Rhapsodic (The Heart Wants What it Wants)

by BlackDog9314

Summary

Painter and transfer student Castiel Novak is adjusting to life at university, where he knows no one and is hours away from his hometown. Haunted by his dysfunctional family and a painful adolescence, Castiel soon meets fellow art major Dean Winchester. Dean is a scarred, quiet, and handsome abstract painter who may be more haunted than Castiel himself is. What sorrows and secrets lie hidden behind those grass-green eyes, and can Castiel help Dean overcome them before his own finally bleed through to the surface?

This is a story of loss, friendship, and profound bonds.
Since it seems to need saying: I PROMISE that there will be a happy ending to this story, and for those who have read my other works, you know I deliver on that even when it feels impossible :) 
Thank you so much for your continued support, it means more to me than you will ever know <3

This fic is no longer on hiatus and was updated on 12/30/2018.
Castiel felt trepidation pooling in his belly as he gathered his brushes and paints in his portable plastic case. He almost damaged the lid with his shaking hands as he tried to snap it shut. He knew it was too soon to be getting ready for his painting seminar, but he'd been restlessly wearing a path beside his bed for the past half hour. His English composition class had been released not long before, and since then he'd only been able to drink a soda and check his new university email for updates.

Admitting to himself that he was anxious about meeting the other painting focuses, Castiel began putting on his shoes and double-checking his bag for the notepads and pens he knew he'd been certain to store there.

Twenty minutes before two Castiel left his small campus apartment, making sure he had his key in his back pocket before locking the door behind him.

He already knew where the Fine Arts Building was; he'd seen it on his very first tour of the small campus a few months previous.

He hitched the handle of his case up into the crook of his arm, adjusted his bag, and set off. Sweat immediately gathered on his forehead and the small of his back as he walked across the campus in the stifling August heat.

He passed through the residential area and then by the cafeteria, laundry center, and library before finally coming to the FAB. The three-story building was sleek and modern on one side and decidedly sixties-looking on the other. Castiel had guessed when he first went on the tour a few months previous that there'd been a partial renovation or add-on at some point in the recent past of the place. He squinted up at the third floor, knowing that the small windows he saw there were those of the painting studio.

Castiel stepped forward and closed the last few yards between himself and the building's back entrance, sighing with pleasure when a wall of air-conditioning hit him as he let himself in. Texas heat was not something to be trifled with, and they were still in the thick of it.

He walked down a carpeted hall and into a foyer that was as sleek-looking as the left side of the building. It contained circular couches arranged outside a round rug beneath a large, spherical light set in the high ceiling. The colors of the place were muted blues and browns, and the metal backs of the sofas glinted in the soft light.

Castiel noticed immediately that the foyer and the large hallway beyond it displayed many art pieces of varying sizes that hadn't been there when he went on the tour, and that they were student-made. There was a decent selection of styles present, and seeing as he still 15 had minutes until class Castiel stopped to inspect them. He gave each piece about the same amount of time as he moved about the room: good still-life, decent portrait, terrible portrait, good abstraction, awful still-life, and then—

Castiel stopped in front of a very large painting that hung on the far right wall of the foyer, completely arrested by what he saw.

It was an obvious abstraction, but of what, Castiel wasn't sure, and he found himself wondering if perhaps the piece was done entirely from the artist's imagination. The colors were well-picked,
luminous earth tones, soft yellows, sea-foam greens and a single, broad stripe of ultramarine blue which worked its thick way up the center of the work. The amount of paint present on the canvas was intimidating. The layers of paint were fat and deliberate, yet not overly fussy or caked-on. The work reflected the light of the room, suggesting that the paint had been heavily mixed with medium before it was applied. The effect was pleasant, making the paint vaguely glassy. Castiel looked to the lower right beside the painting, searching for the name, the title, and grade of the artist.

"Drifting, Dean Winchester, Third Year."

Castiel checked his cellphone and realized he'd spent more than a few minutes examining the painting and needed to get moving to make it to class on time. He felt a stab of dread as he briskly walked to where he had seen the elevator in the hallway past the foyer, stepping into it only to have to hold it for a red-haired girl who looked about his age. Her hair fell into her face as she situated herself while the doors closed. She turned toward Castiel expectantly.

"Third floor?" he asked her as he pressed the corresponding button.

"Yeah. Are you going to the painting seminar?"

Castiel nodded, and she smiled, her high, angular cheekbones softening.

"Are you new to the university? Transfer?"

Castiel nodded again, "I'm a junior, I did my first two years at community college."

"I'm a senior, my schedule is just fucked four ways to Sunday," she said, rolling her eyes. "Oh! I'm Charlie." she held out her hand with enthusiasm, and Castiel took it.

"Castiel."

"That's one I've never heard before," she said, a laugh in her voice. "Is that European?"

Before Castiel could answer her the elevator doors opened onto the third floor, and both of them exited rapidly. Well, at least, Castiel exited rapidly. His fear of making a bad first impression on the very first day quickened his steps. Charlie lingered behind him, pulling out her phone to check something before she followed Castiel to the large set of double doors at the left end of the hallway.

The studio was better looking than he remembered it having been on his earlier tour, and Castiel almost smiled as he again took in the sight of the spacious, high-ceilinged room. He felt a moment of gratitude. He'd been in the art studios of more than one college the past few years, and none of them had been as nice or as well-organized as the one he was going to be able to spend the next four semesters in.

The floor was white linoleum tile, and the walls and ceiling were a cream color, but the studio didn't feel cold or impersonal. Castiel could tell where the senior spaces were because of the paintings already hanging on the walls in a few of the partitions. On the far end of the space Castiel saw the windows he had contemplated from below, and beside them there was a little sitting area with a few shelves filled with books and three ancient looking, olive-green armchairs.

The rest of the class was already sitting in paint-spattered wooden chairs grouped at the front of the studio, and in the center of the mass stood the woman Castiel could only assume was Professor Ellen Harvelle. She was an attractive woman, with wavy chestnut-brown hair and luminous, intelligent brown eyes currently fixed on him and Charlie. Castiel hurriedly walked to where the rest of his classmates were gathered, pulling up a stray chair at the same time Charlie did. He settled next to her and behind everyone else, taking out a notebook and pen.
“That's almost everyone,” Professor Harvelle announced. “Let's wait a few more minutes.”

Castiel took that time to cast a look around the group of students he was now a part of, and felt a twinge of surprise as he quickly realized that he was the only male in the room. There weren't many people in the class, with Castiel counting only eight girls, himself and his professor.

“Um...” Charlie raised her hand partway after an additional five or six minutes had lapsed as they waited for stragglers. “I don't know if Dean's coming to class today. I just texted him.”

Professor Harvelle gave a little sigh of disapproval, and nodded her head, “Thank you, Charlie.” The unspoken words seemed to trail, *He'd better have a good reason.*

Castiel was relatively certain that the Dean of which they spoke might be the Dean who'd painted the gigantic abstraction hanging in the lobby two floors down. The university was a very small one, and Dean wasn't a name he'd often heard before. Castiel felt a detached disappointment that he wasn't going to be able to meet him alongside the rest of his classmates.

Professor Harvelle quickly launched into the rules of the class and a summary of the projects they would be doing that semester, and immediately after that gave them a few more handouts on suggested brushes, colors, assorted supplies, and books to read. Castiel was about to ask a question about a particular brush's necessity when the Professor announced that it was time for the students to pick the cubby-space they wanted and the person they'd be sharing that space with.

The empty, partitioned sections quickly became occupied by his female counterparts and their chosen partners, all of them clearly already acquainted with each other. That left Castiel, awkwardly holding his supplies in the center of the studio. Charlie had given him a little wave and paired up with a blue-haired Latina girl in a floral-print skirt, and Castiel had no idea who to attempt to pair up with, now. He felt a small measure of panic and then a dull kind of annoyance at the feeling. Seeing him standing there looking around, Professor Harvelle stepped up to him after a minute or two and gestured to an empty space directly across from him.

“Why don't you take that one? Dean can share it with you when he gets here Wednesday.”

Castiel nodded, grateful to have a direction in which to go.

He settled into the left side of the space Harvelle had pointed him to, opening his plastic case to take out his brushes, paints, silicoil, wax paper, and saran wrap. He organized everything, tubes of color by shade and intensity, brushes by size and shape, and placed his silicoil neatly beside the small plastic cups that would soon hold different painting mediums. He then laid out a sheet of wax paper for his palette preemptively, smoothing it down and then smoothing it again. He stood back to look at his spread, then gave his head a little shake as he proceeded to reorganize everything twice more.

Castiel had learned long ago that he couldn't produce work that was up to his standards if his studio space didn't have a proper system of organization.

Castiel didn't realize that it was time to return to the front of the room until Charlie rapped twice on the partition Castiel was using as a leaning-post. She did so as he considered reorganizing for a third time.

“Wow. My area's never that neat.”

Castiel wasn't sure if it was a compliment or not, but followed her back to where everyone was again grouped around Professor Harvelle.

As soon as he was seated, trying not to cast another appraising look at his cubby, Harvelle gave
Castiel a smile and went to stand beside him, her hand resting on the back of his chair.

Castiel felt a blush begin to creep over his cheeks before she even began to speak. He harbored a general dislike of any unnecessary attention cast his way, and tried his best not to look around at the others, currently turned in their seats and quiet, waiting to see what Harvelle was doing next to him.

“Now that we're settled in, I'd like to introduce those of you who haven't met him to our newest student in the painting focus, Castiel Novak. Castiel? Is there anything you would like to say? Influences? Favorite works?” Her smile should have been reassuring, but Castiel felt at a loss to describe either, so distracted was he by the eyes upon him and the weight of their attention.

All he managed to say, after a minute or two of silence, was, “I'm glad to be here.”

Chapter End Notes

Please leave comments if you feel so moved =) This is my first fanfiction ever, and I'm as nervous as I am in love with my OTP.
Chapter 2

Hoping to update again soon, waiting on my lovely beta for the next 6 or so chapters :)

Castiel's second day of university and single Tuesday class was rather uneventful. The young professor teaching the course stumbled over his own introduction and dropped half of the syllabi on the floor. Castiel had hurried to help him gather them, sympathizing with the man.

The class itself felt as if it were over far too quickly since they were released early after introductions and a course summary, and Castiel headed directly back to his apartment. He was already craving solitude.

That evening he sat idly before his laptop, having already cleaned his room and finding himself unable to think of much more to do when he didn't yet have assignments to work on. He was pleased when his phone began to go off beside him and he saw that it was his sister calling. He didn't wait for more than one ring to answer.

“Anna?”

“Hey. How're your first couple days going so far?”

“They're alright. Nothing's really happened yet.” He laughed softly.

“I miss you already. It's weird without you here and it's only been four days.”

“I think I feel better having my own space. How's Mother?”

“Nothing new.” A muted sigh followed.

“Anna?”

“Yeah?”

“I miss you, too.”

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The first Wednesday of the new semester dawned, and later that day Castiel left a full thirty minutes early for his painting class. He wanted to be sure his space felt right before the second session started.

When Castiel opened the heavy doors to the studio and began walking towards his cubby, he was surprised to see that the formerly-vacant right side had been filled with supplies in his absence. He'd honestly forgotten someone else would be sharing the space with him from Wednesday on.

As he moved closer, Castiel's relief melted into dismay as he realized that not only was Dean's space completely disorganized, but who he guessed to be Dean himself was sleeping in one of the wooden
chairs in front of his painting table.

Dean's paints were piled haphazardly on one corner of the table, and from the look of a few errant blobs of paint surrounding the pile Castiel guessed a few of them hadn't been properly secured. Dean's silicoil was on the floor beside his feet, a hazard Castiel had a hard time not holding against the other boy. Dean's palette was stained and looked as though it might not have even been scraped properly, and sheets of wax paper were crumpled on the lower shelf of the painting table beside a nonspecific mountain of brushes, bottles of Liquin and linseed oil, charcoal pencils, and oil sticks.

Dean was positioned awkwardly on the chair, with half of his body tilted forward slackly while his right arm stretched behind him and around the back. Castiel could tell that the chair back was digging into Dean's arm, and that he'd have a deep red bite circumscribing his bicep when he woke up. He almost winced at the sharp angle at which Dean's head was positioned.

When Castiel set his bag down beside his chair, it made enough noise that Dean startled awake with a loud exhale, and he sat up quickly. He turned towards Castiel with a sleepy half-smile.

“Oh, hey. It's about time we had another guy here. Gets old after a while, bein' the only one. I'm Dean.” He held out his hand to Castiel, who took it, making sure his grip was firm.

Dean was good-looking, Castiel quickly noticed. He had a softly squared jawline, light green eyes, and a full, delicately shaped mouth. His short, gold-brown hair was tousled, and he was wearing a faded and paint-stained Led Zeppelin t-shirt and tattered jeans.

Castiel abruptly realized that he hadn't said his name in return, and quickly mumbled it.

“Castiel...does that come with a nickname?” Dean asked with the same half-smile.

Castiel paused at this, actually searching his memories for an instance in which someone had given him one. He found none, and shook his head.

Dean shot him a look of surprise. “Huh. Weird.”

With that, he yawned, stretching his sturdy torso with his arms behind his head and taking for granted that Castiel wasn't looking.

That class period they were given their first assignment for the semester: a conceptual or process-oriented work inspired by a subject they were personally acquainted with.

Castiel sat in his chair as everyone dispersed. Some went to the library, some to the reading nook filled with art history texts on the opposite end of the room. He was experiencing the initial block of ideas that he always seemed to at the beginning of a project. Castiel tended to formulate his concepts gradually and work at a steady pace; he wasn't a painter who could marathon a piece overnight with satisfactory results.

Dean was already hunched over a large sketchpad in his chair beside Castiel. He held a charcoal pencil between his teeth as he stared at the page before him, moving his hands absently into various angles, already planning out compositions. Castiel had to drag his eyes from the sight as he pulled out his phone to refresh himself on the artists he was currently drawing inspiration from.

After about twenty minutes of image perusing Castiel began to sketch random shapes and symbols, still uncertain as to whether he knew just what he intended to do. But he knew from experience that oftentimes one had to simply start somewhere and let the process work for them.

When class ended an hour later, Castiel still felt stumped as he gathered up his things, and thought to
himself that he didn't have a head for conceptual art. So deep was he in his musings that it took him
turning to look directly at Dean to notice that the other boy was no longer staring intently at his
sketchpad, but was again asleep in the uncomfortable wooden chair. This time, he was slumped
almost completely forward.

As Castiel contemplated whether or not he should wake him before he left, he heard someone clear
their throat behind him, and turned to see Charlie standing there. She had a grin on her face that
Castiel saw wasn't directed at him, but at his cubby-buddy. She stepped between them into their
space, gently placing a hand on Dean's shoulder.

Castiel turned away and busied himself with his bag after he saw Dean stir and sit up abruptly for the
second time that day, his eyes red-rimmed from the accidental nap.

“You need to stop working nights, man. Last semester was bad.” Charlie sounded both amused and
concerned.

Dean made a dismissive noise, and Castiel heard his chair creak as he stood.

Charlie sighed. “Please text me?”

Castiel guessed that Dean nodded in response or in some way appeased her, because Charlie said
nothing more before cheerfully bidding them both goodbye and leaving the studio.

“Do you know what you're doing?” Castiel asked Dean, turning back around.

For a moment Dean looked deeply contemplative, and Castiel wondered if perhaps he'd misheard
him. But then he met Castiel's eyes again.

“I think so. I'll probably change my mind tomorrow, though.”

Castiel nodded. “It's better than what I've managed to come up with.” He gestured with his
hands, *nothing.*

Dean laughed a little before cutting himself off. “Uh, I'll see you later.”

Castiel nodded again, leaving soon after.

That evening Castiel sat hunched in front of his computer once more, a ritual that was becoming all-
too familiar to him in only his first week of university. He'd already finished the assigned readings for
his other classes, and remained at a relative standstill in regards to what he wanted to do for his first
painting assignment.

Rubbing his eyes and shutting his computer off, Castiel took a few of his favorite art textbooks and a
sketchpad to bed with him. He wrapped himself in an old blanket from home and began to thumb
through the already-worn pages of landscapes by Egon Schiele, figures by Lucian Freud, and mixed
media pieces by Anselm Kiefer.

The well-known and loved images filled Castiel with the familiar, undefined longing to create
something as beautiful, even just something as meaningful. Kiefer's word-adorned pieces were ones
he'd always been drawn to, and he opened his sketchbook and absently doodled for an hour or so.
He wrote and underlined words, making ornate squiggles that led back into the tail of a 'y' or the
stem of an 'i'. Soon a few pages were filled with disconnected letter combinations and isolated parts
of their shapes, illegible to someone who hadn't watched Castiel's progress. He lost track of the time
as he absorbed himself in the white world of his paper plans.

When Castiel fell asleep not long after ten, his cheek pressed against the cover of a book he hadn't gotten to yet, he dreamed. He dreamed that Dean was painting the white walls of their studio space instead of a canvas, wearing black and holding his brush aloft like a torch.

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The rest of the week passed by slowly, but Castiel had finally gleaned what he wanted to do for his first assignment late Thursday night after an art lab Dean was absent for. As soon as he knew the wood shop would be open on Friday, he made his way there.

Garth, the lab instructor, a thin man with an endearing (if not strange) smile, was literally in the process of unlocking the door as Castiel came to stand beside him. Garth checked his watch, his expression bemused.

“You gonna need any help?” he asked Castiel, “I know you're new.”

Castiel hurriedly shifted his bag on his arm and dug through its contents to produce the pages of careful notes and measurements he'd taken earlier. He showed them to Garth as he explained what he wanted to do.

Garth whistled. “It's been a while since I had a challenge. You sure you want to make this? Knowing how long this'll take us to do here, I'm sure Professor Harvelle would understand if you just got one from Michael's or something.”

Castiel shook his head. “I want to make it. It's...my first opportunity to make a canvas myself.”

Garth nodded. “Ellen mentioned you'd transferred in from ACC. They aren't exactly known for their facilities.”

Castiel nodded and smiled gratefully as he followed Garth into the shop.

Castiel was unable to tear himself away from the studio with his idea burning a hole inside of him, and he set to work on his project as soon as the gesso on his small, circular canvas was dry. Balancing the thing on the flat rungs of the easel proved to take more than a few minutes, however.

So preoccupied was Castiel with this task that he didn't notice when both Charlie and Dean entered the studio behind him. He turned and saw them as he stepped back to make sure that his canvas was centered.

“What's gonna happen with that?” Charlie asked. Castiel smiled as he turned to look at her. He felt triumphant and excited, emotions rare enough to be unusual for him.

“It's an exploration of how words and letters sound and look like what they are. Or can mean,” he added, not sure if he was adequately explaining the concept. Charlie didn't look as though she entirely understood, but Dean seemed to be mulling his words over with more than casual interest.

Castiel shrugged, and Charlie laughed. He liked Charlie's laugh, he decided.

Dean spoke, “Do you write?”

“Nothing published,” Castiel answered simply. He was generally reticent about the fact that he
wrote; only his sister knew. Dean accepted Castiel's response and asked no more questions, and
Charlie came a few steps closer, studying the small, round canvas attached sturdily to the easel.

“This is well-made,” she said, running a hand along the side of the canvas and admiring the
craftsmanship of Garth and Castiel's combined efforts. “And I'd be interested in reading whatever
you've got.”

"It's nothing worth reading," Castiel told her honestly.

Charlie pulled herself back and gave Castiel one of those sweet smiles he was becoming accustomed
to from her. "There's a lot of stuff worth reading. I would know."

Dean snorted from the other side of the cubby, and Charlie rolled her eyes hard enough that Castiel
wondered how she didn't do herself damage. Castiel's expression must have been a questioning one,
because the red-head said in explanation, “He’s just being an asshole because I read fanfiction.”

Dean actually burst into a loud bout of laughter at that, and Charlie glowered at him.

“I only read the good stuff, I'm a literary snob,” Charlie assured Castiel with a grin before what
he recognized as the main Lord of the Rings theme suddenly began to sound from her back pocket.
She pulled her phone out to answer it, moving away from them to take the call in private.

Castiel looked to Dean in her absence, a chuckle about what she'd said on the tip of his tongue. But
Dean looked serious now, his face impassive. He knelt to grab his mask and earplugs from the pile
beneath his table.

Castiel wasn't sure why Dean had so quickly sobered up, but figured he was probably thinking about
constructing his canvas. While it wasn't a difficult or especially taxing activity, it could be time-
consuming, and required concentration and care. This was especially true if one was building a large
canvas, as Castiel suspected Dean might be.

Castiel began mixing a range of colors on his palette after that, some he knew he would need and
others he wasn’t sure about yet. He organized the blobs in neat rows, as was his habit.

Shortly after Dean left for the woodshop, Charlie returned to their cubby from the opposite end of the
studio. She shoved her phone back into her pocket as she cast a glance around the space, clearly
unaware that Dean had been planning on leaving. Castiel informed her and watched her roll her eyes
for the second time that day.

“Way for my bestie to tell me 'bye,” she griped good-naturedly.

“Oh. He's not your—” Castiel cut himself off, not sure how he'd planned to end that sentence.

“I'm not into guys,” Charlie said good-naturedly. “Dean's like a brother.”

“Oh,” Castiel said stupidly, feeling his face heat under Charlie's gaze.

“He's a good friend. I'm also pretty sure he could be the next Jackson Pollock,” Charlie said with a
laugh. “But, anyway, that was my friend on the phone. Iota's first open-house party's tonight. You
live on campus?”

Castiel answered in the affirmative, and Charlie asked, “You wanna come with tonight? Should be
fun. Iota's my favorite frat, and campus life without some occasional drunken debauchery can get old
pretty fast.”
Castiel's first instinct was to decline her offer. He had almost no experience with parties, and was uncertain what he would even do if he went with her. He was used to being perceived as too intense or unreadable, even within his own family. He wasn't sure how a bunch of inebriated college students would get along with him. He'd avoided parties at ACC like the plague, and had assumed that at his new university things would be no different.

But even as those thoughts made their way through his head, Castiel distantly heard himself tell Charlie yes, he'd go to the party.

They exchanged numbers, and Charlie left to go begin building her own canvas in the woodshop, leaving Castiel to work on his piece for a good three hours.

The small frat house that Charlie led him to that night around eleven was decorated in what Castiel assumed were its colors, red and yellow. It seemed comfortably lower on the income scale than he had imagined a frat house would be, with a homey atmosphere and mismatched furniture.

That being said, the down-to-earth air the place had was somewhat mitigated by the numerous students brandishing red solo cups, the loud music, and the dark floor filled with drunken dancers. There was an almost absurd amount of people (including a few of the house members) who had decided for seemingly no reason that dressing in costume and covering themselves in glitter was a fitting way to begin the semester.

Charlie laughed loudly as a guy that Castiel assumed she knew rushed over to them, wrapping one arm around Charlie's waist and taking her drink with the other, stealing a sip. Charlie snatched her drink back after a minute or two, when the current song ended. Her cheeks were flushed from dancing, laughter, and the beverage she'd consumed before the one she held in her hand.

Castiel had only managed to dutifully nurse one drink during the time they'd been there. He didn't like the taste of what Charlie had told him was called 'Jungle Juice'. It tasted vaguely like rubbing alcohol with a drop of fruit punch in it, but he'd be lying if he said he wasn't having an interesting time.

The guy between Charlie and Castiel ended their dance with a few hip-pops aimed in her direction, then leaned in to give her a hug. His straight, white teeth shone in the neon lights from the dance floor as he turned to Castiel and shook his hand, introducing himself as Arnold.

Arnold eased an arm around Charlie's shoulder, making conversation with the both of them.

"Charlie says you're a painting major, too?" he asked interestedly.

"Yes, I'm a junior. I transferred from community college," Castiel said.

"Must be a change bein' in little ole college town, huh? It's cute, though. Everybody here is so sweet it'll make you sick," Arnold said to Castiel as he took another stolen sip of Charlie's drink.

Charlie laughed at that, nodding her head in agreement as she swiped her cup back and finished her second serving of Jungle Juice.

"Well, almost everybody." Arnold's tone seemed less genial then.

"Did you grow up here?" Castiel asked him.

Arnold nodded. "Sure did. One of the few natives at this school."
Castiel realized he'd finished his drink.

“Speaking of, where's Dean? Still here? Haven't seen him yet,” Arnold looked at Charlie as he spoke, and Castiel looked to her as well to hear her answer.

“Yeah, yeah, he's here. He's just working. Same as last year.”

“Again?” Arnold asked meaningfully, and Charlie just nodded.

Somehow feeling that this was a conversation he shouldn't be privy to, Castiel decided that maybe he did want another drink after all. He politely told the two of them that he'd be back shortly, and began to make his way to the little bar in front of the dingy kitchen near the rear of the house. He tapped his foot restlessly to the music playing as he took in the sight of the reddish-purple drink puddles that had spilled and were beginning to congeal on the Formica bar. He moved back a little in distaste, only to feel a hand pressed to his shoulder. He looked behind him and saw Charlie there, her cheeks even pinker now.

Castiel was handed his drink and let Charlie lead him away to the back living room of the place, where there was better lighting and fewer people.

She sat him down on a sofa with three separate kinds of cushions on it and looked at him imploringly.

“So, how're you liking your first party here? And for that matter, how's your first week going?” Excitement suffused her words that Castiel had a feeling was not solely the effect of the alcohol. He smiled at that as he took a sip of his drink.

“Well...nothing's really happened yet. Most of the people in my classes are either too quiet or too loud. I don't think I've ever directly talked to my roommate...the most interesting thing in my life right now is our class.”

Charlie nodded. “Enjoy that while it lasts. Harvelle's a bit of a bitch when it comes to her class workload, hell, all the professors here are. And you're a little unlucky you came in late. If you're taking upper-level classes most of the students are gonna be your age, but they already know each other. This school is like small-town elementary sometimes.” Castiel was rewarded with another, funnier eye roll at that.

“You're the only person I've really talked to here,” Castiel assented.

Charlie clapped her hand on his shoulder, “Dean and I, you mean.”

Castiel wasn't sure what to say, and Charlie got him up from the couch soon after and got him to dance with her and drink a few more cups of Jungle Juice.

When they finally stumbled back to their apartments at almost two in the morning, Charlie left him at his door with a slurred but sincere, “Live long...and prosper.”
Saturday morning Castiel was awoken by his cellphone ringing next to him on his bedside table. He groaned and covered his face with his hands. His head was pounding dully, his mouth tasted disgusting, and if his phone was correct it was just after 9 am. Of course, it was his sister on the phone. Castiel answered quickly, despising what his ringtone was doing to his headache.

“Anna.”

“Hey. What's up?”

“You're the one who called me.”

Castiel had a sneaking suspicion that what he was experiencing was a hangover, and was dismayed to find it as unpleasant as his older siblings had warned.

“Were you asleep, Castiel?” Anna sounded surprised, and with good reason. Castiel had always been an early riser, usually waking up and getting out of bed at 7 on most days unless he had to be up earlier. He hadn't intended on sleeping later today. Since he had, he could only assume he'd slept through his alarm.

“I went to a party last night with a friend. I may have had something to drink.”

Anna laughed, loudly and longer than he would have liked. “Are you hungover? Wow, Castiel. That's a first, isn't it? Well, here's what I do, I take some ibuprofen, drink some water, then some juice, and make myself a bacon and egg sandwich.”

“Do the eggs help in particular?”

“No. I just like eggs.”

Castiel rolled his eyes and then winced, sitting up in bed as he cradled the phone between his head and his shoulder. He noticed that he still had his socks and t-shirt on.

“So, you're making friends?”

Castiel smiled to himself. “I think so, yes. I went with a girl from painting, Charlie. You'd like her. She's a redhead, too.”

“Do you like her?” Castiel understood what she meant, and felt annoyance at the question.

“I just met her, and she's gay.”

“Okay. I was just calling to ask how your first week went.”

“Like I told Charlie last night, nothing's even happened yet. The only other guy I've talked to isn't even there half the time, in painting.”

Anna mm-hmm'd and Castiel could tell she was doing something else while she was on the phone with him. Judging by the click-clack he heard in the background, he guessed she was answering her emails before she left to go to work at the lab with their mother.

“Well, I'm going to go to the studio, Anna. I'll talk to you later.”
"Okay, love you."

"You, too. Bye."

Castiel went to his bathroom and was relieved to find that he had a few ibuprofen left in his bottle in the medicine cabinet. Then went to the kitchen to make himself breakfast, hoping that soon he'd feel less wobbly on his feet.

Two hours later Castiel was in the studio, slightly hunched in his chair as he intently worked on his painting. He received a text message from Charlie asking him if he was there, and he quickly answered yes. Soon Charlie entered the room as well, looking tired.

Castiel brandished his paintbrush at her in mock-accusation. "I had my first hangover this morning."

Charlie smirked. "I didn't make you have the third drink, hon."

"True enough," Castiel conceded.

As Charlie opened her mouth to respond, the heavy studio doors practically flew open, and in walked Dean. He said nothing as he settled beside Castiel in their cubby. His large, blank canvas was leaning against the partition on his side.

Charlie nodded to Castiel before she withdrew into her own space on the other side of the studio.

Castiel wanted to tell Dean hello, but the defensive set of his broad shoulders as he balanced the canvas on his easel seemed to indicate that he shouldn't, so Castiel returned to his painting without comment.

Though he tried to ignore the other boy, Castiel couldn't help but track Dean in his peripheral vision as he sat in his chair with his sketchpad and numerous photographs in his hands. He seemed to be looking at each one in turn, and Castiel could hear the sound of his pencil scraping the paper as he made sketches.

Within the next few hours Castiel made considerable progress, and Dean began an underpainting. He laid out strange shapes in repetitive patterns over the canvas, some larger, some smaller, and all in shades of dark brown-red, fleshy pink, and black. Castiel was uncertain what it meant or was derived from, but had to admit it was intriguing.

The two of them worked silently in their space.

Castiel's painting, being as small as it was, was shaping up well after a few solid hours of work. His design was essentially a line inside of a circle, bisecting it down the middle. It had an almost cultic look to it, as though it might be some sort of rune or symbol. His colors were all earthy browns and pinkish yellows. He wanted it to look like the warm inside of a cellar, or like the space beneath the roots of a tree.

Castiel was so engrossed in his work that he didn't realize Dean had left until he returned, the door shutting solidly behind him.

Castiel casually looked over at Dean as he sat back in his chair. He was in the middle of checking an old, cracked cellphone before he apparently felt Castiel's gaze and lifted his eyes to meet it. Dean looked more at ease than he'd been when he first came in, and Castiel was startled at the relief he felt when Dean gave him a small half-smile, his green eyes drifting over Castiel's piece.
“I like that. Is it an I inside an O?”

Castiel hadn't been expecting anyone to get it so easily considering it wasn't exactly a self-explanatory piece, and was happy Dean had seen it.

“Yes, it is. I'm trying to show how in words belong in and out words belong out. Sharp sound pierces, soft sound accommodates, at least a lot of the time.”

Dean nodded, continuing to study the work across the space from where he sat. Castiel took the opportunity to give Dean's painting some thorough observation. He noted that it now had a lot more darkness to its color scheme, with a myriad of grays and darker reds having worked their way between the clusters of markings that covered the surface.

“What about yours?” Castiel felt it appropriate to ask, considering Dean now knew his aims.

Dean turned his gaze back to his own work, the momentary lightness which had put Castiel at ease seemingly absorbed into some sort of tension once again. Dean's eyes narrowed for a moment as he contemplated his response. When he spoke, his voice was rough.

“The shapes are scars. The bigger ones are the ones I have the most in the shape of, the smaller are...well, you can guess. It's, uh...more process art than conceptual.”

Castiel noticed for the first time that the photographs haphazardly scattered on Dean's sketchpad beside him were indeed pictures of scarred-over cuts and bruise-like pockmarks. They marked freckled ribs, broad shoulders, defined hipbones, and bowed leg joints. Castiel wondered how Dean had come to have so many of them.

Dean followed Castiel's eyes and said quickly, “I worked in auto-body shops a lot in high school, you tend to get 'em pretty quick when you don't have the money for thick enough jeans.”

Castiel nodded, though he didn't entirely understand.

Dean looked away from him. “Guess it's a more personal version of the whole 'body as canvas' thing.”

“It's definitely personal. Are the colors arbitrary?” Castiel asked.

“ Mostly, yeah. Beyond being, ah...referential of skin.”

Castiel was impressed. He certainly thought Dean's idea was more substantive than his own. Language was fascinating, certainly, as were the philosophical ideas and questions that could be applied and asked of it. But Dean's piece was intensely personal, a quality which always imbued the art Castiel admired.

They slid back into silence for the rest of the time they worked, which was a few hours more by Castiel's watch. He was the one who left first. He'd done enough on his piece that he felt the contented kind of tiredness he was accustomed to after a solid day of work. Castiel rinsed his brushes and capped all of his bottles and containers, then re-straightened them on his painting table.

As Castiel slung his bag over his shoulder Dean said, “Leaving?”

“Yes. I was here longer than you.”

“See you later, Cas.”
Castiel took a moment to absorb the fact that he had just been given his first nickname. That and the fact that it had been given, no less, from a moody Jackson Pollock-type in his painting class.

“Goodbye, Dean.”

"Cas? I thought you didn't have any nicknames =P"

Castiel sighed as he read the text from Charlie an hour or two after he’d arrived back at his apartment. He wasn't entirely sure how to respond.

But finally he did: “I don't. Guess Dean thought my name was too long.”

"Its cute. You should consider going by it. Castiel sounds kinda old, no offense. Its pretty and all, but...yea"

"Is Dean always so...intense?" Castiel didn't know if that was the word he was looking for, but was unable to think of a better one.

"He works a lot. Like, too much. He's always doin something & he helps his brother and his dad"

"Is it an older brother?"

"Nah. Sam's 17."

"I see."

"Ttyl, Cas =)"

***

Castiel finished his first painting assignment the following Monday evening, having stayed an hour or so after class ended (another session that Dean didn't attend) and everyone but he and Charlie left. He stepped back to get a final, full view of the piece before declaring it official to himself. He checked his watch and saw with triumph that it wasn't yet seven 'o clock. He would still have time to do his readings for Tuesday before he went to bed.

When he heard Charlie make a noise of frustration from her cubby on the other end of the studio, Castiel walked over to see what was the matter, feeling light on his feet. Charlie's piece was a copy of one of Degas' dancers done entirely in lipstick (a feminist commentary) and she'd been having trouble finding shades and consistencies that wouldn't melt under the studio lights. On his way over Castiel wondered if she was still struggling to fix this issue, and sure enough, as he reached her he saw that a particularly dark shade of mocha lip color was slowly running down the canvas over some of the work Charlie had already done that day.

“Dammit!” Charlie’s yell punctuated the silence of the studio, and Castiel jumped a little. Charlie looked at him, an apologetic expression on her face.

“I'm getting tired of having to start over. I can't tell that the colors are gonna melt until they're already dripping. Even within brands they aren't always consistent,” Charlie ran a hand through her hair and groaned. Castiel sympathized; he'd been in the studio with her all weekend and she definitely had reason to be frustrated.

“Why don't you try a fixative, or working somewhere else? I know it's convenient to be in here, but
the lights...”

Charlie nodded, looking as though she was trying not to fall asleep.

“Go home before you fall over. These aren't due until next Monday. You still have time.”

Charlie nodded and tiredly shouldered her bag as she bid Castiel goodnight.

“Thanks for the advice, Mother Study.” Her tone was kind.

“I'm younger than you,” Castiel reminded her.

Charlie laughed at him and left soon after.

Castiel glanced around the empty studio as he stretched languidly beside his painting. His shoulders and back ached as they always did from the unintentionally slouched way he tended to sit. He cast a glance over at Dean's painting, noting that, though he hadn't made it to class that day, he'd done more work on it at some point.

Castiel back was still singing and his arms still in the air when he was shaken out of his reverie by the appearance of none other than Dean himself as he entered the otherwise empty room. He immediately noticed that Dean looked either ill, exhausted, or perhaps both. Dean's eyes flickered down to the strip of belly and hip exposed by Castiel's stretches, and he quickly lowered his arms. He felt something he couldn't quite define in the pit of his stomach at the thought of Dean's eyes on his bare skin.

“You were absent today.”

As soon as he said it, Castiel heard how obvious the statement sounded, and he cringed internally.

But luckily, Dean didn't seem to notice Castiel's ineptitude. He sat down heavily in his chair in front of his painting, running his hand over his face in a way that echoed Charlie's frustration from earlier.

“Yeah...I had to get my brother from school this afternoon. Usually someone else picks him up,” Dean said.

“Is he alright?” Castiel asked.

“He's fine. Got in a fight. Sammy's a good kid, but he doesn't take anyone's shit.” Pride was evident in Dean's voice as he spoke.

“Does he get in fights a lot?”

Dean shook his head. “Nah. But he...gets made fun of sometimes.”

Castiel nodded. “Is he in trouble?”

