears someone calling his name.

“Anna?” He squints into the shadows near the wall, making out two people standing there—Anna and Anael. As Anna moves forward, Castiel can see the blood still streaking her clothes, but the cuts on her face are gone. “Oh, thank god you’re okay,” he says, stepping forward to hug her tightly.

“Thanks to you,” she says as her arms tighten around his back. Castiel can feel the magic still buzzing around her body, strong and vibrant. She moves back to look at him, still gripping his arms. “Are you okay?”

As she releases him and moves to hug Dean next, he says, “We did it, Anna. The Seal’s gone—magic is free.”

A smile comes to Castiel’s face, although the hollow feeling in his gut tells him they haven’t really won. There will always be people who want to control magic. Rowena will find another Thaumatech to create her new Well, and they’ll be back to square one.

Anna steps back from Dean and turns to Sam. “Hello, Sam. Let me help you with that.” She puts a hand on his arm and Sam gasps as she draws sharply on her own energy and heals him.

Castiel stares at Anna in surprise. He’s so tired he doesn’t think he could heal so much as a scratch at the moment, not without eating something at least. Anna must be retaining some of the energy Castiel poured into her from the Well.

Sam rubs at his arm, then lifts it up and down. “Thanks, Anna,” he says, smiling at her.

Anna turns to Charlie, still standing just behind Dean. She looks pale and drawn to Castiel’s eyes, and he’s sure she needs to get inside and sit down.

“We didn’t get introduced before,” she says gently to Charlie. “I’m Anna, Castiel’s sister.”

Charlie opens her mouth to reply, but just then, a voice comes from the front of the D.

“Bobby, they’re out here.” It’s Ellen, and she sounds pissed. “Hey, what’re y’all doing around here? Where’ve you been? We’ve been waiting hours!”

Castiel turns quickly to Anna before she gets any ideas and teleports away.

“Wait, Anna,” he says, reaching out to her again. “Promise you won’t just…disappear. I thought I’d lost you again today—I…”
“I’m not going anywhere, Cas,” she says, smiling at him. “But even with magic free, this mage bar isn’t really our scene. Here,” she adds, reaching for Castiel’s hand. She quickly gestures over his palm, then lets his hand fall, stepping back to reach out to Anael. They both disappear.

“Who was that? What’re you all mixed up in?” Ellen demands, her hands on her hips as she reaches them. Castiel can see Bobby and Jo outside the door now, hurrying towards them as well.

Castiel looks down at his palm to see a number scrawled across it—Anna’s phone number, he assumes. It’s spelled into his skin, looping over and over as the numbers draw themselves. He smiles.

“Charlie?” Dean asks, sounding concerned, and as Castiel turns to look at her, his eyes widen in shock as Charlie sways on her feet, and collapses onto the concrete path. He’s sure he’ll never forget the look of horror on Dean’s face as he tries to catch her, or his dread at the sickening thump as her head hits the ground.

Dean hates hospitals. Hates how confusing they are to navigate, the inner hallways like a maze. Hates the cramped waiting rooms, the crappy TV shows turned to low volume. Everything about the place sets him on-edge—even the vaguely chemical scent of industrial-strength cleaner makes his stomach flip.

“Hey,” Castiel whispers beside him, sliding a hand over Dean’s shaking knee. His kneecap stills, but the nervous energy just rises through to his hands—folding and refolding in his lap. “You okay?”

The thing Dean hates most about hospitals is how he’s only here when someone he loves is in danger. He barely had the time to scoop Charlie up, fireman style, before feeling the residual arcane energy burning off her like a fever. How had they not noticed? How could Dean be so preoccupied that he let his best friend pass out right in front of him?

If anything happens to her, I’ll never forgive myself.

Castiel nudges Dean with his elbow and Dean turns to him, an impatient rebuttal on the tip of his tongue. But the look on his boyfriend’s face is sincere, worried, full of love—and Dean’s anger towards himself and the whole situation dissolves a little.

“What do you think?” he grumbles out rhetorically, reaching to entwine their fingers together. Sam is sitting in a chair on his other side, with Ellen, Bobby, Dorothy, and Jo seated on the opposite row. They’ve been here for nearly an hour now, and the lack of information they’ve received from the hospital staff is making Dean fear the worst.

“This hospital employs some of the best medical mages in the country, Dean,” Castiel says evenly, and Dean wonders if that’s the second or third time Cas has tried to comfort him with this knowledge in the last twenty minutes.

Unsurprisingly, it hasn’t comforted him one bit.

“I knew something like this was gonna happen,” Dean says miserably, pulling his hand away and scooting away from Cas, hanging his head in his hands. He glances over at Dorothy, noticing the tear marks on her cheeks, the way she’s hardly said two words since they’ve gotten here. “Fuck, the minute Charlie wouldn’t let me wander off alone to look for Sam, I knew. And then Crowley
spotted us and everything just...went to…” Absolute fucking shit.

He exhales shakily, surprised to feel Sam patting his back. He scrubs a hand over his face and sighs, turning to face his little brother. Sam might be healed up thanks to Anna, but he still looks terrible—his clothes are several days old, and they look it. He was kidnapped and drugged, then supercharged when only him and Crowley had access to the Well. Poor kid’s been through the goddamn ringer tonight.

“You should go to Bobby’s,” Dean mumbles, exhaustion aching down to his bones, “get changed, get food. Sleep.”

“No way,” Sam says instantly. His eyes flash defiantly, much in the same way they would when they were just kids and Dean would tell him to go to bed. “I’m fine. It’s Charlie we should be worried about.”

“Don’t tell me who to worry about,” Ellen grumbles out in response, arms crossed at her chest. “‘Cause I’ll tell you what—I’m worried for every one of you.”

Dean shoots her a restless glare. They’ve spent the past forty minutes or so getting everyone else up to speed on the night’s events, which hasn’t been easy. He loves them like they’re his own parents, but all he’s gotten from Bobby and Ellen so far is some form of a lecture. He’s ready to snap.

“Don’t look at me like that, boy,” Ellen says crossly, elbows on her knees as she leans forward. “I had my suspicions that you were mixed up in something or another, but never could’ve guessed all this in my wildest dreams.”

“Never shoulda let you meet that Captain,” Bobby mutters, adding to the apparent parental disappointment conversation he’s being forced to have. “Even if she is—apparently—Cas’ sister. Still should have been more careful.” He shakes his head as if the world is too small, too coincidental, and that’s one thing Dean can actually agree with.

“Hey, Anna’s awesome,” Sam defends.

“No offense, Sam, but you trusted a double-crossing demon skank, so…” Jo’s voice trails off and Sam’s mouth sets into a hard line.

“She fooled everyone, it wasn’t just me,” he argues, though the waver in his voice gives him away. He’s still hurt by Ruby’s betrayal, even if she did end up being an agent of Dr. MacLeod in the end. Dean doesn’t even have the emotional bandwidth to talk the Ruby thing out right now, though.

“Yeah, well—” Jo begins, voice rising, but Dean interrupts her.

“Can we not?” His small store of restraint has officially been depleted. He runs a hand through his hair, tugging at the short ends. He really wants to get out of here, but he can’t fathom not being nearby when the nurse returns. They’re doing some kind of emergency spellwork to drain Charlie of all the excess energy, like a normal doctor inserts a shunt for fluids, but it shouldn’t be taking this fucking long.

Dean’s about to stand on his feet and start pacing when the blonde-headed nurse returns, her gentle face stuck in a frown.

“Nurse Hanscum,” Castiel greets, because he’s the thoughtful kind of guy to remember someone’s name even in a crisis. He slips a hand on Dean’s back, their bond buzzing between them, easing some of Dean’s panic into the background. “Do you have news?”
“How’s she doing?” Sam asks, at the same time Dorothy says in a small voice, “Can I see her?”

“She’s not doing well, I’m so sorry to say,” Nurse Hanscum announces with a heartfelt frown. “We’ve run the spell twice now, but it’s not working. We haven’t been able to produce a strong enough channel for the energy to drain. I’ve worked here for fifteen years and have never seen anything like it.”

Everyone is on their feet now, crowding around her, desperate for more information.

“Whaddya mean ‘not working’?” Bobby grumbles out, accusation heavy in his voice. “It’s like putting a nail in a tire and letting the air out—can’t be that hard.”

“It is that hard. There’s simply too much of it,” the nurse says, eyes traveling from Bobby to Ellen to Dorothy to Dean. “To borrow your metaphor, imagine the tire has too much air in it. Eventually it’ll just…”

“Pop,” Sam whispers, as the nurse nods.

“She’s stable now, but won’t be for much longer.” Nurse Hanscum looks at them with wide, shining eyes. “You can have a moment, if you’d like, to see her and say goodbye.”

Dean shuts his eyes, anger flaring through his veins, his hands, his feet. “Fuck that,” he grits out, “we did not saving the whole fucking world just to see Charlie die.”

“Dean—” Cas begins to say.

“Show us her room, now.”

The nurse looks momentarily stunned by this reaction, which is possibly the only reason she agrees when Dean demands they all be allowed to go into Charlie’s room together, rather than immediate family only. They follow her at a quick pace, Dean’s mind racing with possibilities. Can he and Cas really handle another big spell like this? This is advanced medical magic, the kind of shit they teach you at med school only. If the doctors can’t do it well enough, how the hell can they?

Forever on the same wavelength, Castiel thinks at him—You go ahead, I’m going to call Anna for backup. He takes a step back in the hallway, sliding his phone out of his maroon hoodie and holding the phone up to his ear.

Hurry, Dean urges him, already missing the warmth of Cas’ body walking in step next to him. The bond is so strong now that he feels Castiel’s absence instantly, but forces himself to keep walking, knowing Charlie needs him now more than ever. They enter her private, critical care room to see her looking unusually small in the stark hospital bed, various wires and machines hooked up to her. One of them is beeping erratically, and Dean turns to the nurse and asks, “What’s that mean? The beeping?”

She sweeps around the side of the bed, bringing the tall, towering machine closer. “This measures magical energy in the body. It’s beeping because her levels are far beyond normal. They’re critical, in fact.”

“But the spell you usually use—it’s not working?” Ellen asks, fear in her voice. The nurse shakes her head.

“What about another spell?” Dorothy sits on the edge of her bed, hand brushing over Charlie’s cheek. “Is there anything else we can try?”
The nurse opens her mouth, another frown on her face that clearly says no, when Castiel takes commanding steps through the threshold. Anna follows him, wearing the same clothes as earlier and looking just as frazzled. To Dean’s astonishment, behind her steps in Anael, Rachel, Hester, Neil, Zuriel, and Benjamin, until the hospital room is sufficiently crowded with magicians and mages alike.

“So fucking glad to see you guys,” Dean breathes out, surprised by how true the statement is. He never expected to bond with the coven so much, to consider some of them real friends. Anna takes a wide step towards him and hugs him tightly, and Dean relaxes for half a second, feeling something bond-adjacent rolling between them. An affinity, probably, like the one Cas has with Anna. Now Dean shares one with her too…he probably has for a while, and is just now noticing.

“What can we do?” she asks gravely, eyes traveling between Cas and Dean as if they’re in charge. And maybe, this time, they are.

Castiel searches around the crowded room until he finds the nurse. “Nurse Hanscum—”

“Donna,” she interrupts. When Castiel tilts his head in his typically confused and adorable way, she adds, “I have a feeling that whatever you’re about to ask goes against my nurses’ training, so I figured we’d better be on a first-name basis before I agree to help.”

Despite everything, Dean feels a small smile tug on the corners of his mouth. If Donna helps them save Charlie, he’ll buy her a fucking fruit basket every day for the rest of her life.

“I need you to show us the spell—the one the doctor’s tried,” Castiel says slowly, watching her face for signs of disapproval. When he doesn’t see any, he adds, “I truly think we can save her.”

“I understand you wanting to save your friend,” Donna begins with a sad lilt in her voice, “but what makes you think you can do what the professionals couldn’t?”

Dean answers for them. “First of all, this is my badass boyfriend, and we have a profound bond—”

“Perhaps the strongest you’ll ever see,” Anna points out, and Dean only swallows, feeling a little winded by that revelation. Surely, there’s no goddamn way that could be true. Could it? He reaches for Cas’ hand, entwining their fingers together and feeling a wave of strength flood through him.