“Not really. Principal knows it was the other guy's fault, Sam just got sent home.” Dean's voice trailed off, then, and Castiel saw that his eyes were no longer focused on him.

“Is Harvelle going to let you keep missing class...?” As soon as Castiel asked, he regretted it.

Dean just shut his eyes and shook his head. Castiel didn't know if he was telling him no or he was trying to clear his thoughts.

“I talked to her about it. She...she's known me since freshman year,” Dean said.
“Okay,” Castiel wasn't sure what else to say.

Dean began to twist in his chair to look at something on the table beside him, and winced loudly halfway through the motion. His hand flew to his side and cupped it as he gingerly turned back to a straight-facing seated position.

“Are you—”

“I'm fine.” The words were said without inflection, but Castiel could practically hear Dean's teeth grinding as he set his jaw.

“I'll see you later, Dean,” Castiel said as he let himself out of the studio not long after, not waiting for an answer.
Chapter 4

Castiel was surprised to get a phone call from his mother late Tuesday night.

He was sitting at his desk leafing through Foucault's *Discourse on Language* and writing a philosophical explanation of his ideas to accompany his painting, and was completely preoccupied in the work when his cell began to ring.

Castiel almost didn't answer his phone when he saw who was calling. But ultimately, he did what was expected of him and pressed the green accept button.

“Mother?”

“Castiel. I called to tell you hello and ask how you're liking university.”

“I like it here. I was...ah, writing a paper when you called.” He winced as soon as the words left his lips. He knew it sounded as though he already wished to end the conversation, and felt bad because that was exactly what he wanted.

“Are you painting, like you said you would?”

“Yes, It's what I want to major in.” Castiel barely kept the edge from his voice.

“I did some research on your school, it's a good place. They have a superb sciences program—”

Castiel couldn't keep himself from politely interrupting her. “I have no desire to go into the sciences anymore, Mother.” You can't make my choices anymore. The unspoken words lay heavily between them, even over the phone.

“You know I have your best interests at heart.”

Castiel said nothing, irritated now. His mother always seemed to have that effect on him.

“I have to go help your brother with something. Goodbye, Castiel.”

Castiel waited until he heard her hang up before doing the same himself, deferential in spite of his agitation. He felt heavy and loose, and his phone slipped from his fingers to clatter solidly onto his desk. Its impact upset his pencil, dog-eared book, and the framed photograph of him and Anna behind his laptop. It was the only photo he had on display.

He looked at it for a moment, taking in the familiar sight of Anna, of her red hair and her large eyes with her arms unabashedly wrapped around Castiel's neck. There was a gap between her teeth as she laughed at something, and one of Castiel's hands was draped over her slender arm. His dark and unruly hair contrasted with hers, and his deep blue eyes were serious as he could never stop them from being, but his lips were stretched into a timid smile aimed at the person who had taken the picture. It was from when Castiel been fifteen or sixteen, and the memory was a bittersweet one. His brother Gabriel had taken the photo.

Castiel hadn't spoken to Gabriel in almost three years; his older brother had left home a year or two after he graduated their homeschooling program. It hadn't been long after their father died and
Gabriel had received his cut of the inheritance.

He'd never come back or sent word to his sister and brothers.

Anna and Gabriel had always been the siblings Castiel was closest to in his family, and it had little to do with their ages (Castiel was only one year younger than her, almost three years younger than Gabriel).

Castiel was deep in uncertain and nostalgic thought when his phone began to vibrate again. He felt apprehension as he forced himself to see who it was; he knew, despite his misgivings, that he would answer again if it was his mother. But much to his relief, it was only Charlie.

“Charlie?”

“Hey. Do we seriously have a field-trip tomorrow?”

“I’d actually forgotten about that. Thanks for reminding me. I think so...” Castiel dug out the syllabus for his painting class one-handed, giving it a look. “Yes, it says so right here,” he confirmed.

“I hate that she's making us go. We should be working tomorrow.”

“The exhibition she's taking us to looks interesting, though,” Castiel said, trying to point out the positives.

“I guess...”

“Sorry, Charlie,” he said, and then dissolved into a fit of laughter.

“Hardee har har, Novak. You're totally the first person to say that,” Charlie's voice dripped with sarcasm.

“I didn't even realize it until I said it,” he took a moment or two to stop his laughter, finding it much funnier than it likely was. “Okay, sorry. I'm good, Lady Charlie, reader of fanfiction and facilitator of hangovers.”

“Better be. Well, I, on the other hand, am bummed. I'll see you tomorrow. We'll probably meet outside the FAB, by the way.”

“Alright, see you then.”

Castiel hung up and sighed, his breath leaving him in a long, slow exhale. He tried to continue reading his book, but had little success; he was restless now. He closed Foucault and set him down after only ten or fifteen minutes, reaching instead for his sketchpad. He began to make little drawings of the cartoon people that tended to populate his doodles. He only realized after he'd already made a few that most of them were caricatures of Gabriel.

Castiel crumpled the pages angrily, throwing them across his room with a shaking hand.

***

For his part, Castiel was excited that the painting class was going on a field-trip. He woke up earlier than he needed to for his morning class, considering whether or not he should take his sketchpad as well as his notebook to the museum. He finally settled on taking both items should inspiration strike while they were out, and made sure he had enough money for lunch. The seminar was scheduled to meet two hours earlier than usual in order to get a decent start to the gallery and beat some of the
midday traffic, giving him only a few minutes between his second class and the meet-up time.

Castiel restlessly made it through his first two classes, checking his watch so often that the motion took on the quality of a nervous tic. The gallery that the class was to visit was one of the best known in the nearby city, which was already a liberal, metropolitan area artsier than many others in the state of Texas. Harvelle had told them a time or two that the gallery on their syllabus was one unafraid of exhibiting controversial material.

When Castiel's second class finally ended he briskly made his way over to the parking lot behind the Fine Arts Building, a smile crossing his lips as he saw Charlie and Dean standing by the university van. They were speaking to Professor Harvelle, and both of them looked grumpy and hot. Professor Harvelle said hello to Castiel when he approached them, giving him an approving look when she saw what he'd brought in his small bag.

“Looks like you're prepared, Castiel.”

He heard Charlie giggle behind her, and wondered if he shouldn't have brought so much. But when Harvelle went to go speak to Garth, he understood Charlie wasn't laughing cruelly.

“You are too cute. Did you really bring a book?” she asked.

Castiel looked down at his Anselm Kiefer book, spine-up beside his notebook, and nodded.

Charlie elbowed Dean. “Cas brought a book to read and everything. Harvelle's gonna start telling us we're slacking soon.”

Dean just readjusted the composition booklet in the crook of his left arm and nodded. “Good on ya, man. How'd you know Harvelle brings art books every trip?”

“I didn't. I just—”

“He's joking, Cas,” Charlie interrupted, “She does, though. Way to get her good side. Have you always been a natural suck-up?”

Castiel laughed, considering divulging the fact that his mother had been his teacher for much of his life, but deciding not to.

When it came time to clamber into the van a few minutes later, Castiel wasn't surprised that all of the girls sat together, with even Charlie taking a seat next to a dark-haired painter named Lisa, leaving Dean and himself to take the remaining two seats at the front of the bus directly behind Harvelle and Garth, who occupied the driver's seat.

Garth was in a good mood, joking as he started up the bus that hopefully this time no one would die in a fiery crash. Harvelle reprimanded him with a little smile. The day was a happy one, and Castiel was seeing a side of his classmates that he hadn't in the serious atmosphere of the studio. Charlie and Lisa played punch-buggy directly behind he and Dean, and Castiel could hear the rest of the girls giggling, relating humorous anecdotes, and reading the texts of memes to each other off of their phones.

Beside him, Dean was looking out the window. He was wearing a Black Sabbath t-shirt with moth-eaten sleeve seams, and his hair looked as though it had been styled that day. Castiel nudged him gently after ten minutes or so of silence. Dean tore his eyes from the window and met Castiel's.

“Have you ever been to this gallery?” Castiel asked him.
“I, uh...came with Sam and Bobby a few years back. Before I'd even applied to the university. I loved it. I think Bobby knew I wanted to go to school after that.”

Dean's voice seemed to flow beneath the sunlight falling onto his golden skin and hair. Castiel wondered if it was the easy-going setting of the field-trip that made it easier for him to talk.

“What do you mean?” he asked Dean.

“He, uh, found my sketchbooks when I was in high school. After that, he never shut up about me goin’ to school. He was the first person besides my brother who ever saw my drawings.” Dean smiled fondly and a little sadly, though Castiel couldn't figure why the story was a sad one.

“Bobby, is he your...?” Castiel's voice trailed off as he searched for what he even wanted to suggest with the question. Uncle, godfather, grandfather? Dean hadn't really alluded to any of the three.

Dean seemed to understand, and said, “Bobby's a friend of ours. He and my dad've been tight since they were teenagers. Both grew up in town. We—my dad and my brother and me, lived here when Sam was a baby, then...well, Dad got an itch to move around. We only settled back here a few years ago, when Sam started high school.”

Castiel nodded, though he felt as though he was missing a few details crucial to understanding the story.

“You finished school here, though?”

“Yeah, had to do summer school and an extra semester, but I graduated from the same school Sam's gonna. All my credits were a little messed up from the moves. Almost just had to go get a GED. Glad I didn't, though. Gettin' into school would have been a pain.” Dean laughed at that.

“I was home-schooled,” Castiel volunteered.

“That explains a few things.”

Castiel scowled, and Dean put his hand on his shoulder with a laugh.

“It's not bad, man.”

Castiel enjoyed the feeling of Dean's warm fingers clasping his shoulder until they were no longer there.

Dean was silent for a moment, then asked, “Did you like it?”

“It was quiet. A lot of my siblings were older than I was. By the time I was 15 or 16 most of them had all left home,” Castiel said.

“How many brothers and sisters d'you have?” Dean asked.

“I'm one of five.”

Dean whistled. “Doesn't sound like that'd be quiet to me.”

“You'd be surprised,” Castiel didn't notice the bitterness that had seeped into his voice until Dean changed the subject and asked him if he was planning on doing any more to his project. The conversation carried them through the rest of the drive.

They reached the gallery ten or so minutes later and found temporary parking nearby in the city. As
soon as everyone had stepped out of the van, Harvelle began ushering them toward the gallery. She kept a fast pace ahead of them while Garth brought up the rear.

Castiel, Dean, Charlie, and Lisa fell into a group beside Garth's gangly frame. Castiel couldn't help but notice that Lisa made an effort to position herself between Charlie and Dean, and that she was smiling brightly at him. Dean walked easily beside her, seemingly unaware of how often their shoulders brushed or how her long hair kept getting swept along his shirt collar in the warm breeze. Castiel could hear her asking Dean how he was handling the project, and if he would be going to so-and-so's party that coming weekend.

Castiel looked at the ground, feeling uncertain next to them and thinking about the way Dean's casual touch had felt in the van.

Charlie turned to him as they entered the gallery and stood in line to pay for their admission, but said nothing. Dean and Lisa were in front of them in line, and Lisa kept touching Dean's shoulder and leaning in and laughing at whatever he said.

Castiel said to Charlie, his tone light, “I didn't realize they had a permanent Jackson Pollock installation here.”

Charlie grinned. “Yeah! And last time I was here they had an Eva Hesse exhibit, it's a great gallery.”

When everyone was properly admitted, Harvelle gave them a time to meet back up an hour and a half later and free reign in the gallery until then. Castiel quickly began to walk away from the others when Harvelle bid them happy art-observing, wanting some time by himself. He heard Charlie begin to say his name but pretended he hadn't heard.

He found himself in front of one of Jackson Pollock's larger drip paintings after his feet had blindly carried him over however many yards and past however many frames. Castiel stared at the intricate ins-and-outs of the chance drops of paint layered one on top of another, their colors blending and separating again over the blank white they decorated. After more than a few minutes, Castiel realized he'd been standing there motionlessly and that he should join Charlie again, knowing he'd left her without explanation, and went off in search of her.

Castiel found her a room over with a pen in her mouth as she stood before an older Pollock work, one that still had a figurative feel to it.

“Hey.”

She took her pen from between her teeth and inclined her head. “See something you liked?”

“I thought I saw one of my favorites of his in another room.” Castiel gestured to the Pollock painting in front of them to indicate the artist he was referencing.

“She always does that, you know.”

“Who does what?” he asked, knowing full-well what she was talking about.

“Lisa. The whole...extremely-obvious-flirting-thing? She always does that with him. But she's not his type.” Charlie was looking at the painting as she spoke.

“I don't think I noticed.”

“I guess you didn't,” Charlie conceded.
After the hour was up, the art students returned to the van and began to vote on a place to get lunch. A small cafe nearby was agreed upon somewhat easily after someone confirmed that it had vegetarian and vegan options, and Garth drove them there.

Castiel kept himself busy on his phone on the way, sending his sister text messages that he usually wouldn't have, and Dean looked out the window and said nothing.

Upon arriving at the cafe, which Castiel had to admit was adorably quaint and perfectly indie, the great exodus of the van happened for the second time, and he and his classmates stood in another line. A few of the girls stood on their tiptoes to read the menu written on the blackboard behind the counter. Castiel ordered a chicken sandwich, Charlie ordered a veggie wrap, and Dean ordered nothing.

The three of them sat at one of the tables outside after they got their food, leaving Lisa and her friends to the indoor tables in the air-conditioning. Once they had settled, Dean massaged his temples, shutting his eyes for a moment.

"You want some of my wrap?" Charlie offered, holding it out to Dean before she took a bite.

Dean shook his head, "Rabbit food's what Sam likes, not me, remember?"

Charlie rolled her eyes and took a bite, then said, her mouth half-full, "How's he doing? You guys need to come over again sometime."

"I'll tell him you offered. God knows he's been missing your Magic bullshit," Dean grumbled.

"It is not bullshit, Dean Winchester! Magic is magic, bitch." Charlie threw an errant cucumber slice at him, and Dean flashed her a grin.

Castiel and Charlie ate their food mostly in silence after that, and Dean lounged in his chair, tilting his head back and letting the midday sunlight warm his face and neck. Castiel averted his eyes at the sight of Dean's exposed collarbones.

Less than half an hour later they were back at the university, and Garth parked the van in the FAB parking lot. Everyone disembarked somewhat slowly, many of them obviously drowsy from the lull of the drive and the midday heat.

Charlie quickly hopped into her car and bid Dean and Castiel goodbye from the window of the little hybrid, and Castiel turned to tell Dean he'd see him soon, but the other boy spoke first.

"You want a ride somewhere, Cas?"

"It's fine, the walk isn't bad." The words were an obvious lie considering it was almost ninety-five degrees out.

"It's hot out," Dean said.

Castiel wiped a hand across his damp brow and found himself questioning the point of telling Dean no again.

"Alright. Thank you, Dean."

Dean nodded and motioned for Castiel to follow, and he did easily enough, letting the other boy lead
him to an imposing black car parked a few yards away. Castiel didn't notice the noise of surprise he'd let slip until Dean smiled and ran a hand lovingly over the hood before looking back at him, pride clear in his gaze. The car was clean and looked well-cared for, in contrast to Dean himself and his tattered shirts and scarred skin.

“This's my baby. Dad and I fixed her up when I was fifteen. She's a 1967 Chevy Impala.”

Castiel was not one to claim he knew the first thing about cars, but he thought that he liked this one. “She's... impressive.”

"Damn straight. Let's jet," Dean said, rapping his knuckles lightly on the hood before pulling a set of keys from his pocket and sliding into the driver's seat. Castiel waited for him to unlock the vehicle. Once he had, Dean stretched across both seats and held the passenger door open long enough for Castiel to grasp it himself.

Castiel settled into the seat, strapping himself in with the seat-belt and noticing that Dean didn't do the same. Dean asked for directions to Castiel's apartment as he backed out of the parking lot and onto the main road that circled around the north side of the campus.

Dean's car smelled like him, for the most part: like soap, linseed oil, and the clean kind of sweat. But there was another scent that Castiel caught: the rank smell of old alcohol. It was wrong mixed in with the other scents, a comedy and a sad mistake. Aside from a few rumpled papers scattered along the floor of the car and an empty glass coke bottle, the car was empty and the leather seats were clean of context.

Next to him, Dean lightly drummed his fingers on the steering wheel to a beat only he was privy to. Castiel noticed for the first time a small bronze pendant on a black cord around Dean's neck that bounced on his chest with the motion of the car.

Castiel remembered one of the last car rides that Gabriel had given him, then, as he watched the picturesque green lawns and manicured sidewalks of the university passing like an impressionist painting outside the Impala's passenger window.

Gabriel had been singing along with some terrible pop song in a voice not nearly as bad as he would have said if asked, the long fingers of one hand resting on the back of Castiel's neck. The wind coming through his window had lifted Castiel's hair off of his warm scalp then as it did now, and Gabriel had been driving them to a diner not far from the house.

Their father hadn't been dead then. Gabriel hadn't been fed-up, hadn't hated the fighting so much that he would rather leave then pretend like Anna and Castiel that everything was fine. No, that ride Gabriel had been happy, and Castiel had been tired but willing to get out of bed at two in the morning to spend time with him.

Castiel saw his apartment complex nearing and told Dean to hook a right, gathering his bag and book into his lap as he prepared to hop out of the car. As Dean's car idled in front of Castiel's apartment, he thanked him for the ride. Castiel propped open his door and slid out, checking once more to make sure he'd left nothing in Dean's car.

"Wait, Cas."

Castiel was surprised when Dean said his name as he was about to turn and walk away, and he bent down so that he was again eye-level with Dean, waiting for him to speak.

“Lemme give you my number real quick.”
Castiel took out his phone and handed it off to Dean, letting him enter his number and contact information however he wanted to.

On a whim, when Dean gave him back his phone Castiel asked him where he worked nights during the week.

“The fast food joint across the street from the Wag-a-Bag,” Dean said.

“Jimmy's?” Castiel asked.

“That'd be it.”

“Do you work weekends there, too?”

“Nah. I work with Bobby at the salvage shop most weekends,” Dean answered.

Castiel nodded and waved goodbye, then, backing away from the car as Dean drove away. He looked down at his phone, unable to keep a faint smile from his lips as he saw what Dean had named himself in his contacts.

D.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave me comments! They would be very much appreciated :)
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next week passed without incident: Castiel wrapped up the accompanying theoretical examination of his piece, Charlie found a better place to work and a strong fixative conducive to making the lip colors stay on her canvas, and Dean made the finishing touches on his scar documentation. His painting was now very expressive, highlighted here and there with neon pinks and fire-reds that made Castiel think of exposed muscle and fresh blood.

Castiel hadn’t yet been able to bring himself to text Dean and give him his number in return, though they comfortably shared their small space together and gave passing comments on each other’s works as they developed. It seemed reasonable that perhaps they’d reached the point where texting would be appropriate, but Castiel continually found reasons not to.

* * *

The class’s first critique day of the semester came and went quickly, and was mostly uninteresting and procedural. Castiel assumed that the succeeding critique days wouldn’t be so formal, but that everyone was easing into the activity from an intellectually lax summer.

Dean, for his part, looked relieved when only a comment or two was made about his piece. He sat with his arms crossed over his torso, Ozzy Osborne peeking over his forearms from where his face was emblazoned on Dean’s faded t-shirt. His eyes were self-consciously averted as a few class members complimented his color choices and compositional arrangements, and he seemed only too happy to relinquish the spotlight, temporary as it had been. Castiel sympathized.

Castiel’s painting garnered more than a few positive comments but not much in the way of constructive criticism, similarly. Harvelle was disappointed with this trend, and had no problem making it known to the class.

“Next critique, I expect all of you to be more vocal and address the assignment directly.”

The class dutifully affirmed that yes, they would, and started shuffling out the studio doors in small groups.

Before he left, Castiel saw that Dean, after having moved his painting back to their space, was standing before it. His eyes were strangely vacant as he took in the abstraction of his own scars.

* * *

Castiel received his first long-essay assignment of the semester not a week after that Wednesday, and, as was his habit, got an early start on writing the outline and opening paragraphs. He’d been rereading and taking notes on the relevant text for the past few hours, and before that had been busily sketching and researching for his second painting assignment. Unfortunately, the book on which the essay was to be written was one that Castiel had read before and was having difficulty focusing on; the prose felt stunted and heavy to him as he attempted to read through an important excerpt for the third time in ten minutes. He knew he was having a hard time concentrating from being holed-up in his room, and that he should take a break and tackle his assignments the following day. He’d made decent progress on more than one of them, and it was starting to seem as though it’d been too long since he’d last been outside.
The evening was supposed to be a cool one from an earlier rainshower, a pleasant reprieve from the sweltering summer mornings and afternoons of the past week, and with that knowledge, Castiel decided to take an aimless, sprawling walk around campus and perhaps through a few of the surrounding neighborhoods. He wanted to clear his thoughts and shake the slowly-growing claustrophobia clinging to him like old ivy.

The little college town was known to be a good one with few instances of crime, but Castiel stuck his pocketknife in the back of his jeans for added security. He set out soon after that, looking up at the moon where it glowed like a nervously chewed-off thumbnail in the sky opposite a brilliant sunset.

One could still smell the rain in the damp, heavy air, and the sidewalks were slick and the grass muddied. Castiel walked with his hands loosely resting in his pockets, his thin t-shirt already slightly damp with sweat and humidity only a few minutes in. He saw few other people out as he walked around campus, running into only three or four students. He knew none of them.

The sky slowly darkened as Castiel made his way down all of the campus sidewalks that he came to, having no destination in mind and savoring the random path he was making. Some of the sidewalks were ones he’d walked before, others were new to him; he saw a few patches of flowers here and there at the cracked edges of the concrete, having sprouted up from the rain and leaning heavily inwards on their stems, weighed down by their blooming tops.

Castiel reached the edge of campus sooner than he thought he would, and chose to go left on the first nearby residential street without knowing where it would lead.

Castiel tried to make a mental note every time he took a turn or a detour, remembering the street names as best as he could and knowing that if he got truly lost he had a GPS on his phone. He’d walked through more than one neighborhood before long, losing himself in the memories the walk dredged up in him.

It was funny, he thought to himself, how alike one street could look to another. The houses he passed reminded him of the ones which had surrounded his childhood home, a front porch here, a swing set there, an attic window in the distance. It felt as though pieces of his hometown had disparately relocated themselves, followed him to school through the connections made by nostalgia.

Perhaps every town is every other before long.

Castiel remembered a time six or seven years before when he, Gabriel, and Anna had snuck out of the house when their parents were gone for the evening at a benefit for the lab. They hadn’t known much about the event, just that it was yet another formal gala meant to raise funds and awareness of their research. Their two oldest brothers were already out of the house at the time, and Gabriel had easily taken on the mantle of eldest sibling in their absence. Their parents were normally very strict regarding just about everything, from the food Castiel and his siblings could consume and the clothing they could wear, to the people they could consort with and the places they could go. While this was obviously not a new feature of parenthood, Castiel knew by the way that other children had treated them their whole lives that his parents held them to standards hard to come by in other families.

Castiel, while never being exactly thrilled about it, had always done his best to conform to their expectations and desires. Anna and Gabriel, however, had always been the rebellious ones. Gabriel seemed to enjoy breaking the rules, smoking pot in his bedroom and wearing oversized t-shirts with vulgar slogans on them, and Anna had come out to the family as a lesbian when she was thirteen, an orientation that her parents had fought her over ever since.
The night of the gala they'd left the house not long after their parents, with Gabriel declaring that they were going to have a 'wrecking good time'. Whatever plans he had had for the evening, however, they only ended up doing what Castiel was doing now, walking around the surrounding neighborhoods. They'd told one another crass jokes and enjoyed the temporary freedom of saying whatever they pleased about their parents and the lab, none of which was polite.

“Just a few years, then I am getting the fuck outta Dodge and working in a bakery. Or a cafe. I think. I just want to bake shit.”

“To sell or to eat for yourself?”

“Shut up, Cassie, to sell. And to eat. Both, I guess, really.”

“Would we get discounts at this shop of yours, Gabe?”

‘Course, baby sister. Anything to never have to fuckin' hear about 'the good that we do at Novak Labs' again.”

Castiel was able to travel no further down memory lane when the sound of a yell broke the stillness of the night. Startled, he instinctively reached behind himself and patted the shape in his back pocket, making sure his knife was still there.

There sounded one, then two more cries, and then came silence again. Castiel could clearly tell where the voice was coming from by its last echo, and it was likely close to where he was; he estimated only one street and a house or two over. Going against his better judgment and drawn by curiosity, Castiel quietly made his way over to where he judged the source to be. As he did so, he was glad both that his eyes were adjusted to the dim lighting and that he was obscured by the shadows of the homes.

Castiel only saw the person slumped over behind one of the houses because their cellphone had fallen open beside them, shining out like a small beacon next to their prone form. Castiel felt a pang of fear as he traced the bent body with his eyes, unsure if it was wise to approach them. For all he knew they were drunk or violent, and he'd lost track of what neighborhood he was now in. The dwelling they were both behind had lights on inside, and Castiel could hear the sounds of a sitcom emanating through the screened-in window directly above where the person lay.

Castiel took a step closer to whoever it was on the ground, then another, but stopped dead where he stood as they lurched and haltingly began to right themselves. He heard a gasp punch itself from his own lungs as he realized that it was **Dean** on the pavement in front of him.

Now that Castiel was closer, he could clearly make out the other boy's familiar features, and he saw with a twist in his guts that Dean's nose was bleeding heavily.

Dean threw out a hand, beckoning for Castiel to stop, and he realized that Dean couldn't see him clearly in the dark.

“Dean, are you alright?” Castiel asked softly.

Dean's hand came down and his eyes snapped up to Castiel's.

“Cas? What're you doin' here?” He sounded congested, which Castiel guessed was due to the blood gushing from his nose.

“I was walking, and I heard...was that you?”
Dean lifted his hand to his face, bringing it away red and slick. It was a moment before he answered.

“I fell. Stupidest thing. Wanna help me up?”

Castiel hurried over at the request, getting halfway behind the other boy and putting one hand under Dean's arm and the other around his shoulder as he bodily pulled him up. He may have done it too quickly in his anxiety to get him off the ground, because Dean clutched at him tightly for a moment as he steadied himself, his breathing still wet with the sound of his own blood.

“Where did you fall from?” Castiel heard the disbelief in his own voice.

Instead of answering the question, Dean asked him what time it was. When Castiel told him it was half past nine, Dean cursed.

“I work at 10. Can you come with me to Jimmy's? Think I, uh, may have fallen harder than I thought.”

Castiel agreed and let Dean lead him to the Impala, which was parked in the driveway around the front of the house.

“Do you live here?” Castiel asked as he climbed into the passenger seat, keeping an eye on Dean as he shakily started the car.

Dean nodded once but said nothing as he drove them both to the diner, which Castiel noticed was closer to the university than Dean's home had been. He'd clearly misjudged how far he'd walked in the few hours he'd spent wandering around town.

Dean's nosebleed had slowed by the time they arrived, and Dean parked them near the back of the diner. He wiped a hand across his face to get some of the blood off before he reached behind him into the back seat to retrieve a shirt with the Jimmy's name and logo emblazoned across it. He quickly pulled it on over his bloodied, gray t-shirt.

Dean got out of the Impala, motioning for Castiel to do the same, and they walked into the diner together, bypassing the one waitress busy cleaning a table and going to the men's bathroom. Luckily there was no one there. As soon as the door shut behind them, Dean approached one of the sinks and ran the water so hot Castiel could see steam pouring from the faucet.

He watched as Dean quickly and efficiently washed the dried blood from around his nose and mouth, and saw then that he also had a split lip which the flow from his nose had concealed earlier.

Dean only managed to keep his nose pinched for a minute or two before he had to go and throw up some of the blood he'd undoubtedly swallowed earlier in one of the toilets. He quietly came back, and for the second time washed away some of the blood that had started flowing again from the exertion, and repeated the process. This time, he kept his nostrils pinched until the bleeding stopped entirely.

Castiel said nothing to him, afraid that if he did, Dean would make him leave. He wasn't sure why Dean had brought him, but was glad he hadn't driven alone. So, he stood silently behind him, occasionally catching sight of himself in the mirror and wishing that his eyes didn't look so wide.

Dean finally turned to him.

“'s not too bad, is it?” Dean gestured to his face.

Castiel supposed it wasn't the worst he'd ever seen, but Dean's lip was still swollen, and he looked
far too pale.

“...you fell?” He asked again.

Dean nodded. “My own fault.”

Castiel felt distinctly that Dean was lying, remembering the cries he’d heard almost two streets over, splitting the silence into ominous halves, one before them in time and one after.

“Where's your brother?” Castiel asked.

“At Bobby's.”

“Your father?”

Dean lowered his eyes. “Asleep. Didn't want to bother him.”

Castiel opened his mouth to say what, he wasn't sure, but finally closed it and said nothing, simply looking at Dean in the end.

Their eyes stayed locked for so long that Castiel began to shuffle his feet nervously, and it was Dean who broke the stare. "If you need a ride home, you can wait for my shift to end or I can call my buddy."

Castiel shook his head. "I can walk."

Dean turned and left Castiel in the diner bathroom after a small incline of his head.

When Castiel exited not long after, he didn't see Dean anywhere in the restaurant, and figured he must be a dishwasher or fry cook.

He walked back to the university feeling as though the past thirty minutes had been the product of some sort of fever dream.

He texted Dean when he reached his apartment, sinking into bed and falling into a restless and shallow, early sleep as he pressed the send button.

“I hope work goes well. It's me, Cas, by the way. Goodnight.”

* * *

Castiel wasn't sure what he'd been expecting to happen after the night he watched Dean doctor his own bleeding nose in a diner, but it hadn't been nothing. However, that was almost exactly what happened.

They worked side by side in the studio on their new assignments, as usual, and Dean didn't bring up what had happened, so Castiel didn't, either. But there were a few small changes in their dynamic: Dean began to give Castiel rides to his apartment from the studio after class ended (whenever he made it to class), and they got into the habit of shooting a few texts back and forth to one another every few days. They didn't talk about anything serious, mostly what Dean had missed after another class session took place without him, or some funny or interesting quote Castiel had come across in one of the many books he made a habit of perusing. It wasn't wasn't a dramatic change. But Castiel felt as though he'd apparently passed some kind of test that night in the diner in Dean's eyes.

Charlie noticed after a few weeks.
“Dean doesn't even give me rides back to my place =P ”

Castiel wasn't sure how to respond to the text message, and waited about an hour before saying, “He told you?”

“He did, but I also see you guys after class. I have these things called eyes .”

Castiel felt a flush spread over his cheeks at the thought. He hadn't really considered before that yes, obviously people would see him getting into Dean's car if they only cared to look.

Dean was quiet, almost hard to talk to, and even intimidating at times. The fact that he'd somehow become somewhat of a friend was something Castiel found hard to believe.

“Like I'm going to pass up a chance to get a ride in that car.”

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The last weekend of September the university’s drama department put on its first production of the year, a modern revamping of A Midsummer Night's Dream. Charlie insisted Castiel come and see the first showing that Friday with herself and Sam.

“Don't tell me you need to work on your piece some more. Knowing you, you've been in the studio all day. It'll be fun, and you can finally meet Sam. Show starts in thirty, and we get free tickets as students. Get down here.”

Having inquired as to why Sam was going but his brother wasn't, Charlie told him that Dean had said he couldn't afford to take a night off from work, and that it wasn't all that unusual for her to take Sam to do things even when Dean couldn't come along.

Charlie had been right in her estimation of how long he'd spent in front of his current painting, and Castiel decided to go enjoy himself for a few hours. Before he took the elevator downstairs to meet up with Charlie in the lobby of the Fine Arts Building (where the school's theater was located), he sent Dean a text message.

“You're not going to the show tonight?”

“Gotta b at the diner man. By the time the show ended Id have missed 2 hrs of wrk.”

“Ok. I hope you have a good night.”

“Mhmm. Don't cry too hard over me not bein around. ”

Castiel rolled his eyes, practically hearing Dean sarcastically say the words in his head as he read them to himself.

When he arrived downstairs there was already a decent crowd of people milling about in front of the open theater doors, and he saw a few students he knew from his classes acting as ushers with programs in their hands. Castiel spotted Charlie easily enough, her bright red hair standing out among the subdued sandy blondes and mousy brunettes of the room. Beside her was a tall, teenaged boy with broad shoulders and shaggy brown hair who Castiel guessed was Sam.

Castiel made his way over to them, relieved when Charlie informed him she'd already gotten their tickets and used his name. After she handed him his stub she motioned to Sam and introduced them to each other.
Sam gave him a dimpled smile and held out a hand for Castiel to shake before Charlie started to herd them into the theater, reminding them of the time. In a few minutes they were seated, with Castiel situated between Charlie and Sam. Soon after they’d gotten comfortable the lights dimmed in the theater and the production began.

Castiel was impressed by the quality of the sets and the costumes, and by intermission was sad Dean was missing the play. He'd found himself laughing almost ceaselessly, and thought Dean would have appreciated the humor of the modernized Shakespeare.

He, Sam and Charlie didn't leave the theater during the intermission, but stayed in their seats and chatted.

As soon as he had Castiel and Charlie's attention, Sam began excitedly comparing aspects of the play to a few others of Shakespeare's that he’d recently read for his senior English class, pointing out thematic and symbolic similarities he'd noticed.

Dean's younger brother, Castiel found, was just as intelligent and endearing as Dean had described him to be. He reminded Castiel vaguely of a puppy, all warm eyes and eager gestures. Castiel was surprised at the differences he spotted between Dean and his brother almost immediately. Where Dean was tense, Sam was relaxed; where Dean was silent unless directly spoken to, Sam was much more talkative.

He and Charlie listened with interest to Sam's commentary before the lights dimmed once more and the play reached its conclusion an act later.

Castiel stood with Charlie and Sam in the foyer outside the theater after the play, reluctant to part ways and return to his apartment, where the only company he would have were his books and his thoughts.

Castiel liked Sam, he decided. He had interesting things to say and radiated a kind of unassuming warmheartedness he probably wasn't aware of. He seemed eager to prove himself, to make himself worth knowing. Castiel found himself questioning again how it could be that he and Dean were so different. He couldn't imagine Dean volunteering half as many of his own observations to someone he'd just met.

Charlie unexpectedly got a phone call and moved away to take it a few seconds after that thought crossed Castiel's mind, apologizing to them as she excused herself.

When she was gone, Sam turned to Castiel and said with a smile, “So, you're in painting with my brother.”

Castiel nodded. “His work is...intimidating.”

Sam laughed and then said, “He used to destroy his work. I still almost can't believe he's going to school for it.” Castiel heard admiration in his voice.

“He destroyed his work?” As an artist, Castiel couldn't imagine intentionally unmaking something unless he thought it to be truly worthless.

“Yeah. We moved so much, he used to say there wasn't anywhere to keep it.” Sam sounded matter-of-fact.

Before Castiel could think of how to respond to that, Charlie wandered back over to them, her phone still in her hands. She looked stressed.
"Everything okay?" Sam asked.

"Gilda's not feeling so hot, I think I need to go be with her right now. Cas, do you drive?" Charlie asked him.

Castiel nodded, "Who's Gilda?"

Sam loudly cleared his throat and Charlie went on. "Can you please take Sam to Bobby's, Cas? I'm so, so sorry to ask. But Gilda needs someone to go over, and Bobby's is only a few minutes away. Is that okay, Sam?"

Sam looked unaffected as he nodded.

"Cas?" They both turned to him.

"Sure. My car's not far."

Charlie gave them both almost suffocatingly tight hugs in turn, telling Castiel that she owed him one despite his protestations to the contrary before she hurriedly left the building.

Castiel looked at Sam, shrugging his shoulders as if to say, 'well then?'

Sam voiced his agreement and they soon left themselves, beginning the walk to Castiel's car, one which was considerably less cool than Dean's Impala.

As they walked, Castiel asked, "Is Gilda a friend of Charlie's?"

Sam gave a short huff of uncomfortable laughter and shook his head. "Gilda's Charlie's ex. They were on-and-off for a few months. They aren't even a thing anymore and she still treats Charlie like a secretary."

"She's never mentioned her," Castiel offered unhelpfully.

"Good. She used to be all Charlie talked about. We were glad when Charlie finally broke it off. Not that it's changed much."

Castiel said nothing more on the subject, sensing that Sam clearly disliked Gilda and likely wasn't a reliable source on the situation. He personally couldn't imagine Charlie allowing herself to be a doormat to anyone, no matter the connection between herself and the other person.

They reached Castiel's old Nissan Sentra a few minutes later, and he self-consciously angled himself in front of the dent on the driver's side as he unlocked it. He'd purchased the car for a very reasonable price a few months prior, just before he'd left his family to transfer to the university.

He and Sam got into the car, and Sam gave him simple directions on how to reach Bobby's home and salvage yard from the university. Castiel was tempted to ask Sam why he didn't stay with Dean and his father, but knew it wasn't any of his business.

"Dean's mentioned you a few times. He thinks you're cool. Said you were as smart as I was," Sam said after giving Castiel the directions.