“And this is my sister, she leads a coven of witches,” Castiel adds easily.

“And we aren’t no slouches, either,” Bobby says, pointing to the rest of them. “Point is, you’re standing in a room of people who get shit done. You seem like a nice lady, so just show us the spell and we’ll get shit done. All right?”

Somehow—maybe it truly is magic—the nurse nods and agrees.

It’s a complicated spell, Dean’s not surprised to learn. The hand gestures alone vary into twelve different positions, all minor changes and adjustments that could crash the caster into the wall or even start a fire if not done properly. But Donna is a confident and cool-headed instructor, her years as a nurse really shining through while they’re all in crisis mode, and after a while many of them have mastered it. Cas, Dean, Bobby, and Ellen have it memorized first, with Anna, Sam, Jo, and Anael following close behind. Some of the other lay magicians aren’t trained enough to learn the gestures that quickly, but offer up their own energy to be channeled, which Dean is still grateful for. Dorothy tries to rally, but she can barely see to practice the motions over the tears in her eyes, and eventually she joins the other lay magicians—offering up what supplemental energy she can.
It’s the second time today that Dean and Cas have had to simultaneously cast with a large group of others, and Dean isn’t used to coordinating a spell with this many people. He’s feeling nervous, worrying that they just might blow a hole through the hospital wall, when Cas takes charge. “Dean and I will start, and the rest of you can join in when you’ve found the rhythm.”

“This isn’t a game of jump rope, Cas,” Ellen says, though she sounds good-natured considering everything they’re going through. “You two lead, and we’ll follow.”

Dean nods, thankful that Cas jumped in on their behalf. There’s some shuffling around the room then, with the casters forming a circle over Charlie’s bed and the rest standing on the outside, watching with wide eyes. Having an audience will never get easier, but the moment Dean finds Castiel’s eyes, the murmur of voices fade into the background. Castiel is so striking and intelligent and strong, and Dean would trust that man to rescue him from hell and back. Remind me to kiss the fuck out of you when this is all over, he thinks with a small smile. Castiel returns it, giving Dean’s hand a squeeze.

Then they begin casting.

The spell truly is complex, a pattern of shifts and moves that doesn’t feel fluid at all. Dean stumbles during the first round and a sharp crack ricochets into the bathroom—the sink mirror cracking in half.

“Shit,” he breathes, panicked. Donna slips out behind them and shuts the door. He wonders how much trouble she’ll get into if the hospital finds out she took such a big chance on them.

“Shake it out and try again,” Castiel says, slipping into his professor voice as easily as most people put on a pair of glasses. It’s a real shame he had to quit, Dean thinks offhandedly, because Castiel is such a good teacher.

Dean follows the advice, flapping his hands around and trying to relax the tension in his shoulders. But it’s no use—it’s too big, too much. Haven’t they been through enough today? How can his best friend’s life hinge around this one spell?

Dean, I need you to breathe.

“Can’t,” Dean answers aloud, his throat dry. “Cas, this is too much. If we don’t get this right, then Charlie…”

Do you remember what you told your class last fall? When you were teaching cooperative magic?

Dean swallows. “Now’s not exactly the time to get nostalgic.”

If anyone thinks Dean is borderline crazy for having a one-sided conversation with Cas, they don’t show it. Though Dean isn’t exactly worrying about them right now.

I remember exactly what you said, because it was so insightful. You said the stronger the relationship, the stronger the spell. You told them that magic is a personal practice and our emotions impact our abilities. Remember?

Dean doesn’t trust himself to speak this time, so he nods and thinks, Is this the part where you tell me to take my own advice?

Castiel smiles a little, reassuring in a way that Dean can’t quite describe. And then he says, aloud, “I just need you to believe in yourself the way I believe in you.”
Dean’s cheeks burn, the edge of his eyes feeling heavy, and he nods. He looks glances down at Charlie, kisses the top of her head, and finds Cas’ eyes again with a nod. “Okay, let’s fucking do this.”

It’s draining and methodical—medical magic is so not his forte—but Dean is surging now with determination, and he allows himself to get lost in the movements. After a moment, a vertical line of glowing light appears over Charlie’s chest and Dean’s eyes widen.

“Taking that as a good sign?” he huffs, careful not to drop his hands. They gain momentum then, each turn of the spell making the channel pulse brighter, until a stream of transparent energy is following through the centre. Dean can feel the arcane energy releasing itself into the air, practically electrifying every atom in the room.

“A very good sign,” Castiel agrees, and their hands are practically flying now. Dean feels the impact of each caster as they trickle in, joining the spell—there’s Anna first, her magic meshing well with theirs. Then Ellen and Bobby, Sam and Jo, Anael bringing up the rear. The energy is pouring out of Charlie consistently now, though someone apparently loses focus for a moment and a spark of stray energy fries the bulb in the overhead light. Now it’s twice as difficult because they’re casting in the dark, and Dean feels a rise of worry in the back of his throat…until the lay magicians surround them, holding small white flames in their hands. In the glow of the flames Castiel looks ethereal, magicificent, and power is coursing through Dean’s veins with each turn of his hands.

“The machine,” someone says—maybe Rachel or Hester. “It isn’t beeping anymore.”

It only takes a few more minutes before Charlie lets out a little gasp, coughing as her hands reach up to grab her chest. Dorothy runs to her side, knees on the floor as she cups Charlie’s hand.

“What’s up, bitches,” Charlie croaks, eyes cracked open. “What’s a girl gotta do to get a glass of water in this joint?”

Dorothy chuckles, wiping tears from her face, and practically runs towards the cups. Relief floods Dean, but before he celebrates, he looks at Donna and asks, “Should we keep going, or…?”

“Her levels are close to normal,” Donna states, bending over Charlie and examining her and the machine at the same time. “I don’t know how you did it, but you…” She exhales, grinning. “You’ve all performed a miracle tonight.”

Dean barely has time to process the words before Castiel drops his hands and wraps his arms around Dean’s neck. He pulls Dean into kiss that leaves him so breathless, Charlie eventually shoos them away so “a girl can kiss her own girlfriend, already.”

Feeling sheepish, Dean checks in on Charlie more properly before they slink away to the corner of the room. Seating is limited and the room is much too full, so when Cas sits down in a padded chair and pulls Dean into his lap, Dean’s legs swing sideways and he goes willingly. Everyone is crowding around Charlie now, not paying them much attention, which Dean is honestly glad for.

They just hold each other for a moment before Castiel’s mouth kisses his chin, his cheek, his neck. “Is that what we dreamed?” he mumbles.

Dean’s arms tighten around Cas’ neck. “I dunno. Maybe, or maybe it was supposed to be Anna. Or Sam.” He shivers and buries his head into the crook of his boyfriend’s shoulder. “Cas, I really thought Charlie was gonna…”
“I know. Me too.” Castiel rubs a hand on Dean’s back in soothing circle. “Looks like we changed
the outcome, whatever it was. Prophetic dreams aren’t set in stone.”

“Yeah, Pam told me that once,” Dean murmurs, feeling warm and relaxed. He’s ready to fall asleep
right here, in Castiel’s lap. It’s as if all the adrenaline has been siphoned from his body. “Boy, are
you comfy.”

Castiel chuckles, hands tightening around Dean’s waist. “I’d be an even more comfortable pillow
for you if we were in bed.”

Dean pulls up, wondering if they have the strength left over to teleport or if they should catch a
ride with someone. “Let’s check in on Charlie, then—let’s go home?”

Castiel grips his hand, turning his hand and gently kissing Dean’s wrist. “Yes, let’s go home.”

They barely get a chance to make sure Charlie is still okay, before Donna hurries them all out of
the room so that Charlie can rest. Dean and Cas say their goodbyes to the rest of the coven, and
Dean tells Sam he’ll catch up with him later.

As they pass back through the waiting area, Cas puts his hand on Dean’s arm, pulling him to a
stop.

"Dean, look."

The television in the corner of the room has the volume turned just loud enough to be heard. A
flustered young reporter stands outside the distinctive Archimedes Hall, holding a microphone
along with a gaggle of other media people. "The magical authorities are still no closer to
discovering the cause for the sudden drop in elemental energy, but it's believed at this time that
there's been some kind of attack on Stanford University’s School of the Occult."

The reporter turns at a commotion behind her, and Zachariah Adler appears from the doors of
Archimedes Hall.

The reporter quickly says, “It looks like we’re going to get a statement, here,” before she joins the
other reporters calling questions out to the harried professor.

Dean snorts. Who the hell let Adler speak for the university?

“Good evening,” Adler says, trying to speak over the noisy reporters.

“What happened here tonight, professor?” Someone calls out off-camera.

“Allow me to reassure you that the university is working with the authorities to find out exactly
what happened, but there appears to have been some kind of security breach, and our elemental
Well was damaged. This is just a symptom of a wider problem in our community. The underground
lay magician groups are—“

“Yes, thank you, Doctor Adler,” a voice with a Scottish lilt says, as Doctor MacLeod sidles in,
neatly hip-checking him out of the shot. Her name appears on the screen after just a few moments.

“Yes, there was an attack on our university tonight,” Doctor MacLeod continues, “but a contingent
of staff and students have defended it admirably. The threat is over for now, and security measures
are back in place.”

Another reporter calls out, "And has any group claimed responsibility for the attack?"
"Yes, I believe they call themselves 'demons', but make no mistake," the professor says as she looks into the camera, "they will be brought to justice. That’s all the questions for now, thank you."

The two professors return to the building and the reporter turns back to face the camera. "There is some speculation as to whether this attack is linked to two disappearances of university staff early last year, but at this stage it’s too early to tell. The investigation continues."

The news anchor appears. "Meanwhile, renowned Thaumaturgical expert and Astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson has released a statement on what may have happened to the Well."

The shot cuts to Neil Degrasse Tyson himself, who says, “Well, the arcane energy stored in the Well is held there inside a huge container—"

“Yeah, okay,” Dean says, pulling Cas away from the TV. “I don’t need a pop science guy to tell me what you just did."

Cas chuckles. “Hey, we both did it.”

“We sure did,” Dean replies, leaning in for a kiss as they leave the hospital.

Chapter End Notes

Neil DeGrasse Tyson (1958-) is an American astrophysicist, popular science presenter and mage. A well-known graduate of Stanford University’s School of the Occult, he went on to gain many awards and accolades, (including being voted People magazine's "Sexiest Astrophysicist Alive" in 2000) and holds a position of honor on the Magical Council of America. These days his appearances on TV keep him from doing research, which is perhaps why he wasn't available to join Rowena's scheming. He's a busy guy.

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Go on, head to the next chapter… You know you wanna!
Dean sighs and stretches out on the length of the couch, jiggling his legs restlessly. His head is in Cas’ lap, and he feels his boyfriend’s hand—which has been stroking his head for nearly an hour now—halt suddenly.

“Dean,” Castiel says, a bit teasingly since this is not the first time Dean’s let out a frustrated huff. “Must you be so impatient?”

“That’s a rhetorical question, right?” Dean flutters his eyelashes as Castiel lets out a small chuckle.

“I thought you were going shopping with Charlie today? Didn’t she say something about needing a new suit for job interviews, and wanting you around for the…?”

“Montage,” Dean finishes with a snort. He’s relieved that Charlie has made a full recovery—and is apparently being offered a slew of positions at various companies, thanks to her in-demand degree in Magical Mediation and Information Technology—but still. Shopping is a major drag. “And no, that’s tomorrow. She also said it’s my duty as her ‘gay best friend’ to help her find new clothes, which I said was offensive as hell and confusing, since she’s way gayer than me.”

“Is she now?” Castiel asks dryly, looking down with a smirk. “Anyone who heard you this morning would probably disagree.”

Dean’s cheeks burn pink, quickly cataloging all the embarrassing things he said in bed earlier. He opens his mouth to give a suggestive retort, but Cas is already frowning down at his phone again, lost in thought. “Hey, not fair. You can’t flirt with me and then ignore me!”

“I know, but I just need to find—”

“Cas, come on. You’ve been looking at job listings for hours,” Dean whines. Above his head, he spots Castiel’s phone being lowered, his thumb no longer scrolling through endless job sites.