"As if he isn't smart," Castiel said somewhat irritatedly in response.

"You know how he is. Or at least, if you don't now you will soon enough," Sam said ruefully.

"He said I was smart?" Castiel couldn't help but ask a few minutes later.
“Yeah, man. I'm glad he likes the one other guy in the major.” Sam laughed, and Castiel laughed with him.

Castiel dropped Sam off in front of Singer Salvage soon after, where he received a polite thank you and a warm farewell, which he returned sincerely.

After he found a parking spot near his apartment and had returned to his room twenty minutes later, Castiel pulled out his phone to call Charlie and ask if everything was going alright on her end. He got side-tracked when he found that Dean had texted him only a few minutes earlier.

“Thanks for driving Sammy to Bobby's.”

“It's fine, Charlie would have anyway.”

“Still. Thanks. Night Cas.”

“Goodnight, Dean.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments are appreciated :) let me know if I'm doing a good job?
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The night after Castiel, Charlie, and Sam saw A Midsummer Night's dream was the first time Dean ever saw Castiel's apartment from the inside.

Harvelle made a habit of giving the seminar class weekly technical quizzes or short essay reviews over readings and artists relevant to their assignments, and that week she'd given them a reading on New Image Art. However, given that neither Castiel, Dean, nor Charlie completely understood it, they decided to get together and study at Castiel's place Saturday night to try and get a better handle on the author's main points.

Castiel and his mostly-absent roommate (who he had discovered earlier in the semester was a tall blonde with a British accent named...Bal? Bart?) had a small television, and he told Charlie this beforehand. This prompted her to not only bring her handout, but also the Lord of the Rings trilogy on DVD and her deck of Magic: The Gathering cards.

Dean arrived at the apartment a half hour or so after Charlie did, smudged with oil and rust from working at Bobby's all day. He sat carefully on Castiel's couch, looking as though he was afraid of staining something, which he managed not to do over the course of the night. Dean smelled like sunlight and transmission fluid, which Castiel found he liked when he was close enough to smell it. Charlie joked that she was glad to have such a strapping young lad as a friend, and Dean sighed in good-natured exasperation, wiping his dirty face with the dirtier collar of his white t-shirt.

After about fifteen pleasant minutes of lounging around not doing much of anything, Castiel felt obliged to remind them that the faster they went over the reading, the faster they could put one of the movies on and relax.

The three of them buckled down after that, re-positioning themselves around Castiel's squat coffee table and retrieving their handouts. Their second and current assignment was one in which they'd been instructed to make a piece of New Image Art. While it wasn't very difficult to make a painting that fit the broad criteria, wrangling together the criteria itself was proving to be much harder, even with the aid of some theoretical writing on the subject.

For his project, Castiel was painting a surreal scene set at night: a man in a field with a large pair of silky, reflective black wings. Dean was making a blurred portrait of a woman in black, gray and white, and Charlie was painting the night sky in neons instead of traditional colors; all three of them were feeling some uncertainty over their style and subject choices, and were hopeful that the reading would alleviate this. But after an hour of studying the material, explicating certain sections with painstaking care, and getting somewhat lost in the long-winded prose of the author, they decided that they were done for the night, and away went the readings in favor of the deck of cards.

Charlie put The Fellowship of the Ring on to play in the background as she tried to teach Castiel and Dean how to play Magic. Or at least, as she tried to teach Castiel how to play; Dean just sat across from her making jokes the whole time and not taking any of his moves seriously. Charlie won, to the surprise of no one, and they played through another game before the movie ended. Though Castiel felt as though the game was a little over his head, he enjoyed the look on Charlie's face whenever he started to slowly improve.

Dean had clearly played before, and was better than Castiel by a small margin.
By the time the second movie ended, Castiel understood the basics of the game and was as excited as Dean was tired. He was obviously trying not to drift off, but it was almost one in the morning and he'd worked outside most of the day.

Charlie packed up her gear and said her goodbyes not long after Dean began snoring while sitting at the table, giving both boys an affectionate peck on the cheek before she left the apartment.

When she'd shut the door behind her, Castiel saw Dean's expression become noticeably less easy-going. Before Castiel could open his mouth to ask Dean if he was alright, his friend crossed his arms behind his head and shut his eyes for a moment before opening them again and looking at Castiel.

They stood for a moment just like that, their eyes aligned: green searing into blue, sky resting against earth. It reminded Castiel of that night in the diner restroom, when Dean had silently stared through him, his bloody t-shirt collar just visible beneath his Jimmy's shirt. Castiel's tongue felt weighed down by the sheer amount of questions lingering there.

Dean looked away first, as he had the last time, leaving Castiel to wonder what had passed between them.

“Are you alright, Dean?” Castiel asked quietly.

“I'm fine, Cas.”

Charlie decided to spend Sunday evening at Castiel's apartment as she had Saturday, which gladdened him immensely. He was slowly improving at Magic, it seemed, and Charlie brought a bottle of vanilla rum, some coke, and the first three Harry Potter movies over the second time around. She poured herself a double shot of the rum before making herself and Castiel a drink each, toasting him with comical, put-on somberness before they began to nurse their booze.

Castiel cautiously took a sip of his rum and coke and decided that he liked it. He took a swig and licked the sweet remains of it off of his lips, which he noticed with irritation were chapped again.

Charlie was shuffling her deck for another game, having just popped the Sorcerer's Stone into the DVD player, when her phone vibrated loudly on Castiel's coffee table. The vibration lasted for a good ten seconds, and Charlie laughed as she reached for it, seeing the look on Castiel's face.

“It spazzes out when I get more than one text at a time,” she explained as she flipped her phone open to check it.

Castiel watched her expression as he finished the last few swallows of his second drink of the night. Charlie's features momentarily darkened as she read whatever her phone screen beheld. However, she soon shut her phone and poured herself another double shot without comment, smiling at Castiel after as she slammed the empty shot glass down on the coffee table.

“Who was that?” Castiel asked, figuring it worth asking after that display.

“No one.” Her voice had a rancor to it that Castiel had never heard before.

“No one is who that was.”

As Charlie was heading out the door a few hours later, both of them tipsy and laughing, Castiel
could've sworn he heard her say something about heading over to Gilda's.

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The following Monday found Castiel in the studio sitting before his painting.

He'd finished the underpainting of burnt sienna and Prussian green, and was preparing to begin laying down the first local colors. The piece was due that week on Wednesday, and Castiel knew he was going to need to put in some serious hours to get it finished in time.

He was surprised from his thoughts when Dean entered the studio a few minutes later, the creak of the doors alerting him to the other boy's presence. Class wasn't due to start for another hour, and usually Dean was either five minutes late to class or entirely absent. In fact, Castiel couldn't remember a single time when Dean had come early to work on a class-day.

Dean greeted Castiel as he took his seat next to him in their cubby. His painting was close to done, as far as Castiel could tell; the purposefully blurred lines and mostly black and gray color palette of the work lent the woman Dean had painted a haunted look. The painting was far more realistic than anything Castiel had ever seen him do, and when he'd remarked on this earlier in the project, Dean had admitted that it was a stretch for him.

Castiel had looked at the painting more than once when Dean wasn't around, and felt that there was something obvious about it that he wasn't consciously noticing. It was only in that moment, as he looked at Dean in front of the ghost-portrait, that he understood what it was he'd been sensing but not seeing.

Dean was studying the piece, his chin resting in his palm as he worried his lower lip in concentration, when Castiel asked, ‘Is she meant to look like you?’

“That's my mom. So yeah, she looks like me,” Dean said into his hand.

“Will you give it to her when it's done?”

“She's dead, Cas.” There was no anger or sadness in Dean's voice, only a heavy temperance. Castiel felt as though his friend had said those words aloud many times. There was no inflection, only the flatness of one reciting a fact which has lost its practical reality.

“I'm sorry. I didn't know,” Castiel wasn't sure if Dean heard him. His eyes were still fixed to the painted green ones of his mother on the canvas in front of him, the only dash of color on its surface.

Dean didn't respond for a few minutes. Castiel began to wish he hadn't said anything when he saw Dean's face take on the same far-away look it'd worn when he'd stood before his scar-painting. Castiel was about to try and change the subject when Dean stood up suddenly, absently running his fingers through his hair.

“I can't do this today.” He quickly sidled out of his and Castiel's space before turning and beginning to walk back out of the studio.

Castiel stood up, too. “Dean, don't go. I'm sorry I asked--”

“I'm gettin' outta here. Do you wanna come?” Dean was half-turned towards Castiel as he waited for an answer.

Castiel felt as though he were in a dream as he nodded and began to cap his silicoil and palette cups. Part of himself, the studious, panic-driven part, was pleading that he stay and reminding him of how
little time he had left to finish the painting. The other part of him was trying to hurry and get his
supplies squared away before Dean changed his mind and left without him. But Dean waited
patiently as Castiel rinsed his brushes off and made sure that his newly-mixed piles of paint were
properly covered with saran wrap before leading him out the door.

Castiel followed Dean's rapid, heavy steps down the three flights of stairs to the foyer, through the
doors of the Fine Arts Building, and across the parking lot to where the Impala was parked. Dean's
work boots clunked loudly on the asphalt, the sound made stark and echoing by the blistering, empty
air.

Castiel said nothing to Dean as they got into his car. He'd never skipped a lesson in the entirety of his
school career, home or not, and was feeling what he knew was a childish amount of guilt and
excitement. Dean pulled out of the parking lot and onto the main road. His expression was far-away
again as he drove them down a few residential streets.

Almost twenty minutes passed in silence before Castiel realized Dean was driving them aimlessly
around town.

“Did you have somewhere you wanted to go?” he asked timidly.

Dean looked at him for a second, as if only then remembering that Castiel was in the car with him.

“I'm still deciding,” he responded.

Castiel nodded and looked out the window, contenting himself with the drive for as long as it would
last. In a few minutes he heard Dean put a cassette into the Impala's player, and rock music began to
blare through the car, making Castiel's seat vibrate.

Liking the sound of the first song, Castiel turned to look for the cassette's case and found it on the
center console. Its plastic spine read *Zeppelin, IV*. The handwriting was faded, the paper on which it
had been written yellowed, and Castiel wondered how old the tape was.

“They're one of my favorites,” Dean explained as the second song began.

Castiel felt as though he should know who *they* were, then. “Zeppelin?”


Castiel shook his head. “Sorry.”

“You seriously haven't heard of 'em?” Dean asked.

“No. I like The Shins and The Beatles, though,” Castiel said by way of explanation.

“I can get behind the Beatles, but man, we gotta get you educated,” Dean said with a grimace.

Castiel agreed easily enough.

By the time Dean had picked a location and taken them there the album was halfway over and
Castiel could see that they'd used up almost half a tank of gas in the process.

Castiel had heard of the old park in town, but had yet to visit it. As Dean parked nearby he saw that
it consisted of a dilapidated-looking jungle gym, swing set, and a shallow pond filled with lethargic
looking ducks. The grass was yellowed and short, and there was dirt instead of smooth white rocks
beneath the swing-set and the playground. He and Dean each took a seat on a bench beside the
jungle gym, and Castiel watched as Dean got out a pack of Marlboro Reds and lit one with a zippo he retrieved from his boot.

“You smoke?” Castiel had never seen Dean smoke a cigarette before.

“Not really. Once in a while. Or when I'm drunk. Want one?”

“I don't know,” Castiel answered honestly.

“Take a drag off mine, see if you like it.” Dean handed the lit cigarette to him, and Castiel took it uncertainly.

Not wanting to prolong the moment any longer than necessary, he lifted the cigarette to his lips. He felt the dampness from Dean's mouth on the paper as he hesitantly inhaled. The smoke rushed down his throat more quickly than he had imagined it would, and it burned his lungs. He coughed predictably. He handed the cigarette back to Dean as he cleared his throat as well as he could.

“Do you want one?”

“I don't think so.”

Dean laughed at his reaction and then cursed as the sun chose that moment to come out from behind the clouds. It bathed them in sunlight and made the warm day that much warmer. Castiel felt himself begin to sweat, and silently wished he'd worn a lighter shirt. Dean, for his part, unself-consciously stripped off his t-shirt, soon wearing only his wife-beater and that bronze pendant that was showing itself again; it hung between his collarbones. Castiel had to drag his eyes from Dean, from the sunlight making his eyes an almost sea-foam green, from the freckled expanse of his shoulders and the casual way he brought his right leg up to his chest and rested his elbow on his knee.

“It happened when I was four,” Dean said after he finished his cigarette.

“What happened?” Castiel asked.

“My mom. It was a gas fire.”

Castiel shuddered. What a way to go.

“Sammy was a few months old. Mom got trapped in the nursery.”

“Shit.” It seemed to be all Castiel could say that expressed the magnitude of his horror.

Dean nodded, his expression grim.

“Does Sam remember anything?”

“I don't think he does, no.”

Castiel felt at a loss for words, then. More silence stretched between them before Dean spoke again.

“You ever lost anyone?”

“Not really.”

Dean raised an eyebrow, and Castiel explained.

“My father died when I was almost eighteen. But...Gabriel leaving hurt more.” He felt ungrateful
telling Dean that his father's death hadn't affected him after seeing how upset Dean still was by the loss of his mother. But Dean just looked at him, wordlessly inviting him to continue.

“Gabriel's my older brother. After my father died, there was a lot of conflict over who would do what, get what. My parents founded Novak Labs, and I guess my father hadn't planned well enough. The company went to my two oldest brothers, Luke and Michael, and my mother, and they were always arguing over who should do what, who should be in charge of this project or that. Gabriel wasn't having it, I guess...I haven't heard from him since. But, I can't say anything. I left to come here. I couldn't stay, either.” Castiel didn't know how upset talking about his family was making him until he felt Dean put a hand on his shoulder. He let it linger for a longer time than he had on the bus weeks before.

Castiel looked at Dean with incredulity. “It's fine. It's worse to lose a mother than an asshole brother.”

“People leaving always hurts,” Dean said simply.

Twenty or thirty minutes later Dean announced that they were leaving the park and going to Bobby's. Castiel was glad to get out of the heat, and followed Dean to his car for the second time that day.

On the way to Bobby's Dean asked suddenly, “So, your parents founded the Novak Labs?”

Castiel had to refrain from sighing aloud. There it was, the inevitable question he got from anyone who found out.

Castiel answered in the affirmative and braced himself for more questions. But Dean seemed to understand that he didn't want to talk about it, and he asked nothing more. They reached Bobby's house a few minutes after that, and Dean retrieved a key from his jeans pocket and let himself in just as Castiel received a text from Charlie. He checked the time and winced. Class had been going on for almost 45 minutes, and it pained him a little to know that he was missing valuable studio time even as he was happy to spend it with Dean.

“Are u with Dean?”

“Yes”

“You better get your ass over here when he drops you back off or whatever, your painting doesn't look close to being done.”

“It's not...”

“Its okay, Ima be here all freakin night. We cn keep each other company.”

"Idk when he'll want to go back, but I'll come over, no worries."

"Mk. Tell him Charlie says to go fuck himself."

Castiel relayed her message to Dean, who laughed and said, “I love her, too.”

The man himself, Bobby Singer, soon came in from the back of his house where the salvage yard apparently was. He smiled when he saw Dean and Castiel sitting at his coffee table. Mr. Singer was an older man, with a gray-streaked beard and a worn baseball cap halfway-shadowing dark green eyes that looked kind, though Castiel got the distinct impression that Bobby could be intimidating when he wanted to be.
Dean stood and so did Castiel, who Bobby was introduced to quickly; his handshake was strong and his fingers were warm and calloused. Bobby commented on the strangeness of his name, something Castiel was becoming accustomed to.

“You can just call me Cas, Mr. Singer. Dean does.”

Castiel heard Dean snort beside him, and Bobby shot him a look that had a paternal feel to it. “Boy's never addressed anyone proper in his life.”

Dean stopped laughing, then, and looked almost sheepishly over at Castiel, who couldn't recall Dean ever looking at him that way before. Dean shuffled his feet awkwardly, “I didn't even think...Do you--d'you mind that I call you Cas?”

Castiel immediately shook his head. “I like it. No one's ever called me anything but Castiel before you.”

The sudden relief on Dean's face would have been comical had Castiel not been glad to see it. For reasons he hadn't examined too closely, he cherished that Dean had been the first to give him a nickname. The last thing he wanted was for Dean to revert to his full name.

Bobby nodded in satisfaction after Castiel spoke, and said, “You can call me Bobby, none 'a this 'Mr. Singer' crap. Makes me feel like my dad.”

They sat down at the table together after that. Castiel, who normally felt uncomfortable and awkward around new people, found himself enjoying Bobby's company and laughing at the things he told him about Dean.

Dean, the way he told it, was a bit of a wild card in his last year of high school in town. He'd gotten kicked out of parties and accidentally made girls cry at dances. He'd drawn huge abstract sketches on newsprint and burned them in the school parking lot. He'd stayed home from school for almost a week to take care of Sam when he came down with the worst cold Bobby had ever known anyone to have.

Dean shuffled his feet again under the table as Bobby spoke of him, clearly not comfortable being talked about. However, he respectfully didn't contradict what was said. Bobby finished up a final anecdote when he saw Dean checking his phone. The last story took place during Dean's closing month of high school, wherein he'd come home from a night shift at Jimmy's only to stay up the remaining few hours so he could drive Sam to a UIL Science competition three cities away at six in the morning.

Castiel checked his phone as well, surprised to note that they'd sat around Bobby's table and talked for almost an hour. It would soon be four, the time the local high school let out, and Dean told Bobby that he would get Sam so that the old man could go back to work. Bobby nodded and bid them goodbye, saying he was glad to meet any friend of Dean's and that Castiel should feel free to stop by whenever.

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The Wednesday due-date in their seminar came and went, and Castiel managed to get his project finished before then. He was lucky that Charlie, true to her word, was there in the studio with him and just as busy and harried.

The second critique day was not all that much more successful than the first, but Harvelle seemed more concerned that Dean was again absent. Castiel saw her write something down as the class
passed his piece without comment, and felt worry.

That evening after the class ended, he and Charlie went out to the local Starbucks to celebrate the end of their second project. As they took their seats in a booth near one of the windows, Castiel offhandedly commented that he wished Dean was around to celebrate with them. Charlie rolled her eyes at him and pulled out her phone, rapidly dialing a phone number.

“Dean? Hey, don't pull that shit with me, you know that I know this isn't Chula Telulah's number. Cas and I are at the Starbucks next door to the HEB, come on over and chill with us...Do we need a reason? The second project is over and we have the weekend to recoup! Get your fine ass over here, Winchester. Coffee's on me.”

With that, she snapped her phone closed and smiled slyly at Castiel.

“That wasn't so hard, was it?”

“If you're trying to make a point, I don't know what it is,” Castiel said as he took a sip of coffee.

In less than fifteen minutes Dean arrived at the Starbucks, finding his friends and throwing himself down beside Charlie. His eyes were lined with deep circles and his skin was a little pale. He smiled tiredly at them and looked at Charlie with a smirk. “You promised me coffee, Bradbury. Hop to it. None of that candy crap.”

Charlie stood and made a humorously elaborate curtsy before making her way back over to the counter on the opposite end of the mostly-empty cafe.

Dean had his arms crossed around himself, his smile fading once Charlie was gone.

“Why weren't you in class, Dean?” Castiel asked.

Dean looked at him, their eyes meeting for the briefest of moments before he redirected his gaze to something in his lap.

“I was sick.” His voice was little more than a mutter.

Castiel wasn't sure what to say, and he didn't have the chance to think of something before Charlie returned with a plain black coffee. She slid it over to Dean, who reached out a hand to grasp the thick paper cup.

Castiel almost immediately noticed the dark, fresh-looking bruise on the inside of Dean's arm as he moved the coffee closer to where he sat at the table. He felt an indefinable, sick feeling settle in the pit of his stomach.

Dean was smiling again, mostly looking at Charlie, but Castiel had been dragged back to an earlier memory of of Dean still stored in his thoughts, that of him curled up on his side next to his house in the humid darkness, his phone lit up beside him like some strange, land-bound lighthouse.

But he smiled back anyway.

Not long after he had arrived, Dean left, saying he needed to take a nap before his shift at Jimmy's that night. Castiel gave him another forced smile as Dean told them goodbye and walked out the door, his arms around himself.

When Castiel was certain Dean had left and wasn't going to be returning for something he'd left or to tell them anything additional, he couldn't stop himself from asking Charlie, “Did he look...unwell to
you?”

Charlie's face fell, and it seemed it was her turn to look at her lap.

“I think something might be wrong, Charlie,” Castiel said.

Charlie took a few breaths, still looking at her hands, before raising her head again.

“Cas...I don't know if it's my place to tell you.”

“You don't have to.”

Charlie seemed to make a decision then. “What I say does not leave this table. If Dean finds out I told you, he'll...You have to promise me that you will not say anything to him.”

Castiel hesitated a moment, actually asking himself whether or not he would feel comfortable keeping something to himself if that something turned out to be what he was afraid it was. But he came to the conclusion that he would have to do his best. He nodded, and Charlie took another few breaths before speaking again.

“Dean's dad's a...a drunk. That's why Sam doesn't live with him anymore. Dean stays with him to make sure he doesn't do anything stupid, like blow himself up or crash the car. He barely works, I think he might get disability. Dean's the one who works. One night a few years ago, Dean was drunk. He was a freshman. Came over to my place, said he needed to stay with me for the night. I'd never seen him that drunk, never have since then, either. I grabbed his shoulder and he went and puked in my sink. I made him take his shirt off and it turned out his arm was broken. It was pretty fucking bad. I asked him who did it and he said that he'd made his dad mad, that it was fine, he just needed to sleep.”

Charlie looked away then, and by the look on her face Castiel could tell she was disturbed by the memory.

“I drove him to the emergency room. Bobby helped with the cost. Dean never talks about it, his dad or anything. Everything I know is 'cause we've been friends a while. He still says he got hurt at the shop and that it just took him moving around to notice how bad it was. I don't think he remembers telling me. I've asked, but he never gives me anything except the same bullshit stories.” She gestured helplessly with her hands, and Castiel tried to fight the feeling of revulsion pooling beneath his skin.

Charlie must have sensed his emotions; she reached across the table and touched Castiel's hand, her fingers light and gentle.

“We need to let him know he has us, Cas. I...I don't know what else he'll let us do.”

He nodded numbly, an ache growing near his temples as he imagined Dean's green eyes, staring out into the darkness from a window Castiel recognized as the one he'd seen illuminated by the light of a television almost a month before.
Chapter 7

Castiel was young, maybe twelve, and his father was sitting beside him. Castiel's mathematics book was still open on the desk before him; Father had unexpectedly entered his room as he studied his lesson from that day. Castiel sat up as straight as he could and looked to his father respectfully. Castiel, Anna and Gabriel were not much accustomed to interacting with Father beyond the family dinners he and their mother insisted they have whenever work allowed it. Michael and Luke were the eldest, the ones Father was teaching the ins and outs of the lab and its various goings-on to. Michael and Luke were as serious as he was, and as devoted. Already they spent almost as much time as Father did at Novak Labs. They were far removed from their three younger siblings. Gabriel and Anna, Castiel knew, had been disappointing to their parents, the black sheep of the family. Castiel was not sure who he more resembled in personality, Gabe and Anna or Michael and Luke. He knew also on some level that his father was not sure, either. Now he sat, looking up at Father, who looked down at him thoughtfully with eyes that were hazel like Gabriel's.

“Are you happy, Castiel?”

Castiel blinked, taken aback by the question. But he recovered quickly, even at the age of twelve knowing what the best response would be.

“Yes, Father.”

“You've got a knack for recording data, I've seen your work.”

Castiel thought back to the week before, when he and his mother had conducted a simple physics experiment multiple times in their spacious basement, changing variables every so often. Castiel had faithfully recorded the results of every run-through, noting with pride how neat his writing was, how consistent the outcomes had been.

“She said I did well.”

“You'll do well in the future, Castiel. You take after me, I can tell.”

Castiel couldn't contain the prideful blush that crept over his cheeks at that.

It was then that a shout sounded from the hallway outside of his room, and his father immediately stood and left to see what it was. Castiel timidly followed, not surprised when it turned out to be Gabriel, running from an angry-looking Michael...

Castiel sat up rigidly in bed, sweat damp on his forehead and under his arms. He shrugged off his comforter and sheets, running his hands over his eyes and cheekbones.

He hated when he dreamed of his father. He always awoke feeling guilty and angry and sad. He still remembered the instance of which he'd dreamed with unnerving clarity. It was around that time that his family had begun to notice Castiel's compulsion to organize and group, to clean and clean and clean again, to lose sleep over clutter and dust.

Shaking his head, Castiel got out of his bed with a misguided vehemence, shooting up violently onto his feet and checking his phone. The time read 7:22am, and Castiel gauged that it was almost late enough to begin getting ready for his Wednesday morning art history class. He had a text from Anna, he noticed, and he absently read her simple good morning as he walked to his bathroom to splash some water on his face and make himself look presentable.
Setting his phone down on the bathroom counter, he bent over the sink, turning the cold knob all the way. He enjoyed the shock of the frigid water on his hot skin, and slacked a little of it back over his unruly, sleep-mussed hair. He knew its natural texture would soon reassert itself, but wanted to look more put-together than he felt.

Castiel straightened up, mentally going over what all he had to make sure got done that day as he squeezed toothpaste onto his toothbrush and started brushing.

Almost two weeks had passed since Charlie had told him what little she knew of Dean's home life, and since then Castiel had tried not to let his concern show.

Every time Dean revealed through little, stunted movements that he was in pain, every time Castiel saw another bruise Dean was keeping mostly-hidden, he faithfully said nothing.

Castiel had suspected something similar to what Charlie told him, but it was upsetting all the same to know beyond a doubt that he'd been right, and to know that it continued to happen. But it wasn't his concern or his business, he reminded himself. He had no right to know what he knew, and Dean was not a child. He was over eighteen; if he was staying with his father despite the mistreatment, he must feel he had a valid reason to withstand it.

One, small thing that made the situation more bearable was the fact that since he and Dean had skipped class together, they'd begun to spend time with each other more outside of the seminar. Two or three times already, Dean had come over to Castiel's apartment to spend an hour or two before he went in to work on a given night. Dean didn't say much; he and Castiel mostly studied together or did homework, but neither of them seemed to mind the silence.

Castiel spit into the sink and rinsed, groaning to himself as he thought with dread of how much he had still to do for his third painting project of the semester. For this assignment, Harvelle had given them complete artistic and ideological freedom. She'd told the class that it was time they started moving in their own direction so that by the time they took the senior seminar the following Fall they would know without a doubt what they wanted to create.

Practically speaking, Castiel was making much better time than he had on the last project. That being said, he was nonetheless beginning to feel the stress of getting all of the paintings done while also performing satisfactorily in his other three courses; community college had been uncomplicated and slow-paced in comparison. Castiel had been expecting the impressive workloads and the pressure, having wanted a challenge after a few semesters of easy coasting and boredom, but it was still exacerbating his natural nervous tendencies. He was grateful that he had Charlie and Dean to commiserate with on that front. If anything, they complained more consistently than he did, saying that at least Castiel was new to the school and full of momentum as opposed to their general lack of patience with the school's high standards.

Castiel walked back into his room and began to get dressed, pulling on a black and gray striped v-neck and baggy, faded jeans. Once dressed, he shouldered his bookbag and locked his apartment door behind him, beginning his trek across campus and the rest of his Wednesday.

That day in class was a busy, preoccupied one. There was only a little over a week left until the finished products were to be debuted for the class's third critique.

Castiel, for his part, was intently focused on exacting as much detail as he could from the artfully strewn arrangement of sterile, white latex gloves on the folded baby blue felt pallet in front of him in his half of his and Dean's space. Earlier-on in the project Castiel had moved a small, beat-up rolling
table into the space from the adjacent drawing studio. He had been using it and an old spotlight provided by the art department to set up the variety of still-lives he was painting for the assignment.

For his current project Castiel was doing a series of small studies in which he painted various objects with medical connotations, such as lab coats, latex gloves, and paper face masks in unusual color schemes. He was enjoying the work and was halfway through the project (with three out of six of the studies finished).

On the other side of their space, Dean was standing back from his formidably-sized canvas, his expression serious as he contemplated what he'd done so far on his huge, abstract work. Castiel knew without looking closely that little progress had been made on Dean's painting since the last time he'd stood back like that. He'd noticed over their weeks of being cubby-buddies that Dean tended to make very slow progress when they were actually in class together, and often came to the studio outside of class to work on his own time, when he would make immense changes and developments. Dean, Castiel supposed, worked better on his own time-table than the university's.

Castiel and Dean worked in silence for the entirety of the class, and Castiel wasn't even aware that the session had ended until he saw his classmates gathering up their brushes to take them to the sinks up front for rinsing. He stepped back from his diminutive canvas, then, deciding that he'd made better progress this class period than he'd anticipated. He grabbed his handful of brushes and made his way to the sink, having turned off the spotlight and capped his silicoil and palette cups before doing so.

Across the room, Charlie was still working, and humming happily to herself as she flicked her wrist in delicate flourishes over the surface of her panel. She was doing a large painting of a winding, neo-Expressionist-style tree draped with realistically rendered jewelry and dolls hanging from its branches, a feminist statement if ever there was one. Her bright red hair was tied back from her face in an uncharacteristic ponytail as she devoted all of her attention to fine-tuning the smallest details, but the fact that it was up hadn't stopped her from somehow managing to get little finger-fuls of blue and white paint in some of the tangled strands.

When Castiel returned to his cubby after rinsing his brushes, he saw that Dean had wandered over to chat with Charlie. He was giving her an exasperated smile as he ran his hands through her paint-smeared ponytail.

"...one day I'm not gonna be here to tell you, and you're gonna walk outta here looking like the mad painter you are."

Charlie had dissolved into laughter and was swatting Dean's fingers away.

Castiel spoke up as he came to stand beside his friends, “He's right, you know. You do look a little...mad.”

Dean looked at Charlie with triumph, and she rolled her eyes at him with as much vehemence as she could muster.

“So, Dean-o. You know how I said we'd totally pre-game at my place on Friday?” she asked as she took a comb out of her bag and began working it through her hair.

Dean nodded as he attempted to swipe the comb from her.

The end of October, Halloween, and the accompanying weekend of legendary All Hallow's Eve debauchery that the frats were known for were all quickly approaching. Charlie had made Castiel and Dean promise on Monday that they would go with her to Iota's party that weekend, and had also assured them that pre-gaming beforehand was imminent. Castiel'd told her he would go, but had
been adamant about not going in costume. That was more than he could say for Dean and Charlie, who were going as a woodsman and medieval princess respectively. Dean had told him privately that he didn't enjoy dressing in costume, but that Charlie always loved to and he didn't want to disappoint her, especially during her senior year.

“I was thinking, it'd be better if I combined both mine and Gilda's powers before the party, so we'd have more liquor,” Charlie's words were inflected like a question rather than a statement, and Castiel felt trepidation lurch unpleasantly through him at the mention of Gilda.

Dean almost immediately let his hands fall to his sides, fixing Charlie with what Castiel could only describe as a look of irritated concern. Castiel instantly thought of Sam's obvious dislike of Gilda, and how Charlie seemed to feel the need to drink after having gotten a text from her a week or two previous.

“She's coming?”

Charlie huffed with annoyance and moved a step or two away from Dean. “She's just gonna bring some Fireball and go with us to the party. I doubt she'll stay with us once we get there anyway.

“Yeah, 'cause we all remember how well that went last Halloween, Charlie.”

“She was fucked up and I was dumb. It'll be different this time. We're not together and I have no illusions that we will be.”

“If she's pre-gaming with us she'll be fucked up.” Dean's tone was one of contempt. Castiel felt his heart chill; he'd never heard that from Dean before.

“Well, it's my apartment, and she's coming. Okay, Dean? So be nice,” Charlie said firmly. Castiel winced internally at the fact that she'd resorted to demanding rather than continuing to try and talk Dean through the situation.

Dean seemed to feel the same way, and his face became expressionless as he nodded to her curtly.

As soon as the door slammed behind Dean, Castiel looked to Charlie, unsure of what to say. Charlie met his eyes, and he read in her face that she wasn't sure, either.

“...What happened with you and Gilda?” He finally asked.

Charlie shook her head at the question.

“I'll tell you if you buy me a drink.”

That was how, thirty minutes and a short drive in Charlie's car later, she and Castiel wound up in the savviest bar of the little college town, sitting in front of two Dos Equis's dressed with salt (Charlie's favorite). Castiel said nothing. He merely sipped his beer and silently contemplated the numerous vintage movie posters and old-fashioned accessories in the place.

When Charlie finally spoke, they were both almost finished with their Dos Equis's and Castiel had been in the process of deciding that yes, he liked the taste of the green-bottled beer in his hand.

“We weren't actually together that long, Gilda and I. Just a few months, maybe a little more. She...she's not gay, not even really bi. She just has a thing for me. Things were okay for a little bit, I guess. I fell pretty hard, but feelings aren't really her thing.” Charlie's voice was resentful. “She
cheated on me, and we broke up. She still says she needs me, though. I guess we're...friends now? I don't know what else to call it. She calls me and I go over when she freaks out, when I get bored she brings over something to drink and we play Magic. She has a fucked-up family, and I think I kinda get why she is the way she is, but that doesn't exactly make everything easier. I don't know. I don't miss her, not really. She just needs friends. She doesn't have that many, not like she thinks she does.”

Castiel felt a dart of anger at the thought of someone cheating on one of his friends, and he immediately understood the dislike that Sam and Dean harbored for Gilda. But he said nothing. He sensed that Charlie was conflicted enough as it was; she didn't need to hear from another person how wrong she was to keep Gilda in her life.

“When did this all happen, Charlie?”

“We started dating last August, broke up that October, been hanging out since. Shit, I guess it's been over a year. I hadn't really realized...” Charlie's voice trailed off, and Castiel touched her hand as gently as he could.

Charlie dropped him off at his apartment not long after.

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The following night when Castiel received a text message, he decided to finish cleaning his room before he checked to see what it said. Soon after, he sat on his freshly-made bed and surveyed his now-spotless room before pulling off his t-shirt and relaxing a little. When he flipped his phone open, he was surprised to see that the text was not from Charlie, as he might have suspected, but from Dean.

"You've never met Gilda, have you?"

"No. Only heard Char talk about her. Why?"

"Eh...just trust me when I say you probably won't like her either."

Castiel didn't answer until long after, not sure what Dean meant.

"Are you working tonight?"

A pointless question, considering it was a Thursday and Castiel already knew that Dean always worked at Jimmy's from 8pm-2am, Monday through Thursday.

"I'm actually not. I'm helpin Sammy w/ a thing for AP science and asked for tonight off. Wanna come over? We're at Bobbys."

Castiel didn't have to think for very long before answering in the affirmative, putting his t-shirt back on and leaving his apartment to drive to Bobby's. On the way out he heard what sounded like Bal having very loud sex and rolled his eyes while at the same time feeling a twinge of lonely jealousy. He quashed the feeling as he closed his door behind him and readjusted the textbook and composition journal he was taking over to Bobby's; he figured that time with Dean over there likely wouldn't be much different from time with him at Castiel's place, and that he should bring things to work on.

When he arrived at Singer Salvage ten minutes later Castiel was greeted by the sight of Bobby himself sitting out on the front porch, a half-full glass of brown liquid in one hand and his baseball cap in the other. Bobby inclined his head toward him and said hello, gesturing behind him to the door. Castiel smiled at him and entered the house, feeling relief as he wandered to the dining room
and found Dean and Sam there.

The two brothers were sitting at the beat-up dining room table hunched over a laptop and a stack of papers. Sam seemed to be entering data into a table on the laptop screen, and Dean was reading off numbers and percentages to him. Sam noticed Castiel before Dean did, since Dean was facing in the opposite direction, and he waved enthusiastically when he saw him. Dean turned and smiled when he saw Castiel.

“Hey, Cas. Come on over, you can set your stuff down anywhere,” Dean gestured to an empty chair on the opposite end of the table.

“How you been, Cas?” Sam asked Castiel as he took a seat beside the boys. “You want some water or anything?”

Castiel shook his head before he spoke. “I'm fine, thank you. And I'm okay, I'll be glad when it's the weekend.”

Sam laughed. “Oh, yeah. Dean's been talking about the parties since yesterday. Don't get too wasted, 'kay guys? I'd rather not have a repeat of the last week of school in 2013.”

Dean rolled his eyes and good-naturedly socked Sam in the shoulder. “Hey, I was not that bad. And anyway, you were the one who decided to take it upon yourself to get me and put me to bed. Drunk-me would have been just as happy had you left me on the sidewalk outside Chi house where I was.”

Sam scowled at him, “Drunk-you called me, and all your friends'd left.”

“Oh, yeah. Forgot about that. Well, anyway, I stand by what I said.” Dean grinned.

Castiel began to laugh and had to cover his mouth with his hand at the mock-angry look that Sam shot him.

“Seriously, though, keep an eye on him, please, Cas,” he implored.

Castiel nodded, sure that he wouldn't be doing much drinking or partying that weekend anyway. He'd be lucky to make it through the night without embarrassing one of his friends.

“What's your project, Sam?” he asked as he took a glance at the sheets of numbers and equations Dean was holding and had been reading from earlier.

Sam excitedly began to explain the specifics of his senior physics project in such great detail and scope that Castiel had a little trouble following him. But he nodded politely and tried his best to understand the intricacies of Sam's goals. He looked at Dean across the table at one point, only to have Dean smile at him and cant his head toward Sam. I know, I know, total nerd boy there.

Castiel had to suppress his own grin in response. Dean's smile usually had the effect of prompting him to return it almost involuntarily.

After Sam finished his explanation of his project, he and Dean returned to the task of transferring the data from the papers to the spreadsheet on the computer.

Castiel opened his textbook and began to finish up his reading for the next day's class. He soon tuned out the sound of Dean's voice reading number after number and of Sam's fingers endlessly typing in the figures. Castiel dimly registered at some point that Bobby came in from the porch, setting his empty glass in the adjacent kitchen sink and telling them goodnight. At this, Castiel checked his phone and was surprised to see that it was already almost midnight. He looked up and saw that Sam
and Dean were reaching the end of the numbers, and he waited until the very last one had been read off to tell them that he would have to go home soon.

Sam gave him another smile. “It was good seeing you again, man. You'll have to come over when we're actually doing something fun.”

“Fun? What's this foreign concept of which you speak?” Dean asked jokingly.

Castiel played along. “I've never heard of it.”

Sam let out an exasperated sigh. “I get it, I get it. Woe to the two hard-working college students, I don't know how you do it. Parties with booze and girls? God, what a nightmare.” He stood up and gave Dean a quick one-armed hug then, telling his brother and Castiel goodnight before leaving the dining room and retreating down a hallway to the left.

“He's kind of right, you know, Cas. It's your first year of actual college, and you've been to one party,” Dean said thoughtfully.

“Maybe I've been to more,” Castiel said defensively.

“I'm pretty sure you'd go with Charlie if you did, and she hasn't said anything. You need to have some fun, man. You work harder than anyone I know, even Kevin.”

“I have fun,” Castiel's voice had become stiff. “And besides, I'm going out this weekend with you and Charlie. Isn't that enough?”

“Of course it's enough, Cas. Look, I'm just saying...you deserve it,” Dean said as he shrugged, looking suddenly uncomfortable.

“Fun?” Castiel asked.

“Good stuff,” Dean clarified.

Silence stretched between himself and Dean, and Castiel stood up and began to gather his things.

He wanted to tell Dean that he didn't know how to talk to other students, that he still wasn't used to being around people other than his siblings, that he would rather clean a house than dance inside it. He wanted to tell Dean that he feared what he would say if he drank too much, that he might scare people off with unintelligible scientific jargon or stark and uncomfortable observations. He wanted to tell his friend that he wasn't a perfect face with green eyes and an American mouth.

But Castiel said none of these things, and he tried not to notice when Dean placed an easy hand between his shoulder blades as he told him goodnight outside of Singer Salvage.

Castiel pulled himself away, got into his car, and drove home.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I just want to let you all know that my schedule is very busy right now (I am a senior in university and doing a capstone and whatnot) so my updating schedule may be a little sporadic! That being said, thank you to all who have commented and kudos'ed this work! =) You are very appreciated.

Castiel was walking out of his only class of the day when he got a very unexpected phone call Friday afternoon. He pulled his cell from his back pocket and felt his stomach drop unpleasantly as he read the name on the screen.

Incoming call from: Michael.

Castiel flirted briefly with the idea of throwing his phone with as much force as he could generate, or with throwing up as quietly as he could manage in the nearest bathroom. Either option was more appealing than talking to his brother. But while he did neither, he also didn't answer the call. However, even having decided that he wouldn't, he couldn't seem to make himself press the red end button on his phone keypad to send it to voicemail. Instead, he awkwardly held it until the vibrations stopped.

Castiel stared down at the plastic and faux-metal contraption in his hand. Thoughts and questions flung themselves through his mind so quickly he was having a hard time cataloging and acknowledging them all.

What does he want? Is someone sick? Is it about Gabriel--

Castiel shook his head almost violently, running his fingers through his hair after he shoved his phone into his bookbag rather than back in his pocket. He feared even the familiar feel of it against his skin through his jeans. He was suddenly very glad that he was going to a party that night. He reminded himself that soon, he would be with his friends, having the fun Dean was apparently so sure he needed.

Castiel began the walk to his apartment then, barely seeing where he was going as he tread the familiar sidewalks on autopilot. When he arrived at his door, he was surprised to see it swing open before him right as he stretched his hand out towards the tarnished, brass knob. He found himself face-to-face with Bal for maybe the third time that semester.

Castiel had no idea what to say to him, so he said nothing. However, Bal had no such qualms, and said to Castiel as he walked by, “You look like shit, mate. I have some rum in the fridge, take a shot if you feel like it.”

Castiel's mouth fell open at the words, and his roommate nodded at him before starting briskly down the sidewalk. Sighing, Castiel went in through the still-open door and into his room, collapsing on his bed without ceremony.

He felt odd, a mixture of anxious and angry. He didn't want to think about the possible reasons for Michael calling. Anna and Gabriel were the only siblings Castiel had ever wanted to talk to, and he
had interacted very few times with Michael and Luke at all because of the age gap (Castiel was 21 to Michael's 30 and Luke's 28) and their different personalities. No, Castiel doubted Michael would call him up just to have a casual chat.

Castiel knew logically that the most prudent thing to do would be to call Anna and ask her what was going on, if anything. She still interacted with the family on a regular basis considering she worked at Novak Labs. But Castiel didn't want to become mired in his family's politics and problems any more than he had to. He'd been only too happy to escape to college, for his part.

If only Anna had been so lucky.

Castiel closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of the clean comforter beneath his warm face. After what he thought was a few scant moments he lifted himself from the bed sluggishly. He checked his phone after taking it from his bag. His eyes widened as he realized he'd unintentionally fallen asleep for almost seven hours; it was now 6:30pm. He also had another missed call from Michael blinking on the screen. Making up his mind, Castiel made his way into the little shared kitchen a few yards outside of his room and opened the refrigerator. He searched for the rum Bal had mentioned and found it soon, a 750ml bottle of Cruzan spiced. He poured a few fingers worth into a coffee mug.

He sat himself down on the sofa in the small living room and set the mug down on the table before him, looking around for some mess to straighten up and finding none. It seemed Bal had chosen that week to be conscientious and clean up after himself.

Castiel took a tentative sip of the rum then, wincing as it burned on the way down. Castiel hadn't ever had alcohol by itself before, and he decided that after this he'd keep up the habit of only having mixed drinks. But he finished off the rest of it quickly, setting the mug in the sink before he went back into his room and grabbed his phone. Castiel hadn't eaten since early that morning and could already feel the rum effecting him ever so slightly.

Charlie'd be proud, he thought to himself as he checked his texts and saw that he had a group message from her asking if eight was a good time for everyone to meet up later that night and kick off the pre-party drinking.

Even feeling the rum, Castiel could tell that he was likely on the verge of a mild anxiety attack, an occurrence that had been much less common since he'd moved away from his family and their ulcer-inducing 'discussions'. He bit his lip hard at the realization. Castiel reminded himself that he was used to anxiety, used to the uncomfortable tightening of his chest, the flip-flopping in his stomach that never seemed to cease, the compulsion to cry or move or talk ever more loudly to quiet the thoughts in his head.

He'd be drinking with Charlie and Dean in a few hours, he reminded himself again.

The remaining hour or so before Castiel could head over to Charlie's place seemed like an eternity to him. He managed to reorganize the contents of all three of the kitchen cabinets more than once before he realized that it was almost time to leave, and rushed to his room to change shirts and run a comb through his unruly hair. At 7:50 Castiel was finished getting dressed, having put on a dark-washed pair of jeans and a navy blue v-neck that he had been told by his sister brought out his eyes. He made sure he had his ID and his keys in one of his back pockets before locking the door behind him and setting off towards Charlie's.

Castiel lifted his face to catch the chill evening wind that charged the air, enjoying the feel of it on his skin. He had received no more phone calls from Michael, or anyone else for that matter, and his anxiety had lessened with his compulsive cleaning bout. He was beginning to feel more himself.
When Castiel arrived at Charlie's he knocked politely, smiling at her as she opened the door. She was clearly in the process of getting dolled up, with one eye lined and the other bare. She also had a cordless curling iron in one hand which she was holding up near her head as she curled a lock of red hair.

Charlie let him in immediately, and it took only one look cast around her apartment to see that he was the first to arrive.

“You okay?” Charlie asked him in her bathroom as she positioned herself in front of her mirror to continue applying makeup and styling her hair.

Castiel only nodded noncommittally from his new vantage point on Charlie's toilet seat, not trusting himself to talk casually about his day. Charlie gave him a sympathetic look.

“You want a drink now? I was gonna wait until the others got here, but...”

Castiel nodded gratefully, and Charlie set her curler down to go to the kitchen and make him something. When she came back she handed him a full solo cup without telling him what it contained, and Castiel took a drink of it without asking.

“You want me to put some eyeliner on you? You have nice eyes,” Charlie asked conversationally as Castiel tried to isolate what all he was tasting with the first few sips.

“I've never worn it before,” he said in response, though he felt as though he should have more of an issue with her question than he did.

“You wouldn't be opposed to trying, though? It is Halloween.”

Castiel thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

Charlie finished making herself up and giving herself a head full of curls, commenting that it was almost eight thirty and no one else had arrived. Castiel didn't answer, being almost halfway through his drink and having enjoyed sitting down and watching her get ready.

"Here we go,” Charlie said as she moved into Castiel's space, taking his cup from him and gently pulling down each of his lower eyelids, swiping them with a little black pencil.

When she was done Charlie hauled him up from the toilet seat and next to her in front of the sink, smiling at their reflections in the mirror. By then Castiel was three-fourths through his drink and liking the way the black around his eyes made the blue pop like crystals did in silver settings.

As Castiel looked at himself in the mirror he realized how rarely he did so with any consciousness. He gave himself perfunctory once-overs every morning, yes, but he almost never perceived his appearance in aesthetic terms. Castiel had never particularly liked the way he looked, nor had he disliked it. Despite his age, he'd never had a sweetheart, or anyone to tell him he was attractive or handsome. His family had placed almost no emphasis on physical appearance, having instead an obsession with being the best researcher, the best theoretician. The community college at nineteen, his entrance into the real world, as it were, was when he'd begun to realize that appearances were very important to people his age.

Charlie interrupted his thoughts. “You look fine, Cas. Better than fine, really. You're a looker, y'know.”

Right then there came a knock on Charlie's door, and she and Castiel exited the bathroom to greet the newcomer.
It was Dean who stood outside in the darkness. He was dressed much the way he usually would be except for an axe in a sort of utility belt around his hips, a pair of leather suspenders, and a garish red plaid flannel shirt rather than one in the more subdued blues or greens he generally preferred.

He nodded to Charlie and Castiel and shut the door behind him as he entered the apartment, settling himself on Charlie's couch as she went to the kitchen to make him a drink. He asked when she was going to put the rest of her costume on as she came back with a cup in her hand.

“Not 'til it's closer to when we leave, that thing's a little hot.”

Dean laughed at her and took a long pull of his drink, tilting his head back and closing his eyes for a moment as Castiel took a seat beside him.

“Was there a lot to do at the salvage yard today?” Castiel asked as he finished the last swallow of his drink. It was safe to say he was feeling substantially less anxious now, buzzing a little and sitting with the princess and her woodsman.

Dean shook his head, looking at Castiel as he took another sip. “Nah, wasn't too bad...Cas, are you wearing eyeliner?”

Castiel only said in explanation, “Charlie offered.”

Dean nodded, and Charlie soon saw that Castiel's cup was empty and went to make him a second drink. It was when Charlie was on her way back into the living room with it that another loud knock at the door startled them all.

Dean stood to answer it, and who he let in were two young women that he nodded to politely, but said nothing. The girls were both shorter than Dean by a few inches, and they smelled of pot and body spray. The girl nearest to Dean was slender-looking with smooth, olive-toned skin, and golden-brown hair that was obviously dyed. She was dressed up like some sort of woodland fairy in a sparkling yellow dress with a delicate circlet perched on her head. The other girl moved forward into the room quickly, her glossy brown hair bouncing in thick waves on her delicate shoulders. She had pale skin and dark eyes, and her lips were red, matching her she-devil costume. She smiled at Castiel and Charlie, looking at them expectantly.

Charlie got the hint and stood to gesture to the girl before them, “Cas, this is Meg, she's a friend of Gilda's. Meg, this is my friend Castiel.” Her tone sounded a little uneasy, and Castiel tried to compose his features into a smile as Meg eagerly sat on the sofa where Dean had just been, right next to him.

“Hiya, Clarence. I'm surprised we've never met before. You a painter like this one?” She looked back at Dean.

Castiel got the hint and stood to gesture to the girl before them, “Cas, this is Meg, she's a friend of Gilda's. Meg, this is my friend Castiel.” Her tone sounded a little uneasy, and Castiel tried to compose his features into a smile as Meg eagerly sat on the sofa where Dean had just been, right next to him.

“Hiya, Clarence. I'm surprised we've never met before. You a painter like this one?” She looked back at Dean.

Castiel nodded quickly, not certain how to tell Meg that she had gotten his name wrong and unsure if it was worth it to. Meg moved in closer to him, and Castiel realized that she was looking intently into his eyes.

“You gay?”

Castiel was so surprised at her question that he took a hurried gulp of his drink, inwardly thanking Charlie that it was a stronger one than his last.

“What?” he asked once he'd swallowed.

“You're wearing eyeliner. Are you queer?”
Castiel opened his mouth and then closed it again before lifting his cup to his lips once more. No one had ever asked him that, and he hadn't thought too much on the subject of sexual orientation in general. He supposed he did lean more towards men, though he also found the female form appealing. Castiel's overarching concern, though, was that he wasn't sure how to classify himself considering he'd never even had a sexual experience with another person.

All those things being said, he had no desire to speculate on his own sexuality to someone he barely knew. He continued to stall by swallowing more coke and rum. Luckily, Castiel was saved from answering Meg's question when Dean turned sharply from where he had been speaking to Gilda near the door to face them.

“What kinda question's that?” he asked Meg, his voice low.

Meg smiled at him languidly. “Oh, Dean-o, I was just asking Clarence here what he likes. Curiosity, y'know.”

Dean rolled his eyes and looked meaningfully to Castiel, his expression seeming to convey that he shouldn't feel compelled to answer her.

Meg mock-pouted at him. “Come on, ice-breakers, am I right?” Her face had an almost impish cast to it as she stood up to stand beside Gilda and Dean, to Dean's obvious dismay. Charlie, Castiel noticed, was standing motionless next to the couch, her expression one he couldn't read as she looked at Gilda.

Not long after that Castiel stood up himself, half of his drink already gone as he went to do the polite thing and introduce himself to the fantastically-clad Gilda. She was a bit drunk, she and Meg must have had something before they arrived, Castiel thought to himself as he shook her thin hand. Her grip was loose and her words seemed a little oddly-chosen.

“Charlie's told me lots about you. D'you like the university life so far?” Her eyes were an even darker brown than Meg's, and her skin didn't feel warm. Castiel gave her a perfunctory answer. Behind Gilda, Dean was eyeing their exchange warily. Gilda soon stepped away from the group to Charlie's kitchen, and Charlie followed her. Castiel hoped Charlie mixed Gilda a weak drink.

Meg laughed at the sight of Gilda and Charlie in the kitchen, Gilda trying to pour her own liquor and Charlie trying to take the bottle from her.

“C'mon, G, give it a rest for a while. You've almost finished off my Malibu already and it's not even nine.”

“Yeah, Gilda.” Dean agreed, obviously a little uncomfortable saying so. For all his earlier bluster and anger towards Gilda, he seemed hard-pressed to be rude to her in person.

Charlie looked pained as she moved away from Gilda in the small space, but Gilda wasn't disappointed. She shrugged and gestured to the rest of them, saying, “Drinking game?!”

Her enthusiasm left no room for refusal, and soon the five of them were sitting around Charlie's little coffee table, drinks in front of each of them. Meg had again situated herself next to Castiel, and was insisting on calling him Clarence and also continually touching her fingertips to his arm or his hand when she said something to him. Castiel wasn't sure how comfortable he was with her proximity, but was determined not to let on that he was affected.

They'd started playing Never Have I Ever, and Castiel seemed to be the only one who'd never played before. The others had to teach him the rules before they began, and so far he was easily
winning considering how sheltered his life had been.

As the drinks were gradually swallowed by their owners and the night wore on, the mood lightened considerably. Castiel could feel how pink his cheeks must be as they all laughed at Dean, who was having to take a drink for having apparently streaked naked across campus the year previous.

He pointed an accusatory finger at Charlie. “Not fair, you ONLY said that because you're the one who dared me to sophomore year. Asshole.” Charlie smiled smugly at him while Gilda giggled next to her, her arm casually slung over the redhead's shoulders. If anyone thought this was a bad idea, they didn't say so.

Next it was Meg's turn, and she gave Castiel a wicked smile before saying, “Never have I ever... had a tryst with a chick.”

Everyone in the group called her various names in a bout of good-natured ribbing before taking swigs of their drinks, but Castiel could only blush furiously and stare down at the dregs in his cup.

It was Gilda who commented on this fact. “You've never been with a girl, Castiel?”

Castiel looked up slowly, having no choice but to shake his head. He'd been hopeful that his friends wouldn't find out, especially Dean. On some level, he'd assumed that Dean would think less of him if he knew of Castiel's inexperience. Dean, he knew from a few things Charlie had said, went to bed with people pretty regularly and without much fuss.

But Dean was looking at him now, not with distaste or disdain, but with something Castiel thought looked akin to curiosity. He didn't know what to make of it.

He got up from his spot on the floor then, saying his cup was empty and that he needed a refill. But before he could get himself one in the kitchen he heard Charlie call to him from the living room, “Cas, it's already almost 11. We're gonna head out soon, don't bother getting another one. Just get a shot if you want.”

Castiel heard the others shifting and getting up and decided he would indeed like a shot before facing them again. As he poured some vodka into an already-sticky shot glass and raised it to his lips, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

He was not surprised to see that it was Meg beside him, her cat-like brown eyes focused on him the way they'd been earlier in the night.

“I didn't know. I've just been messing with you a little. You're cute, is all. We're cool, right?”

Castiel held up a finger in her direction and downed the shot before answering, “Why wouldn't we be?”
After Charlie put on the rest of her costume (a startlingly regal-looking dress made of heavy green and gray fabric) the five of them left the apartment and began the ten minute walk to Iota house.

It was safe to say that they were all very comfortably tipsy, with Gilda being perhaps the most tipsy of them all. She kept giggling and clinging to Charlie, and Castiel heard her murmur more than once that she'd missed her. But while that concerned him, he was also very preoccupied with enjoying the way the world looked as it swam around him. He had never been out walking while buzzed before, having only drank in his own apartment. He felt a smile ghost his lips as he thought of poems he'd like to write about the way the fluorescent white streetlamps danced on their backdrop of blue-black like big, unnatural stars.

Dean was on one side of him and Meg the other. Dean was reticent as they walked, his hands in his pockets and his expression unreadable. But Castiel noticed him casting uncertain glances towards Charlie and Gilda every so often.

When they got to Iota, the party was already in full-swing despite the fact that it was only eleven-fifteen. They all waited outside the door; a bored-looking member of the house was sitting at a card table smoking an e-cig and checking everyone's university ID's and soon enough, they were all in.

They were almost immediately accosted by a drunk-looking Arnold, who was shirtless and covered in paint and glitter. He recognized Castiel and gave him a hug, leaving a trail of silver and gold flecks in his wake. Castiel was happy to be remembered, and asked Arnold what he was supposed to be. Arnold looked at him for a long moment before saying, “Kesha! Duh. What about you?” But before Castiel could answer, Arnold was already distractedly moving around him to greet Dean and the others, all of whom obviously knew him and were glad to see him, too.

Things got hectic after that, and Castiel soon realized that as tipsy as he may have been, everyone else at the party seemed either twice that or at the very least determined to get there. Around him everyone was holding drinks, taking shots, dancing raunchily, and smoking e-cigs whose vapors smelled almost sickly sweet in the crowded heat of the makeshift dance floor. He hadn't even realized that Dean had been gone until he returned to the group with three beers in his hands, one for himself and one each for Charlie and Castiel. Castiel took his beer with a word of thanks, and beside him Meg asked if she could have a sip from his cup; Castiel obliged, and when Meg thanked him her red, waxy lips brushed his ear.

A few minutes passed before Charlie and Dean noticed that Gilda was nowhere to be seen, and Charlie began to look sulky. Dean looped a friendly arm around Charlie's shoulders and smiled at her, undoubtedly saying comforting words that Castiel couldn't hear over the deafening music. Castiel tried to focus on the two of them and the things they were yelling to one another, not the overwhelming amount of writhing students in the small, warm house.

Castiel didn't like the taste of the beer in his hand but continued to drink it anyway and finished it
much more quickly than he'd expected to. Meg noticed and grabbed his arm to lead them toward the
bar, getting two more beers for them.

Then, without asking Castiel, Meg kept a hold of his arm and rather forcefully led him up a flight of
stairs, through a hallway and out onto a smallish upstairs porch. It was festooned with red and yellow
lights, and there were a good dozen or so students leaning against the railings painted in the same
color-scheme. It was much less crowded on the porch, and Castiel felt momentarily relieved at the
taste of the fresh, cool air. Most of the students around them were smoking cigarettes and drinking,
and Meg easily bummed a cigarette off of someone and let them light it for her with a smile on her
face.

“You ever been up here before?”

“No,” Castiel answered honestly, now distracted and a little uncomfortable. “The others--”

“--your besties will be just fine for a little bit downstairs. It's a party, Clarence, you're permitted to
wander. Geeze, you gotta loosen up. What're you, Mormon?” With that, Meg pushed his full cup to
his lips and tilted it a little.

Castiel took the hint and quickly drank about a third of his beer.

“Do you know where Gilda is?” he asked her when he was done.

Meg shrugged easily. “She knows a lot of people here, she's probably in someone's room. She can
take care of herself.”

Castiel wasn't so sure, but he nodded. Meg gave Castiel her cup to hold and reached into a pocket on
the inside of the leather jacket she'd worn over her costume. When she pulled her hand back out, she
was holding a little baggie with what looked like a well-rolled joint in it and a miniature Bic lighter.

At the sight of the pot, Castiel thought of Gabriel. He'd smoked pretty often in the two years or so
before their father died and he left. Though Castiel had always been worried about their parents
catching him and reacting God-knows-how, Gabriel had been careful and no harm had ever come of
the habit.

“Come on, Castiel, take a little hit. It'd probably help with your freak-outs, y'know.”

“Shut up, Gabriel, it smells like skunk.”

“You, kiddo, are a drag. Fine, stay in your room and feng-shui it or whatever the fuck for the
millionth time while I go smoke a doobie and then make some fuckin' awesome pancakes.”

“Father and Mother will be home in a few hours, make sure you keep the vents open.”

“Sheesh, thanks, Michael ...Oh! Don't give me that bitch-face! You sound just like him sometimes--”

Castiel hadn't realized that he was absently staring out over the railing while still holding both his and
Meg's beers until she lightly punched him in the shoulder. “Earth to Clarence. Maybe you are kinda
drunk. Whatever, wanna share this with me?”

Castiel looked at the now-smoking joint held between her thumb and pointer fingers for a moment,
feeling light and full of fresh, outdoor air. He was definitely a little drunk, he could tell; he was no
longer on the verge of an anxiety attack. That was likely the only reason he was seriously
considering trying pot for the first time. To say that such a thing was out of character would be an
understatement. But Castiel wasn't feeling entirely himself, standing outside beneath the blue moon
with a she-devil next to him smelling of skunk and lavender. He was already drinking and at a frat house filled with costumed party-goers, it all felt like some sort of dream anyway. Would it feel all that bad if he tried something new? Gabriel never acted that much different, Castiel remembered; he just would laugh a lot and bake cakes and other sweet things, his good-natured hazel eyes red-rimmed and slanted. But one thought was holding Castiel back: Dean and an upset Charlie were still downstairs, and he had already been up on the porch with Meg for a while. He didn't want them to think that he was willingly ditching them. But Meg also intimidated him.

“What about-”

“If you mention Dean and Charlie again, I'm gonna put this out on you,” Meg said flatly.

Castiel blinked a few times and then asked, “Will it make me uncomfortable?”

“It doesn't make me feel bad. Chills me out. Also, you're drinking, you'll only need to smoke a little. This is good shit.”

Castiel thought for a long moment, some part of him (the same part of him that had balked at skipping class with Dean, no doubt) absolutely appalled that he really might just get stoned to say he'd tried it. But the rest of him was more than a little drunk, and suddenly missing Gabriel and worried that Michael would call him again in the morning. He nodded, saying quickly before she handed him the joint, “After this we need to go find Charlie, Dean and Gilda, okay?”

Meg gave Castiel a slightly patronizing pat on the back as she nodded to him, which he wasn't sure what to make of, but he hesitantly took the joint from her. At first he held it away from himself as though it were a claw-happy kitten. Meg rolled her eyes and grabbed his wrist, moving the joint to his lips. He opened his mouth and felt his stomach lurch as he closed his lips around the tip of the rolled paper. He was almost immediately reminded of how the cigarette he'd shared with Dean had felt on his lips, how the sun of that day had warmed his skin while the Marlboro-flavored cancer slid down into his lungs.

This was nothing like that.

Knowing that it was Meg’s saliva on the joint changed it, he wasn't sure how. But Castiel inhaled anyway, accidentally taking a large hit and having to cough as he handed it back to her. Clouds of smoke unfurled themselves from his lips and were dissolved into the night, and Meg clapped him on the back with a laugh.

“That was a good one! Damn, you'll be fine with just that, probably.”

Castiel, for his part, could already feel something. It was as though his eyes were getting smaller, or perhaps it was that they were determined to remain half-closed all of the sudden, and the people around him seemed louder. He felt a sort of buoyant feeling well up in his chest and spread through his body, making his limbs and appendages tingle lightly. The physical feeling of it was nice, he decided. But that didn't change the fact that there seemed to be some dark undercurrent present. He wouldn't have called it discomfort if he were asked, but he also supposed that was the only word that kind of fit. Meg was still laughing at him, and her lips looked so much redder than they had before, smoother, her teeth whiter. How had he not noticed before how white her teeth were? And Dean and Charlie, he needed to find them now that he'd smoked like Meg asked--

Castiel handed Meg's beer back to her and started to move away without saying goodbye, forgetting that it would be seen as rude to do so. He heard her say something angrily and turned to her.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I need to find them now. Would you like to come?” he asked.
Meg shook her head in annoyance and raised the joint to her lips, “More for me this way, Clarence.” Her voice was bitter and Castiel wasn't sure why, but he nodded and started off again, finishing the rest of his beer without realizing that he was doing so.

While he and Meg had hung out on the porch many more people had come out to smoke, and getting to the door again took longer than he’d anticipated. He let his empty cup fall to the porch floor without noticing and politely waited until the amorous couple in front of the door inside noticed him and moved. Castiel stepped inside and saw down the dimly lit hall a sign for the bathroom, a hand-painted wooden board that read 'watercloset'. He felt suddenly that he needed to pee as he read the sign, and made his way over to it.

Once inside, he saw that it was being used as a unisex bathroom and did his best not to look at the girls primping in front of the mirror near the front. He located the last urinal and relieved himself, surprised at how long he had to stand there. He must have had more to drink than he realized. He zipped up and quickly washed his hands; while at the sink he spared himself a quick look in the mirror and saw that his cheeks were a little pink and his eyes were still lightly lined, but now they were also red and half-lidded.

Upon exiting the bathroom Castiel soon literally ran into what appeared to be a very drunk and giggly Gilda.

She laughed and used their accidental proximity to hug him tightly for a moment. Castiel, still mostly unaccustomed to close touching, tensed up, unsure of what to do. She let go and looked at him, her pupils wide and her gaze a little unfocused. “D'you know where Charlie is? I need to find her...” her words were slurred. Castiel was about to answer when Gilda seemed to forget she had asked a question at all.

“Hey! Come take a shot with me and Arnold!” Gilda didn't wait for him to answer before she grabbed his hand and pulled him into a nearby room. Castiel was feeling increasingly uncomfortable but didn't pull away.

Inside the small bedroom Gilda pushed him into were Arnold and a tall guy with dark brown hair and ice-blue eyes that were uncommon enough to be instantly noticeable. He was leaning on a bookshelf and casually sipping on something in a red solo cup, and was also talking to a wildly gesticulating Arnold, who was sitting at his desk and seemed to be as drunk as Gilda. Castiel started as Gilda practically slammed the door behind them, her tanned cheeks flushed and her circlet noticeably askew.

The blue-eyed guy seemed sober, which Castiel was glad of, and he extended a hand to greet Castiel. “Name's Benny. I've never seen you around before, brother.”

“I'm Castiel,” Castiel took his hand and found it warm and much larger than his. He was aware that he probably sounded a little drunk as the words left his lips. At the mention of his name, Benny seemed to become more interested; one eyebrow quirked upwards.

“Castiel, Dean's Castiel?”

Castiel was surprised both at being recognized and at being referred to as Dean's. “He's mentioned me?”

Benny nodded. “Mhmm. He digs your work. Says you're a friend.”

Castiel couldn't deny that he was pleased at the thought. He then remembered that he needed to find the man himself and said, “Do you know where Dean is right now? I need to find him.”
Benny shook his head. “No, but I can help you look.”

Castiel looked at Gilda, who was taking a shot of Svedka with Arnold at the desk next to them. He inclined his head towards her while looking at Benny pointedly, not wanting to say out loud that he didn't think she should be having anything more. Benny seemed to get the message, and he set his drink on top of the shelf and put a large hand on her shoulder. Gilda smiled at him.

Benny asked her, “Want to come downstairs with us to look for Dean?”

Gilda seemed uninterested at first, but Benny nudged her in the direction of the door and she went willingly enough. Arnold yelled goodbye as they left, more people coming in after them to fill the vacated spaces in the room with him.

Castiel felt relief as he finally made his way down the stairs again and to the dance floor. Benny and Gilda were close in front of him, and they began to search the various groups of people dancing and chatting.

Almost ten minutes later, they finally located Charlie and Dean sitting on the same far-set couch that Charlie had pulled Castiel to all those weeks ago.

Charlie seemed annoyed and Dean looked almost angry; he was sipping a drink while Charlie had her phone out and was doing something on it. As Benny, Gilda and Castiel approached them they both looked up. Charlie’s eyes went first to Gilda, and it was as though her expression froze. Dean, on the other hand, saw Benny and Castiel first and smiled at them with relief. Castiel couldn't help himself from smiling back, as always. He was reminded again by the syrupy spread of the grin across his face that he was drunk and a little high. Dean stood up to pull Benny into a one-armed hug, and Castiel looked at the easy way in which one’s hand clasped the other's shoulder.

He heard Dean say to Benny as they parted, “Aw, man, I didn't know you were here. I feel like I haven't seen you too much this semester,” to which Benny replied, “You're the one who's a stranger, brother. Andrea's been asking why you don't come by like you used to.”

Castiel didn't hear what Dean's reply was, however, because Charlie stood up as well and approached Gilda. Castiel saw Gilda say something but could not hear exactly what. Charlie poked Dean in the side to get his attention. Dean looked over to her, and Castiel might have been more drunk than he realized, because it seemed abruptly that Dean was saying to Benny that they had to get going, and then he was herding the three of them out the back door of Iota house.

The walk to Gilda's on-campus apartment was considerably less fun than the walk to Iota had been, and Castiel felt his anxiety returning with a vengeance as the atmosphere became thicker with tension with every wobbly step; the three of them were practically vibrating with it as they trekked across dewy grass and white sidewalks.

Dean was quiet. He just kept one hand on Gilda's shoulder and another on Castiel's, both of whom were prone to slight weaving if he did not.

When they arrived at Gilda's apartment she let herself in and stumbled inside. They soon heard what sounded like vomiting, and Charlie turned to them and said, “Guys...I think I have to stay here tonight. I'm sorry...I thought things would be better.” She seemed to look to Dean for a response, but Dean said nothing, he simply nodded.

Castiel told her goodnight to break the silence, and she smiled sheepishly at him. Momentarily, she followed Gilda into the apartment and closed the door behind them.
The silent journey to Castiel's apartment was interrupted by his phone ringing loudly in his pocket. Castiel's stomach dropped at the sound, and he wondered if he could simply ignore his phone again, but Dean looked at him pointedly, and Castiel had no choice but to take the device from his pocket and see who was calling him at almost one in the morning.

Had Castiel been sober, he would have known that it was highly unlikely Michael would call him at this hour, but drunk Castiel was not so confident. So he simply shut his phone off without looking at it and shoved it back down into his pocket, making no comment. But the damage was done. The tension before had made Castiel nervous, and now his insides felt as though they were twisting inside of him. The remainder of the walk to his place was unpleasant. Castiel wasn't aware that he was wringing his hands fitfully until Dean reached out and touched the knuckles of one hand gently when they reached his apartment.

“Oh...” Castiel's voice was shaking, and he wished that it wouldn't.

Dean held out his hand for Castiel's keys, which he was quickly given, and after he unlocked the door and let them both into the darkened living room Castiel began to fumble blindly to his room. He turned the light on once there, and was surprised when Dean didn't turn around and leave after seeing that Castiel had been safely deposited.

Instead he asked, “Can I crash here, Cas? I'm bone-tired and...well, I wouldn't want to drive right now. Had me a few.”

The question caught Castiel off-guard, but he immediately answered that yes, of course Dean could stay with him. Perhaps it was better that he stay with him tonight of all nights, Castiel was drunk and high and anxious and didn't want to think about his phone and--

There it was again, Dean's feather-light touch on Castiel's clasped hands.

“You okay, Cas? Where'd you go earlier?” Dean's voice was steady.

“Meg. She took me upstairs.”

Dean nodded. “That'd explain why you smell like pot. She's a big-time stoner on campus...Did you like it?”

Castiel shrugged, “I don't know. I think so? Maybe. I just wanted to feel...different. But I don't know if I do.”

“Why?” Dean's voice was the tiniest bit softer, then.

“I--” But Castiel's words caught in his throat. No, he would not say that he missed Gabriel and that Michael frightened him. He just shook his head and climbed into his bed with all of his clothes still on.

Dean grabbed Castiel's extra pillow and settled down on the floor next to the bed after turning the light off for them. Castiel listened to the rustling noises of Dean getting comfortable and then the soft sound of his breathing. The room smelled faintly of him, he noticed, and he liked that.

Castiel was slowly and uneasily drifting off when he felt Dean's hand reaching for him from the floor; its warm pressure came up to circle around Castiel's wrist and fasten its fingers there for a moment before lowering itself back to Dean's side.

After that Castiel fell asleep, and by some miracle did not dream of anything.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

So, this is a very short chapter, but I wanted to update anyway =) Things are crazy at school right now.

At 7 am, really only a few short hours after Dean and Castiel had settled down for the night, Castiel's usual alarm went off, piercing and unpleasant.

Castiel habitually reached over and shut it off while sitting up at the same time. He groaned as a shard of pain spiked its way through his head, raising his fingers to his eyes. On the floor next to the bed Dean stirred and yawned, reaching for his own phone.

This being Castiel's second ever hangover in his life, he only had Anna's advice for helping it go away, and hobbled to his bathroom to take an ibuprofen and slam some water. When he came back out Dean was awake and on the phone with someone. Seeing Castiel looking at him, Dean gestured to his phone and said only, “Charlie,” in explanation.

Castiel cocked his head to the side in question, patiently waiting for Dean to tell her goodbye and hang up.

“Gilda's good, Charlie's back at her place, said she wants to go out with us for breakfast. I think that sounds good. I could eat.”

For his part, Castiel had to actively keep himself from wincing at the thought of food, but, wanting to spend time with his friends, nodded his assent and grabbed a clean shirt from his closet to change into.

Dean seemed just fine in comparison, his pallor healthy and his gait steady, and Castiel tried to pretend he didn't have the headache currently chewing on the backs of his eyes. Dean seemed to understand, though, and more than once he asked Castiel if he felt up to going out, saying, “You had more to drink than I did, I think.” But, luckily, the water and ibuprofen began to kick in about the time they left for Charlie's apartment, both to retrieve her and because that was where the Impala was parked.

When they arrived at her door and Charlie came out to greet them, de-princess-ified and with her Lord of the Rings Messenger bag slung over one shoulder, Castiel was relieved to note that she didn't seem upset or morose. After spending time with Gilda, he'd been worried she wouldn't be her usual, sunny self. But she gave them both a smile and insinuated herself between them, linking her arms through theirs as they made their way over to the car. She asked them how the rest of their night had been, and Dean answered for the both of them, there not being much to say.