“And I’ve barely found anything suitable,” Castiel says, voice full of poorly masked disappointment. “Outside of academia my credentials are useless, I’m afraid.”

“That’s not true,” Dean replies with a frown. They’ve been having this same discussion for two weeks now, between bouts of crazy sex and then sudden, paranoid fear that the enforcers are going to come knock down their door any day now. Thankfully, it seems Dr. MacLeod maintained her version of the story and vouched for them all, even after Cas was such a freaking badass and quit on the spot. Still, when it comes to the job hunt Dean’s not sure what else to say to comfort Cas. While he’s perfectly happy working at Bobby’s magic shop indefinitely—it is the family business after all—Castiel is a professor who no longer wants to work at a university. At least not Stanford, with its bureaucratic bullshit. If Dean wasn’t around, tethering him here, he wonders if Cas would try and get a position at other universities. Would Cas be happy working somewhere else? Leaving
Palo Alto hasn’t even come up as an option in their talks of the future, not yet, for which Dean’s secretly grateful. The thought of leaving Sam while he’s still an undergrad after everything they’ve been through this year—not to mention never seeing his family again outside of birthdays and holidays—sounds pretty miserable.

But it’s a sacrifice he’s willing to make, if his boyfriend asks him to. No matter what, he’s sticking by Cas’ side. The thought of being separated now—when their bond has grown and they’re so reliant on each other—seems impossible.

The other thing that feels impossible at the moment is getting said boyfriend to put his phone down and pay attention to him. Dean shuffles his head back and forth, indirectly rubbing against Castiel’s groin as his hand moves towards the elastic band of Cas’ sweatpants.

“Dean,” Castiel says again, in a scolding voice that’s less threatening and more sexy, “what are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Dean says innocently. “I just think…”

“Yes?”

“Well, that you should take a break and let me suck you off.” Castiel stares down at him, mouth agape. Dean meets his eyes, flashing him a cocky grin. Castiel clears his throat, attempting to regain his composure.

“As enticing as that sounds, I’ve already spent two weeks having absurd amounts of sex with you all around my apartment,” Castiel says evenly, though he licks his lips as Dean’s head continues to rub against him. “And only two hours looking for a job.”

“Dude, we basically saved the world. The celebration sex was well-earned. Plus, two hours is a long time. I think you’ve earned a reward.” Dean tilts his head, Cas’ thighs acting an uncomfortable pillow as he breathes over the front of Castiel’s pants. He leaves a gentle kiss on the fabric, enough of a press to know he’s grazed Cas’ cock. Castiel’s breath above him is labored now, his hand tightening in Dean’s hair.

“Now I remember why we never got any work done at the library,” he says, a little shakily as Dean chuckles. As happy as Dean is to have graduated, he’ll miss the thrill of sneaking off with Cas to make out behind the shelves.

“So, does that mean you’re game?” He leaves another kiss, this time more open-mouth as he wets the cotton.

“Dean, I was literally inside of you—” Castiel makes a show of checking the time on his phone. “Three hours ago.”

Dean scoffs, undeterred. “Yeah, your point?”

Castiel shakes his head, though a small smile escapes his lips. “My point is that I love you, but I’m not ‘game.’ Not right now. Maybe later?”

He bends over clumsily to kiss the top of Dean’s forehead, evidently thinking the matter has been settled. Dean only grins wider, excited to test the boundaries of Cas’ self-control as he snakes a hand down the front of his pants. After all, he’s always wanted to put on a show. He’s not even wearing underwear, having slipped on the first pair of pants he’d found after Cas had thoroughly fucked him earlier. With all of this buzzing in his brain, it takes no time to stroke himself a few times until he’s half-hard.
After a moment, he hears Castiel’s strangled cough.

“You okay?” Dean asks, overly sweet.

“Are you actually…?”

Dean twists his wrist, his mouth still breathing against Cas’ groin. “What? Snooze ya lose, babe.”

Castiel doesn’t say anything else, but he doesn’t shoo Dean away for being distracting, either—which is definitely a good sign. Dean keeps his hand tucked inside his sweatpants as he continues his ministrations, his cock filling out simply from the knowledge that Castiel is above him. *Above him and watching him.* Must be kinkier than I thought, Dean thinks with a lift of his eyebrows. To keep himself hard, he imagines what he wants to be doing to Cas right now, where he wants to be. Maybe squeezed between his legs, pumping Cas’ dick in and out of his mouth. Fuck, he loves the feeling of Cas’ stiff cock enveloped in his mouth, the head all pink and tender against his tongue. He lets out a moan without quite meaning to and hears Castiel drop his phone haphazardly on the couch.

“Take your pants off,” he says, almost as if he’s asking Dean to pass him the remote or fetch him a glass of water. He’s still trying to feign disinterest, but Dean knows better—he can feel the prod of a half-hard cock against his cheek.

“Nah, think I’m good,” Dean teases, his hand working overtime now. Even without lube, it feels pretty damn amazing, and all the attention he’s getting from Cas makes him feel mischievous and sexy.

“You are insufferable,” Castiel grumbles playfully, and Dean laughs at his apparent victory when he feels Cas’ hand slip beneath his waistband, covering Dean’s as they both begin to stroke him.

“Fuck,” Dean sighs, dropping his own hand so Cas can take over. Touching yourself is great and all, that’s always been Dean’s motto, but there’s nothing better than being taken care of. He sets his sights back on getting Castiel’s cock back where it belongs—aka, his mouth—and becomes more aggressive at mouthing against the front of his pants. A moment later, Castiel lifts Dean’s head as he shimmies his pants down and flings them to the ground, his cock practically bouncing against Dean’s waiting lips. Dean kicks his sweatpants down to his ankles and off the couch completely as Castiel wraps his hand back around Dean’s erection. He uses his other hand to push against the back of Dean’s head, maneuvering him closer to Cas’ cock, and the feeling of being manhandled makes Dean feel electrified. He takes Cas’ dick as far down as he can, breathing through his nose as he moans around the head. Castiel leads the rhythm in a way that feels thrilling and arousing, and Dean has a striking vision of Castiel properly fucking his mouth one day. It’s an image that he must have sent to Cas by accident, though, because Cas’ hands grips his hair harder and he moans unabashedly—a sound that goes straight to Dean’s groin. Fuck, he is *insanely* turned on. He wants Cas more and more all the time. How does Cas have this power over him?

The handjob feels great, but it’s not enough—Dean needs more, so much more. He pulls off but keeps licking against Cas’ cockhead, before looking up at his boyfriend face and whispering, “Fuck me? Please?”

“Dean…” His gaze is full of affection and lust and Dean situates himself up on the couch, straddling Cas’ lap. “Of course.” Castiel strips Dean of his t-shirt, hands touching his chest and shoulder blades, before kissing him filthily—sucking his lower lip before flicking his tongue into Dean’s mouth. Dean moans as his hands grasp Cas’ neck, rutting his ass against Castiel’s lap and reaching back to stroke his cock. Castiel kisses him everywhere, frantically going lower, to his chin then neck and collarbones, before settling on his nipples and biting gently.
“F-fuck,” Dean whimpers, feeling heavy and weighted as he leans backward, allowing Castiel better access to his chest. His tongue is flat and wet against Dean’s nipple, his mouth sucking insistently, and Dean’s about ready to blow his load without even having a cock up his ass. Which, to be honest, is simply unacceptable. He sits up straighter, trying to regain some of his composure, and casts a quick spell for the bottle of lube they keep on the nightstand. They really ought to start leaving lube stashed everywhere, at this rate, because those few seconds of waiting feel downright tortuous. A moment later, though, he’s got a generous portion lathering up on his palm and reaches for Cas’ cock, their eyes locked as Dean spreads the lube around. Castiel’s gaze is full of heat and Dean can’t help it, he kisses him again, not sure which is gonna explode first—his heart or his dick. It’s a pretty common feeling anytime he’s with Cas, because the sex is mindblowing and he’s so fucking in love that he can barely breathe sometimes.

Dean lines up Cas’ cock, searching for the feeling of the head breaching him, but Cas thinks urgently, Prep?

“Still good from where you fucked me,” Dean breathes, heart pounding as he impales himself on Cas’ dick. Jesus Christ. That assumption might not have been totally true as the stretch burns and makes him pant, gripping Castiel’s shoulder for stability.

“You okay?” Cas asks, kissing Dean’s face all over as he adjusts to the fullness. Dean responds by grinding his hips down and nipping at Cas’ lower lip, biting gently before sucking on the sting. They kiss and kiss, losing themselves in each other. After a while, Dean’s not totally sure where his body begins and Cas’ ends—they feel so connected. When their lips break apart, foreheads still touching, Dean begins to move. In no time at all he’s riding Castiel’s cock like his life depends on it, hands gripping the back of the couch as he bounces with a renewed burst of urgency.

“You’re amazing,” Castiel is saying beneath him, kissing the side of Dean’s head and stroking his lower back. “You’re everything to me, Dean.”

Castiel had started saying this kind of thing more and more during sex, especially after graduation day and the realization sunk in that they had almost lost each other. Dean would usually protest that he didn’t do “chick flick moments,” but this time he just kisses Cas in response—putting all his love and devotion into the kiss, hoping that Cas knows what it means.

With all the sex they’re having, Dean’s stamina has certainly increased. Still, he’s so close to coming if he could only get the right angle. Castiel shifts his hips around, one leg on the couch and one leg on the floor, gripping Dean’s thighs as he pounds into him from below. This new position is doing wonders. The first thrust hits Dean’s prostate and he cries out, the rhythm increasing mercilessly as Castiel nails Dean again and again.

“Cas, god, feels so—I’m gonna—”

“Come for me, Dean,” Castiel says in a low rumble, his pace only increasing the louder Dean screams. Only the sounds of skin against skin and the proof of Dean’s pleasure fill the room. Weirdly, when he comes, he’s wondering if Cas’ neighbors are tired of hearing them have crazy sex all the time. His next thought is that he definitely, without a damn doubt, does not care. He’s shaking as he comes down, brushing Cas’ lips with his own while their stomachs become wet with come.

And then Cas is putting Dean on his back, knees parallel to Cas’ hips, and he’s fucking into him earnestly now. It feels good and looks so unbelievably hot that Dean almost wishes his cock could rally again, but in no time his boyfriend is cursing under his breath and then Dean’s insides are fully wet as come fills his hole.
“Jesus,” Dean breathes, chest panting as Castiel’s head lolls to the side, his heart racing against Dean’s chest. He grins, hand swiping through the slightly sweaty hair on Cas’ forehead, and says, “See, wasn’t that way more fun than working?”

The legitimate glare that comment earns him makes Dean regret his seductive skills momentarily, even though it was clearly a success. He casts a quick spell that cleans them up, and then redresses, leaving Castiel to brood over his job hunt without further distractions.

A while later, he’s drinking a beer on the back patio when the door crack opens. Castiel takes his seat without a greeting, just comments on the sunset and reaches over to take Dean’s hand. Dean’s mind feels preoccupied, whirling with thoughts of their relationship and their future, and it startles him when Cas kisses his knuckles and whispers, “Sorry.”

“For what?” Dean takes a final sip from his El Sol, craving a fresh one but not wanting to interrupt Cas’ speech.

“For earlier. Being grumpy.” Castiel frowns and Dean squeezes his hand, shrugging.

“S’okay, babe.”

“No, it’s not. I never want to take you for granted, Dean. I just…” He halts, staring down at his hands and frowning. “I’m happy with you, but I’m not happy with myself, if that makes sense.”

Dean sits up straighter, the conversation taking the type of turn that makes his heart race. “You’re not happy?”

“No, Dean, I am. I’m insanely happy and I can’t believe you’re mine.” Castiel sighs, scrubbing his free hand against his face. “But without a job that I love, a purpose, I’m just not…”

“Fulfilled,” Dean finishes, trying very hard not to take this whole discussion personally. Then an idea occurs to him. “Cas, who did you wanna be when you grew up?”

“A teacher,” Cas answers instantly.

“I said who, not what,” Dean reminds gently.

Castiel tilts his head for a moment, then says, “I wanted to be someone who helped people. You?”

“No clue,” Dean says, chuckling a little. “I knew that family was important to me. That I wanted to make things better for people who couldn’t defend themselves. And I knew I wanted…well, I didn’t want an apple pie life or anything, but I did want to find my person. To love someone the way I love you.”

Castiel’s gaze softens, eyes shining, and Dean strokes his thumb against Cas’ clasped hand. “Have you gotten everything you wanted?”

Dean scoffs for a moment, looking straight ahead at the sky. “I have. That’s the scary part. Even though everything is still up in the air, life has never been this good for me. And that’s because of you.” He turns to look back at Cas, his expression open. “Which is why I want you to be fulfilled, too. You wanna teach? Go teach.”

Castiel is already shaking his head. “I refuse to work at—”

“Forget Stanford. There are other schools, Cas.”
“None in the States,” Cas points out. “And certainly none in California.”

Dean swallows, his throat dry. “Then we’ll leave. I’ll pack up, take a happy pill and board a ridiculously long flight so we can make your dreams come true, okay?”

Castiel’s eyebrows shoot up, overwhelming surprise painted on his features. “I would never ask you to leave, to give up your life for me.”

“I know,” Dean says softly. “And that’s why I’m willing to do it. You don’t have a copyright on self-sacrifice. Plus, traveling around Europe? Sounds fun enough, if I’m with you.”

Castiel shakes his head, eyes gleaming, evidently in disbelief. “I appreciate the gesture, I really do, but there has to be a better option.”

“Cas—” Dean begins, gearing himself up to launch into another lecture.

“No, listen. You’re not the only one who considers Sam family now,” Castiel says firmly. “I would die for him—I nearly did. And I care about Bobby and Ellen and Charlie, too. I don’t want to leave right now either.”

Dean leans against the chair, stunned that his little “let’s go to England” pep talk doesn’t seem to be working. Maybe he misread the situation after all. “Well, then… What do we do?”

Castiel opens his mouth to answer, but Dean hears the doorbell sounding off from a distance.

“I’ll get it,” he says, thinking he can stop to grab another beer on the way back. He stands up and runs a hand over Cas’ shoulder as he leaves, knowing they have a lot to talk about and figure out. He drops off his empty beer bottle at the counter, then heads to the front door. It’s early evening on a Friday night, and he has no idea who to expect…

But it certainly isn’t Cas’ siblings, both of them, standing in the doorway. Anna and Gabriel. Together.

“Uh, hey babe,” he calls out loudly, grinning a million-watt smile. “You’re gonna wanna come and see this.”

Anna can’t remember the last time all three of the Novak siblings were together. It’s surreal, standing beside Gabriel in the doorway as Castiel strides in from the back patio, expression full of surprise.

“What are you two doing here?” he says excitedly, pulling them both into a hug. Dean takes a step back, arms crossed as he smiles, watching the scene unfold.

“Get on in here, Deano,” Gabriel says, waving his arm around.

“It’s fine, I’m not really into the ‘group hug’ thing—”

“Get your ass over here,” Gabriel insists. “From what Anna tells me, you’re basically a Novak now.”

Dean blushes and grins, throwing his hands up in surrender as Gabriel squishes him between them.
It feels even better, once Dean is in the mix—complete in a way that Anna had never expected. She had never thought Castiel finding his perfect person would impact her at all, but then again, she never let herself dream that she could be a part of her brothers’ lives again. But she’s accomplished what she had set out to do—the Stanford Seal is not only gone, the Well is, too—and she can begin rebuilding her life.

“As nice as this is, you still haven’t answered my question,” Castiel says, voice muffled. He pulls away after a moment and everyone follows suit, the door closing behind them. Anna and Gabriel follow them into the living room, and Gabriel goes to sit down on the couch as Dean visibly winces.

“What?” Gabriel says, still hovering over the seat. Dean and Castiel exchange a knowing glance, Dean’s cheeks still pink, and Gabriel says, “Seriously? Is there anywhere we can sit where you two haven’t screwed like bunnies?”

Dean snorts and says, “Not really, dude. It’s just—that spot in particular just got some good action today.”

“Dean!” Castiel exclaims, looking equally amused and mortified. “Can we not talk about our sex life with my siblings?”

“He started it,” Dean argues, coming up to Cas and pecking him on the cheek. He looks back and Anna and Gabriel, seeming to make up his mind about something. “Hey, I was about to head to the store and grab something to whip up for dinner. You two staying?”

“We’d hate to impose,” Anna begins carefully. “Gabriel hadn’t planned to come back with me to Palo Alto, but we were having such a great time together and missed Cas, so we just sorta… teleported here.”

“I’m glad you did,” Castiel says, reaching over to squeeze’s Anna hand. “You’re welcome here anytime.”

Something like contentedness blooms in Anna’s chest, and she grins, looking at Dean. “In that case, I’d love some dinner. I’ve spent the past week in New York with Gabe, and all he offered me was street meat.”

“We got plenty of that around here too,” Dean says with an outlandish wink. Gabriel laughs and Castiel shakes his head.

“You’re lucky I love you,” Cas says.

“Yeah, yeah I am.” Dean’s tone is less teasing and more sincere, and Anna grins and exchanges a look with Gabriel as Dean and Castiel share a kiss. She and Gabriel have talked about everything the past few days, connecting on a level they never have before. But one of their favorite topics has been discussing how head over heels their younger brother is, and how they never expected him to settle down with a guy…but now they can’t imagine anyone complementing Castiel quite like Dean.

Dean grabs his car keys and his wallet and walks out the front door—promising to come back soon with groceries worthy of a family reunion. Once he’s gone, Castiel claps his hands together and leads them to his dining room table, offering them a variety of beverages. His refrigerator and bar are so well stocked, Anna doubts Dean actually had to go the grocery store at all. He’s simply respectful enough to give Castiel some time alone with his family, and it just makes her appreciation for Dean grow tenfold.
“Well, I’d ask what’s new, baby bro, but Anna pretty well filled me in,” Gabriel begins, as Cas pops open a bottle of red wine and sits across from them, pouring generous glasses. “You two have been busy.”

Cas holds up his wine glass and they follow suit, clinking their glasses together before taking long sips. “You could say that.”

“And neither of you thought to involve your brother?” Gabriel scolds, though it’s mostly teasing. “Bringing down the Stanford Well, releasing all that magic back into the world... Not to mention, tangoing with someone like Crowley.”

“He is a nasty piece of work,” Cas agrees. “I just wish we knew what happened to him. Once the Well exploded, he just vanished. We haven’t heard from him.”

“Have I not told you...?” Anna begins, and when Castiel looks at her with wide eyes, she says, “Anael saw what happened while the rest of us were passed out in the library. Apparently, once the demons learned he hadn’t delivered on his promises, they, well...” She set her wine glass down with a small clink. “Probably murdered him, is what it sounds like.”

Castiel exhales loudly, shaking his head. “After everything he did, and all the people he manipulated, I can’t say he didn’t have it coming. I’m just glad Dean thought to break the bond between Sam and Crowley before that happened.”

“Yeah, even I know Deano would’ve gone bonkers if his baby bro ended up...” Gabriel pauses, letting the implication hang in the air before changing the subject. “You’re famous now, you know. Not that anyone knows it was you, but still. Everybody’s talking about it.”

“At the magic shop?” Castiel asks, sounding surprised. “I didn’t realize anyone would feel much of a difference, though I suppose my bond with Dean keeps me from feeling the change in the elements too much.”

Gabriel blinks at him. “You’re serious? You thought you could break magic society and nobody would notice?”

Castiel opens his mouth, likely offended by Gabe’s poor choice of words, but Anna interrupts him first. “What he means to say—is you aided your big sister in successfully leading the biggest revolution anyone’s ever seen,” she says dryly.

“True. Anna worked and organized the underground resistance for years—Dean and I just pulled the trigger, you could say,” Castiel concedes. He looks back at Gabriel, interest piqued. “But sure, I suppose people were bound to talk. We haven’t heard much, though—we’ve kept our heads down.”

“Probably in your best interest,” Anna says reasonably.

“Who have you overheard? Mages? Lay magicians?”

“Both.” Gabriel takes a large swig of his wine, smacking his lips together. “Mages feel less powerful, magicians feel more powerful... You spread the magic around and leveled out the playing field.”

“Well, I doubt it could ever truly be level. We might not have to rely on lay magic anymore to cast spells, but we still have no resources—no access to education,” Anna points out. After everything she’s been through—forming the resistance group, assembling her own coven, making deals with Crowley and Rowena and nearly dying from them—nothing had prepared her for the aftermath.
There’s no clear path for the next step towards equal rights, and she feels a little lost right now, wondering what her future will look like.

Castiel is frowning when she glances up, staring down at his wine glass as if he’s lost in thought. Anna clears her throat, feeling guilty for bringing the mood down. “Anyways, Castiel was brilliant. You should’ve seen it. And Dean is brilliant, too. I went to his thesis defense—”

Castiel returns to the conversation instantly. “You were there? How?”

“I had a meeting with Rowena that day, and she let me through the campus wards.” Anna swirls her wine around in the glass. “Plus, I’m very good at blending in. Spend fifteen years on the run and you learn how to slip under the radar.”

“Still can’t believe you’re the shadiest Novak of the bunch,” Gabriel grumbles, eyebrows lifted. “Definitely thought I’d take that title.”

Castiel scoffs, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Well, Mother would certainly agree. Do you remember when I accidentally broke a vase, but she was convinced you did it?”

Gabriel narrows his eyes. “Yeah I do. You even confessed, and she still grounded me for it!”

“Pays to be the youngest,” Castiel says cheekily, grinning over his wine glass. Gabriel kicks him under the table and Anna laughs, wondering if she’ll have to forcibly separate her brothers by the end of the evening. The three of them haven’t been together like this since she was…seventeen? Eighteen? She was still living with her parents at the time, but that was short-lived after she received her rejection letter from Stanford. Even with all the time that’s passed, spending time together like this feels warm and familiar. Feels like home.

By the time Dean returns—carrying an impressive amount of grocery bags on each arm—the first bottle of wine is empty, a second one popped up. Slightly buzzed, Anna and her brothers are loudly arguing about the infamous Christmas event of 1998.

“You two purposefully ruined that relationship,” Anna says heatedly.

“Castiel talked me into it!” Gabriel replies, literally pointing fingers at his brother.

“His name was Lucifer,” Castiel says bitingly. “We couldn’t trust him!”

From the kitchen, the sound of Dean laughing flows into the dining room. A moment later he comes in, sliding his hands around Cas’ shoulder and embracing him from behind. “Okay, so I’ve been eavesdropping. Let me see if I got this right.” He looks at Anna wryly. “In high school you were dating a guy named Lucifer and brought him over for Christmas dinner, but Gabe and Cas tried to concoct a truth potion to make sure he was trustworthy. But they were kids and obviously shit at potion making, so the potion just made the guy pee his pants?”

Gabriel and Castiel roll with laughter while Anna glares at them, her mouth resisting a smile. “Yes! At the dinner table, no less!”

They all begin laughing again, and not even Anna can stop herself from chuckling. Eventually they decide to retrieve the album of old photos Castiel evidently keeps in his closet, and Anna and Gabriel go through them while Dean and Castiel make dinner. At one point, she heads into the kitchen for a refill and spots them dancing, Dean’s classic rock playing in a nearby speaker. They’re kissing and laughing and it’s such a sweet, silly moment that she takes a step backwards through the threshold. She goes back to the table with an empty glass and a smile on her face.
Dean, it turns out, is a fantastic cook. Gabriel brags that he learned this fact over Thanksgiving, but as Anna tucks into her steak and potatoes, she can hardly believe how rich and flavorful the food is. They catch-up more properly over dinner—congratulating Dean on graduating, learning that Gabriel’s magic shop is apparently so lucrative that he might begin to franchise. Dean tells Gabe about the magic shop he works at near Stanford, promising to take him by sometime soon so Gabriel and Bobby can exchange notes owner to owner. The conversation eventually moves to Anna and Castiel’s plans, which are far less concrete, it seems. Anna might finally have access to elemental magic, but she’s still an uneducated lay magician—there’s so much she doesn’t know and wants to learn.