When Dean asked her the same question Charlie shrugged, her smile faltering for a moment and no longer. “Boring. I cleaned up Gilda's puke and then we crashed for a little bit. This morning I went back to my place.”

Dean didn't comment, which Castiel felt was wise, and when they all clambered into the Impala Castiel let Charlie ride shotgun. They decided to go to the nearby IHOP, and Castiel listened to Dean
and Charlie chatter idly for a little while before remembering that he needed to see who had called him.

He switched his phone back on and checked the missed calls, learning that the call he had received only hours before had been from Anna. A twinge of guilt lodged itself in his chest when he saw she had called him more than once. But he felt tension he hadn't even realized he'd been experiencing drain from his body at the sight of her name and contact photo. Interestingly enough, he also saw soon after that he had a text message from an unknown number.

Opening it, he saw that it read, “Just so you have my number, Clarence. -M”

Castiel blinked a few times as he stared at the screen, unsure as to how exactly Meg had even gotten his number, not seeming to remember her asking him the night before. He was also fairly certain that neither Dean nor Charlie would give out his number without asking, but he soon lost interest and put his phone back into his pocket without answering her.

By the time they pulled into the IHOP parking lot and found a place to park Dean's baby, Castiel was mostly convinced he'd be able to successfully keep some food down. The three of them walked inside the restaurant and were glad to find there was no wait, the place being understandably dead on a very early Saturday morning.

Bundled together into a corner booth beneath cool fluorescent lights at a table recently wiped down with disinfectant, Castiel, Dean and Charlie quietly looked at the menus. Charlie and Castiel predictably enough got stacks of pancakes, and Dean ordered a breakfast plate with bacon, sausage, eggs, hashbrowns and pancakes. Dean was on his second cup of coffee and Charlie halfway through her first when their orders were brought to the table.

Over the IHOP faire, Castiel said to Dean, "How did you and Benny meet? He seems nice."

Dean nodded at that, a faint smile ghosting his lips as he sipped more coffee before drowning his pancakes in three of the four kinds of syrups placed on every table in the place.

Before he could answer, Charlie wrinkled her nose at him. “You're like a human garbage disposal, Winchester. Seriously. I hate you. If I ate half the shit you did I'd be...well, I wouldn't be able to fit into my favorite Star Trek t-shirt, I'll say that.”

Dean laughed around a mouthful of eggs and bacon and brandished his fork at her playfully, which Charlie swatted away. But after he'd finished chewing and had yet another gulp of coffee to wash it down, Dean redirected his attention to Castiel and said of Benny, “He took Drawing I with me freshman year, did it for his art credit. I can't say he was all that good, but he's cool as shit. Harvelle loved him; I'm honestly pretty sure he made the grades he did 'cause of his accent and all the 'oh ma'am, yes ma'am's.”

Charlie snorted at that, nodding fervently. “Seriously, Harvelle talked about Benny in our class.” She rolled her eyes as she dissolved into giggles. “That fucker's charming. Andrea never had a chance.”

“Is that Benny's girlfriend?”

Dean nodded, “Fiancé, been engaged almost a year now. She's a nice girl.”

Charlie stage-whispered, “Good thing Benny got over his man-crush on you.”

Dean choked into his coffee and Castiel was instantly curious.

Charlie had a knowing smile on her face. “Don't deny it, Dean. He basically told you straight-out. Or
not so straight, whatever, you know what I mean.”

Dean looked pained for a moment, and Castiel asked, “Did that bother you?”

Dean shook his head, his face a little sad. “Nah. I don't have a problem with people hitting on me as long as it doesn't go too far, and he didn't push it. He's a nice guy, just not my type.”

Charlie nodded solemnly and Castiel was so surprised at Dean's response that he almost swept over his glass of water.

Dean scratched the back of his head self-consciously as both of his friends watched him. “I'm just happy we're still friends. He's been there for me through some stuff. I don't know what would've happened if he hadn't...well, anyway, why are we still talking about Benny? He ain't even here.”

They all laughed at that and went back to their food and talking about their respective art projects, and Castiel saw Dean look at him for a moment after talk of Benny ended, his eyes questioning.

Though what that question could be, Castiel didn't know.

After Dean dropped him and Charlie off and he said his goodbyes, Castiel let himself in to his apartment and sat down on his bed. It wasn't even 11 am yet. Anna wouldn't be at the lab for another couple of hours. It was the perfect time to call her. He prepared himself to call his sister, chiding himself for having not done it sooner. She had called more than once at a strange time, something out of character for her; it was likely she was contacting him on behalf of Michael's missed calls.

Anna answered on the second ring, and she sounded a little breathless. “Castiel?”

“Anna? You called last night?”

“Yeah. Michael says you've been ignoring his calls.”

“I...I've been busy.”

“Don't lie to me. Look, I know you don't like talking to him. I'm not mad at you. Hell, I can't tell you honestly that I like talking to him. But...something's wrong.”

Castiel felt his heart drop even though the words were ones he had been expecting.

“Is it Mother?” he asked.

“It's Luke. He's...in rehab right now, Castiel.”

“What? For what reason?” Castiel felt stupidly surprised by the news.

“Um...coke and alcohol. I feel so bad, I...I'd known about the drinking for a while. He started after Gabe—after Gabriel— ” her voice faltered and Castiel closed his eyes at his brother's name. “I knew he drank a lot and that he started spending nights at the office a few months ago, but I guess I just thought it wasn't a big deal because he never screwed up. Well, until recently.”

“What happened?”

“He wrecked on the way home the other night, then got tested and came back positive for coke and unholy amounts of vodka. Mother of course immediately signed him up for rehab, and for once I actually think she's done something right.” Anna's voice was dull.
Castiel lay back on his bed, keeping the phone pinned to his ear with his shoulder, having nothing to say that he could easily express. It was all-too easy to imagine his blonde, handsome brother drinking alone at his desk in the white sterility of Novak Labs.

Anna spoke again. “Can I come visit you next weekend? I need to get away for a little bit. I can’t stand work right now. Mother’s being unbearable, frankly, and I miss you so much.” Her voice was fraught with stress, and Castiel answered in the affirmative, realizing as he did so just how much he’d been missing his sister.

“There are also some things I need to tell you in person, okay? I’ll see you soon, Castiel.”

Castiel told her goodbye and began to pace absently beside his bed.

He thought of Luke, making white powder disappear up his fine-boned nostrils; Luke, who was caustic and rarely smiled even before everything changed and who Castiel had once caught crying a few weeks after their Father died, sitting on his knees in the hallway with a blank look in his blue eyes. He thought of Gabriel, young and angry, the cold look he’d given their mother the night before he left. He thought of Michael and his obsession with control and of his father, stern and imposing in doorways and at the head of the dinner table. Castiel thought even of himself, with his trembling hands and his inheritance spent on something his father would have hated, and the gracelessness and timidity that inhabited his very bones.

Even though Castiel had barely known his father, Andrew Novak had left a mark on him, as well.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Another shorter update, but here it is =) And yeah, I know, the intensity level's gone up to 5. I can't help it, it just kind of happened =P

Most of the following week passed without much incident; Castiel worked on his small paintings, wrote another essay for one of his classes, and had Dean or Charlie over in the evenings when they had time. Dean was quiet, as he always was, and Charlie played Magic and thought it was a secret that she was forever texting Gilda. Meg texted him a second time on Tuesday evening, asking him if he wanted to smoke again with her some night. Castiel had only responded politely but noncommittally, not wanting to be rude but also uncertain whether he wanted to see her again or not. They were, in other words, a mostly pleasant but uneventful couple of days. At least, they were until Castiel got a call from Sam about halfway through the day that Friday. He hadn't recognized the number but answered anyway on the off-chance that it was something school-related, and was surprised to hear Sam's voice on the other end.

“Cas?”

“Sam? Is everything okay?”

“Uh...I need your help. I got your number from Dean's cell after you drove me home from the play.”

“Oh...” Castiel said, still wondering why Dean's brother had called him.

Sam got the hint. “Listen, today at school, I—well, I defended myself against some people, and I'm getting sent home again. I don't want to make Dean miss class like last time and ask him to come pick me up. He's on campus right now. Are, uh...are you busy?”

Castiel had no more classes to attend that day, and all he had been doing when Sam called was reading a theoretical essay on New Criticism for his English course. He had the time, and hearing how small and angry Sam's voice sounded was worrying him.

“I need a few minutes, but, yes, Sam. I can come pick you up.”

“Thank you, Cas, just, please...don't tell Dean, okay?”

Castiel wasn't sure he could promise not to, so he said nothing and hung up, frowning. The end of the exchange had echoed eerily the one he'd had with Charlie when she told him about Dean's father. He slipped on his shoes and a jacket before leaving his apartment and making his way over to his car.

He started his beat-up little Nissan and drove to the local high school from which he and Dean had picked Sam up that memorable day they'd skipped class together.

Sam was waiting out front, and Castiel felt true shock upon seeing him up close when the other boy walked over to the car and let himself in; Sam had a split lip, a nose that was still bleeding, and was
holding his right arm at a strange angle. Castiel felt a protective sort of anger thinking of someone doing this to Sam, not unlike what he would have felt had it been Anna beside him, bruised and bloodied.

“What happened, Sam?”

Sam said nothing, he just shook his head and looked at his knees. In that moment Castiel saw the family resemblance between Sam and Dean that he hadn't before.

The drive to Bobby's was halfway over when Sam spoke up.

“Dean and I always got made fun of for being poor in school. We've never had nice things, new books, any of that. People are assholes, and that's the same in every town. It's better here, it's only a certain group, I have friends and all, but, still...it happens. Dean used to get in bad trouble when he was still in school with me, used to fight for me. I don't want him knowing it happened again. He was pissed last time.”

“For good reason, Sam,” Castiel reminded him.

Sam sighed and ran his hand under his nose, swiping at the crusting blood there.

“I'm sorry, Cas. I'll tell him on my own at some point...just not today.” He looked imploringly at Castiel, who shrugged unhappily in response.

When Castiel reached Bobby's and stopped to let him out, Sam thanked him profusely and looked as though he was considering hugging him. But in the end, he didn't, simply inclining his head with a weak smile instead.

Castiel watched as Sam walked up the gravel driveway to the front door. When Bobby opened it before the boy reached it, Castiel waved back cautiously as Bobby acknowledged him; the older man had a grim look on his face.

Castiel put the car in drive and started home, thinking of Dean with his tattered black t-shirts and his faded, hole-riddled jeans, defending Sam with scarred fists.

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On Saturday, Anna drove from the house near Novak Labs up to Castiel's campus a few cities over. It was a three hour drive that she made faster than he'd expected, and as promised earlier via text, it was a little past noon when she arrived.

Castiel suggested they go to a local deli in the town square for lunch when she knocked on his apartment door. Even as stressed as she obviously was, Anna was a sight for sore eyes. Her bright red hair was in a messy ponytail, and her blue-grey eyes were adorned with deep purple circles. Her naturally pale skin also looked a little sallow. But there was no denying that Anna looked no less gorgeous, only a little more vulnerable, and when Castiel saw her standing outside, she was wrapped in his arms within seconds. She smelled the way she always had, and Castiel didn't want to let her go until he had to, and she let him hold her for a minute or so longer before gently pulling away. Anna had always been one of the few people Castiel felt comfortable enough with to touch like that.

They walked to her car and drove to the deli soon after, speaking of nothing important, mostly making small talk. Anna casually mentioned a new medication being tested at the lab, and Castiel made sure that he looked politely interested. But Anna didn't seem too excited about the project herself, her delicate features glum as she recited statistics as though she'd memorized them.
When they got to the deli and went inside Anna began to ask him about his art classes, what was he painting, how did he like it? Her voice was taking on the wistful quality it always had whenever Castiel talked about his art education, and Castiel tried to quash the guilt he felt at that.

When they had their food and sat themselves down at one of the little tables near the back, they both went quiet. Castiel tried to imagine that it was because they were focusing on their full plates of food. But he knew on some level that it was because Anna had something to tell him that was even more uncomfortable to talk about than Luke's rehab trip, and she was afraid to start the conversation.

But, finally, she looked up from her plate to Castiel, who had been unabashedly staring at her across the table, unable to calm his nerves enough to stop. Anna set her wrapped sandwich down with a smooth motion incongruous with the crumpled paper there, and Castiel caught himself looking at her fine, slender fingers. Anna was always so graceful, the movements of her arms and neck eloquent. She and Luke were alike in that way, moving soundlessly and deftly. Instead of lab technicians and researchers they seemed more like trained debutantes to Castiel, sometimes. He knew he was not like them in that way, he was slender but he was not elegant. His grace lay in his brushstrokes.

Anna spoke then, finally. “It's about Gabriel.”

Castiel's mouth dropped open, and his first response was, “Fuck him.” The words felt torn from his throat, rough and half-whispered, and he surprised himself with his own venom in that moment. But he didn't take it back.

As if she had been expecting his reaction, Anna reached across the table and clasped his free hand before he could pull it out of her reach.

“Castiel, let me just talk to you about it--”

“What? You know where he is? He probably wouldn't talk to us anyway. It's been years, Anna.” Castiel was glowering at her, suddenly so angry he didn't know what to do with himself. But Anna kept a tight hold on his hand and continued.

“Look, you remember Hester? You used to play with her when you were little? Blonde girl?”

Castiel remembered Hester, nodding curtly.

“Well, she's in Chicago right now in culinary school. She got transferred to a different class section last month in pastry-baking, and she kept seeing someone who reminded her of Gabe. She finally got up the nerve to ask him, and he said yeah, that was his name. He didn't recognize her, but she was right. It's him, Castiel. He's doing what he wanted.”

Castiel looked at her with disbelief. “Anna, he left us. He walked out the door and never came back, never called or wrote or anything. Why should we be glad that he's baking cakes? It doesn't change anything. He's still gone and we're still here.”

Anna sharply turned her face away at that, and it was clear Castiel had struck a nerve without meaning to.

“Castiel... *I'm* still there, you and Gabriel got out.”

“You can still leave, Anna. It wasn't your fault,” Castiel said softly, his anger dissipating at the thought of having hurt her.

Anna just shook her head with an air of finality and changed the subject back to Gabriel. “Castiel, I don't think Gabriel wanted to stay gone. I think...well, I've been wondering lately if—-if Mother--”
but her voice faltered, and Castiel looked at her with dawning comprehension.

“You don't think she...” Castiel found he couldn't say it either.

“I found letters in her desk last week, when I was looking for documentation that Luke had been sent to a proper facility. Some of them are really old, from, right after he left.”

“He did write us?”

“It looks like it, Castiel. I've been wondering too if that was why she never let us make Facebook profiles or put anything of ours online, so he couldn't reach us. I still haven't made one, didn't even think about it because I'd never had one.”

“He's her son. Why would she make him stay away?” Castiel asked.

“I don't know, Castiel.” Anna rubbed the long fingers of her free hand over her tired eyes. “I don't understand it either. She's vindictive, but I never thought...maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's a misunderstanding.”

She looked at Castiel intently then, and he saw in her wide, stormy eyes the hope that he would agree with her, but he found he couldn't. He knew his mother marginally better than he knew his father, and there were few things he would put past Naomi Novak if she felt she were crossed. Crossed or abandoned.

He shook his head slowly, unsure of what to say to make Anna feel better.

***

That coming Wednesday found Castiel standing beside Dean in their shared space in the studio, both of them looking at their newly-finished projects. The project critique would commence in less than fifteen minutes, and both boys had finished up the last details on their respective works only moments before. Dean almost ran a paint-smeared hand through his hair, and Castiel noticed and stopped him with a light touch on his wrist before he could. Dean rolled his eyes at his own carelessness and nodded at Castiel in silent gratitude.

After Anna left on Saturday Castiel had gone back to his room and slept for almost five hours, covering himself up to the top of his head with his comforter. Charlie had come by later and woken him up by knocking on his door, and though he hadn't told her anything, she seemed to know that something was disturbing him. She'd stayed with him that night, crawling into bed with him and sleeping only a few inches away from his left side. It reminded Castiel of when Dean had spent the night only a week before, and he'd been grateful to both of them. Having Charlie there that first night helped, though she probably didn't know how much.

Castiel had extremely mixed feelings about all that Anna had told him, and was struggling to keep up the appearance that nothing was bothering him.

“You okay, Cas? You seem like you've been a little...sad. Sam's been asking after you, too,” Dean said.

Castiel looked at Dean with surprise; he hadn't known he was so obvious. “I'm fine, Dean. Really. Tell Sam I'll be over to Bobby's soon if he'd like me to be.” Castiel tried for a smile and hoped it didn't fall flat.

Dean looked at Castiel, streaks of red and white paint decorating his sharp cheekbones. Dean always
looked a little worn-down, and that moment was no exception; there was a fading bruise marring the skin on the right side of his jaw, decorated with a dab of red paint that looked almost like blood, and Castiel felt a helpless ire towards Dean's father. He wished then, looking at Dean looking at him, that he could reach out and touch him for longer than a casual second or two.

He had been wishing that a lot, lately.

“Sure, Cas. You still okay with me and Charlie coming over today before I head to Jimmy's?” Dean asked at last.

Castiel nodded, his eyes on Dean's bruise while he wondered if Gabriel was happy in Chicago, baking cakes.
That same week on Thursday, Castiel almost missed a scheduled appointment with Professor Harvelle. Normally being the furthest thing from forgetful on account of his almost obsessive attention to detail, Castiel still wasn't exactly feeling himself since his visit with Anna. He shook his head ruefully at the thought as he knocked on Harvelle's office door, across the hall from the entrance to the studio.

Besides being his painting instructor, Ellen Harvelle was also the head of the university's Fine Arts department and his academic advisor. Though it wasn't yet time for Spring registration (which would be later in the month), the appointment was for preregistration schedule advising and talking about Castiel's ideas for his next and last independent project of the seminar. Castiel gave Harvelle a small smile as she let him into her office, and sat himself in one of the chairs in front of her desk, setting his bag next to his feet as he took out a notebook and pen to write down any relevant advice.

The first part of the appointment went by quickly considering Castiel had already meticulously planned out his next three semesters so that he'd be able to graduate by Spring of the year after next; he had limited time and funds with which to finish school and more than once had given his transcript thorough thought and consultation. The second half of the appointment was less structured, with Castiel musing aloud on what he was thinking of doing for his last painting in the course. He was leaning heavily towards another series of small studies, this one with more naturalistic colors and subjects; he'd been missing the warm, earth-toned palette of his first painting of the semester. Harvelle readily agreed, and was about to say something to him about an artist she thought he should look at when Castiel's phone began to ring, loudly.

Mortified, he hurriedly fished it out of his bag and shut it off, but not before seeing that the call was from Dean. Apologizing as he shoved the phone deep into the recesses of the bag, Castiel said in explanation, “That was Dean, I'm sorry.”

Harvelle just laughed and shook her head, “I'm glad the two of you hit it off. Have you met his brother yet?”

Castiel was a little surprised, but nodded, “Yes, I met Sam a few weeks ago. He's nice.”

Harvelle agreed, “He and Dean and my daughter are around the same age, and I knew their parents because of Mr. Singer, here in town.”

“I haven't met Mr. Winchester yet,” Castiel supplied, uncertain how to respond.

“He and Sam are the good part of that family,” Harvelle said as she closed a file cabinet behind her desk.

Castiel was surprised at the boldness of her statement, and his face must have shown it, because after
that his professor seemed to realize that her comment wasn't exactly professional; Harvelle almost immediately resumed her brisk, teacherly demeanor as she handed him books and gave him suggestions, with Castiel writing everything down and packing the texts into his bag to read them later.

Castiel politely told her goodbye as he let himself out of the office, weighed down with more than new books.

A few hours later, Castiel weathered the cold November wind on his way to evening lab, hoping that Dean wouldn't be absent that night.

When Castiel arrived at the studio Charlie and Dean were already there, and the sight of them was like sunshine to him. Upon seeing Castiel, Charlie grinned and approached him for a hug, and he and Dean exchanged smiles and hellos. Seeing Dean, Castiel was reminded of the phone call that he'd never returned after his appointment with Harvelle, and he took the opportunity to ask Dean what he'd been calling about while the three of them were still grouped together with a few minutes to spare.

Hearing Castiel ask the question, Charlie mimed face-palming herself and said, “Oh, shit! Yeah, Dean, you called me, today, too. I almost forgot. What's up, buttercup?”

Dean surprised them both by breaking into a huge smile. Castiel stared openly for a moment, realizing how rarely, if ever, he had seen his friend smile in such a way.

“Sammy won an award for his science project at school, and now he gets to enter it in the county-wide science fair coming up in December. Bobby and I are gonna have a get-together for him this weekend, just a dinner thing, and I'm pretty sure he wants to bring a girl over. I figure he'll feel less awkward about it if I invite you guys. Also, you're friends with him, too; I know he'd like it if you guys came.”

Said Charlie immediately, “Kid's gonna go places, Dean. You know I'm down. When's Bobby wanting to do it?”

“Probably Saturday night. What do you say, Cas? You in?” Dean asked.

Castiel heard him pose the question and feared, suddenly, that Dean didn't actually want him to go to Sam's celebratory dinner. Perhaps he'd called Castiel about something else entirely and simply felt awkward asking Charlie to go while Castiel was present. At the very least, he doubted Sam cared so much as to specifically want him over on his special night.

Castiel opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again, managing only a tight nod in response. Dean smiled and clasped Castiel's shoulder for a second, blessedly not questioning him.

Lab officially began not long after, with Garth entering the room and instructing everyone to scrape and de-clutter their painting tables and the surrounding spaces so that the last project could be started in a clean, sanitary, and stress-free environment.

Dean and Castiel ventured into their shared space and soon fell into the effortless, productive silence they so often inhabited around each other. They each used the old, clunky scrapers provided in the studio to free the dried globs of paint from the glass covers on their tables. It was only the first of the five or so tasks done to tidy the work area.

About ten minutes into their cleaning sessions, Dean said to Castiel from his side of the cubby,
“Cas...do you not wanna come over on Saturday?”

Castiel immediately looked up, knowing his face wore an expression of astonishment. Dean's earlier smile had been replaced with something tenuous.

“I very much want to come, Dean. I just...don't know why you'd want me to.”

Dean inclined his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

Castiel sighed, not knowing how to say what he felt.

“Cas, you're my friend, Sam knows you. He asks about you, so does Bobby. Why wouldn't I ask you to come?” Dean said.

“Forget it, Dean.”

Castiel thought of the students at ACC, laughing at him behind their hands when he asked questions in class. He thought of Michael, rolling his eyes and telling him that few people would want to hang around with someone who 'talked like a book'.

“Cas—”

“It's fine, Dean, really. I'm glad you want me to go.”

Dean seemed to concede, then, shrugging his shoulders and frowning before returning his full attention to the task at hand.

An hour passed in still more silence until a somewhat familiar voice interrupted it.

Castiel lifted his head from where he'd been re-taping the table edges to see Lisa Braeden standing next to Dean, leaving little space between them. She was leaning prettily on the partition, her floral shirt framing her slender, tan shoulders. Her long, dark hair was somehow lustrous in the unflattering fluorescent lights, and her brown eyes seemed to be smiling as well as her full lips. She was entirely fixated on Dean, her body almost framing his. When she saw Castiel look up she politely greeted him, lifting a hand and flashing him a smile. But soon she was focused on Dean once more, looking at him and asking him how he was feeling about his project after the critique.

Castiel excused himself to the restroom without allowing himself to look at Dean and the easy, glued-on smile he always seemed able to pull from nowhere when talking to a girl, even if it was just Charlie.

Once outside in the hallway, Castiel took a sharp right and shut himself into the last stall of the men's room. He wasn't sure what all he felt in that moment, but knew at least that it was too much; too many thoughts, too many memories threatening to fill his veins in place of blood. It was too easy to fall into them, to let them wash over him like water, cold and suffocating and quick-moving (what's going on—cinnamon rolls burning in the oven the night of the crash—what do you mean, an accident?—Meg's red lips and the burn of Malibu going down straight—where is everyone Gabriel—the tapping sound of Father's impatient fingers on the dinner table—I don't understand, where—Mother hiding Castiel's paints and holding out data sheets with so many blanks they would never all get filled out—where is everyone, where are they—).

Castiel breathed in deeply and swiped his fists over his eyes, knowing he needed to get back to lab soon.

A few minutes later Castiel went back to the studio, still wired and full of unpleasant, irritable
energy. When he got back inside he saw that Dean was walking away from Lisa, who looked disappointed. Dean had apparently been on his way to the door when Castiel opened it.

He stopped, and the both of them hovered just inside the doorway, facing each other.

Dean's lips parted to say something, but no words came. He just reached out and touched Castiel's arm instead, much as he had earlier, his fingers warm and calloused. Castiel glanced at him, and then at Lisa behind him before he could stop himself.

Dean smiled at him, and his touch was soft, and Castiel's jumbled thoughts condensed to one, thrumming and solid.

Dean.

Castiel smiled back.

***

On Friday, Castiel decided that it would likely be prudent to make a Facebook profile in light of what Anna had said. It was true, their mother had been adamant that her youngest children not have online identities, her reasons being safety and privacy. But if Gabriel had one then perhaps Castiel could try and contact him. His stomach lurched at the possibility of talking to his brother again after so long. But, he reminded himself, he was thinking too far into the future when he hadn't even become a member of the site yet.

He enlisted Charlie's help in making the profile, having no idea where to start or what to say about himself. Charlie was more than happy to assist him, and spent almost half an hour with his computer in her lap, asking Castiel questions he was fairly certain were not listed in the site's 'about me' blanks.

When it came time to assign him a profile picture, Charlie insisted on taking a photo of the both of them together and using that one. The first thing she did was tag herself in it (Charlie had also made certain that she was the first person Castiel friended).

“I'm sending Sam and Dean requests for you. Hmm...what did you say your sister's name was, Cas?”

“Dean has a Facebook?” the words were out of his mouth before he could stop them, and Castiel felt a blush creep along his cheeks. But Charlie didn't seem to notice his eagerness, and she nodded.

“Mmhmm, but he doesn't get on a whole lot. Anyway, bud: sister's name?”

“I don't know if she has one yet, but Anna Novak.”

“...Anna Marie Novak, hot redhead?”

Castiel walked around to sit behind Charlie on the bed so he could look over her shoulder at the screen.

“That's her, yes. I didn't know she'd made one so soon after she visited.”

“Seriously, is everyone in your family this freakishly attractive?” Charlie asked.

“I'm not,” Castiel said.

Charlie looked back at him for a moment before rolling her eyes. “If that's what you think, you're blind.”
An hour or two after Charlie left, Castiel logged into his new profile, trying not to think too much about his actions as he clicked on the link to Dean's page.

As he'd expected, Dean's Facebook was rather bare, with his current profile picture being over six months old. It was a low-quality photo obviously taken on an old phone of Sam and Dean making silly faces together. Dean's arm was slung over Sam's shoulder while Bobby peeked out from between the gap of their necks, making a face of his own. Castiel couldn't help but smile as he looked at it, and after seeing all there was to see on Dean's (still partially-blocked) page, he logged out and lay back down on his bed.

Perhaps he should have searched Gabriel's name, seen if there were any Novaks in Chicago. But even the thought made his chest start to tighten. Though Castiel knew the reason he had just constructed a profile was to look for his brother, thinking about trying to find him and maybe even succeeding made a familiar anxiety flare inside of him. What if Anna was mistaken? What if Gabriel was ignoring them of his own volition? What if—

Castiel's phone began to ring, interrupting his ruminations, and he looked down at where it was on the bed next to his thigh. The screen identified the caller as Meg. Castiel was unused to getting phone calls from people besides his sister, or more recently, Dean, and he hesitated to answer. But answer he did, raising the phone to his ear with a tentative, "Hello?"

"Heya, Clarence. What are you up to?"

"Well, I was planning on reading—"

"Wanna come over, see how you like bud without the booze? I'm next door to Charlie's complex."

Castiel was planning on telling her no, making up a credible excuse about studying, or something, anything. But then Meg said in a conversational tone, "I saw Lisa Braeden walking around with your friend Winchester last night. Looked kinda cozy. Are they a thing?"

Castiel decided then that he didn't want to study. He grabbed a pen and held it above his palm.

“What’s your apartment number?”

***

That night Castiel walked to Meg's on-campus apartment, which he realized was the same one Gilda had been dropped off at on Halloween weekend. He hadn't been aware Gilda and Meg were roommates, but supposed he wasn't too surprised.

When he knocked on her door, Meg opened it immediately, making Castiel wonder if she'd been waiting just inside. She led Castiel through the cluttered living room and back to her room. Gilda was nowhere in sight.

Meg's room was an interesting space. There were numerous psychedelic posters adorning the walls along with many ornamental knives and swords on display, either hung up or on collector's stands. Meg had two or three bongs of varying sizes and colors arranged in front of the curtained window on the left side of the room. Her bed was covered with what looked like a heavy, purple velvet comforter, rumpled and cozy-looking. She had many extra pillows strewn here and there on the bed and the floor, and her desk was littered with papers and glass pipes and pens. It felt like a nice room, with a cool, dark energy almost at odds with Meg's active brand of abrasiveness.

Meg gestured for Castiel to have a seat on her bed, and he did, sitting Indian-style as close to the edge as he could get. Meg sat down beside him, and Castiel noticed that without the dramatic
makeup, Meg was quite pretty and not nearly as intimidating-looking. Her cheeks were pale and her lips a faded pink, and the feathery circles beneath her eyes reminded Castiel of Anna's.

Meg smiled at him, and without the red goop on her lips she was not so much cat-like as sweet, her energy a little subdued. Castiel wasn't sure what to do now that he had arrived, and he shyly smiled back, wondering what had possessed him to say yes.

“Let's get this show on the road,” said Meg after a minute or two of silence, leaning over Castiel to reach for a baggy of weed and one of the glass pipes lying on the surface of her desk.

Castiel felt some trepidation as Meg broke the green clumps in the bag into smaller clumps. She packed bits of it into the empty bowl of the indigo-blue pipe resting between her legs, her bottom lip between her teeth as she worked. In a few minutes she was handing the pipe and a lighter to him, saying, “Newbie gets greens.”

Castiel took the the items from her, holding both uselessly until Meg rolled her eyes at him. “What, you can take a hit off a joint but can't smoke a pipe?”

When Castiel didn't answer Meg took the pipe and lighter from him, putting the mouthpiece of the pipe to her lips and lighting it briefly but effectively, inhaling deeply. Then, she set the pipe down on the bed beside her and moved rapidly, framing Castiel's face with her hands and pressing her mouth to his before he could comprehend her goal and stop her. Castiel let out a muffled noise of surprise as he realized the new position he was in, so quick had she been. Meg moved her lips against his. He guessed that he was supposed to part his lips, and when he did, Meg exhaled all of the smoke she'd been holding into his mouth. He breathed it in somewhat involuntarily, his hands raised but motionless near his shoulders.

When Meg withdrew, Castiel sputtered as he exhaled the secondhand pot smoke. He wasn't sure if he was confused or angry. “What was that, Meg?!”

“Shotgunning. That way none of it gets wasted.” Meg gave him a sly smile, and Castiel said, before he could stop himself, “That was my first kiss.”

Meg shook her head with a laugh. “That wasn't a kiss, honey. And, shit, don't sound so bummed.”

Castiel looked down at his hands, embarrassed by her reply.

"Alright, I shoulda warned you, Clarence, but I won't do it again. Okay?” Meg said the words as if Castiel were a child, slowly enunciating each syllable. Castiel felt annoyance at that, but it was quickly being eaten up by the other feeling rolling over him like some heavy tide, coloring him light blue and transparent in the still air of the room.

“You want to take a hit by yourself this time?” Meg asked after she'd lit the bowl again and exhaled her smoke somewhere that was not Castiel's mouth.

“Okay,” he agreed, his voice distant. He reached for the pipe of his own volition.

He struggled a little with angling the lighter correctly but ultimately took a successful hit, coughing as smoke billowed into his lungs. Meg smiled and leaned against him, and Castiel found he didn't care about the proximity.

Minutes passed in silence as they passed the pipe back and forth until the bowl was ashed, and Castiel asked Meg without realizing he was doing so, “Do you have paper and a pen?”

Meg nodded and reached out to grab what he had asked for from her desk. She handed him the
materials and Castiel opened the notebook quickly, placing the pencil to the paper. He felt as though he had something to say, a poem to write or a story to tell.

But nothing came, and the pen remained poised and motionless above the paper.

Castiel breathed out heavily after a time, setting both pen and pad on the bed beside him and rubbing his hands over his arms. He was disappointed. He'd felt so...full. As though the words inside of him finally had a form, a shape and an escape route. The high had made the desire to create that he knew so well swell to a fever-pitch, only to find him as ineffective as he always seemed to be.

Meg looked at him with curiosity, her face housing a question. Castiel, less self-conscious because he was stoned, said easily, “I used to write. I have dozens of notebooks filled with my work back home. But I haven't been able to for a while.”

“How long's a while?” Meg asked.

“Maybe three years,” Castiel said.

“Any idea why?”

“Something to do with my father, I guess. He died, and I stopped writing.” Castiel would never have said that while sober, but he didn't care at the moment.

Meg looked concerned, moving to put her arm around Castiel, who would have protested had he been thinking about more than the words he couldn't say and the way his fingers were tingling. Meg laid her head on his shoulder, and her curls tickled Castiel's chin. Castiel made no move to push her off, noticing how tight his skin felt stretched over his limbs, and knowing that if he could paint right that very second, he'd paint a sky.

“I'm sorry about your dad. That sucks,” Meg murmured.

“It's okay. I don't miss him,” Castiel assured her.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes, I am. Why?”

“Cause you look like you're about to cry.”

“I think I may just be high.”

“Yeah.” Meg stood up from the bed and stretched, her eyes never leaving Castiel's face. “What'd you used to write?”

“Mostly poetry.”

“You don't strike me as the super-poetic type, but I guess I could see it.”

“Well, I was,” Castiel said with irritation.

Meg nodded slowly, her eyes as red as Castiel could only imagine his were. She walked toward him then, crouching down on the floor and looking up at him with her clouded brown eyes.

“Hey, Clarence?”

“What is it?”
“How close are you to Winchester?”

“He’s my friend. Why?”

“Just remember what they say about broken things: how easy it is to cut yourself on ’em when you try to put them back together.”

An hour later at a little past eleven thirty, Castiel was letting himself into his apartment, still stoned and not particularly observant. He was scared almost out of his skin by a hand on his shoulder. He jumped where he stood and whirled around with his hands out, only to see none other than Dean standing there.

“Dean?” he sputtered.

“Sorry, Cas, I didn't mean to startle you,” Dean said guiltily.

Castiel tried to play it off. “You...didn't.”

Dean smirked at him, and Castiel rolled his eyes and capitulated. “You might have. But that's mostly my fault for not being more perceptive. What is it that you want, by the way?” He noticed he was talking more than he'd usually be moved to.

“I'm sorry to bother you, man, but can I stay with you tonight?” Dean asked.

“Of course. Is everything okay at home?” Castiel asked the question without thinking.

Dean tensed visibly but recovered quickly. “Yeah. My old man just wanted the house to himself tonight.”

“Okay, Dean.” Castiel unlocked the door so they could enter the apartment. Balthazar was nowhere in sight, and they made their way back to Castiel's room without incident.

Dean tossed his bag to the floor by Castiel's bed, and by some accident of timing (or Castiel's still heedless behavior) the two almost collided in front of the bathroom door, and Castiel had to put a hand on Dean's arm to keep himself from falling backwards.

“Are you high, Cas?” Dean asked, getting a good look at Castiel's eyes because of their sudden proximity.

“I may still be, yes,” Castiel conceded.

“I'm gonna take a wild guess and say you saw Meg?” Dean asked.

“She invited me over earlier.”

Dean didn't move away from Castiel or make him take his hand off of his shoulder, and Castiel didn't think about doing either himself. He wondered if he should tell Dean about the 'shotgun' Meg had given him without asking, and how instead of her lips he'd thought of someone else's entirely.

“What happened there, Dean?” was what he said to him instead, seeing a new cut on Dean's forehead, right along his hairline.

Dean stepped away only then, saying, “Can I use your shower? I'll make it quick.”
Castiel nodded, and Dean shut himself in the bathroom. Castiel stripped himself of his jeans and t-shirt, putting on pajama bottoms and an old white t-shirt because Dean was going to be around. He lay down in his bed and listened to the sound of the water running through the closed door. In his current state, it sounded almost musical, and if Castiel closed his eyes he could practically hear a melody...

The water soon shut off, and Castiel exhaled and turned in the bed, waiting for Dean to come back out.

A few minutes later he did, dressed in a clean black shirt and sweatpants. Castiel was glad that he'd packed something to sleep in, unlike the last time.

“Tired, Dean. Are you fine with going to bed now?” he asked his friend.

“Sure, Cas,” Dean said softly.