“What about you, Cas?” she asks, pushing her plate away with a hefty sigh. At least there was a side salad on the plate, which Anna predicts was likely for their benefit, not Dean’s. He’s still happily chewing away on his steak and downing his second beer, no salad in sight. “What’s next for you?”

Dean and Castiel exchange a heavy look, and Anna wonders if she’s stepped into something her brother doesn’t want to discuss.

“I’m not sure,” Castiel admits. “I’m job hunting, but there aren’t any teaching options here for me.”

“What about Oxford?” Gabriel suggests. “Meg is up for tenure soon, ya know.”

“No, after my performance at graduation I doubt I would be welcomed back. But Meg is on the tenure track? That’s such good—” Castiel stops, looking at Gabriel with a suspicious glare. “Wait, how do you know that?”

Gabriel shrugs, staring down at his plate. “We, uh, might keep in touch…”

“Gabriel,” Anna says, her voice scolding as she tilts her head in Cas’ direction. They share a glance before Gabriel sighs.

“Fine. We’re sorta…dating?” he says in a rush. “Are you pissed? Gonna punch me?”

Castiel only blinks while Dean looks between the two of them, full of interest. “I’d like to know that as well.”

“No, I’m not. I’m disgusted, maybe, but that’s it,” Castiel finally mutters. “But if you two are happy, I’m happy.” He reaches over the table, placing his palm faceup. Dean takes his cue, entwining their fingers together. “Now that I have Dean, I realize that every previous relationship I’ve had pales in comparison.”

“Ouch,” Gabriel says, though he looks visibly relieved. “Well, good. Now I don’t have to worry about you stabbing me over the turkey at Thanksgiving.”

Dean’s mouth goes slack. “Wait, does that mean…I have to see Meg at every Novak family function?” He plasters a sarcastic grin on his face and tips his beer upwards, taking a long gulp. “Super.”

Anna can’t help it—she laughs. Her brothers and their complicated love lives.

“Also, fun fact,” Gabriel begins in an excited rush. “This isn’t the first bed buddy Cassie and I have shared, so…” He winks at Dean suggestively, who coughs on his beer until Anna finally pats him roughly on the back.

Dean’s voice is strained when he asks, “Who else have you two…?”
Castiel grimaces, probably embarrassed by his dirty laundry being aired out, but Gabriel grins elatedly. “April,” they say simultaneously, which only makes Castiel narrow his eyes more.

“She was hot, but a piece of work,” Gabriel comments, then offhandedly adds, “Cas likes ‘em feisty. Can’t help it if that’s also my type.”

“Yeah, well…” Dean grumbles out. “Let’s just say, that trend stops with Meg. You’re so not my type.”

Castiel looks visibly sickened by the conversation, and says, “That would never happen. Even if I drop dead right now, you’re on my ‘never’ list, Dean.”

“Your what?” Anna asks, realizing that being the leader of an underground resistance group has left her little time to engage with popular culture. So while Gabriel shows her the urban dictionary page (which, turns out, essentially means putting an ex on a list meaning no else can date them ever) Dean says, “Well that’s morbid, babe,” as he strokes his thumb over Castiel’s hand. Then he smiles and adds, “But you’re on mine too. Pretty sure I’d cut off the dick of anybody who tried to steal you away.”

Gabriel grimaces, covering his own crotch instinctively. “And who says romance is dead?”

The conversation returns to safer topics afterwards, which Anna is thankful for. The kitchen cleanup doesn’t take long, with Dean casting a handful of useful charms over the dirty dishes. Then they take their drinks into the living room, conversation still flowing easily enough. But something is nagging Anna in the back of her mind, and she sits in an armchair and crosses her legs, leaning over to talk to Castiel.

“So, we were talking about your job prospects before we were rudely interrupted,” she says, casting her eyes over at Gabriel’s direction, who simply shrugs.

“Oh, right…” Castiel frowns, and Dean throws his arm behind the back of the couch. “Well, Dean and I were actually just discussing that when you arrived. It seems we’re at an impasse, because neither of us want to leave Palo Alto but I can’t teach here, either.”

“But I don’t want him to give up on his dream,” Dean chirps, hand gripping the fresh beer in his hand.

“Well that sucks,” Gabriel says bluntly, and Dean and Castiel both nod. Anna, though, stands up suddenly—her hands on her face as she thinks.

“Anna?” Castiel asks, concern in his voice.

“Of course,” she says to herself quietly. “I can’t believe I’ve never thought of it before.”

Dean’s forehead wrinkles in confusion. “Uh, you okay? How much wine did you have?”

“It would take a staff of mages, some administrative help, and a large amount of starter money, but it’s doable,” she mumbles, eyes wide as she begins to pace. She turns to face them suddenly, heart pounding out of her chest. “It’s obvious, isn’t it? The solution to all our problems?”

When no one speaks, she laughs softly. “Castiel, we should start a magic school. A place where mages and lay magicians can learn the craft as equals. Hell, a place where those terms don’t even exist anymore—they won’t need to, because it’s finally an even playing field.” Her voice is shaking with emotion, and she feels on the verge of tears. “A place where you and Dean can share your knowledge with everyone, especially people like me. There are so many things I don’t know,
Cas... magic theory, history of magic, physics. I want to know and others do, too. We can do this... I know we can.”

Castiel’s eyes are wide, his cheeks flustered. “I... I don’t know anything about creating a school.”

“So we’ll figure it out,” she says, still pacing, pumped full of adrenaline. She looks at Dean and Gabriel, both of whom look just as overwhelmed but are grinning. “Dean?”

He looks at Castiel, nudges his shoulder, and says, “We stay in Palo Alto, we help people, and we get to give Stanford the middle finger?” He turns to Anna and nods. “I’m in.”

Something like an excited chuckle leaves Anna’s lips. This could really happen.

“How will we pay for it?” Castiel asks, still looking at Anna like she’s grown two heads. “Starting a university of our own... The finances are daunting.”

Gabriel leans over, dropping his empty wine glass onto the coffee table. “You two left me out of your last grand plan, so hell if I’m gonna be left out of this one.” He takes a deep breath, looking between his siblings with a look of excitement on his face. “I’ll put my shop’s franchise money towards it. It should be enough to get your feet off the ground, at least.”

“Holy shit,” Dean breathes, voicing exactly what Anna’s thinking. “This could really happen. You’re a genius, Anna. This is awesome.”

Everyone laughs nervously, excitedly, except for Castiel. He’s still planted on the couch, looking pale.

“Cas?” Dean asks in a small voice.

“I’m sorry, but there’s no way I can do something like that,” Castiel whispers, staring straight ahead. “I can’t... I’m just a professor. A new professor at that. I would have no idea what I’m doing.” He finally blinks and looks at them all, eyes shining. “How do you all have so much faith in me?”

“Cassie, two weeks ago, you were one of a handful of people who saved all of magic,” Gabriel says incredulously. “There’s really nothing you can’t do.”

Castiel scoffs and Anna moves to the floor, kneeling beside her brother and putting her hands on his arm. “What is this really about, Cas?”

Only silence follows, Castiel looking inward—like he used to as a child when he felt overwhelmed.

Finally, Dean turns to face Castiel. “Listen, if you really think this is a bad idea we’ll nip it in the bud right now.‘ His tone is firm but Castiel looks at him, hanging on Dean’s every word. “But babe, every bone in my body is tellin’ me that you want this too. You’re just scared.”

“I would be a fool not to be scared,” Castiel says defensively, and Dean throws his hands up.

“Uh, duh. Anything that’s worth doing is scary as hell. But that doesn’t mean you don’t try.”

“Never thought I’d say this, but Deano here is right,” Gabriel says lightly, which causes Dean to roll his eyes in Gabe’s direction.

“What is it that you told me, before we saved Charlie?” Dean puts his hand on Cas’ neck, and his touch must be soothing, because Castiel’s face is instantly more open and relaxed. “I just need you
to believe in yourself the way I believe in you.”

What happens next is something that Anna knows she’ll spend years thinking about, seeing in her mind clear as day: the exact moment Castiel’s face changes from anxious fear to renewed determination. He kisses Dean’s forehead before turning to Anna, exhaling nervously, and nodding.

“What should we call it?” he asks evenly.

Anna grins, her heart so full she worries it might burst. Then she shrugs, admitting, “Honestly, I have no clue.”

“What do you guys think about…” Dean pauses with significance before suggesting, “The Novak Institute of Magic?”

The name settles into the air as Castiel grabs Dean’s hand, squeezing tightly. Anna feels flustered at the thought, fighting a tightness in her throat.

In the end, it’s Gabriel who claps his hands together and says, “I think it’s got a nice ring to it.”

Chapter End Notes

So here we are, at the end of our story…

Kidding. There's an epilogue left, OF COURSE. We couldn't leave Dean or Cas without showing a flash of the future we're envisioning for them. So hang tight, grab your popcorn/tissues/blankets, and get ready to say goodbye to these guys right alongside us.
Ellen: Well, here we are, nine months and 220k words later, at the end of Magic bfs! Can you believe it? I'm going to miss these boys so much 😊

TCB: I can’t even convey how much I’ll miss this story. “Magic bfs” is the nickname we gave this fic, by the way. Which was always sort of ironic, considering it took them like...80, 90k to be actual boyfriends? Lol ANYWAYS. In order to say thanks to all our wonderful readers who've stuck with us all the way, here's a special holiday epilogue chapter to finish things off! We hope your holiday season is warm and wonderful and full of love. (Especially of the Destiel variety.)

Ellen: absolutely, and a relaxing break, if you're able to. I recommend not writing a huge plot-heavy fic at this time. You know that meme with the guy with things stuck all over the wall and string connecting everything? That's what it felt like putting this fic together 😒

TCB: God, that is not an exaggeration. We’ve talked about this story—wrote it or reread it or thought about it—everyday for nearly a year. It’s the end of an era, really, and we’re so thankful you’ve all come along on this journey with us.

Ellen: so here we go: the end! ❤️

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Castiel shuts the door to his office and hurries down the corridor. After ten years of teaching and running the Novak Institute of Magic, the end of the semester can’t come soon enough. He desperately needs a break—they all do. But one more class and he’s out of here. He hurries into the central part of the school building.

The main entryway of the Institute is full of students rushing to get to their next class. The space feels even more crowded than usual thanks to the gigantic pine tree filling up the space, the tips of the branches nearly brushing the high, pressed ceiling. Floating golden lights descend all around it like softly falling snow and they twinkle where they rest in the branches. Castiel admires Dean’s work in decorating it. The whole thing is powered by a spell of Castiel’s own—a container holding a store of fire energy, kind of like a battery, and not dissimilar to the elemental Well they’d accidentally destroyed, what—twelve years ago now. Doesn’t time fly? Castiel muses as he looks up at it. He’s sure it only feels like just the other day.

He feels Dean’s magic before he sees him hurrying into the foyer from the opposite direction with Charlie by his side. He’ll never stop being struck by how beautiful Dean looks in the light filtering down from his festive creation, and even more when he’s animatedly talking to his friend. Sure, maybe they both have a few more lines in the forehead and around their eyes, but they’re mostly from laughter, and only a few of them are from their students.

Dean’s voice carries across the foyer over the hubbub of the bustling people. Castiel’s sure he’d be able to pick him out of a stadium crowd if he had to. “Yep, that’ll be great. And make sure you guys bring some of that eggnog again—that shit is amazing,” Dean says, his face lighting up even
further as he looks around for Castiel, obviously sensing him as Castiel had just done.

Their eyes meet, and the world disappears, just as it always does. Castiel’s heart feels as though it might burst at the relief just from seeing Dean, from connecting with him in their busy day. You okay?

I’m just great now, Cas. Dean’s smile lights up the whole room.

Charlie clears her throat from beside Dean. “Uh, I’ll leave you to it. Catch you later, love you guys!”

Castiel drags his eyes away from Dean to call to Charlie as she passes him on her way out of the foyer, “See you at the Mana Bar, right?”

“Sure thing! Don’t suck face for too long, class is about to start,” she adds, laughing as she goes. The other students start to thin out as well.

Castiel steps forward and wraps Dean in his arms, pressing his lips to Dean’s. Their kiss is sweet and warm, and with the gentle falling lights of the Christmas tree all around them, Castiel feels like he might have found heaven. Could he just stay here for the rest of the afternoon?