After Dean turned off the light, Castiel bid him goodnight. Like the last time, Castiel listened to the muffled sounds of Dean settling himself on the floor next to the bed, using Castiel's extra pillow again and a blanket. He could imagine the warmth of the breaths he heard leaving Dean's lips, and the softness of his skin, undoubtedly like the lightness of his touch.

Castiel was not usually so tactile, but he decided that he liked this side-effect of the pot. He also felt distinctly more at ease, 'chilled out', as he could practically hear Charlie saying in his mind. The usual throbbing anxiety that collected under his skin seemed somewhat quieted. He'd felt like that since he and Meg had smoked another bowl together a half hour or so after the first.

Perhaps that was why Gabriel had smoked so often. God only knew it had been a high-stress living situation in the Novak house.

With those thoughts and various others languidly making their way through his head, Castiel fell asleep.

He awoke what had to be only a few hours later to the sounds of heavy breaths and mumbled words softened by blankets and carpet.

Castiel rubbed his eyes and sat up, looking down at where he knew Dean to be in the darkness. He couldn't make out anything that Dean was saying, but could clearly hear the sounds of him moving under the throw.

“Dean? Are you alright?” Castiel called lowly, not wanting to startle him.

The words continued, and the shaking breaths grew a little louder.

“Dean, wake up.” Castiel swung his legs over the edge of the bed carefully, feeling his toes brush Dean's arm as he stepped down between him and the bed. He crouched beside the boy on his floor and cautiously reached out, his fingers brushing Dean's cheek by accident. His skin was hot and clammy with sweat, and at the touch Dean gave a gasp and shot up. Castiel only knew this because he'd felt it, still unable to make Dean out in the dark. He carefully moved his hand to Dean's shoulder, feeling that his shirt was also damp.

“Dean? What's the matter?”

“Cas?” There was uncertainty there.
“Yes, Dean,” Castiel answered.

“I guess...I must've been dreaming, huh?” Dean said.

“You were talking.”

“Sorry, man. Did I...say anything?”

“I couldn't really catch what you were saying,” Castiel told him honestly. He began to get up, planning on releasing Dean's shoulder and sitting on the bed again. But to his surprise, Dean loosely grabbed his wrist and kept his hand anchored where it was.

“Do you want some water?” Castiel asked his friend.

Dean didn't answer, he just kept a hold on Castiel's arm. He was trembling, and it saddened Castiel to feel it. Before he thought better of it he asked, “Do you want to get in the bed instead of staying down here?”

As soon as he said the words, he regretted them. Castiel may have been someone generally unclear on social norms and protocol, but something he was fairly sure one did not do was ask their male friend to climb into bed with them. He awaited the inevitable awkwardness that would likely ensue.

But instead: “Is—is that okay with you?”

“It's fine, Dean. I've had night terrors a few times...My brother used to let me sleep with him, after. It helped.” Talking about Gabriel hurt less if he didn't use his name, Castiel found.

As they stood up together Dean said, “I, uh...I used to do that for Sammy growing up. He had nightmares about the fire. He'd come runnin' into my room, asking if I'd hug him 'til he fell back asleep.”

“He remembered?”

“I don't think so; I think he just knew about it, was afraid it'd happen again. He used to tell me that in the dreams I died instead of Mom.”

Castiel climbed in on his side of the bed while Dean went around. He felt Dean's weight settle beside him and the sudden wave of warmth that washed over him even across the few inches between them. It wasn't like when Charlie had been in the bed with him: this time he wished he could close the distance, feel Dean's skin for himself, even wet with fear and sweat as it was now.

“That's awful, about Sam. I'm glad he had you.”

“I'm glad you had your brother.”

Castiel looked over at Dean, finally able to see him enough to read his expression. “Do you remember what you were dreaming about, Dean?”

“No,” Dean answered quickly. Perhaps a little too quickly.

“Goodnight, Dean.”

“Night, Cas.”

***
Though Castiel stayed asleep for the majority of the rest of the night, he remembered the alien sensation of someone touching him, of a weight on his shoulder not unlike how Meg's head had felt earlier, and an arm slung over his chest. But then he was dragged down into the depths of REM sleep again, and in the morning Dean left early to check on Sam and drive him to school.
The Saturday of Sam's celebratory dinner was grey and cold with stinging mid-November rain and formidable wind-chill, and that afternoon found Castiel sifting through the limited contents of his closet.

Behind him in his room, Meg had taken the liberty of stretching herself out on his bed like a large (and very chatty) cat, an empty pipe next to her on Castiel's nightstand. The room still smelled faintly of pot, and Castiel was humming a Shins song quietly to himself, having just smoked with her. For whatever reason, Meg had apparently decided that she liked spending time with Castiel, and an hour or two earlier had called him to invite herself over.

Though the dinner wasn't until six in the evening and it wasn't yet three, Castiel had been mulling over what to wear practically since he'd gotten out of bed that morning (not long after Dean had taken his leave and gone to see Sam).

“You do realize that you're kinda smokin' hot and that whatever you wear, you'll still be smokin' hot, right?” Meg asked lazily from the bed. She was awfully close to where Dean had slept only hours before, and Castiel tried not to dwell on the thought.

He rolled his eyes at her exclamation, though. “I just don't want to look stupid.”

Meg snorted, “Sure, Clarence. That's why you've been going through your closet for an hour. What, are Winchester's parents gonna be there or something? Are you proposing already? 'Cause I gotta tell you, you should really give it a few months before you pledge your undying love in front of the family.”

Castiel turned around to look at her. “Firstly, I have no idea what you're talking about; and secondly, I don't know if Dean's father will be attending.” But just the possibility pulled an unpleasant damper over his pot-induced placidity. If Mr. Winchester did come, Castiel wasn't sure if he would be able to interact with the man without letting his emotions show.

“Whatever, honey. But wear something blue, is what I'd say. You got some eyes on you, make 'em count. Also, speaking of, I'm gonna leave my eye drops here for you. Just in case you don't look completely kosher by the time Charlie picks you up.”

Castiel nodded absently, holding up a dark blue button-down that had been hiding in the back of his closet. Meg snapped her fingers behind him, motioning for him to turn around with the shirt held up to his body so she could see it, and he did. Meg nodded in approval, smiling.

“I say that one! Maybe Winchester'll man-up and take you out.”

Castiel turned back around quickly, shoving the shirt into the closet again. “Meg, Dean isn't like that with people like me. I'm his friend.”
He could practically hear Meg rolling her eyes, but she said nothing more on the subject, and in less than an hour she left to go meet up with a few other people on campus. She ran the backs of her knuckles over Castiel's cheek in farewell, and her brown curls bounced as she let herself out.

As he and Charlie had arranged earlier in the day, Castiel bundled up (wearing the navy button-down beneath his coat) and waited in his living room for her to arrive. It was half-past five.

Castiel had made sure before taking a seat that he didn't still look stoned, using the drops Meg had left on his bathroom counter just to be safe. He was mostly sober by that point, however, and was unfortunately feeling his customary nerves surge through him again with every passing minute.

By the time Charlie arrived, Castiel had worried himself into his usual silent and contemplative state, and when Charlie wrapped her arms around him he made himself relax into her touch.

“Well, let's get going, Cas. I'm starving, I don't know about you,” Charlie said enthusiastically.

“I'm actually really fucking hungry, now that you mention it.” The words seemed as if they’d been said before Castiel had even comprehended the fact that he was, indeed, almost ravenous.

Charlie began to stare at Castiel, having even stopped walking towards the door in surprise, her mouth halfway open and her face frozen. “Did you just...?”

“I guess I'm...really hungry,” Castiel supplied, feeling his cheeks flush under her gaze.

Then, Charlie started laughing, harder than he'd ever heard her laugh before. She linked her arm through Castiel's as she started to steer them towards the door again, her hand over her mouth as she guffawed at him. Castiel laughed with her after a little while, and by the time they got to her second-hand hybrid, both of them were still giggling like children.

The quick drive to Bobby's seemed even shorter than usual to Castiel, who was soon silent again on his side of the car.

When they arrived and parked on the curb in front of the neighbor's house, he made sure his coat and shirt were straightened. He also more than once self-consciously patted his hair down, inwardly despairing over the fact that he could never get it to lay flat. Charlie came around to his side before they went into the house, putting her hands on Castiel's shoulders and giving him a smile.

“You look fine, boo. I promise.” She leaned in and briefly pressed her lips to his cheek.

Castiel breathed out heavily. “I'm sorry, I know.”

Charlie shook her head, “Nothing to be sorry about. Now, let's go inside before we freeze.”

She linked her arm through Castiel's again, for which he was grateful.

Before they even got to the door it was opened by the man of the hour himself, Sam. He looked happy, his long hair swept behind his ears and his smooth skin a soft pink in the yellow light emanating from inside the house. He ushered them in immediately, smiling and clapping both of them on the back as they passed through the doorway.

Inside Bobby's house all was clean and bright and warm, a stark contrast to the bleary weather raging on outside of its walls. There was a spotless white cloth on the table in the dining room beyond, and seven places were already set in plain but prettily-colored dishes. The living room had been
straightened to within an inch of its life, it appeared, the pillows fluffed and arranged on the couch and Bobby's knick-knacks similarly rearranged so as to look more cohesive. There was a pretty glass centerpiece on the coffee table that Castiel had never seen before, and beside that was a humble serving tray stocked with chips and dip.

Sitting on the sofa was a young girl that Castiel had to assume was Sam's crush, with thick, curly blonde hair and friendly brown eyes. She looked to be about Sam's age, and when she stood up to meet them she was introduced to them as Jessica Moore, a classmate of Sam's, Castiel was proven right. Though Sam had not implied that they were anything more than friends, the way they stood so closely together and kept shooting each other meaningful glances left little doubt that they were mere hours away from agreeing to go steady. Castiel only wondered which one would spring the question first.

Bobby was standing near the kitchen with a beer in his hand, chatting with a tall man next to him who had dark hair and was wearing a faded military jacket, holding a beer as well. As soon as Bobby saw Castiel, he gestured for him to come over to where they were standing, presumably to introduce him to the man beside him.

Charlie, Castiel noted, saw the man with Bobby and narrowed her eyes in disapproval, though she said nothing as Castiel walked away.

When Castiel reached Bobby the old man grasped his hand happily, saying to the man with the military jacket, “John, this is Cas, he's a friend 'a Dean's. Castiel, this is John Winchester, Dean and Sam's daddy.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” said Castiel, holding out a polite hand to Mr. Winchester, though there were few things he wanted to do less in the world. Mr. Winchester, he saw up close, didn't resemble Dean so much as he did Sam, all sharp angles and wide nostrils, with the same almond-shaped eyes and long chin. Dean had clearly inherited much of his looks from his mother, Castiel thought as his hand was firmly shaken before being promptly released.

“Castiel? Never heard that one before. You go to school with my son?” John asked.

“Yes, sir. We're in painting together.”

Standing before Mr. Winchester, Castiel felt all of the ways he had been trained to talk to his own late father returning swiftly in the back of his mind, *stand up straight, be sure your shoulders are back, no slouching, no looking down when being addressed.*

“I see,” Mr. Winchester took a long pull of his beer after the words left his lips, assessing Castiel as though he was less than impressed. Castiel looked at Bobby for a second and then stopped himself, not sure how to respond.

“The boy paints some pretty cool stuff, John. Dean showed me some of it on his phone,” Boby said.

“Yeah?” Mr. Winchester grunted, “You paint actual *things*?”

“Do you mean...non-abstract subjects?” Castiel asked, not understanding.

“Yeah. You know, stuff. Like chairs and people, not 'emotional content'.” At the last words, Mr. Winchester raised his free hand and made air quotations, his tone disdainful. Castiel got the feeling that the phrase had been one used in an attempt to explain abstract art to him before and that it hadn't been a successful one. He sensed an attack aimed at Dean's paintings hidden in his words.

“I paint non-abstract subjects, yes. But Dean's work is by no means marginal in modern art today.”
John laughed unkindly and Bobby intervened again, “Speaking of Dean, he's in the kitchen finishing makin' dinner, maybe you could help him?”

Castiel nodded immediately, silently thanking Bobby as best as he could with his eyes before walking past them into the kitchen.

True to what Bobby had said, there Dean was, a dishcloth thrown over one broad shoulder as he manned the stove. A bowl of mashed potatoes was sitting on the counter adjacent, steam still rising in little curls from its surface, and on one of the burners was a pot of simmering green beans with bacon and pearl onions. On the front burner was a large pan where what looked to be pork chops were being fried, and the smell was to die for, especially considering Castiel's appetite. Dean heard Castiel come in and turned to face him, a smile playing on his full lips.

“Hey, Cas. Wanna get me a plate from that cabinet for these?” he gestured to a cabinet nearby and Castiel did as he asked, selecting a large serving dish and setting it next to the stove.

“This looks...wonderful, Dean. Did you do all of this yourself?”

Dean looked almost bashful then, turning around to face the stove again. “Yeah. Sam could burn water and Bobby worked all day, so...”


Dean shooed his compliment away. “It's not that hard, you could. You meet my dad?”

Castiel averted his eyes as he answered, “Oh, yes.”

Dean surprised Castiel by turning around and saying with pride, “He's a badass, man. Former Marine, me and him raised Sammy on our own after Mom passed.”

Castiel was at a loss for words, wanting to ask how Dean could possibly so prize someone who clearly abused him, but knowing he'd be crossing a line if he did. He felt trapped, and said only, “Yes, I noticed his jacket.”

Dean seemed not to notice his discomfort, and hummed to himself as he loaded the finished pork chops onto the plate next to him and then did the same with the green beans, transferring them into a large bowl that had already been set aside.

A few minutes later Dean announced that dinner was ready and everyone filed into the dining room after helping themselves buffet-style to the spread. Sam and Jess were somehow holding hands and their plates at the same time and sat next to each other, to no one's surprise. Dean, Charlie and Castiel made sure to sit together on the opposite side of the table, and Bobby sat to the left of Sam. Mr. Winchester sat at the head of the table in the extra chair that had been tacked-on to accommodate everyone. Seeing him there, Castiel was reminded of Andrew Novak, imperious and monolithic.

John was opening a new beer before grace was completed, and did not seem interested in talking, digging into his food along with everyone else and sitting silently while the rest of them conversed. Even Castiel managed to contribute more to the discussion than Dean's father did, something that rarely (if ever) happened to him.

The food was nothing short of delicious, and almost everyone said so more than once, asking Dean what seasonings he had put in this dish or how long he had cooked that dish for. Dean accepted every compliment with a shy smile and a careless shrug. However, it seemed that no matter how often Charlie or Sam or Jess told him he had done well, his eyes stayed fastened on John, who sat eating and drinking and staring at nothing in particular. Castiel would have said that John seemed
distracted, but that would have implied that Dean's father had some thought or thing to be distracted by, which didn't look to be the case. No, John Winchester just looked as though he was there, taking up the space of his chair and nothing else.

Almost an hour later most everyone had gotten their fill of Dean's cooking, and most of them wandered out of the dining room and back to the living room to mingle. Castiel, Dean and John remained. Castiel stayed because he figured he'd help Dean stack the dishes in the sink and wrap all the food up for refrigeration in thanks for the meal. John was drinking his third or fourth beer of the evening and contemplating the label on the bottle, mechanically pushing his plate toward Dean as he came by to take it for him.

“Did you like it, Dad? I got the recipe for the pork from Mom's old book.” Dean sounded hopeful.

John looked up at his son as though he hadn't noticed him before he'd spoken.

“Oh...yeah. Yeah.” John's voice was far away, and though Dean said nothing Castiel could tell by the dejected set of his shoulders as he followed him to the kitchen that he was disappointed.

After the dishes were rinsed and the leftover food was in Bobby's Frigidaire, Castiel and Dean joined the others in the living room (where John had also wandered to while they cleaned the kitchen). Charlie was sitting on the sofa with Jess and Sam talking animatedly, her arms making swooping gestures and her features excited. When Castiel sat next to Charlie she turned to him and said, “Right, I could take over the world with my strategic prowess as showcased by my kicking your ass at Magic?” she looked so expectant that Castiel nodded yes without hesitation, not even having fully processed her question.

Jess broke out into peals of laughter, covering her mouth with a hand as she snorted. Sam grinned at her and placed his fingers over the hand still resting on her lap. Jess blushed a little and slowly stopped laughing, looking at Sam as though she couldn't believe he was real. Castiel didn't even know the first thing about relationships and he found them to be unbearably cute.

Dean winked at Sam when he saw the exchange, as if to say, that's my boy, and Sam pretended to be embarrassed but smiled all the same.

After ten or fifteen minutes more of casual conversation between the five of them, Mr. Winchester walked over to join them. He had a new beer in his hand, and Castiel found that he'd lost count of how many he'd had by that point.

John clapped Sam on the shoulder and said hello to Jessica, telling her how glad he was to meet any friend of Sam's, especially one so pretty. Jess blushed and said thank you, not seeming to think much of the sentiment. It was when John commented that it was about time one of the boys found a good girl and eyed Dean ruefully that Jess looked down at her and Sam's interlaced fingers instead of at John. Castiel saw hurt flit over Dean's features, followed quickly by a kind of resignation.

Sam scoffed and said, “Dad...we both know Dean works too hard.” He chuckled awkwardly, clearly trying to diffuse the tension now present in the room.

Dean shook his head, smiling that smile he'd pulled on for Lisa and for Charlie so many times. It wasn't long after that that people began to go home, clearly unsure how to rebound from John's rudeness. Sam told everyone goodbye and gave Dean a purposeful look before leaving with Jessica to walk her home, and Charlie shot John a scowl before asking Castiel if he was okay with leaving soon. Before Castiel could answer, Dean stepped up behind him and said, “I'll take him home in a little while, okay? Cas, wanna help me clean up here?”
Castiel could feel Dean's breath hot on the back of his neck as he spoke, and he turned around to tell him yes. Charlie nodded and gave Dean a peck on the forehead before saying her goodbyes to Bobby and taking her leave.

John vanished back into the kitchen as soon as Charlie had shut the door behind her, and Bobby went down the hall to use the restroom.

Castiel heard the refrigerator door open with a creak. He assumed Dean's father was getting himself another beer, and clearly Dean thought the same thing, if the curse he let loose under his breath was any indication. He turned and walked back toward the kitchen without explaining himself.

Castiel walked quietly to the archway that led to the other room, stopping before he could be seen but where he could hear Dean and John's conversation well enough.

Dean spoke in muted tones, as one would to appease a child. “Dad, c'mon, don't you think you're good for now? That six-pack's almost done, and—”

Castiel flinched as the words were interrupted by a clipped grunt of pain from Dean and the sound of a small struggle, the rustle of clothing and snick of a cracked knuckle.

“Don't tell me what to fuckin' do,” John's words were very slightly slurred, almost unnoticeable if one wasn't looking for it, and Castiel made up his mind and acted before he could talk himself out of it. He marched into the kitchen, feigning innocence at walking in on any sort of private moment, and inhaled sharply at what he saw even so.

John had Dean by the wrist in a grip so tight the tips of his fingers were white, holding him still and close. Dean turned and looked at Castiel, his eyes disturbingly blank. The still-unopened beer was in John's free hand, its label partially peeled-off of the sweating glass. Dean had an ugly red mark near his nose that had not been there before, and Castiel guessed with a dull anger that it would soon bloom into yet another bruise to add to the collection.

Castiel said nothing, he simply stared at father and son.

Soon, John realized the implications of the situation and released Dean without ceremony, telling him gruffly to get out. Dean pulled himself away, his head slightly lowered, and Castiel followed him out of the kitchen and into the living room when the other boy went without comment.

Dean turned around and looked at Castiel when they were both out of John's earshot. “Can we go to your place?”

As Castiel saw the beginnings of a bead of blood pooling in one of Dean's nostrils, he hurriedly said yes. Not long after, Dean led them out the door and to the Impala parked outside in Bobby's drive, not having waited even long enough to tell Bobby goodbye.

They didn't speak during the drive to Castiel's apartment, and before they reached campus and found a spot to park, Dean's nose had begun to bleed steadily. Dean did nothing to staunch the flow as they walked to the apartment in the cold, earning an odd look or two from the few people they passed. When they'd arrived at the apartment and Castiel let them in, they were greeted by a pleasant wall of warmth and by Balthazar, sitting on their little sofa sipping on something in a clouded glass.

Castiel was almost stunned to see Balthazar considering it so rarely seemed to happen, and forgot to say hello immediately. But Balthazar was not so affected, and, as though one of them did not have a gushing nose currently blooding up their Black Sabbath tee, asked casually, “Fancy a drink?”

Castiel was about to tell him no for the both of them, but Dean answered before he could for the
second time that day. “Please.”

Balthazar nodded and got up from the sofa to make them whatever it was he had to give, and Dean remained where he was in the living room, Castiel beside him.

Soon Balthazar returned with two glasses in his hands, giving one to each of them before inclining his head and disappearing into his own room. Castiel raised his eyebrows at this but didn't comment, and he and Dean shrugged their shoulders at one another and got to situating themselves in Castiel's room, shutting the door behind them.

Whatever his reasons for making drinks he didn't plan on enjoying with them, Balthazar had made them strong.

Castiel suspected there was more vodka than sprite in the cups, but drank his anyway. Dean downed his in a few large gulps, setting the empty glass down heavily onto the nearby desk.

A word had still not been exchanged between them since Bobby's house, and Castiel's bravery walking into the kitchen had apparently been short-lived, and he didn't break the silence. Dean was sitting in Castiel's office chair where it was turned outward from the desk, the flow from his nose having slowed noticeably as he stared absently at the far wall. Castiel sat on the edge of his bed, sipping his drink while deep in thought.

Castiel looked at Dean after most of his drink was gone, and hated the sight of the dried blood on his lips and chin, not bright red anymore but an ugly brown that clashed with the violet spot flowering on the side of his nose.

Castiel got up to go to the bathroom and wet a washcloth with warm water before returning to the room with it. He walked toward Dean cautiously, moving to stand in the v of his legs.

Dean looked closely at Castiel as he stood there, his face slipping into a look painfully young, the way it had once or twice before when he and Castiel were alone. But he said nothing, he only watched.

Castiel tentatively extended his hands, one with the washcloth clutched in it and the other empty. The hand with the cloth he gently pressed to Dean's face, starting at his cheek and carefully working his way inward to the stretch of skin between his nose and his lips. Dean's eyes widened at the touch, and Castiel placed his free hand on the opposite side of Dean's face, bracing him with as light a touch as he could manage.

The cloth in his hand quickly began to soak up Dean's blood, becoming first a dirty pink and then red-brown. Castiel felt Dean lean into his touch, his eyes fluttering closed as he slumped a little under Castiel's hands. He noticed then that Dean was shaking, and that as Castiel continued to touch him, he seemed to steady himself little by little.

Soon, all of the dried blood had been wiped away and the flow had slowed to almost nothing. Castiel folded the washcloth so that its clean side was facing outward and placed it on the desk behind Dean.

Dean opened his eyes at the absence of the damp warmth on his skin, and without thinking Castiel reached his empty hand up to replace it.

Their eyes met, and Castiel said, “You didn't fall when I found you in the street.”

Dean's tremor returned, and he closed his eyes again, nodding ever so slightly.

Castiel understood that Dean didn't want to talk about it, to clarify. There was no confrontation that
night, there was no confirmation. There was only that single motion of his head.

Castiel thought with sadness of how Dean had looked in the kitchen, and traced his fingertips over the side of his face, over the sharp cut of his cheekbone and the smooth frame of his jaw. Castiel mutely marveled at how soft Dean's skin was, at how he was now close enough to count the myriad freckles dusting the flesh under his fingers, and to feel the warm breath coming from his delicate lips. Castiel hadn't realized how badly he'd always wanted to touch Dean this way until the moment he was actually able to.

Castiel continued to cup Dean's face a few seconds longer, wishing he could wordlessly convey all that he felt: the almost intolerable yearning to keep Dean safe and un-bruised, un-scarred. Knowing that he couldn't, he knelt in front of Dean instead. The other boy moved his hands from where they'd been resting loosely on his own spread knees, and wrapped his arms around Castiel.

Castiel breathed in slowly, carefully, looking up into Dean's face. What he expected to find, he didn't know.

He let out a long sigh and laid his head in the hollow of Dean's neck, feeling his skin slowly warm as they stayed like that, Castiel looking for all the world as if it was he who needed comfort instead of the one who held him.

In Dean's arms, Castiel did not feel suffocated or afraid.

He and Dean remained like that for an indeterminable amount of time, words unnecessary between them as they always seemed to end up being.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a bit short, I suppose it's more transitional. More coming as soon as I'm able =)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

On the mildly temperate Sunday immediately following Sam's ill-fated dinner, Castiel came down with the worst bout of the flu he'd ever had in his life.

He didn't immediately identify it for what it was as he made his way to the studio that afternoon to get some work done on his last project. Having already constructed the canvases before the weekend began, he started the underpainting of the first, small study. He noticed not long after that he was trembling slightly and abnormally hot beneath his t-shirt. Assuming that he was just sleep-deprived and the studio too warm, Castiel went out to the hallway to take several large gulps of water from the fountain next to the men's room. There he felt, if anything, that it was even hotter in the hall than inside the studio.

But Castiel continued on determinedly, anyway. He painted until he couldn't properly delineate the details of his root and branch still-life, so unsteady were his hands. Noticing that he was making progress too slowly to justify continuing and that he was incredibly tired, Castiel made his way to the small sitting area near the back of the large space and sat heavily in one of the soft armchairs. He disliked the feel of the aged upholstery sticking to his damp skin, but couldn't be bothered to do anything about it. Soon, he'd descended down into the folds of the sunken cushion and into a shallow unconsciousness.

Castiel was woken up by the touch of a cool hand on his forehead, how much later he wasn't sure, and he started and opened his eyes. He saw Dean looking down at him with concern, his nose bruised the way it hadn't yet been the night before.

“<i>I think you might be sick, Cas. You're burning up.”</i>

“It's hot in here,” Castiel mumbled, swiping self-consciously at the tacky feeling of dried sweat on his face.

“No, it's really not, Cas.” And sure enough, Dean, he saw, was still wearing his beat-up leather jacket inside.

“I'm tired,” he said, his voice frayed.

“I think you should go home, man. You've got some time to finish this last one. It's not even Thanksgiving break yet. Don't kill yourself over it,” Dean said.

Castiel blinked, surprised at himself for having forgotten that Thanksgiving was in only a few days. “This Thursday's Thanksgiving.”

Dean nodded, “Yeah...we have from Tuesday to Sunday off, remember? I figured you'd leave to go home.”
Castiel groaned and closed his eyes, his face and body flushing anew at the thought of yet another awkward holiday dinner in the Novak household that no one wanted to attend.

“I don't want to,” he said honestly.

Dean shrugged. “The way it's lookin' right this second, I don't think you should. If you're falling asleep after painting, you probably shouldn't be driving for longer than a few minutes.”

It ashamed Castiel how relieved he was to agree with Dean. “I guess I'll go back to my room.”

The thought of sleeping in his soft, cool bed was quickly becoming more and more attractive as he visualized it. Castiel nodded to himself and stood a little too abruptly. His vision grayed-out for a few seconds, and the trembling he'd experienced earlier resumed with twice the intensity. He felt Dean steady him with an arm around his shoulders.

“Let's get you home.”

Castiel wanted to say that he wouldn't require any help, but when Dean didn't move his arm as they walked out of the studio together, he decided not to voice the words. Even though sweat soon began to form under where Dean's arm was wrapped around him, Castiel silently drank in the weight of Dean's arm and the smell of leather and linseed oil.

Dean drove Castiel to his apartment and got out of the car to walk him to the door, despite Castiel's insistence that he'd be fine to scale the remaining few yards by himself.

“The flu's going around right now, Cas. That might be what this is. Shit's never fun.”

Castiel only nodded in agreement, feeling another unpleasant chill roll over his skin even as sweat beaded on the back of his neck beneath the collar of his jacket.

“I'll sleep some, Dean. Okay?” Castiel promised.

Dean only looked at him sternly before assenting and walking back to the Impala.

Castiel unlocked his apartment and, after shutting his bedroom door behind him, stripped himself of his jacket, shirt and jeans as quickly as he could. He clambered halfway under his sheets, leaving his feet and arms outside of them and wriggling around a little to get comfortable. Castiel sighed at the feeling of the cool pillow case against his hot face, and within a few minutes was pulled back down into the strange, burning sleep he'd slept in the studio.

***

Monday morning dawned on a Castiel who was even sicker than he'd been the day before, and who had a migraine as well as a nose so stuffed he couldn't breathe through it and a rapidly worsening cough. He let out a moan as light from his window slotted its way insistently into his eyes. Castiel fought a wave of nausea at the pain in his head. It had been almost a year since he'd had a migraine; it was then that he knew without a doubt he had definitely come down with something.

It was almost ten in the morning by the time Castiel managed to brave the short walk to his bathroom, wincing as every movement of his body made his head throb. Downing the last of his ibuprofen and praying it kicked in soon, Castiel grabbed an unopened box of tissues from his bathroom cabinet and shut his blinds before crawling back into bed. He lay on top of the covers as he shivered and sweated continually, listlessly using tissue after tissue to staunch his streaming nose.

He knew somewhere through the haze of general discomfort and heat that he needed to call Anna
and tell her he wasn't going to be able to make it home in time for Thanksgiving, but couldn't think
very far past the pain in his head. There was no way he was going to make it to his classes, let alone
call his sister and listen to her act as mediator in any family issues his absence might cause.

He wasn't aware of falling asleep, but he must have at some point, because the next thing he was
conscious of was someone shaking his shoulder. For the second time in as many days Castiel was
roused by one of his friends standing above him.

Charlie had a sympathetic look on her face and two bulging grocery bags in her arms. “Balthazar let
me in, I'm here to deliver supplies and tell you 'bye. I'm leaving to go home in less than an hour.”

“How'd you know I was sick?” Castiel's voice wasn't quite a croak, but it was halfway there.

“Dean.” Her tone implied that Castiel's question had an obvious answer. “Okay, hon, so I brought
chicken-noodle soup, Powerade, saltines, cough drops, tissues with aloe in 'em, throat-coat spray,
and a metric fuck-ton of caffeine-free tea.”

Castiel sat up in disbelieving astonishment and gratitude, wincing a little as his head throbbed
spitefully. “Charlie, you didn't have to do all that—"

“I wanted to, and Dean wrote half the list. I almost wish I wasn't leaving, seeing you now. I think
you might be pretty sick, Cas.” Charlie's blue-green eyes were soft as she looked at him.

“Do I look that bad?” A cough punctuated the end of his sentence.

“You also sound like death. Does your family know you'll need a ride if you're not better by at least
Wednesday?” Charlie asked.

Castiel kept his face impassive. “I'll call them.”

Charlie looked incredulous, but her cellphone went off with its characteristic Lord of the Rings tone
before she could question him. She cursed silently as she noticed the time upon silencing the call, and
put her phone back in her pocket. She blew Castiel two kisses (both of which he mimed catching and
hugging to his chest, which made her smile) and wished him a happy Thanksgiving. Charlie left the
cough drops, a bottle of Powerade, and the throat-coat spray on his dresser, taking the remaining
items with her as she exited his room. Before the front door closed behind her, Castiel heard Charlie
yell at him to call Dean if he needed anything and that she was putting his groceries in the kitchen
cabinet. Then there was silence in the apartment once again.

Castiel grabbed his phone from his nightstand and dialed Anna's number while he still felt fairly alert.
He started coughing as the phone rang, his body shaking with it, and he sprayed some of the throat-
coat liquid into his mouth while also reaching for one of the cough drops in the almost econo-sized
bag Charlie had gotten him. By the time he'd unwrapped the cough drop one-handed, Anna was
answering her phone.

“Hello?”

“Anna, I—”

“You sound sick, Castiel.”

“That's what I'm calling about. I am. I don't think I'll be coming home for Thanksgiving. Could you
tell M-Mother?” A cough forcing its way up from his diaphragm stuttered his speech near the end.

“Do you need me to come up?”
“I don't think I'm that sick, no. I'm just tired.”

“Okay. I miss you. Sleep as much as you need to.”

“I have been, today and yesterday.” Castiel's voice was irritated.

“There's nothing wrong with needing rest. I'll tell Mom tonight.”

“I miss you too, Anna.”

Not long after, Anna had to return to work, and Castiel fell asleep again only a half hour or so later, the bottle of Powerade half-empty and screwed shut beside him in his bed, cradled in the crook of one arm like a stuffed animal.

Around eight in the evening Castiel made himself put on a shirt and leave his room. He fixed himself one of the many cans of Campbell's soup now lining the pantry and brewed himself a strong cup of sleepy-time tea. His cough had only gotten worse since he'd seen Charlie, and he sucked on another cough drop as he waited for the microwave to time-out.

By the time Castiel carried the hot bowl of soup back to his bedroom he noticed he had missed a call, and received a new text after checking his phone for the time. Assuming it would be one of his family members, Castiel sucked in a breath and checked to see who the sender was. To his relief (and some other twisting feeling in his gut he didn't think on too closely), Castiel saw that both the call and text were from Dean.

*How are u? Better or worse? Wanted to see if you could talk, but g2g to work now.*

Castiel was touched for the second time that day by someone caring about him as much as Charlie and Dean seemed to. He smiled through his runny nose at the thought as he sipped his soup, and texted Dean back once to say, *Charlie left me supplies. I won't be running any marathons this week, but I think I'm fine. Have a good night at work.*

Castiel went to bed a few hours later, thinking of Dean in the back kitchen at Jimmy's, situated behind a grill as he flipped eggs, sausages and pancakes on its sooty surface. Dean would look happier there, he imagined, maybe even smiling as he cooked, almost like he had in Bobby's kitchen.

***

A few days later, Thanksgiving found Castiel in worse shape than he'd been on Monday, but better shape than he'd been on Wednesday and Tuesday. Even Balthazar (who it turned out was staying on campus for the entirety of the break) had seemed concerned at the flu's peak on Tuesday, asking Castiel through the door if he'd hacked up a lung yet. But, thankfully, Castiel's symptoms had begun to let up just as he'd been on the verge of caving and making a doctor's appointment.

Castiel was in and out of a fitful sleep most of the holiday itself, much the way he'd been most of the week, and dreamed strange dreams: in one, Gabriel had apparently somehow found him and was standing by the foot of his bed, smiling and saying words Castiel couldn't hear and in another, his father was calling his cellphone and leaving disdainful messages telling Castiel that he was sleeping too much and should be filling out spreadsheets instead, and yet another featured Dean, holding Castiel much the way he had before. But in the dreams Dean felt as though he was on fire, so hot enclosed around Castiel that all he could do was sweat and shudder in his arms.

Castiel was miserable, and whenever he felt he was awake enough to do so safely he brewed tea, ate coughdrops by the handful, and used ever more of the throat-coat spray.
He got more than one 'Happy Thanksgiving' text over the course of the day, one from Sam, one from Anna, one from Charlie, and his dinner consisted of a bowl of soup, a bottle of Powerade, some saltines, and more cough drops. He was grateful Charlie had gotten him so much of each.

He tried to relax as he lay in bed after, the dirty soup bowl and steadily growing pile of empty wrappers crowding the dresser next to him. He felt as though he was making the cough worse by some underlying tension in his body and couldn't shake the theory. Just as he was about to accidentally drift off into that dreadful, fevered sleep again Castiel heard a knock at the door and the sound of Balthazar opening it. The accompanying clink of ice cubes suggested his British roommate was having himself a drink in honor of the American festivities.

Then, “Castiel, Dean's here. Are you decent?”

Castiel scrambled out of bed, throwing on the shirt he'd taken off the night before and hoping his hair didn't look as slovenly as it felt beneath his hands.

“Yes, I'm okay,” he called out after he'd also pulled on some pajama pants over his boxers.

It felt as if only a second passed before Dean was letting himself into the bedroom, balancing two saran-wrapped plates stacked one on top of the other. His bruise was fading to a dull greyish-yellow, Castiel noticed. He self-consciously shifted on his bare feet as Dean looked at him with concern, knowing he probably looked as bad as he felt.

“Dean, what's—“

“I brought you some leftovers from our Thanksgiving. We had it at Bobby's a little while ago. Sam and Jess were there,” Dean said.

“Did you make dinner again?” Castiel asked.

“Not all of it, Bobby did the deviled eggs and the squash casserole, I did the broccoli casserole, the turkey and the mashed potatoes. Oh, ’n the stuffing, too.” Dean was blushing a little, Castiel was certain of it.

“Thank you, Dean. That's very kind of you. I've already eaten tonight, but I'll have it tomorrow.”

Dean smiled a small smile. “Didn't want you to have nothin' good on Thanksgiving.”

“You're here,” Castiel pointed out before he could think better of it. Dean looked at his feet for a moment, and moved his hand to scratch at the back of his neck the way he had at the IHOP.

“I wanted to check on you and drop this off. But I have to go to Jimmy's now.”

Castiel nodded, wishing as Dean stood there holding the plates that he could touch him the way he had only a few nights before, nestle his head in the warm crook of his neck and breathe in the scent he'd inhaled on the way to the car from the studio. But he didn't know how to initiate such a thing, or if contact like that would be welcome a second time. So he said nothing, standing beside his bed trying to contain the cough he could feel blooming in his lungs. But it wasn't something he was able to do successfully, and in a few seconds he was covering his mouth with a closed fist, attempting to keep as quiet as possible.

Dean moved forward and steadied him with one hand as Castiel grabbed onto the bedpost nearest him in support. The gesture reminded Castiel of what Dean had done in the studio a few days earlier.

“Damn, Cas. I don't think I've heard a cough like that since Sammy got sick when he was little. We
had to take him to the hospital,” Dean mused as he kept a firm grip on Castiel's arm.

“I'm fine, Dean. Charlie brought me cough drops,” Castiel said.

“Make sure you use 'em, okay, Cas?” Dean's voice was almost stern.

“Don't you have to go to work?”

Dean nodded a little belatedly and let go of his arm, telling Castiel to go to sleep and to let him put the plates in the fridge before exiting his room.

Castiel watched Dean leave and sat back down in his bed, shucking off his shirt immediately after he heard the front door shut, already uncomfortably hot in it. He could still feel the ghost of Dean's hand on him, and he splayed his fingers over that stretch of skin, just a little bit warmer than the rest of his arm.

***

Castiel wasn't sure what he was looking at, but he could just barely make out the two figures swathed in yellow and orange sheets below him in their warm-looking bed. He was gazing down upon them from some place above.

One of the people in the bed had dark gold hair, the other chocolate-brown, and it was then that Castiel realized he could feel what they did to one another on his own skin. When the lighter-haired pressed his lips to the dip between the darker-haired's clavicles, Castiel touched his fingers to the same place, exhaling sharply as phantom warmth stole onto the flesh there. When the darker-haired shifted his hips against those of the lighter-haired man's under the orange sheets, Castiel had to cover his mouth with one hand to stop the gasp that almost escaped.

The two of them were dazzling where they came together, their beauty reminding Castiel vaguely of The Kiss by Klimt, all bright colors and patterns surrounding rich skin tones and tousled locks of hair. Their room was nothing like Castiel's at home or even the one he slept in at school. No, this place existed elsewhere. Sunlight filtered onto them from a window Castiel could not see and did not care to, so enraptured was he by the way that the men below him moved and touched and kissed. Castiel wanted to see who they were, to feel for himself—

Castiel let out a pant as he sat up in his bed to the sound of his phone ringing. He was hard in his boxers and hot from more than his on-again, off-again fever.

He cast an annoyed glance at his phone and felt his stomach jump into his throat when he saw that it was his mother calling him at half-past six in the morning. He answered without preamble, holding the phone to his ear and closing his eyes as he said, “Mother?” His voice was little more than a half-there utterance, hoarse from coughing and mucus drainage.

“Castiel. I was calling to tell you I was concerned about you over Thanksgiving. ” Though Castiel wouldn't have read Naomi's tone as a concerned one, he admitted that it sounded softer than usual.

“I'm sorry I didn't call. I was sick and got a hold of Anna first,” he answered honestly.

“I would have liked to hear that from you, Castiel. Just because you aren't living at home anymore doesn't mean you can't call me. You're acting like—”

“Gabriel?” Castiel felt a brittle anger, dried-out and sad for reasons he couldn't place. What right had she to make him feel guilty if it was true she'd kept Gabriel's letters?
She faltered. “I—I—well, yes, Castiel. Like him. All this time with...nothing.” Her voice sounded off-kilter at her son's name on someone else's tongue, her words not as carefully chosen as they usually were. “He...it started that way with him, too. Do you think I want to lose you?”

There it was, the chance to ask Naomi if Anna was right, to ask about the letters and the silence. Even sick and a little absent-minded, Castiel was aware of the opening. He parted his lips, the question lying in wait there.

But he found he couldn't, not with the way her voice had wilted as she spoke the last words.

“No, I don't, Mother.” He exhaled the sentence, thin as vellum paper.

“Are you coming home for December break, Castiel?” There was the brisk tone he was so accustomed to from her, back with a vengeance now that any emotion had been successfully circumvented.

“For a little while, yes.”

Castiel knew he was a coward as he hung up a few minutes later, collapsing bonelessly onto his back again as he raked his hands over his face, oily from sleep and sweat. He looked out the window to his left and saw how unpleasant it looked outside. A weak cough shuddered through him, and he habitually grabbed another cough-drop from the now half-empty bag on the dresser. That Friday was day five of being ill, and though he was on the upswing at this point, it hardly mattered to his tattered throat and raw nose.

After chewing the drop to get to its menthol center, Castiel closed his eyes and tried to fall back to sleep, wanting to return to that warm, sunshine-painted space from which he'd been jostled.

Castiel shivered as the realization that he wanted to be touched like that insinuated itself into him. He wanted to press his lips to the warm skin stretched across someone else's muscles; he wanted to feel the pulse beneath their surface and the echoes of it rippling like water beneath his fingertips.

Castiel wanted in a way he couldn't remember having wanted before in his life of books and paint and solitude, and the feeling was heavy and dense, oil or gold or wet silk.

I want the dark-haired man to be me and the lighter-haired man to be—

Castiel curled in on himself instinctively, his arms wrapping around his middle as he turned his head and let out a half-stifled sob into his pillow.

Chapter End Notes

Cas's bout of sickness is heavily based on a monster of the flu I had last semester. It sucked!!! Ha. Thank you for reading, comments much appreciated! =)
It was late Saturday afternoon when Meg dropped by the apartment, her voice flippant as Castiel answered the door in a baggy shirt and sweatpants.

“Clarence! Guess who has a g of a new strain here and wants you to help her test some product?”

Castiel didn’t answer her immediately. He’d felt strange that day, the reason being that, though by and large he felt recovered from the flu, he was still tired and sluggish. Though, he also felt strange due to the off-putting occurrence of having woken up from another jarringly sensual dream that morning. It had taken place in the same nonexistent room with the citrus sheets, the same perpetual sunlight and the anonymous young men in its center.

Aside from a few texts asking him how he was feeling from Dean and Charlie, Castiel hadn't heard from anyone that day. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to smoke with Meg when he was feeling the way he was, but soon lost his chance to tell her as she walked past him and into the apartment. She flicked the sleeve of his oversized t-shirt with a painted nail.

“What's with the pajama party? You look like you're sick or something.”

“I am. Or, I was. I think I'm mostly better.”

“Good. I brought two pipes anyway, though. Gonna take me back to your room?” Meg asked.

“Oh, yes. Come on.” Castiel led the way.

Upon entering Castiel's room Meg wrinkled her nose at the sight of the half-empty bag of cough drops, dirty soup bowls, empty Powerade bottles, and a lone, discarded tissue box.

“You weren't kidding, huh? I've only been over once and I can already tell this isn't close to how you like your room to look.”

“I do need to tidy up—” Castiel began self-consciously.

“Nah, just sit down and smoke a little. Then you won't mind.” Meg swept one side of the bed clean with a dainty motion, sending wads of used tissues cascading to the floor. She situated herself on the new expanse of clean comforter after taking her shoes off, busying herself breaking up nugs of weed and loading a bowl into a small blue-and-red pipe.

Doing as she asked, Castiel sat beside her and said, “Shouldn't you load a separate one for me? I'm mostly better, but I don't know if I'm still contagious.”

Meg shook her head. “Getting sick isn't the worst thing that could happen to me.” The monotone way she delivered the statement bordered on unsettling.
Soon they were puffing at the pipe in turns, and Castiel could feel that familiar sensation filling him up to the marrow of his bones, the thick, mellow smoke suffusing him with a heady lightness. He'd missed smoking a little, he could admit that to himself. Already, he was unagitated the way he hadn't been since the last time he smoked with Meg.

Meg jabbed his shoulder. “I'm gonna guess you didn't go home for Thanksgiving?”

Castiel shook his head, tapping the pipe. “This is done.”

Meg took the pipe from him as he passed it over, dumping the ash into one of the many available tissues surrounding them.

“Did you? Go home for the break, I mean?” Castiel asked politely.

“No.”

“Does your family live here, then?”

Meg looked at him, and Castiel got the feeling that she was debating whether to answer or not.

Then, “No, they don't.” She turned away from Castiel and started to load a fresh bowl. He didn't ask any more questions.

Two bowls later, Castiel checked his phone and saw that it was almost five in the evening. “I think I'll do schoolwork tonight, considering I'm finally feeling up to it again. I've had so much idle time this week.”

Meg snorted at him, wrapping an arm around Castiel as she laughed at him. Castiel was too stoned to feel that bothered by the close contact. “You're adorable, Clarence. C'mon, you were sick. And from the looks of it, you were sick bad. You'll make it up this week.”

Castiel thought for a moment, “I haven't been sick like that in a while. I used to get sick a lot.” He'd honestly been surprised when neither his mother nor Anna had brought up the fact when talking to him on the phone.

“Called it. You definitely come off like one of those kids who lived with a box of tissues in their backpack at all times.”

Castiel's eyes narrowed. “It's just been a while, I almost thought I wouldn't get sick like that again.”

“Did you just...grow out of it?” Meg asked.

“I mostly got better when I started going to community college.” Castiel didn't add that it was also around that same time his father had died.

Meg stuck her tongue out at him for no reason, and Castiel laughed before he could stop himself. Yes, he was definitely stoned.

“You don't have to leave right now if you don't want to,” Castiel said as Meg made to get up. He wouldn't have minded sitting next to her a while longer; he supposed he'd gotten used to her.

Meg shook her head and gathered her things, bending over in Castiel's direct line of sight to retrieve her bag from the floor next to his dresser. As her shirt rode up Castiel noticed, for the first time, a somewhat large block of ornate and lilting text tattooed onto the pale skin of Meg's lower back. 'They're gonna eat me alive'.
Castiel didn't ask Meg about the tattoo like he hadn't asked her about her family, and she left soon after with one of the unreadable smiles he was becoming accustomed to.

“You know how to get at me if you get bored later. Bye, Clarence.”

***

Castiel spent the majority of his Saturday night slowly easing down from his substantial high and working in the studio on his final project.

In a moment of inspiration, he'd changed the concept of the project and, instead of doing several disconnected studies of the same root-and-branch still-life, had decided to make a puzzle of sorts, each small canvas being a part of one, overall view of the objects. To add visual interest he was considering doing each study with different colors emphasized.

Castiel liked painting while high, he discovered. Sitting on his chair in front of the stained old quasi-industrial metal easel, the moving paintbrush felt like an extension of his hand. He enjoyed the slow slide of his limbs as he worked, and the smell of medium and paint wasn't cloying the way it usually was when he was sober, but muted and even pleasant.

After he'd put in almost five solid hours of work Castiel straightened his half of the cubby and left, entirely sober and satisfied with what he'd accomplished.

When he reached the apartment he cleaned his room properly, truly appalled by the state it had lapsed into upon returning and relieved to rid the space of all traces of sickness. After the myriad tissues and empty containers had been disposed of and every surface wiped down, Castiel changed into his pajamas and settled himself in bed. He was thankful his body was running at its normal temperature again as he pulled the comforter over his legs while he worked at his computer.

He got a good start on one of his two final essays, clacking out a page and a half before noticing that his eyes were heavy and it was almost two in the morning.

Before he put his laptop away and went to bed, Castiel chanced a quick look at his Facebook profile. He rarely had any notifications considering he didn't post status updates or upload new pictures, and aside from cautiously searching Gabriel's name in different combinations whenever he logged on (G. Novak, Gabe Novak, Gabriel Paul Novak—none had turned up any profiles with Gabriel's picture gracing it), Castiel didn't do much of anything on the site.

But upon logging in that night he saw that he had two notifications waiting for him, and read them with curiosity.

One informed him that Dean Winchester had accepted his friend request, and the other that Dean had liked his profile picture—the one of Castiel and Charlie in his room. Castiel clicked on Dean's profile to see what he hadn't been able to before he'd been friended. There wasn't much in the way of new material to look at except for a few photos Dean had been tagged in and a couple of wall posts by Lisa Braeden.

Castiel noticed that Lisa's profile picture was of her standing before one of her abstract works, her nose dotted with paint and her hair in a messy top-knot. It was perfectly indie, and she looked beautiful, a little half-smile quirking her lips while in the background Harvelle laughed at whatever was being said at the time of the picture. The things she posted on Dean's wall were friendly: *Missed you in class today; I dropped the damn silicoil today and thought of you in freshman year; Happy Birthday, Dean, you deserve a good one.*
Castiel checked the date of the last post: January 24th. He had the distinct feeling Dean wouldn't tell him when his birthday was or make an occasion out of it, and wanted to at least wish him a happy birthday when it arrived.

He made himself exit out of the site and close his laptop after that, disappointed both that he and Anna hadn't yet been able to locate Gabriel using Facebook and that Lisa's picture was as perfect as her hair and her figure.

***

Sunday was a productive day for Castiel. He got a few more pages done of the paper he'd started, an intro done of the other essay that needed writing, and the second study of his project completed. It was also on Sunday that Charlie called him to say she'd be arriving back on campus late that evening, which made Castiel smile. He'd missed seeing her on a regular basis.

Castiel was grateful to be feeling back to normal; the amount of perfectly good work-time he'd missed while ill had been a source of guilt for him. Admittedly, in his zeal to catch up before the swiftly-approaching last week of class, he may have overdone it a little. He'd worked ceaselessly the whole day while permitting himself only a short break. But in Castiel's estimation that was what caffeine was for, and he was downing his second Monster as he walked from the studio back to his apartment at almost ten o'clock that night. He knew he hadn't managed to rinse all of the paint from his fingers and that he was leaving colored, smudged prints on the can.

He was already mentally listing what all he needed to get done once he was back in front of his computer when his cellphone began to ring in his pocket. Finishing the last gulp of the energy drink, Castiel threw it into a nearby trashcan to the left of the sidewalk and checked his phone before answering. Upon seeing that it was Dean calling, Castiel picked up without hesitation.

“Dean?”

“Cas? Listen, man, are you still sick? If you're still not feeling good I'll work something else out, but I'm only gonna keep talking if you're even okay—”

Castiel cut him off. “I'm not sick anymore, Dean. What is it?”

“My dad took the car to the Road House and I, uh, got a phone call from 'em a few minutes ago. I need to get him. Can you drive me there? That's all you have to do, just drop me off so I can get him and the car.”

“I can. Are you at your house?” Castiel asked.

“Yeah. Thanks, Cas. Really.”

“I'll be over soon.”

Castiel's essays were temporarily moved to the back burner as he quickened his pace and reached his apartment quickly, grabbing his keys from his nightstand. Bracing himself against the wind chill that had picked up in the past few hours, Castiel was thankful when he was soon warming up inside his car and driving to Dean's house.

The drive was short, and Dean was already waiting outside on the porch, his hands jammed into his pockets and his eyes downcast. He was wearing his rust and oil-stained wife-beater underneath his jacket that Castiel recognized as the shirt he wore to work at Singer Salvage. Dean greeted him briefly and let himself into the car, rubbing his face with his hands and exhaling for a long time as
they set off. Having never been to the Road House, Castiel had to ask Dean for directions.

The Road House, it turned out, was a classic rock-themed juke joint and bar nearly ten minutes away from Dean's house. One of the first things they saw upon pulling into its front lot was the Impala, parked on the side. When they found a place to park and Castiel turned the car off, Dean started to hurriedly extricate himself from the passenger seat, his eyes fixed on the front door of the establishment. But Castiel reached out and grasped Dean's wrist.

“Dean, let me go inside with you.”

Dean shook his head. “'s fine, Cas. You got me here, that's all I need. Dad's inside.”

Castiel kept his hand on Dean's wrist. “I'd like to go inside with you, Dean. I would feel better.”

Dean looked at him for a few seconds, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of Castiel accompanying him into the Road House. But Castiel didn't capitulate; if Dean's father was drunk, which Castiel was fairly certain was the case, he didn't want Dean interacting with him alone more than he had to.

Finally Dean sighed and consented, not meeting Castiel's eyes.

They got out of the car in unison, walking into the bar together.

Considering it was late on a Sunday night, there were a surprising amount of people in the Road House. Half a dozen patrons sat at the bar, and four or five tables were currently seated beyond that. One of the first things Castiel noticed was John Winchester, sitting up at the bar on a red pleather-upholstered stool. He was conversing loudly with the bartender, who was a very pretty girl with wavy blonde hair and a delicate, heart-shaped face. But nothing about her stance bespoke frailty, and she was looking at John warily, her arms crossed over her compact torso and her lips a thin line. As he and Dean closed in on the two of them, Castiel understood that this was because John was trying to get her to give him back the keys to the Impala, which were hanging from a hook on the wall behind her.

“C'mon, Jo. I'm fine. Only had a few.”

Jo shook her head, then saw Dean and Castiel approaching the bar. “Nah-ah, Mr. Winchester. Here comes Dean. Just pay your tab and scoot. I'll give him the keys.”

At the sound of his son's name John turned around quickly, his expression a cross between guilt and annoyance. It was enough to make Castiel stop where he stood, but Dean continued to advance, one of his hands cautiously extended. When he spoke to his father, his voice was almost soft.

“Yeah, Dad. It's gettin' kinda late.”

John looked at Dean, and then at Castiel behind him.

“What's he doin' here?” His voice was decidedly slurred, more than it had been the first time Castiel met him.

“He had to drive me, Dad,” Dean explained.

“Just ask him to take you back. I can get home, 's not far,” John said.

“Dad, c'mon.” Dean's voice was hard for Castiel to listen to.

“I guess I'm a little tired,” John slowly conceded. His compliance reminded Castiel disturbingly of
Gilda at the party and her drunken acquiescence to Benny's suggestion.

Castiel couldn't see Dean's face, but he could tell from his tone that he was likely smiling. “I am, too, Pops. Let me just get this and we'll go home.”

Dean stepped forward to the bar and tugged his wallet out of his back pocket, dropping a few crumpled bills onto the counter and pulling out a cracked debit card to cover the rest. Beside him, John was standing up and stretching a little clumsily. Who he thought he was fooling, Castiel wasn't sure, but he made no comment. He just waited behind them, seeing the way Jo gave Dean a pitying look and gently took his hand between hers for a moment as she handed his card back to him. Dean shook off her touch like one would a fly and turned around. He clasped his father's elbow and steered him towards the door after casting Castiel a furtive look.

Knowing he wouldn't feel comfortable without knowing they made it home safely, Castiel followed them out the door after catching Jo looking at him curiously. Making sure he didn't lose them, he started his car once outside and tailed the Impala back to Dean and John's house. He wasn't sure whether Dean knew he was following them or not, but soon found it didn't matter once they both reached the house.

Castiel parked beside the house across the street and got out, catching site of Dean and John outside the front door. John didn't look particularly observant, absorbed in his and Dean's conversation, which Castiel caught the tail-end of as he walked up the driveway towards them.

“...need to stop being so picky with girls. Jo's nice. Doesn't her mom teach at your school?” John sounded, if anything, even more intoxicated than he had in the Road House.

“Dad—”

“Sam's got someone.”

“Dad, let's get you inside, it's cold.”

Dean obviously saw Castiel, but said nothing to him as he led an irritated-looking John into the house. Castiel was fairly certain Dean would come back out and tell him goodnight after getting John settled, and he was right. Almost ten minutes later Dean reappeared, coming outside to stand beside Castiel on the porch.

Unsure of what to say, Castiel waited for Dean to speak first. It took a few minutes, but eventually he did, his words almost lost in the chill dark.

“He's not always like that.”

“Drinking?” Castiel asked.

“Drunk, I guess. He wasn't like that at all before Mom died.” Dean sounded bitter. “I must've...fallen asleep after I got off work at Bobby's, left the keys on the table. Dumb of me.”

“He shouldn't have taken the car if he was going to drive it to a bar and then get drunk,” Castiel said matter-of-factly.

Dean grimaced and then looked away from Castiel, staring into one of the windows behind them.

“If you want to stay with me tonight, I'm not sick anymore, Dean,” Castiel said quietly.

“I—I better not tonight, Cas.” Dean wasn't looking at him at all. His eyes remained fixed on the
window, as if instead of panes of glass he was seeing his father, passed out somewhere inside.

Castiel nodded briskly, feeling as though his chest was sunken in by an invisible weight.

“I should get going, then. I'll see you in class tomorrow.” Castiel began to walk back to his car, planning on heading home and burying himself in his essays. Before he could get more than a few steps away, however, he stopped when he heard Dean say his name.

“Cas.”

He turned back to see that Dean looked dejected, his eyes not on the window any longer but meeting Castiel's so directly that it felt as though his very thoughts stuttered in the wake of that bottle-green. But Dean said nothing more, he only reached out a hand toward Castiel's face unexpectedly. His touch was so light Castiel knew Dean's fingertips must be barely grazing his skin. He closed his eyes without meaning to, wondering how it was that he felt the pinpricks of warmth so acutely in the noisy cold surrounding them. For a moment, Castiel was inside the room adorned with yellow and orange sheets, the familiar scene painted on the insides of his eyelids.

But those sweet and happy thoughts were betrayed by the wind, stronger and colder as it put out their brief light like a weak flame.

Castiel shivered in disappointment. It was a movement so slight it could've been mistaken for a response to the cold.

“Dean,” he whispered.

Dean pulled his hand away at his name, and Castiel opened his eyes.

"I'll see you soon,” Castiel said.

When Castiel was back in his apartment ten minutes later he called Charlie, who was back on campus and soon unpacking with him on speakerphone. He tried to concentrate on what she was saying.

“...I swear, it's like one step forward and two steps back with him—”

“What?”


“Oh, no. Please, continue.”

Castiel covered his mouth with one hand as he listened to her chatter brightly about what she'd done over her break. He curled up in his bed and breathed as deeply as he could behind his palm, trying his best to remember that his body was whole and his thoughts were ones that everyone else in the world had had before.

Chapter End Notes
If it seems like things are getting a little rough for the boys, that's because they are.
In their painting seminar on Monday, to the surprise of no one, Dean was absent.

Though Castiel disliked admitting it, he was almost relieved. He sat in their empty work area and stared at the unfinished study propped up on his easel for a few, unproductive minutes. Beside him, Dean's painting, the beginnings a large abstraction of a head done in mixed acrylic, ink, oil and gesso, seemed to leer at him.

When Charlie tapped him on the shoulder from behind he jumped, and she frowned at him. “You alright?”

“I'm fine, Charlie. I just couldn't get to sleep until late.”

“You and Dean both,” Charlie said with a roll of her eyes.

Castiel looked down at his hands. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Got a missed call from him at, like, 3am. Tried calling back this morning, but, nada. He's probably sleeping now. You heard from him today?”

Castiel shook his head. Charlie took Dean's empty seat and propped her tennis shoes up on the corner of the table not smeared with paint and medium.

“But anyway, I'm glad you're feeling better, Cas. Do you still have cough drops leftover?” This she asked with a smirk, and Castiel laughed and crossed his arms.

“Only enough to last me the rest of my life.”

“Did you have enough soup, juice, tea?”

“I did. Thank you, Charlie. If you hadn't have brought what you did I'm not sure what I would have done. I doubt Balthazar would've been thrilled if he'd had to take me to the store.” Castiel winced at the thought of walking around a grocery store in the state he'd been in.

Charlie nodded seriously. “Anytime.”

Not long after that Charlie returned to her cubby and resumed working on her piece, an impossibly-sized reconceptualization of Rosie the Riveter done in the style of Willem de Kooning.

Castiel was silently distracted for the remainder of the class.

***

Castiel got a call from Anna late Tuesday evening, answering his phone as he sat in front of his computer, halfway through one of his essays.
“Anna?”

“Castiel. I wanted to say hello and ask how you were doing.”

“I’m fine, not sick anymore. How are you? How’s Luke?”

Anna exhaled loudly. “Luke is...well, Mother visits him every couple days and she says he won’t go to the therapy sessions at the facility. I don’t think I’m surprised, though. And I’m fine. I’ll just be happy when we wrap up some of the research that's been going on the past few weeks. I don't leave the office until almost one in the morning half the time.”

“Anna,” Castiel began to chide without heeding the fact that he also often worked harder than he should.

But Anna changed the subject before he could get much farther. “I haven't had any luck looking for Gabe. I called the school and they told me they couldn't give me any information about their students, not that I was really expecting them to. And Hester's back home, now. Her mother died last week, so I don't think I can ask anything of her right now.”

Castiel sighed. “Maybe we could...hire someone to find him?”

“I don't know, little brother.”

Castiel didn't respond to his sister, lost in thought.

“Castiel? You there? You seem distracted.”

Castiel started. “Sorry. I'm here, Anna.”

“Anyway, I'm not sure where else to look besides going to the school ourselves, and I don't know about you but I don't have any vacation days until next year...Oh! I have to go, Castiel. I have a dinner meeting. Bye.”

Castiel hung up and sat back in his desk chair, staring blindly at the words on the white Word document on the screen of his laptop. He missed Gabriel more every day that went by with the knowledge that he might not have abandoned them of his own volition. It saddened him that they hadn't made any progress in finding and contacting him.

He checked his phone a minute or two later, not realizing until after he did that he was looking for a text from Dean.

Absentmindedly twisting his the hem of his t-shirt with his free hand, Castiel came to terms with the fact that he felt uneasy. Dean hadn't contacted Castiel since he'd left him alone with a very drunk John on Sunday night. While he knew Dean was likely perfectly fine and had simply slept through their class on Monday, the radio silence was disconcerting. They'd gotten to a point in their friendship where they texted each other almost as often as Castiel and Charlie did.

Despite this, Castiel was reluctant to contact Dean first or to try and insinuate himself into his life where he may not be wanted. Every time he tried to convince himself to stop being ridiculous and text his friend, the thought of Dean, looking away from him to his father's house with his bottom lip between his teeth and his stance closed-off, flashed through Castiel's head and he couldn't bring himself to.

Castiel shut his phone off with a sigh of frustration and set it in his desk drawer, getting up to take a shower.
When Dean was absent from class on Wednesday and neither Castiel nor Charlie had received so much as a text from him by Thursday morning, the two of them drove to Bobby's.

It wasn't yet five o'clock when they arrived at Singer Salvage, and they asked the old man if he'd heard anything from either Dean or John, or if Sam had mentioned talking to his brother. Bobby hadn't, and it was then that Castiel and Charlie decided to make the journey to John's house and make sure nothing was seriously wrong.

When Castiel asked Bobby if he thought they should call Sam and ask if he wanted to be taken out of school to go with them to the house, Bobby shook his head and said that Sam had been working himself into the ground on the second part of his physics project, and that Dean wouldn't want him disturbed unless there was a reason.

"Sides, Sam doesn't like goin' there," he finished.

Reluctantly agreeing, Castiel and Charlie left Singer Salvage as Bobby became preoccupied with a walk-in seller, and they clambered into Charlie's car to begin the drive to Dean's.

The short way there Castiel felt as though his skin was crawling, and he wrapped his arms around himself. Upon pulling up to the house they saw that the Impala wasn't parked outside, and Castiel's stomach lurched.

Before they got out of the car, Charlie reached a hand over Castiel to open the glove compartment and fish around inside it for a moment or two before re-emerging with a multi-purpose pocketknife. She slid it into the front of her jacket, her eyes devoid of their usual lightheartedness.

They made their way as quickly as possible to the dated front door, which they found was unlocked. The living room and kitchen were very dirty. Empty beer and liquor bottles were littered here and there, half-crumpled fast food cartons decorated the surfaces of the counters, dirty dishes were piled haphazardly in the old sink. Neither John nor Dean was anywhere to be seen, and the house was eerily quiet. Castiel felt uncomfortable being in their house without permission.

Charlie broke the thickness of the silence and called out for Dean, her voice somewhat timid for fear of John hearing if he happened to be somewhere inside. She kept her hand in her pocket, undoubtedly resting it upon the handle of the knife.

The badly-neglected wood-paneled walls of the hall were bejeweled with framed photographs hanging here and there, and Castiel found himself taking them in as he passed them by. They were mostly of Sam and Dean as very young children, and who he now recognized as their mother from Dean's painting. The age progression seemed to stop abruptly. In one photo, Dean (toddler-aged) was sitting in Mrs. Winchester's lap, her long blonde hair brushing Dean's pink, soft baby cheeks as she tickled him and bent down to brush her lips over his. In another, Dean was holding an infant Sam protectively in his little lap, and behind him John smiled for the camera and rested one large hand on his oldest son's shoulder. After these there were mostly solo portraits of their mother, in front of the stove or outside with her hair streaming in the wind or in a rocking chair with her pregnant belly cupped in her hands. Castiel could only look at them for so long, as on-edge as he was, and Charlie gasped next to him when they reached the second room to the left.

Dean was there, sprawled across his disheveled bedcovers and breathing shallowly enough that they
could hear him a yard or two away. He was shirtless, wearing only a worn pair of sweatpants slung low on his hips and his pendant. On the plane of one shoulder stretched an ugly, vivid bruise, its center almost black. But that wasn't the only mark Dean was sporting: an angry cut scored one of his cheekbones, and there sprouted another large bruise on the underside of his ribs on the same side, and the skin there was distended. The room smelled of vomit, and upon seeing a small trashcan parked not far from the bed, Castiel guessed it to be the source.

“Dean!” Castiel and Charlie said in unison as they rushed to his side. Upon reaching him, Castiel was horrified to notice that Dean's collarbone looked broken; a protuberance jutted up beneath the skin where the center of the bruise was.

Dean stirred at the sound of his name and looked at the two of them hovering above him, his eyes unfocused.

“Guys? What're y' doin' here?” he asked, his voice sleepy and his words half-formed.

“Dean, what happened?” Charlie asked, pressing a hand to Dean's face and forcing him to stay horizontal in his bed, which he clearly didn't want to do. Dean reached up to touch his own collarbone, wincing noticeably as his fingers made contact.

“Where's your father?” Castiel asked.

“He's been in and out, 'a think. I, uh...hurt somethin' after work Monday.”

“Have you been throwing up, Dean?” Castiel asked, gesturing to the trashcan, which was indeed filled with vomit.

“A little,” Dean answered noncommittally.

“Dean, you might be really hurt,” Charlie said, her voice tight with frustration. She gently pressed a hand to Dean's purpled and swollen side, at which he abruptly heaved himself up under the touch, groaning piteously and clutching at the bruise, his fingers over hers.

Castiel saw it coming a second before Dean did, and he grabbed the trashcan and held it under Dean's face as he shuddered, hard, then threw up.

“Don't feel so hot,” Dean mumbled after he'd wiped his wet, chapped mouth with the back of his hand.

“Dean, we need to take you to the hospital,” Castiel said as he set the trashcan back down on the floor.

“Can't afford it right now,” Dean slurred petulantly. The dark circles under his eyes caught the weak daylight filtering in through his window.

“Do you know where John is?” Charlie asked him again as she moved away from them to dig for a shirt in one of Dean's open dresser drawers.

Dean carefully lay back down again, touching his shoulder gingerly. “Think he went out this morning.”

“Dean, it's almost Thursday night.”

Charlie came back to stand by the side of his bed with a nondescript, plain black t-shirt in her hands, reaching under Dean to get him to sit up so she could help him slip it on.
Dean gasped loudly in pain when he had to move his torso to put the shirt on, undoubtedly disturbing his injured clavicle and side in the process. It was a noise Castiel had never heard him make before, and one neither of them dared comment on.

With Castiel on one side of him and Charlie on the other, they supported Dean as they walked him out to the car. Dean seemed annoyed by this, but also leaned heavily on them and didn't try to detach himself. Charlie got in the driver's seat and told Castiel to sit with Dean in the back, which he did without resistance.

Dean was seated so that his injured side was opposite Castiel, and when Charlie set off for the local hospital the first thing Dean did was lay his head on Castiel's shoulder and close his eyes.

Without thinking, Castiel looped his arm around his friend and rested his head on Dean's. He felt very warm pressed up against his side, almost a little too warm, and even though he smelled like dirt, sweat and bile Castiel could still barely make out the mellow, softly briny scent of Dean's skin beneath it all.

Up front Castiel heard Charlie call Bobby, telling them where they were headed and what she thought might be wrong with Dean.

When they got to the hospital Castiel was for once incredibly relieved to be in a small town since there were very few people in the emergency room waiting area. After only about a twenty minute wait Dean was helped by one of the nurses into a room down the first hallway in the building. Castiel and Charlie were able to follow him after they told the nurse that none of his family had arrived yet and that it was unknown how long he'd been hurt.

When Dean was stretched-out on an examination cot, Charlie insisted on holding his hand with an almost white-knuckle grip.

The nurse poked, prodded, and eventually confirmed that Dean's collarbone was indeed either broken or fractured, and that he was likely bleeding internally from a ruptured spleen. He would need an x-ray and MRI to get a better look at both injuries and discuss surgical options. The nurse commented with wonder how surprised she was that he hadn't gone into shock or suffered greater blood loss from the rupture, and told Dean he was very lucky.

She was kind, with a genuine smile and brown hair cropped close to her skull. She introduced herself as Nurse Jody, and gave Dean a fluid IV and temporary sling to put his injured arm in to limit mobility until they better understood how bad the break was.

Dean, though clearly still disoriented, smiled weakly at Jody and joked about his own clumsiness when she inquired how he'd attained his wounds. Though they could tell Jody wasn't convinced, she didn't contradict him.

When Jody left them to retrieve something from a different part of the facility there was utter silence in the room. Castiel looked mutely at Dean, and Charlie continued to massage his hand.

Then, “Dean...you need to live somewhere else.”

Dean's eyes snapped over to Charlie, who was looking at him straight in the face, unabashed in the wake of what she'd said.

Dean's smile faded rapidly, and he pulled his hand out from under Charlie's. “It's fine, Charlie. Dad's disability pays the utilities and I have my own room.”

“You know exactly what I'm talking about, Dean,” Charlie said sharply.
“I fell, Charlie. Just got bad ’cause I couldn’t get help. Hell, we should be worried about Baby, not me. Speakin’ of, Cas, can you ask Sam to—”

“I don’t believe you fell, Dean. This is just like your arm—”

“Charlie, stop talking.” Dean’s voice was low and angry suddenly, his casual tone gone.

Castiel was surprised when Charlie did just that, her mouth snapping shut as she got up from the plastic chair in which she’d been seated by the cot and removed herself from the room. She said hello to Bobby on her way out, who was entering the room, harried-looking with his baseball cap clutched in one hand.

“Boy—” Bobby began as he looked at Dean, dirty against the white of the paper beneath him, but Jody came back in not long after. She introduced herself to Bobby with another pretty smile.

“What happened, Dean?” Bobby asked, his hands outstretched towards Dean but not touching him.

Dean said nothing, his eyes flicking to Jody and then to Castiel, his jaw set. Bobby looked to Castiel, then, and Castiel heard himself say as if underwater, “Dean fell.”

The look Bobby gave him was not one of surprise.

The x-ray and MRI took another hour or two more of waiting around in the proper room they’d moved Dean into after his examination. In that time Bobby called Sam, informed him what was going on, and left to pick him up and bring him over. When Sam arrived he looked worried and pale and small, as if he’d shrunk a few inches since Castiel had last seen him. When he saw Dean lying in the bed with the sling and the fluid IV he rushed over to him, kneeling beside the bed and asking him question after question. Why hadn’t he called Sam from John’s, was he in pain, where was John, how long had he been hurt?

Dean somehow managed to answer almost every one with another question, asking Sam about his project, about Jess, joking about how shittily his phone held a charge and how he’d been born under a bad sign.

“This is the worst you’ve ever been hurt, Dean,” Sam said.

It all made Castiel unspeakably upset, and he had to let himself out of the room for a few minutes to wait with Charlie where she sat in the waiting room. She was clearly still angry, and flipping through a magazine with more force than necessary. “I swear to God, I want to burn that fucking house down.”

Castiel flinched, his thoughts shifting to what Dean had told him about his childhood, and Charlie stopped turning the glossy pages, unconsciously holding one motionlessly between her fingers as she had the same thought process. Castiel put his arm around her as she set the magazine down, and soon they went back into the room with the others.

When the tests were finally performed Dean was told that his collarbone was fractured, not cleanly broken, and that all he could do was let it heal and take it easy for a month or so, and that his spleen required immediate removal. He went into surgery around midnight after the staff phoned a surgeon and prepped an operating room.

While Charlie fell asleep in one of the hard, red plastic chairs of the OR lobby, Castiel, Bobby and Sam nervously read, checked their email on their phones, and tapped their feet on the shining, empty
floor, casting each other uncomfortable glances.

Sam called his father's cellphone more than once to no avail.

Bobby told Charlie and Castiel throughout the few hours Dean was in surgery that they could go home and get some rest if they wanted to. But they didn't take him up on it, and after the second time he didn't suggest it again.

Charlie only drove Castiel and herself back to campus once Dean had been rolled, still unconscious, into his room again, spleen-less and bandaged and white under a blue felt blanket. The surgeon had told the four of them with a tired smile that Dean had been lucky enough to have been a candidate for laproscopic surgery, and as a result his scarring and recovery time would be minimal.