A whistle and catcall from a couple of passing students make Dean groan softly, pulling back and putting his forehead on Castiel’s. “You sure we don’t have a few minutes for you to blow me in the janitor’s closet right now?”

Castiel laughs softly. “I don’t think he’s forgiven us after last time, do you?” High spots of color appear on Dean’s cheeks—obviously remembering the time a few weeks ago when Castiel had been enthusiastically fucking him in the closet, and the magical shockwave from Dean’s orgasm had burst every bottle of cleaning liquid in the room. It hadn’t been pretty, and they’d been in the middle of a complex spell to clean it all up when the janitor himself had opened the door. Castiel was still unable to look him in the eye. He chuckles, adding, “One more class, then I’m all yours for two whole weeks, honey.”

“Thank god,” Dean breathes, leaning in for another squeeze, then pulls back to look him seriously in the eye. “Oh hey, did you get in touch with Anna?”

Dean has been planning a Christmas Eve party for weeks now, and Castiel is starting to think he’s getting a little too stressed out about it. He cups Dean’s jaw with one hand, running his thumb across Dean’s cheek. “I did, and she’s coming. She says Anael will come as well.”

“Oh, awesome! It’ll be great to catch up!”

They hadn’t seen Anael for some time, as she’d been away on another research trip to England to visit Oxford and study the way lay magicians are taught there. It seems like so long ago, yet only just the other day when they had all stood in this very spot, the foyer filled with family and friends, and cut the ribbon to open the next chapter of their lives.

The years since they’d decided to create the school have been filled with challenges, sure, like when the purchase of the house the school is based in nearly fell through at the last minute. The old manor house had been run down, but he and Dean had fallen in love with it the moment they’d stepped into this foyer and seen the staircases running around the walls. It had been a nail-biting few hours while Gabe’s finances had finally come through, and the house was secure.

Even before they’d been able to open the doors to students, they’d been on a rollercoaster of ups and downs to get the place renovated, to engage staff and get things rolling, but on the whole,
Castiel likes to think they’ve nailed it. He still has to pinch himself some days to believe he’s really here, and that they’ve kept it running for so long.

Dean steps back and rubs at his face. “Seriously, after the drinks tonight and then the Christmas Eve thing on Monday, you ‘n me got a date with the couch for the next week, okay?”

Castiel grins at him indulgently. This semester has been hard on all of them, and he and Dean have been looking forward to this break for weeks now. “As long as you don’t make me watch Star Wars again, I’m game.”

Dean shoves at his shoulder playfully. “You’re never gonna let me forget that, are you? Anyway, you enjoyed it! Nah, it’s time to rewatch the greatest Christmas movie of all time.”

“What, It’s a Wonderful Life?” Castiel has seen a lot of movies at Dean’s insistence now, but the seasonal ones get a bit hazy.

Dean huffs in disbelief. “No! Die Hard, of course.”

“Of course.” Castiel picks up Dean’s hand where their fingers are laced together, and kisses his knuckles. The magical hum from Dean’s ring, his talisman, resonates with Castiel’s magic where he touches it, his fingers tingling and his lips buzzing when they graze the metal.

Dean’s eyes are soft as he gazes at Castiel, smiling.

“We should get to class,” Castiel reminds him, letting their joined hands swing down between them again.

Dean sighs. “Yeah, I guess. I’ll see you upstairs later?”

“See you then.” Castiel leans forwards to press their lips together again, then steps back and turns to head away towards his Magical Society classroom.

On Christmas Eve, Castiel gets home from the shopping mall laden with bags of presents for their family and friends. He’s glad he got them wrapped at the store—they need to get ready to head down for the party.

Dean’s already home when Castiel opens the door to their apartment. Their comfortable two-bedroom place forms the fourth level of the Institute's building, originally a large attic space filled mostly with spiders and rats, but now converted into a comfortable living space for two professors. The living room walls hold pictures of them both, suited and scrubbed up on their wedding day, smiling at each other with eyes full of love. Other pictures show their family and friends, happy days that might have faded into memory, but bring a smile to Castiel’s face.

His work as the president of the Novak Institute of Magic keeps him busy enough these days, but add teaching a class into the mix and he barely gets any time to scratch his nose, let alone spend quality time with Dean. Guilt gnaws at him, but as he hears the shower running, he decides he’d better try to make it up to his husband.

He dumps the bags of presents on the dining table in their living space and hangs up his trench coat behind the door. Loosening his tie, he starts unbuttoning his shirt before he even gets into the
master bedroom. As he walks into the room, he toes off his shoes and leaves the rest of his clothes in a pile at the foot of their king sized bed.

While Dean has been home much of the day, Castiel had some work to get finished today, and he’d run to the store after he’d finished. He can hear Dean singing in the shower, so he mustn’t be too stressed about the day’s preparations. Castiel pads, naked, through the open bathroom door and bites his lip at the sight of Dean running his head under the shower, the water cascading over his hair and down his back as he hums to himself.

Dean wipes water out of his eyes, but without looking around, says, “There you are. I thought you’d gotten lost.”

Castiel smiles as he steps in behind Dean, glad that they’d decided on a large, walk-in shower for this room. He presses his body to Dean’s back, humming at the wet warmth as he puts his hands on Dean’s sides and nuzzles into the side of Dean’s neck. Dean lets out a breathy moan as Castiel rubs his already half-hard cock against Dean’s crack, whispering, “How was your day, love?”

“Better now,” Dean replies, grinding his butt back into Castiel, who lets out a groan of his own.

He reaches down to grab Dean’s length in his hand, pleased to find it filled out nicely already. He pulls at it lazily a few times, his lips still on Dean’s jaw, until Dean says, “God, I wish we had more time for this right now, but we gotta get moving, Cas.”

Castiel doesn’t stop his hand. “Surely we can take a few minutes to let off a bit of steam…” He continues kissing Dean, his stubble rough on his lips, and Dean lets out a small sound of frustration that turns into an aroused gasp. Castiel thrusts his hips forward again, seeking friction, but just as Dean turns in Castiel’s arms and slots their mouths together, there’s a loud knock on the apartment door.

“Fuck,” Dean says when they both look towards the sound in surprise. “That’ll be Sam. Great, now we gotta deal with this all night,” Dean adds, gesturing downwards.

Castiel pulls Dean in by the shoulders and kisses him again. “If we don’t answer it, maybe he’ll go away?”

The knocking comes again. A faint shout can be heard, “Come on, jerk, time for the food to arrive!”

“Crap, the food.” Dean hurries out of the shower, wrapping a towel around him. He leans back in to point to Castiel. “Raincheck?”

Castiel frowns playfully. “I suppose…”

“Awesome,” Dean says as he runs out to answer the door.

Castiel gets dressed as quickly as he can, hopping with one foot in his jeans while he tries to remember what shirt he was going to wear. Dean heads back in to get dressed just as Castiel’s putting on shoes, and he presses a kiss to Dean’s temple as he heads out into the living room, running his hand through his damp hair as he goes.

Their apartment already seems to be full of people—Sam and his wife Jess, plus Charlie and Dorothy, who must have come up at the same time.

After a round of hugs and kisses and “Happy holidays!” exchanged, they all head down to the assembly hall on the second level of the school building.
Dean has outdone himself with decorations in the hall. The room was once a grand salon, as far as they can tell, with tall windows along one side and a high ceiling, now dark but filled with bright witchlights like stars, covering up the scorch marks left by students practicing their fire spells in this space. The glow falls on a long table on one edge of the room and smaller tables lined up across one side, leaving space for people to stand around. The large Christmas tree in the corner of the room sparkles with silver and gold snowflakes and baubles.

Benny is already there, directing his catering staff where to leave the finger food—sparkling cakes and a pile of color-shifting chocolates, a huge board filled with cheeses, ham and multicolored dips, and a huge bowl of punch with what looks like real fish swimming in it, even though Castiel knows they’re just illusions. Dean hovers around, touching up decorations here and there, and at one stage magically altering the makeup of a tray of small containers containing flavored ice. When Castiel raises his eyebrow at him, Dean replies, “What? The spell wasn’t quite right—they would have melted in no time.” Castiel shakes his head fondly—always a master of spell mechanics, even now.

Soon, more people have arrived and the crowd spills into the room.

Castiel makes his way around to say hello to everyone, his magic buzzing with all his favorite people in one place. Garth has arrived, along with another of their staff, the cranky old combat magic professor, Rufus. Castiel wishes him a "Hanukkah Sameach!” as he joins the other teachers near the food. Other members of Anna’s original coven are also here, including Anael, Benjamin and Hester, and Castiel is glad to see Neil and Rachel with their little son, Alfie.

He’s still standing by the door when Ellen, Bobby and Jo arrive, the two older mages hand-in-hand. And behind them, someone who Castiel hasn’t seen for years, and hadn’t expected to see here at all tonight—though he always sends her an invitation—Missouri Mosely.

Castiel greets her with a warm hug. “How are you, Missouri?”

“I’m well, sugar,” she replies, looking around the room with a smile. “The future looks bright, Castiel,” she says, with a wink. Castiel is a little confused by her comment, but he supposes she’s right—they’ve worked so hard for this, and they’ve done it. They’ve brought magic to everyone, and taught those who wouldn’t have the opportunity otherwise. Castiel doesn’t think he could be any more proud.

“Cas!” A voice calls from behind him and he turns to catch Anna in his arms. His sister is tottering on high heels and a slinky black dress, and obviously already most of the way to being drunk.

“Anna? Are you okay?” Castiel asks, holding her at arm’s length and peering into her slightly unfocused eyes. Anna has been doing this more and more lately—she told Castiel once that she had missed out on hedonism in her youth, so she was making up for it now. Castiel has tried to turn a blind eye to the way she’s worked her way through a string of casual partners and partied her way through the last few years. She deserves a break after all she’s been through, sure—Castiel doesn’t begrudge her that. But worry for her is a constant hum in Castiel’s mind.

“I’m fine, don’t worry,” Anna replies, brushing off his concern with a wave of her hand. “Awesome party, by the way. Look at all our people here! This place is amazing, you know that? I’m proud of us.”

Castiel smiles at her, feeling the glow of her pride and happiness through her magic. “Thanks, Anna. Me too.”

Anna looks back out into the crowd. “Hey, is Garth still seeing that girl?”
“You mean Beth? His wife?” Castiel says slowly, giving her a pointed look when she glances back at him. “Yes, he is, and she’s expecting.”

“Ah. Okay then, never mind.” She wanders off towards the food table, but she almost runs right into Anael on the way. She veers off when Anael drags her out of the room and back into the corridor.

Castiel shakes his head as he watches them go, wondering what’s going on… But as he turns, he’s distracted by the sight of Dean across the room, his head thrown back as he laughs at something Benny says. Castiel will never be able to help being drawn back into Dean’s orbit—his husband, his love—always the center of his universe. He wanders over, wrapping his arm in behind Dean's back. Dean turns to plant a kiss on his cheek, and as Castiel locks eyes with him, he wonders whether this night could get any more perfect.

“Earth to Dean and Cas, you readin’ me?”

Castiel tears his eyes away from Dean to glance as Benny, who stands near them wearing an amused smile.

“After all this time, you two are still in your own fuckin’ world, aren’t you? It’s adorable.”

Dean says through his grin, “Hey, I’ve seen you share heart-eyes with that girl of yours, too, man.”

Benny chuckles again. “We might not have no profound bond or whatever, but what we’ve got is pretty special.”

Castiel smiles, happy to see their friend so at peace with how things have worked out. “I’m sorry to interrupt you, but I was just wondering if you’d seen Bobby anywhere? I need to check with him about some supplies for the potions class after the break.”

“He’s just over there, talking to Missouri,” Dean says, nodding in Bobby’s direction. “But you shouldn’t be talking shop tonight, Cas. Can’t it wait till next week?”

“It won’t take long,” Castiel says, and kisses Dean’s cheek. He leaves Dean and Benny to their conversation and heads back across the room to talk to Bobby.

Dean watches Cas walk away, enjoying the way his new acid-wash jeans hug his ass. He really shouldn’t be having such thoughts now, though—he’s having a hard enough time after their interrupted shower sex earlier. He drags his eyes away from Cas and notices Anna and Anael standing just outside the door to the hall, their faces close together, obviously furious with one another. He eyes the heated whispers between them, raising an eyebrow at Benny.

“Huh,” Dean says curiously. “What’s going on over there?”

Benny, never one to be entertained by gossip, just shrugs. “Nothin’ that involves us, brother.”

“Speak for yourself,” Dean grumbles, polishing off his glass of Benny’s infamous spiked punch. “That’s my sister-in-law with the ‘domestic dispute’ vibes over there.”

Anna stalks down the hallway and through the threshold, and Anael wipes at her eyes, eyebrows wrinkled together in confusion and anger. It’s the expression of caring about someone so much, too
much, and perhaps not knowing how to move forward and take what you want. It’s an expression
Dean remembers wearing the entire fall semester of his final year of grad school.

And suddenly, he knows exactly why Anael and Anna are fighting.

“We’ll catch up later?” Dean tells Benny, though he already knows his longtime friend is doing
well—happily married to Andrea, his restaurant thriving down in Louisiana. He’s not worried
about Benny, not anymore—not since they broke the Well and released all that elemental magic
into the world. His lay magician friend doesn’t even have to be known as that anymore—he’s a
chef, a businessman, a talented magic user. Benny and Andrea are in town for a few days, so
they’ll probably double date with Dean and Cas sometime after Christmas. But right now, Dean
has more urgent conversations to have.

And two redheads that need to be set straight.

He can feel Castiel’s eyes on him as he walks towards Anael, and he wants to send his husband a
quick reassurance, but isn’t quite sure what information to share yet. There’s a good chance that
Dean is wrong, very wrong, but there’s another part of him that sees Anna’s recent years of
partying and one-night stands and sees right through it all. That’d been his MO before Castiel had
knocked him off his feet. Not swept, Dean thinks with some clarity, remembering of how irate him
and Cas used to be towards each other. Knocked.

“You need a drink,” Dean tells his friend by way of greeting, and Anael wipes the corner of her
wet eyelashes and chuckles.

“You have no idea,” she says bitterly, and Dean resists
the urge to say I think I might, actually. He
holds the crook of his elbow out and she takes it gracefully, gliding them towards the punch bowl
without small talk. They’ve been friends long enough that they don’t feel pressured to fill idle
silences, which Dean is grateful for. They’ve also been friends long enough that Dean doesn’t feel
like he has to pussyfoot around, so when they’ve refilled their drinks and taken long sips, he says,
“So, you’re in love with Anna.”

Anael sputters, coughing so loudly that Dean eventually takes her drink. When she recovers, she
snatches her drink away and glares at him. “We’re best friends.”

“That’s not a ‘no,’” Dean says smugly.

“We’re roommates!” Anael says, as if roommates falling for each other are the most absurd thing
that can happen. Clearly his friend has never read a romance novel. Not that, uh, Dean ever has…

“Again, you haven’t said—”

“Just leave it alone, Dean,” Anael hisses, pulling him in by the open end of his flannel. “Maybe
there’s some truth to what you’re saying. But you have no idea what this feels like.”

Dean laughs—he’s not sure why, but Christmastime at the Institute always makes him a bit
nostalgic, and he’s been thinking a lot lately about him and Cas. Where they started, where they
are now, where they’re going. “You think I’ve never had a Novak jerkin’ my chain? Do you not
remember how I met my husband?”

Anael softens a bit, though her eyes are still wary. “It’s different with us. Anna and I have known
each other for so long, and back when she was just ‘the Captain’ and I was her right-hand
magician…everything was so simple.”

Dean nods knowingly, having met them both during this time. “She was the badass leader, and you
were more interested in the new guy,” he says teasingly, adding in a wink. Anael huffs and makes a show of rolling her eyes.

“Yes, though the new guy was totally taken the moment he laid eyes on Castiel Novak,” she says, and Dean shrugs in a “you’re not wrong” kind of way. The day they met, his whole world was turned upside down.

“But after the explosion at the Well, and later—when I came to help you guys set up the Institute—we became friends. Me and Anna, I mean. Actual friends.” Dean’s nodding along encouragingly. He knows all of this, having watched it all go down in his peripheral vision. But if it helps Anael to talk it out, that’s what he’ll do.

“She wasn’t on the run anymore and could have a life again, you know? And while she was out trying to find herself, we moved in together, started doing everything together, and…” She glances down at her drink and swallows it in one large gulp. “God, I just love her voice. I love how soft it is, even when the words she’s saying are the opposite. She’s so strong and measured and intense. And smart! God, she’s smart. And surprisingly witty. And loyal. And maybe the most gorgeous person I’ve ever seen…”

Dean rubs his hands together, a sense of triumph making him grin. Castiel is so damn intelligent that it’s rare Dean gets to surprise him, but boy oh boy, he’ll be thrilled to drop this revelation later. Plus, it’s strangely fitting that Anael’s favorite things about Anna are eerily similar to what attracted him to “Dr. Novak” all those years ago. Those damn, irresistible Novaks.

“You are fucking smitten,” he says, stating the obvious as he gloats. She crosses her arms and sighs, looking like her thoughts are somewhere else. “So what’s the problem?”

She throws her arms down in a huff. “The problem is that she’s in her forties, acting like she’s in her twenties! And after all this time she has no idea what she means to me.”

“Well, not to ask the obvious question, but…have you told her?”

“No,” Anael admits, biting her lip. “But I don’t know how much more obvious I can be. She’s still sleeping around and we fight about it all the time, and I’m about ready to…” She glances down at her feet, swaying a bit unstably as she reaches for the punch ladle. Goddamn Benny and his goddamn punch. It might be even stouter than last year’s. “Maybe it’s just time to—”

“Nu-huh, no way. You do not get to throw in the towel—not on Christmas!” Dean says a little loudly, knowing he sounds absurd and possibly a little drunk. Wow, when are Benny’s caterers bringing out the rest of the food again? He probably needs to pace himself better. “You just need to look for an opening, and take it.”

Anael tucks a red strand behind her ear, looking uncertain. “We’ll see,” she says noncommittally.

Dean opens his mouth to add more, when in the corner of his eye, he spots Gabriel, his wife Kali, and Meg all enter the party together. Gabriel is wearing dark jeans and a button-up, looking a bit like the cat that ate the canary with both women on either arm. Even after Gabriel and Meg officially broke up, and then Gabe married someone else, Dean’s still subjected to seeing her at nearly every family function. He still doesn’t quite understand how exes, turned fuck buddies, turned occasional-threesomes-in-an-open-marriage, somehow works for the three of them…but hey, he’s the furthest thing from vanilla. In the dusty old closets of the manor, he’s pretty sure him and Cas have had way more hookups than any of the students they teach. Neither of their sex drives have diminished with age, which Dean suspects might honestly be magic. He’s thirty-eight, and Cas is forty-one for god’s sake. Meg joked once that their profound bond was laced with
viagra, which even Cas found funny.

While his thoughts are running away from him, he realizes that Anael is physically running away from him—and this conversation. She’s halfway to the long, center table where all the appetizers are spread. Dean huffs in surprise and makes his mind up. He walks towards Gabriel, greets Kali with a warm smile and Meg with a sarcastic grin, then plucks the magic shop mogul from between the two.

“You won’t mind if I borrow your date, will you?” he says flashily, not waiting for a response as Gabriel mumbles something like, “At least buy me a drink first if you’re gonna manhandle me, Deano.”

Dean’s not paying attention, though—he’s thinking in Cas’ direction. C’m’here a sec, I need to talk to you.

“What are you…?” Gabriel eyes go from wide to narrow as he sees Castiel, interest piqued, walking towards them. “Ugh, seriously? I hate when you two do that freaky little telepathy talk. It’s like your *Avatar* tails are touching and I need to look away.”

Dean grimaces, suppressing a laugh. “Okay man, how about you make a pop culture reference that’s not over twenty years old, then we can talk?” Even as he’s saying it, though, the timeline doesn’t make any sense to Dean. It feels like just yesterday he was in bed with Cas, nervously awaiting their first open day of the Novak Institute of Magic. How did all that time get away from him so easily?

Gabriel scrubs a hand over his face and mutters, “God, I feel old,” around the same time that Dean feels Castiel’s warmth beside him. Castiel loops a hand around Dean’s waist, pulling him close, and asks, “And how are we making my immensely older brother feel old today?”

“By telling him that his pop culture references are older than yours—which is saying something,” Dean says with a sheepish grin, as Gabriel laughs at the tables being turned. Before they get too sidetracked, or Dean’s willpower to resist getting another drink diminishes, he says, “Listen, I need y’all to hatch another Novak brother prank tonight.”

“Oh?” Castiel chuckles, eyebrows knitted in surprise. “Why?”

“Oh who?” Gabriel grins wickedly, evidently not caring about the reason. Dean lowers his voice to an excited whispers, tells them his plan, and within five minutes, he’s watching them maneuver around the party, indirectly bringing Anna and Anael side-by-side. Castiel had been a little shocked to learn that their relationship had developed into more than friendship—at least on Anael’s side—but Gabriel had just nodded knowingly and gotten to work. The brothers circled them, casting the spell down by their thighs stealthily, and once the spell was cast…

That’s when the first mistletoe grows above their heads. Anna and Anael laugh it off nervously, neither looking each other in the eye and heading in opposite directions of the hall.

“Perhaps your plan won’t work,” Castiel whispers to Dean with a frown, the minute they have privacy. Dinner is finally served and it’s buffet style, so Dean is happily chewing on some obscenely delicious roast beef while Sam and Charlie make fun of his moaning from across the table.

“Oh, ye of little faith…” Dean shakes his head knowingly and smiles, before sliding a hand on his husband’s kneecap. He’s wearing a blue sweater with a button-up underneath, his hair all wavy and air-dried from the shower, and Dean remembers with some vibrancy… *The shower*. Jesus, Cas had
stroked him up so hard and wet and wonderful, just to leave him with a raging boner and a desperate need to get fucked.

“Dean,” Castiel says, squirming a little. “You mind thinking a little more quietly?”

Like most days when he’s daydreaming about sex, he has no idea he’s projecting his lust and need and fantasies into Cas’ subconscious until the evidence is pressed up, hard, against Castiel’s zipper.

“Oh, Dean,” Castiel says, sounding way more mischievous than apologetic, and Castiel rolls his eyes and entwines their fingers together. Eventually, after some prompting, Dean is telling the whole table embarrassing Sammy stories—Jess’ favorite topic—and Dean thinks for the hundredth time how fucking relieved he is that his brother ended up with someone like Jessica. Back in his junior year, Sam had been too preoccupied with a short and curvy brunette named Satan (or, uh, Ruby) who ended up being a double-crossing bitch. They hadn’t seen heads or tails of her since the day Stanford lost the Well.

“And how’s the school, Missouri?” Castiel says politely, and Dean switches gears, interested to hear this response.

“It’s fine,” Missouri says tactfully, the thin line of her mouth giving away more than her words ever could. Deans not quite sure how they’ve done it, but he knows the Institute has impacted Stanford’s applicant pool. Their attendance grows every year, while lay magicians rights group became more outspoken and visible. As thrilled as the developments have made Dean, he knows it’s simply the most practical choice for higher education—any student with magical abilities and the desire to learn can attend the Institute, at a very affordable cost to boot.

Gotta love poetic symmetry, Dean thinks. Strangely enough, it’s that thought in his head when he turns to see Anael and Anna sitting together a table over, a spelled mistletoe hanging over their
heads. Dean snorts with laughter when he sees the murderous expression on Anael’s face as she glares at him, easily putting two and two together of who, exactly, is behind this. He just shrugs, blowing her an ironic air-kiss, and she furtively shoots him the bird from across the room.

Dean gets lost in conversation for the rest of the evening. It’s amazing how these year-end holiday parties have become an opportunity to gather everyone he loves under one roof. That’s what he needs most nowadays—not more *stuff*, but genuine time to enjoy his family’s company. And that’s what they are to him: family. Even when Bobby pulls him aside to poke fun at his over-the-top lights display, or Jo and Ash get too drunk and end up pretending they’re in a karaoke bar, or Meg finds a sneaky way to pinch his ass and mutter “yep, you still got it, Winchester.” The night unfurls into a chaotic mess of love and laughter and weirdness and incredulity and Dean wouldn’t change one fucking thing. Especially not the moment when—after nearly a dozen separate mistletoes have grown over their heads—Anna finally makes the first move by cupping Anael’s cheek, gazing into her eyes, and kissing her straight on the lips. The kiss had been chaste but it certainly lingers, and Dean wolf-whistles with the best of them (namely, Gabe and Meg) until they tentatively kiss again. By the third kiss, they’re much more confident, and five minutes later, Castiel is mumbling about how “very sorry he is for playing a role in his sister making out with Anael at the dinner table.”

It’s well past midnight when Dean and Castiel have said drunk, jovial, cheerful goodbyes to nearly everyone at the party. As usual, his brother is the last to leave.

“See you tomorrow for breakfast?” Sam asks them, kissing the crown of Jess’ head as she leans into his touch.

“Let’s make it lunch,” Dean amends, smiling somewhat guiltily but feeling way too tired for a six a.m. alarm.

“Yes, and you can tell me how work’s going,” Castiel says to Sam, as if they hadn’t caught up over lunch just last week. “I’ve been following the Abbadon case, but you *have* to me how a jury lets someone off like that, despite all the evidence.”

“I wish I could, Cas. It makes no sense to me either,” Sam sighs in a huff, frowning, and Jess pats his midsection companionably.

“What do you think, Dean? Another Christmas where our husbands talk nonstop about work?” she jokes.

“Hey, it’s a tradition at this point,” Dean concedes, while Sam and Castiel seem to exchange culpable looks. Dean knows that sudden drop of silence from Castiel means something, so he backtracks, adding, “One I kinda look forward to, if you wanna know the truth.”

Castiel smiles and squeezes his hand, and they finally say their final goodnights and trek up to the fourth floor and into their apartment. They fall into their nighttime routine easily, stripping down to their boxers and brushing their teeth shoulder to shoulder. It’s only when they’re lying in bed, Dean situating himself between Cas’ thighs to bend down and kiss him, that he realizes Cas has been thinking hard about something.

“You know I love our school,” he begins tentatively, wrapping a hand around Dean and massaging the muscles of his lower back. “It’s like a dream, how well things have turned out. All day long, I kept on thinking—this can’t be real.”

Dean kisses his forehead. “I know the feeling.”

“I love our students, our professors…the impact we’ve had on the world.” Castiel blinks, the
wheels of his mind turning. “You know all this?”

Dean nods, waiting. “I do.”

Castiel looks up at him, eyes shining, Dean’s hands petting his collarbones. “But you know I love you more, right?”

Dean responds with a kiss, deep and prodding, and Castiel’s mouth opens up for him like it always does. Dean moans when Castiel flips them around, tumbling so suddenly that his back is on the mattress, and they’re still kissing earnestly, heat rising between them. Dean relaxes against the memory foam, almost sighing when he feels a half-hard cock brush his. This intimacy with Cas, this language their bodies seem to speak, it feels effortless and magnificent and right. He’s not sure where he read this, but Dean thinks sometimes about *a petite mort*—a French phrase that essentially means a good orgasm can feel like dying. Tangled up with his husband, his lover, Dean’s knees are brought towards his head and a slick finger is pushed into the tightness between his cheeks, and Dean thinks that he dies and comes to life every time Castiel touches him.

“You’re feeling romantic tonight,” Castiel teases, nipping and tugging on Dean’s ear with his teeth.

“Fuck, how—” Dean hisses when a second finger slides home, giving his erection a quick stroke before forcing his hands back down on the mattress. “How much of that did you hear?”

“Not much.” Castiel tucks his face into the crook of Dean’s neck and shoulder, sucking on the tender spot behind his ear until Dean squirms. “Just something about you ‘dying and coming to life’ every I touch you…”

“Oh, fuck you,” Dean says with a laugh.

“I think you’ve got the mechanics of this mixed up, sweetheart,” Castiel says playfully, though his voice turns husky as he adds a third finger. “And you know I don’t mean to listen in. You’re just a broadcaster.”

“Oh huh, sure,” Dean says, feeling suddenly too busy to be having this conversation because *holy fucking shit, that’s his goddamn prostate.*

“Of course it is,” Castiel mumbles, some pride in his voice. “I could find your prostate blindfolded.”

“Okay, Mister Overconfident,” Dean breathes, pulling his legs up closer. “Why don’t you put some of that attitude into fucking me already?”

When Cas slides his cock in—for the thousandth, maybe millionth time in their life together—Dean still has that momentary thought of too much, too big, too full, before he adjusts and becomes eager for it, rolling his hips in search of friction. Castiel sets the pace, all slow and deep and teasing, and Dean feels his legs shaking with the effort to stay folded. He still loves sex, but he’s not as young as he once was. Sensing his discomfort, Castiel fluffs the pillow under his hips, arranges him into a spot where his legs are parted and resting, and slips his slick cock back into Dean effortlessly. This is Dean’s favorite position after a night of drinking, because he just lies there and takes whatever Cas gives him…which is always much more than he deserves.

His sight begins to go hazy the faster Castiel’s hips seem to move, vision all milky and dim. At first he just thinks his orgasm is fast approaching, but then he hears it—the opening note to “Traveling Riverside Blues,” the song that’s been the personalized tone of his alarm clock for…

Wait, *was* his alarm clock tone. Ten years ago. They heard the song for a solid year before Cas
grew so tired of it that he blackmailed Dean with sex until he changed his alarm clock ringer. But how, and why, would they be hearing it now…?

Dean blinks.

When he opens his eyes again, he’s in bed with Castiel. They’re in their attic apartment. And that is where the similarities end, because their apartment is rudimentary and sparse—half their future seemingly missing, half of Cas’ books still in boxes. It’s a warm, summer morning…not late Christmas Eve. And the Cas beneath him is trimmer, his face smooth and wrinkle-free, and they stare into each other’s eyes and seem to reach the same conclusion.

Dean is twenty-eight. Castiel is thirty-one.

And today is the first day of the Novak Institute of Magic.

“Did we just…” Castiel scrubs a hand over his face, sleepy, as Dean just stares at his mouth, distracted by how gorgeous he finds it. He reaches over with a careless hand and turns off his alarm. “I think we just had—”

“I know,” Dean breathes, blinking and bringing his thumb to Castiel’s lower lip. Last night, they both went to bed nervous about today, worried that there was no way they could pull this off and that the last two years of planning would be for nothing. But he never expected they would be comforted by…

A prophetic dream. Ten years into the future.

A dream with achingly perfect outcomes, and intimate relationships, and lifelong friendships—the details of which are evaporating quickly into Dean’s subconscious. He wants to hold on to all the specifics, wants to clutch them to his chest, but a wiser part of him knows it’s not good to know these things ahead of time.

But still, that future. He wants it.

“That was you and me. And we were…” The word married hangs with significance in the room, though this possibility is hardly a secret. Dean had practically put his intentions on a billboard during that one dream they shared after the Well explosion. Still, he thinks about the engagement rings he’s looked at the past few weeks, imagining them on his finger. Imagining them on Cas’. None of them felt as right as the talismans they’ve already share, so he was considering skipping that whole forced-ring situation altogether, an option his future self obviously agreed with… At least, he thinks so? The finer points are already turning gray, and now he’s just left with a general sense of contentedness.

“Dean—”

“Kiss me?” Dean says in a rush, too overcome to say anything else. “Sweetheart please, kiss me…” His mouth leaves wet, open-mouthed kisses on Cas’ neck. “Then fuck me…” He reaches between them, finding Cas’ morning wood. Probably the result of their very good, very realistic sex dream. There was sex in that dream, right? “Then, we’re gonna meet the first day of school head on, like the badasses we are. Capisce?”
In response Castiel does what he always does. With stubborn hesitation and a playful eye roll, he gives Dean exactly what he wants. In this case, a kiss.

Later, after some stellar morning sex and a shared shower, Dean is sliding on his nicest pair of jeans and admiring the way Cas can really rock dress slacks, when he chuckles to himself. Cas is finagling his tie in the mirror, backwards as always, and he looks at Dean with a curious sort of amusement. “What?”

“Nothing, uh, just thinking…” Dean finishes sliding on his flannel and goes to his boyfriend, slapping his hands always gently and taking over tie duty. “It’s just, the first day of school… This is how we met, remember?”

Castiel’s eyes gaze into his, smiling what Dean considers his “soft, secret smile.” The one reserved just for him.

“I seem to recall you being very late that day,” Castiel teases. “And totally cavalier about your academic future, Mister Winchester.”

“Yeah, well…I recall you being a total dick, Doctor Novak.” Dean chuckles and finishes the knot, but leaves it flipped backwards because the effect is oh-so-Cas. “You gave me shit about everything, man, even my GPA.”

Castiel laughs. “I did. But then you compared the physics of magic to the inside of an engine, and I thought…there’s more to this man than meets the eye.” Dean shakes his head and snorts, heading into the bedroom to find his knapsack. Castiel follows him and says, “I’m serious, Dean. I had never met a mind like yours.”

Hands slide around his waist, and Dean responds by pulling Cas forward, settling into a warm embrace. “Yeah, well, I’d like to say I was thinking the same. But really, I was just distracted by how fucking hot you were.”

Castiel chuckles quietly and kisses his cheek. “I kept thinking about that phone number you had scribbled on your hand. It bothered me for some reason.”

“For some reason, huh?” Dean repeats with a grin. He kisses Castiel once, twice, three times, but pulls away before things can get too heated. They can’t exactly show up at the Institute with wrinkled clothes and sex hair. At least, not on the first day.

“I love you,” Castiel says softly, their foreheads touching, hands wrapped around each other’s waist as the bond glows brightly between them.

Dean’s tempted to give a lighthearted response because that’s his MO. But Cas has received the “Han Solo” reply enough times that it’s lost its comic effect. Plus, today is a big day—one of those days they’ll hopefully look back on and remscience about, like they’ve been doing all morning.

“I love you too,” he whispers, brushing their lips together once more.

Castiel slips on his suit jacket and Dean grabs a thermos of coffee, and they head downstairs and enter the school hand in hand, ready for the day to start. The details of their morning dream have faded by now, but whatever the future may bring, Dean has a feeling it’s gonna be pretty fucking epic.

One might even say magical.
Chapter End Notes

And there you have it! Thanks, and well done for making it to the end ❤️

If you enjoyed reading, would you mind passing the word?
Here's a tumblr post to reblog.
Or you could retweet.

We've been lucky to have a very special team of friends helping us to bring this story to you. We even brought in extras partway through to help us keep track of the complexities! A million thanks to Lorelei2005, WaywardJenn, MandalaRose, WaywardAF67 and CBFirestarter. Love you girls so much ❤️

Ellen: I've got to say a huge thank you to the amazing TCB, for sticking with me through the crazy world building and late night/early morning brainstorming. She's a brilliant and talented writer and editor, and I've learned so much during this process—writing and posting week-to-week, letting go of planning control and trusting the plot to work itself out. It's been a ride, and I can't believe it's all over! Thank you so much —love you hun 😊

TCB: Ellen!! You little sweetie 😊 thank you for having such an epic vision for this story. Honestly, in the thick of it, there were moments where (if it was a solo fic) I might’ve taken the easy way out. But you always pushed us to write the best possible plot and never phone it in. I’ve certainly grown because of it. I’m so proud of the work we’ve done and the effort we’ve poured into this epic world of ours. I love you!

Ellen: We've both got more stories in the works, so stay tuned! Meanwhile, you can find me on Tumblr or on Twitter. Come say hi!

TCB: Yeah, please go to our profiles and hit the “subscribe” button!! I’m actually about to start posting a new WIP with our other bestie, CBFirestarter, so look for that very soon. Also, if anyone is going to the Supernatural convention in Nashville, TN 2020, please let us know so we can meet you!! We love our readers so much and can’t wait to interact with you again on future stories. I can also be reached via email at trenchcoatbaby918@gmail.com, though I’m a slow responder at times I’m still an excellent penpal (I hope)

—

Now, drop a final comment below! Did you see the dream twist coming? What were
your overall favorite parts of this hugeeeee fic? We wanna know!

A Merry Christmas and happy holiday to all, and to all a good night! ❤

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