Bobby and Sam fretted that they'd have to return to school and work in a few hours (considering it was almost four in the morning) and wouldn't be able to return to the hospital until later that evening. To ease their worries Castiel and Charlie promised to spend as much time with him as possible until they made it on Friday.

Upon arriving back on campus Castiel slept a few restless hours, waking continually to find he couldn't breathe in the uneasy twilight of the early morning. He was relieved when it was time for him and Charlie to reconvene at 10 am to return to the hospital, both of them skipping their last classes of the semester to do so.

Dean was very groggy when they settled themselves in his room with their textbooks and cups of hospital coffee that morning, and for most of the first day he slept off and on. When Bobby and Sam got there later in the evening Dean asked Bobby if he'd seen John, and to his relief he had, though the way that Bobby'd said yes had a decidedly grim air to it. Dean smiled sleepily all the same when Bobby placed the keys to the Impala beside him on the faux-wood nightstand.

Nurse Jody checked in on them several times throughout the day, adjusting Dean's IV drips and making sure he wasn't experiencing any serious discomfort. She explained to them that the reason he was so out of it was because he was on strong pain medication and would continue to be for the first few days or so after the surgery. Jody never said so, but Castiel got the impression that the reason they'd been allowed to stay with Dean the entire day irrespective of visiting hours was because she was allowing it, and they were all as nice to her as they could be.

Sam stayed as close to Dean as he could get while he and Bobby were there, sitting on his bed next to him, nervously taking his hand, adjusting and readjusting his covers. At one point Bobby suggested they all take a break and let the brothers have a moment together, to which Castiel and Charlie easily agreed.

As they sat in the waiting room a hallway over little was said, and Bobby drank his coffee and read a national hunting magazine. By the time they all returned to Dean's room, the boys' conversation was over, and while Sam looked as though he might be on the verge of tears, Dean looked practically indifferent, his eyes fixed on the IV pumping clear fluid into the bruised vein on the back of his hand.

Sam and Bobby both left a few minutes after that, and Castiel and Charlie remained a couple hours later and then left, themselves.

Charlie excused herself to the restroom before they began to head back to campus, and Castiel stood beside Dean's bed, watching him sleep his medication-induced slumber. Dean didn't look peaceful the way he usually did in the stolen hours of sleep he took on Castiel's couch. Now, his face was tense and gray under the cold fluorescent light. Castiel wanted to touch him the way he had when he'd cleaned the blood from his face, or to lay a hand on his chest as gently as he could and ask him
for forgiveness for lying to Bobby.

Before Charlie came back, Dean, as though feeling Castiel's gaze, stirred and opened his eyes.

“I'm okay, right? I'm okay, Cas, right?” His voice was hoarse and his face frightened, which startled Castiel so badly that he didn't immediately answer.

“I'm fine, Cas? I'm gonna be okay?” Dean's voice was growing more distressed, and Castiel wondered if his friend was somehow still asleep, or if perhaps it was simply the painkillers affecting him.

“You're fine, Dean. The surgery was fine and you're okay. Charlie and I will be with you as much as we can until you're back home,” Castiel said, his voice low.

Dean's eyes widened. “Don't go.” He reached out an unsteady hand, the palm upturned. Castiel didn't hesitate to move forward and take it, linking their fingers together before pressing their clasped hands to the center of his chest.

“We can't stay the night here, Dean. We'll be back in the morning. I promise.”

***

That weekend was spent in the hospital with Dean during the day, with the later hours of the night dedicated to catching up on their projects in the painting studio. It wasn't ideal, and they felt as though they were running mostly on hopes, dreams and very strong coffee at points. But Charlie and Castiel made it work. Sam and Bobby visited each day as well, and while seeing Sam seemed mostly to cheer Dean up, there were moments of tension between the two of them that they tried to play off.

Dean grew more alert and mobile fairly quickly, informing them that he hoped to be back at work as soon as possible instead of the six weeks the doctor had prescribed. It was easy enough to see that he felt restless confined to his bed, and that even his damaged collarbone didn't seem to be something he considered incredibly serious.

Dean never had another moment like the one he'd had on Friday night, one where his face was so open that it hurt Castiel to look at, one where he wanted to be comforted. Castiel wasn't sure if Dean had been cognizant enough to have a memory of the event, and he never asked. He simply stowed away Dean's words and the warm press of his hand in his memory and left them there, alongside the eternal sunlight of a dream better left unexamined.

On Monday morning, the day final exams began campus-wide, Dean was discharged. Nurse Jody helped him into a wheelchair, which all present could tell he was uncomfortable with, and wheeled him out to where Charlie had the car waiting by the back exit of the hospital. She gave him a careful hug goodbye as he got out of the chair, and told him to tell Bobby hello for her.

They quietly got into Charlie's car, and it was when they were halfway back to campus that Dean said to her, “Charlie, you're goin' the wrong way. Take me back to my house.”

“You should stay with us until you're just a little better, Dean,” Charlie said firmly. Castiel noticed her hands tighten on the steering wheel.

“Dean's response was instantaneous. “The hell I am. Charlie, take me home.”

“No. You're in my car, and you will stay with me or Castiel...until at least finals are over?” She lost some conviction near the end, and Castiel added, “Dean, she's probably right. You'll just have to drive back and forth anyway, it'd be easier—”
“No! Jody said I could stay by myself if I was careful. I need to be home, and Dad needs me.”

Charlie shook her head vehemently but said nothing, and in second or two took an exit Castiel had never been down before and pulled into a gas station parking lot, turning her car off.

“Charlie, what're you doing? C'mon, this isn't the right exit.” Dean sounded annoyed.

Charlie sat motionlessly in front of the steering wheel for so long that Castiel had time to look at the Moon Door-themed covering on it beneath her fingers. When she began to cry, Castiel was surprised. A few tears coursed down her cheeks while she pressed her hand to her mouth.

When Dean realized what was happening, he immediately started coaxing her to sit with him in the back seat the way Castiel imagined he would have talked to a young Sam. Charlie complied wordlessly, and plunked herself down next to Dean after letting herself out of the driver's side door. Dean wrapped his free arm around her and let her lay her wet cheek on his uninjured shoulder.

Castiel watched as Charlie cried a little more onto Dean's t-shirt, and heard her say to him, so quietly he knew he wasn't meant to catch it, “What if you aren't lucky next time?”

Dean stroked her hair and murmured, “I'm gonna be fine, Charlie.”

Castiel tried not to think of how the same words had been a frantic question Friday night.

Charlie eventually pulled back, wiping her face and casting a look at Castiel, whose hands were folded so tightly in his lap it hurt. After that, she slid back into the driver's seat, and when she continued the drive to campus, Dean wisely did not contradict her.

That night, as Dean stayed over at Charlie's apartment, Castiel sent him a text before he could stop himself.

Does Sam know?

He got his response hours later, at almost two in the morning.

Yes.

***

For the duration of finals week Dean alternated between staying over at Charlie's or Bobby's during the night, and often studied with Castiel during the day.

Dean immediately encountered problems with the size of his final painting and his limited range of motion. Though he'd waited a day or two at Charlie and Castiel's behest before returning to the studio, he was honestly not in any shape to be painting at all.

Though they told Dean that he needed rest to heal and get back to his old self, and that the healing would take some time, he responded more than once by saying that because of how much time he'd wasted while confined to a bed he needed to do everything he could to catch up. Castiel understood, but didn't agree.

Sometimes, Dean sat in front of his painting with his head in one hand and his injured arm hanging limply at his side, the sheer amount of work left to be done immobilizing him. Castiel could only imagine how stressed Dean must be considering he wasn't close to completing his painting final and still had three other classes to wrap up, all in only a few hasty days.
Castiel was afraid to speak to him during times like those, only brave enough to buy Dean's favorite vending machine snacks and surreptitiously leave them by his chair, or other meaningless minutiae.

Castiel knew it also frustrated Dean badly that he was still having to wait on his body to mend before he could start working at Jimmy's again, and that he'd yet to even take the Impala for a drive since his release from the hospital. But Castiel tried his best to simply help his friend in any way he could, and when Dean fell asleep on the couch while he was supposed to be reviewing for American Transcendentalism Castiel pulled a blanket over him; when Dean moved too quickly and flinched in pain, Castiel gave him a few Tylenol and made sure he was as comfortable as possible.

It sometimes almost felt as though things had returned to how they'd been before. The main difference was that Dean hadn't stayed over at Castiel's again since before he was injured, though he now had a perfectly legitimate excuse to do so, and at times seemed as though he was waiting for Castiel to ask him. But Castiel couldn't bring himself to do so, thinking of the one time in which he'd asked and Dean had said no.

Some days, Dean seemed more like his usual self, casually flipping through this book or that and joking with Castiel, a touch on his shoulder or his knee accepted with a small smile. Other days, Dean would leave the room to call his father and re-emerge with his cheeks tinged red with anger and something else Castiel couldn't read, refusing to acknowledge either and tensing as if in fear when Castiel reached out to him.

It was the better days carried Castiel through finals week.

Castiel had maintained a successful schedule for his finals, luckily. He was done with both his essays a day before they were due, and finished his root-and-branch still-life with enough leftover time to do additional research on traditional still-lives versus modern ones and what he wanted his project to say about the former. Harvelle seemed pleased with it as she walked about the room observing everyone's pieces, and Castiel was certain his efforts wouldn't go to waste.

Castiel's only sit-down final was on Friday morning, the last day before Christmas break officially began. Setting the exam booklet on his art history professor's desk, Castiel realized he was done entirely for the semester. It was an odd and relieving thought, and Castiel felt himself smiling as he walked from the Humanities building to his apartment. Pulling his phone from his pocket and turning it back on, he saw that Dean had texted him asking if Castiel wanted to hang out before he left campus for good to return to his father's house. There was no real question whether or not Castiel would say yes, and soon Dean was sitting next to him on the couch in the living room like the many times he had before. His feet were propped up on the coffee table and his head tilted back. Where Balthazar was, Castiel didn't know, though he hoped he wouldn't leave without saying goodbye.

Dean sighed and ran his good hand through his short hair. The cut on his cheek was healing well, and the minor protuberance on his shoulder, though it would remain for a long while, perhaps indefinitely, was looking a little less painful every day.

“I saw your painting yesterday morning, Dean. Is it finished?”

Dean laughed through his nose without actually smiling, his head still tilted back. “It's not close to done. But that's the good thing about abstract shit, huh? No one knows. I could say it's a capitalist manifesto and they'd buy it.”

What he said made Castiel think of John's clear disdain for Dean's work and how little value he'd placed on it. He tried to think of something else to talk about.

“How are you feeling?” he asked instead.
Dean opened his eyes and turned his head to look at him. “I'm on academic probation, Cas.”

Castiel wasn't surprised, but was saddened by the news all the same. “I'm sorry, Dean. But...I know you can make that up next semester. It's only your junior year,” Castiel reminded him, knowing as soon as the words entered the atmosphere that they hadn't been what Dean needed to hear.

“I'm broke from that hospital trip and failing, and I got fired from Jimmy's yesterday over the phone,” Dean said flatly.

“I...I'm so sorry, Dean,” Castiel said again, looking helplessly at his friend and not knowing what else he could possibly say.

“Thanks, Cas. Now I feel so much better.” The words were biting and sarcastic, and they wounded Castiel more than he would have guessed such a thing could. He couldn't remember Dean ever having spoken to him that way before.

But he wanted to show Dean that he could be useful, wanted to ease his mind. “I can help you with the money—”

“Just because your family has more money than they know what to do with doesn't mean you can fucking throw it at me when you think I need help.” Dean's voice was sharp.

“It's my inheritance, Dean,” Castiel sputtered, looking down at his lap. “I—I just don't know how else to help.”

Castiel felt his body tense uncomfortably and raked his free hand roughly through his hair. He began to move away from Dean, feeling as though that might make the situation less strained. But before he could, Dean reached out and clasped his arm, keeping him anchored there. Castiel faced his friend again at the touch, afraid of what might be said next.

He wished he'd never asked Dean how he was feeling, wished he'd talked about something mindless and funny instead.

But to his surprise, Dean only looked stricken. His green eyes were wide as they took in the sight of Castiel twisting the fabric of his shirt the way he usually only did when he was alone. Castiel's breaths felt trapped in his heavy chest.

“Shit, Cas, I—I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I didn't—I just got mad, I'm sorry.”

Castiel shook his head, afraid to speak.

Dean took a loose hold of the hand not picking at Castiel's shirt.

“No, I don't know what I wanted you to say. You're a good friend.” He had the same soothing tone he'd used as he held Charlie in the back seat of her car. All traces of bitterness and sarcasm were gone, and he sounded the way Castiel was used to.

Castiel didn't agree and he didn't respond, keeping his eyes locked on Dean's hands where they clasped his wrists.

“I just...I'm so mad, lately. But I'm not an angry person, Cas. I'm not.” Dean's voice was tinged with revulsion.

“You're not,” Castiel said when he felt able to breathe.
In a movement so quick he didn't catch it, Dean's hand crept up to Castiel's face after he released one of his wrists. It was closer and heavier than it had been before on his skin, not the light touch from outside John's house.

Castiel looked at Dean. Their faces were only inches apart, now. Dean's warm breath washed over Castiel's lips as he half-closed the distance between them, pressing his forehead to Castiel's.

Castiel began to tremble from their proximity. He reached out and cupped Dean's cheek the way he'd wanted to again for weeks, and the other boy moved closer to him on the couch, their hips and feet touching.

Dean's lips were almost touching Castiel's. His other hand moved to bracket Castiel's shoulder. He could hear Dean's every breath.

"I'm sorry," Dean whispered again, the words so close Castiel could taste them.

"Don't let him hurt you again."

Castiel spoke quietly, but what he said felt enormous in the room, coming between them faster than any fight could have.

Dean stood and left the apartment without speaking.

Castiel went back into his bedroom and crawled into his cold bed. He pressed his hands up against his chest as he looked at the ceiling and tried to think of anything except for Dean, of how his lips had almost felt.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave me a comment letting me know what you thought, or whatever you're feeling at this point in the story =)
Saturday afternoon Castiel called Meg, the phone pressed against his ear and ringing before he'd registered wanting to do such a thing.

When Meg answered she sounded intrigued. "Clarence. Been a while, huh?"

“I guess so. What are you doing later?”

“Maybe nothing, maybe something. Why?”

Castiel couldn't tell if she genuinely wasn't sure as to why he was calling or simply enjoyed making him uncomfortable.

“I'm, uh—leaving to go home for Christmas break tomorrow morning. I...wanted to see if we could get together before then?” The last part came out a question.

Meg laughed. “Well, just so happens there's a private party tonight at KA. Want to come with me and Gilda?”

“What time?”

When Castiel hung up a few minutes later he sat back in his desk chair. His hand was frozen on the mouse-pad of his laptop where it had been for the entirety of the phone call. He'd been trying to read a theoretical article online before calling Meg. He'd had no success.

After Dean had left his apartment the day before, Castiel fell asleep for almost eleven hours. It hadn't been a restful sleep, but he'd kept himself confined to his bed, preferring his dreams to his thoughts. His flattened and dingy pillow bore the signs of his fitful fidelity.

Dean hadn't called or texted, and Castiel wasn't sure why this was surprising to him.

A few more aborted attempts at tackling the article and some Ramen noodles later, Castiel gave up on reading for the final time and retreated back to his bed; it simultaneously felt like a defeat and a reward.

He stared at the blank wall beyond and picked at the skin around his nails until it bled, not feeling the pressure with which he took himself apart. The whiteness of the wall filled his vision completely; the imperfections left by the pricks of thumbtacks past becoming sonic blips that hurt the backs of his eyes.

When the hour he and Meg had agreed to meet rolled around Castiel was startled by how quickly the time had passed. His feet carried him habitually to his bathroom so he could put on deodorant and brush his teeth.
While he was standing in front of the mirror Castiel noticed that his hair was as unmanageable as ever, and he gave it a passing comb-through and shrugged lethargically. The skin around his eyes was a light purple, and his face was pale instead of its usual delicate olive. For all of the sleep he'd gotten, he felt none of it.

He walked to his closet and back twice before remembering what he'd gone there to get in the first place.

He donned a pair of old jeans and a faded black t-shirt, pulling on a thick, gray sweater last of all and stepping into his tennis shoes. He also took from his wallet a twenty and a five, intending on giving the money to Meg whether she wanted it or not in recompense. He didn't smoke much and she had never seemed put-out, but he felt it was only polite. After the bills were folded in his pocket pressed against his phone, he slipped out of his apartment. Judging by his empty room, Balthazar was already out for the evening, and Castiel was glad he wouldn't be obligated to talk to anyone besides Meg and people at the party he likely wouldn't have to worry about seeing again.

The walk to Meg's apartment was cold and silent save for the faint whispers of the stinging drafts which made their way through the skeletal trees. The air was laden with a heavy December chill that knocked against his skin with every step.

Castiel wondered fleetingly what Charlie was doing and remembered that she was leaving campus early the next morning for her home city, the same thing he was scheduled to do. She was likely packing and getting her things together the way he knew he should have been doing.

When Castiel reached Meg's apartment, he found the door was already open as he approached it; Meg was letting another student in. She smiled at Castiel when she saw him behind the boy currently entering her living room. Her brown eyes were lined thickly with black that echoed the slick leather of the jacket she wore.

“Clarence, you sick again?” she asked as he came near and passed into the yellow light of the living room.

“Finals were hectic,” he said as he shut the door behind himself.

“Well, they're over now!” She looked happier than Castiel could ever remember having seen her. She slung an arm around his shoulder and drew him in as she cast a smile at the other guy, who was standing next to a tipsy-looking Gilda. Gilda was wearing a crop-top under an oversized cardigan and skinny jeans, and appeared thinner than she had the last time Castiel had gotten a good look at her.

“You want a shot?” Gilda asked him, her tightly curled hair rolling along her tanned shoulders as she moved towards him with a bottle of Deep Eddy's in one hand. The guy she'd been talking to smiled and nodded at her suggestion.

Castiel opened his mouth to tell her he could wait until the party, but at the feeling of Meg squeezing his arm said instead, “Sure. Thanks.”

An hour and a half, four shots, and a strong mixed drink later Castiel found himself seated on the couch beside Meg, who was in-between Castiel and her other house-guest. Gilda had retreated to her room to “re-do her lip-liner”. Meg was pink-cheeked and loading a generous bowl in the multi-colored bong held between her legs, humming to herself as she packed fragrant green buds into the little bowl piece at its base. The party began unofficially within the next thirty minutes and, as Meg had put it, she wasn't nearly as fucked-up as she wanted to be to go out. Castiel agreed with that sentiment.
The other guy who was pre-gaming with them—whose name Castiel was fairly sure was either Darren or Derek and seemed to know Castiel's name was not Clarence—reached out a hand and tried to drape it over Meg much the way she tended to do with Castiel. But Meg wrinkled her nose a little and lightly shoved his arm off, scooting closer to Castiel until her round shoulder was digging into his pectoral muscle.

Castiel was buzzed and taciturn, feeling the press of Meg's side and thinking of when Dean had done the same as they shared his bed after the nightmare.

“Clarence! Time for your first bong-hit!” Meg said, clapping him on the shoulder and shaking him from his wool-gathering.

Castiel turned to look at her, noticing that the bowl had been loaded and Meg was holding the bong out to him.

“I don't need greens,” he said politely, trying to wave it away. Beside Meg on the opposite side, Darren (Derek?) said testily, “Yeah. I think Cas is fine, Meg.”

Castiel breathed in sharply at the sound of Dean, Sam and Charlie's nickname on the lips of someone else, and turned to look at Darren. But he said nothing, and downed the rest of his drink before getting up to dispose of the cup in the kitchen. His hands shook as one of his fingertips began to bleed again from how he'd bitten them earlier. When he returned to the living room, Darren was saying to Meg in a low whisper, “… kinda weird, c'mon.”

Had Castiel not been well on his way to drunk he likely would have felt upset at Darren's words, but as it was he felt mostly indifferent. Meg gave Darren a stern look as she saw Castiel come back into the room, and gestured for Castiel to sit on the couch next to her again.

“Darren, if you shut your mouth you can have a hit off this bowl,” Meg said imperiously. She placed the bong between her legs again and flicked the lighter over the mound of green. After she took her hit Darren took his, and Castiel, with instructions from Meg, torched the bowl and smoked the last of it, the sweet-smelling smoke filling the empty cavities of his chest. He held it in for as long as he could, feeling the pressure in his eyelids already as well as the heady tingling in his limbs.

Gilda had been taking shots in her room, as it turned out, and by the time the four of them began to walk together to the party they were all either a little drunk or cross-faded. Darren insisted on having an arm around Gilda, while Meg linked arms with Castiel; her arm looped through his grounded him rather than making him uncomfortable the way it would have normally, and he was glad she was guiding him, stoned and tipsy as he was.

The porch lights of the large, two-story white brick fraternity house were not on when they arrived, and Castiel didn't see anyone loitering outside the way people had at both of the Iota parties he'd been to. Meg stood out on the porch and called someone on her phone, telling whoever was on the other end of the line to come outside and let her in. A few minutes later, a shirtless guy holding a sweating blue solo cup in one hand and a cane in the other came to the door. He allowed Meg to give him a hug from inside the tall doorway, obviously not wanting to venture too far outside because of the chill air. He smiled at Meg as she turned and beckoned for the rest of them to come inside.

The inside of KA house was much nicer than Iota could ever hope to be, aesthetically-speaking: where Iota had ripped and mismatched furniture, scuffed floors and chipped paint, KA had black leather sofas and armchairs and blonde, lacquered coffee and end-tables. The walls were adorned with expensively-framed photographs of past chapters, graduating classes and memorable events, and hip-hop music blared from well-placed speakers mounted in the walls.
Meg tailed shirtless-guy (who walked with a shuffle and leaned heavily with every step on his blisteringly bright metal cane) through the common room and down a spacious hallway into a bedroom, the last door on the left. Castiel, Darren and Gilda followed. Castiel was directly behind Meg and he could hear Darren and Gilda's words echoing in the tiled hallway. Gilda sounded drunk enough that Castiel would have been concerned had he not been intoxicated himself, and Darren seemed to be talking about a party he and his friends were having the following weekend that he felt Gilda should attend.

Once inside his bedroom, shirtless-guy set his cup on the dresser and shut the door behind the four of them. Castiel wasn't sure where to sit, and allowed Meg to drag him across the room to the bed and situate him beside her on it. Gilda sat on shirtless-guy's office chair and Darren stood beside her, his hand on her shoulder. Shirtless-guy himself leaned on his desk after reaching into a mini-fridge adjacent to his computer desk and taking out a bottle of Sailor Jerry's. Gilda squealed at the sight of the bottle, and Meg rolled her eyes.

“C'mon, Milo, that the best you got?’”

Shirtless-guy, or Milo, as Meg had just called him, smiled at her and left the bottle on the table, gesturing for Gilda to have some before hopping up with a bit of difficulty onto his bed and moving towards a shelf above his headboard. He grabbed a miniature plastic organizer from the dusty oak surface and plucked a white pill bottle from its depths.

“Just so happens it's about that time for me, anyway, girl.”

Meg grinned like the Cheshire cat at the sight of the bottle, moving away from Castiel to huddle up closer to Milo and whatever it was his bottle contained. At the realization that Meg and Milo were going to be pill-popping, Castiel knew he should be wary of what they were going to do, perhaps he should even be ready to leave; but he felt so heavy from the pot and the booze. He was content to sit on Milo’s bed while Gilda took still more shots and Darren knelt to wrap his arms around her thin waist from behind.

Castiel looked at the surroundings in Milo's room, the band posters and the haphazardly-piled textbooks, the pictures of Milo and his family, the phone and computer chargers coursing over the soft gray carpet like white, starved snakes.

“Clarence?”

“Yes?” Castiel asked, looking from Milo to Meg.

“You want to try some?” Meg asked, rattling whatever pills the bottle held as she dangled it in front of Castiel's face.

“I couldn't take—”

“It's fine, man. A friend of Meg's a friend of mine,” Milo interjected breezily. “Besides, I can get more. Fucked my knee up a while back playing Lacrosse.”

“What...is it?” Castiel asked cautiously, casting another glance at Gilda and Darren, who seemed on the verge of exiting the room and uninterested in what the three of them were doing.

“Hydrocodone. It's better than bud,” Meg answered. She smiled again as Milo took the bottle from her to open it.

Castiel watched as if in a dream as Milo took the first couple of yellow pills and washed them down with a swig of whatever his blue cup contained, and then Meg did the same. When Milo handed him
two of his own, Castiel tried to put them back in the bottle reflexively, but Meg moved close to him again, her breath warm on the shell of his ear as she said, “C'mon, Cas. We're celebrating tonight.”

Castiel looked directly at her, then, thinking back to Dean saying something similar to him weeks before at Bobby’s.

“You need to have some fun, man.”

“You called me Cas,” he said, his voice small. He couldn't remember any time in which Meg had called him by his name or his nickname.

Meg only pressed the pills into his palm in way of response.

Castiel took them after that, wincing at the slightly bitter aftertaste and asking for something to drink. When the bottle of Sailor Jerry's was handed to him he took a swig of it and set it down on the floor next to his feet, and noticed that Gilda and Darren had indeed left at some point.

“Where'd Gilda go?” he asked.

“Probably to find more booze,” Meg said unconcernedly as she practically sat herself on Castiel's lap, her thighs warm as she perched on him.

“Yeah,” Milo agreed with a laugh. “She likes to wander.”

“But, Darren,” Castiel said, feeling the Sailor Jerry's he'd had hitting him.

“Darren's an okay guy,” Milo said. “Don't worry about 'em, man.”

But Castiel had a twisted, murky feeling in his gut thinking about Darren leading a drunk Gilda god-knew-where in the maze of a frat house they were in.

“I need a restroom, I'll be right back,” he said, trying to transfer Meg from his lap to the bed as gently as he could with his hands on her compact waist as he started to stand up.

Meg looked up at him intently, keeping a hold on one of the hands still on her waist. Her expression was one of annoyance, and her eyes were narrowed. But she didn't stop him, and after a few seconds released him. Beside her, Milo was pouring himself another drink.

“It's down the hall and to the right. Hurry back, Clarence.”

Castiel wasn't sure if he nodded or not, but he exited Milo's bedroom and set off down the hallway from whence they'd come, not sure where to begin looking for Gilda but knowing he had to start somewhere. He made his way through the hall and bypassed the common room that contained the front door. He took the first staircase he spotted, having no idea where he was going. He managed to locate a few more common and study rooms, two bathrooms, and the upstairs porch (did every frat on the campus have one?). Everyone Castiel encountered was either a fraternity brother or one of their dates; he hadn't spotted either Gilda or Darren.

He hadn't realized how long he'd been walking around looking for Gilda until he started to feel different. It felt almost as though he was floating and simultaneously walking with weights strapped to his feet. His head felt light as a helium balloon. His limbs were almost numb, and tracing every crease of the skin stretched between his suddenly fluid joints was a faint itch, like the gentle crawl of a fly or the brush of an eyelash. He wanted to go outside and look at the night sky, or sit down where he was and sleep a while; he couldn't decide. His body was not his own, and it felt good. His anxiety over finding Gilda seemed to be blurring into a dulcet buzz in the back of his mind entirely different
from that which had occupied him earlier that day.

When Castiel passed a restroom a minute or so later he entered it without conscious thought, needing to relieve himself. The bathroom was as glitzy as the rest of the place, and there seemed to be no one else in the other closed stalls.

As he was zipping his fly back up Castiel heard someone else enter the restroom and didn't feel trepidation the way he would have if he were sober. He turned to go to the sink and wash his hands, not looking at the other occupant.

After his hands were washed and dried Castiel took a look at himself in the mirror, noticing peripherally that his eyes were red-rimmed and his pupils were huge, the crystal-blue of his iris a thin ring. The sight of the wells of glossy black in his face made him pause, and he reached a hand up without noticing, his fingers twitching near his chin.

When the other person who had entered the bathroom, a tall, blonde guy, placed a hand on his shoulder and asked, “You alright?” Castiel jumped and whipped around, feeling as though he'd been caught weeping or something equally private.

“I—I'm fine,” he stuttered. The guy had deep green eyes, more emerald than hazel-green the way Dean's were—

“You here with someone?” blonde guy asked, smiling at Castiel from a few inches above him.

“I'm looking for someone,” Castiel said haltingly, remembering then why he'd come upstairs in the first place. “Have you seen Gilda or Darren?”

“Darren Willoughby?” the guy said, cupping his chin in his hand in thought.

“I don't know, I'm trying to find Gilda,” Castiel said, moving away from him to exit the bathroom without much thought. He heard the guy say something else to him as he left, but didn't care to return and hear what it was. The next time Castiel passed the upstairs porch door, he opened it and stepped outside, gasping in relief as frigid air licked at the juts of his cheekbones. It sent an almost pleasurable shudder through him, and he leaned on the outside of the house, his head tilting back to rest against the pale stone.

Castiel thought of Dean, with his eyes closed to the sharp, cobalt dark, and it didn't make him want to dry heave. Castiel thought of the made-up room with the orange sheets and knew with a clarity that would have made him sick were he not intoxicated just who it was he wanted with him in the sunlight.

He opened his eyes and saw clusters of stars beyond the smooth, bleached white concrete of the porch. He was alone, listening to the sounds of a party just through the wall behind him, and that moment in time would soon be gone and so would his high, and then he'd again feel as though his chest was in a state of perpetual collapse. The thought made him shiver.

Castiel didn't realize he'd taken out his phone and called someone until he heard Dean's voice on the other end.

“Cas.”

“Dean,” Castiel stammered. He was so relieved to hear his voice that for an absurd second he thought he might cry.

“What's up?” Dean's voice may as well have been a wall.
“I drove Sam home from school when he got into a fight last month. I didn't tell you because he didn't want me to.” The words tumbled out in a billow of steam that painted the dark blue of the night.

“I know you did,” Dean's voice was softer, then. Somehow, that hurt more than the impenetrable edge before had.

“I should have said something.”

“He's stubborn.”

“If I knew where Gabe was I'd be there by now.” Castiel was probably too cross-faded to be on the phone.

“Are you with Meg?” Dean asked.

Castiel hung up the phone and shoved it down into his jeans pocket, wanting nothing more than to go home and fall asleep. He was trembling, adrenaline running through him as if he'd just picked a fight. He breathed out raggedly, turned and re-entered KA house only to spot the very person he'd spent almost an hour looking for. Gilda was against the wall in the hallway, crying silently into one hand. The other was pulling at her hair, which was sticking out in messy tufts of gnarled curls. Her eye makeup was in glistening gray tracks down her cheeks.

“Gilda? What's wrong?” Castiel asked. Gilda heard him and shook her head rapidly.

“Do you want to go back to the apartment?” Castiel asked, unsure what else to do.

Gilda nodded in the affirmative after swiping a hand beneath her eyes, and the two of them started back to Milo's room, or the general vicinity in which Castiel thought Milo's room had been.

By the time they reached the room Gilda was holding Castiel's hand loosely, her skin as cold as it had been when she first met him. She'd also begun to cry again. Luckily they hadn't run into anyone on the staircase down or in the common room. Castiel hadn't asked her where Darren was.

When they opened the door and let themselves in, Milo was nowhere to be seen and Meg was sitting on the bed looking down at her phone, her hair and makeup a little mussed. She lifted her gaze slowly and fixed it on her friends when they came in.

“It's been almost an hour, I called you,” she said to Castiel with petulant vexation, a slur to her words. Castiel imagined he sounded the same.

“I'm sorry, I'm high. I think,” Castiel responded.

Meg laughed, her eyes as glassy and bottomless as Castiel's had been in the mirror.

“Gilda and I are going home,” Castiel said, uncertain suddenly if Meg would even want to go with them.

Meg looked beside Castiel to Gilda in that moment, clearly not having noticed her before.

“Gil, why're you crying?” she asked.

Gilda just shook her head the way she had when Castiel asked, and the three of them left soon after, Meg taking Gilda's hand from Castiel and leading them out the front door without a word.

When Castiel and the girls made it back to their apartment, Gilda didn't seem to want to say more
than Charlie's name and that they should call her. Castiel cast a glance at Meg, who shrugged, and he checked his phone and saw that it was almost midnight. Knowing that he was chancing waking Charlie up, he dialed the number of a friend for the second time that night.

“Charlie? 'm sorry, it's about Gilda. She's ...upset, and asked for you,” Castiel summarized what had happened as coherently as he was able in his current state, and Charlie agreed to stop by without question.

A few feet away in Gilda's room, Castiel could hear the sounds of Meg talking to her roommate. When Charlie arrived ten minutes later she cast a suspicious look at Meg and Gilda in her room together before pulling Castiel aside. “Cas, why are you with them? Are you...high?”

“And drunk,” Castiel supplied, feeling so heavy he was contemplating sleeping on the girls' couch. Charlie said nothing, she just shook her head and turned to walk into Gilda's room.

"Charlie--" Castiel began before she looked back at him. Her lips were pressed tightly together, her eyes were almost wary.

“We're talking sometime over the break. Go to bed, Cas.”

With that, she went to comfort Gilda. When she crossed the threshold and motioned for Meg to leave them alone Meg did, coming out into the living room to sit with Castiel.

“Gonna stay over?” she inquired drowsily.

“Why'd you let Gilda leave with him?” Castiel asked

Meg shook her head and said, “You can sleep here if you want.”

“Meg, she can't be doing that. Do you think Darren tried something?”

“Shit happens, Clarence. She'd tell me if it was something bad.”

Castiel stared at her, not understanding. “I think I should go home, Meg.”

“Nevermind, just take the damn couch,” Meg said suddenly. She threw her jacket on the armchair and disappeared into her room, leaving Castiel alone in the living room, privy only to two closed doors and the empty couch.

From Gilda's side he could vaguely hear the sounds of her mumbling and of Charlie soothing her. Castiel wondered if he would ever be able to write something that adequately expressed all that he was feeling in that moment, and slid the twenty-five dollars he'd been carrying all night into a pocket of Meg's jacket.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Castiel turned the volume dial in his car all the way to the right, magnifying the NPR reporter's voice to such an extent that the windows rattled with every rising crest of her pitch. The traffic on the highway wasn't too bad considering it was late afternoon on a Sunday, and Castiel was grateful for that. He was much less hungover than he could have been, but his head pounded dully. The pale winter sunlight slanting through the windshield hurt his dry eyes, and even though he'd thoroughly brushed his teeth before setting off, he couldn't shake the feeling that his breath smelled horrible.

He'd fallen asleep on Meg's couch not long after she shut herself in her bedroom, too tired to make his way back to his apartment after he'd made the mistake of sitting down for a few minutes. He'd woken up a few hours later and checked his phone to find that it was almost six o'clock in the morning. He'd felt mostly sober by then, he judged, and drank a large glass of water in Meg's kitchen before returning to his own apartment and starting the packing process he should have twelve hours earlier.

The early walk back had felt almost deceptively lovely, as if a gleaming layer of warmth as thin as cheesecloth had been draped over the shadowy cold of December. The usual morning gusts had been at a stand-still, and the fine rays of gold and bright blue were just peeking over the tops of the campus buildings, casting tepid shadows onto the gray sidewalks and trees.

When Castiel had gotten back in he was surprised to see that Balthazar was not only in, but awake, no less. He was bustling around their kitchen while his outdated coffeemaker bubbled merrily on the counter behind him. Balthazar's short blonde hair was windblown and his cheeks reddened; he had his coat on and his sky-blue eyes were distracted as he threw all of his perishable foods into a plastic grocery bag hanging from one wrist.

Castiel must have looked both troubled and hungover, because his roommate had taken one look at him and begun pouring him a mug of coffee after handing him a half-softened pink apple.

“You get lucky, or what?”

Castiel had nodded and taken a sip from his cup, not wanting to divulge the truth of his night out. Balthazar had smiled as if he understood and said, “I'm leaving soon to go on holiday with Inias and his family in Arizona. You leaving today?”

Castiel had nodded again. “I am...Thank you for the coffee.”

Balthazar waved away his words. “Don't mention it, mate. When'll you be back?”

“The day after Christmas, probably.”

Balthazar had nodded and ventured back into the kitchen, grabbing one of Castiel's thermoses (which he didn't find worth commenting on) and pouring coffee into it until the black brew reached the rim. “Alright. Well, have a good one. I'll be gone in a few. You can have the rest of the coffee, just turn off the maker when you're done.”

And with that Balthazar had gone back into his room, undoubtedly to double-check and gather last-minute remembered items. Castiel had taken his coffee and his fruit into his own room, closing the door behind him.
A few hours, a cup and a half more of coffee and one shower later, Castiel had been packed and ready to leave, himself. He'd texted both Charlie and Meg, telling them he hoped to talk to them soon, and specifically instructed Meg to look in the pockets of her jacket. He'd yet to receive a reply from either girl, but suspected Meg was still asleep and Charlie was busy.

Castiel had hesitated before leaving his apartment, sitting for a moment on his bed with his phone opened to the 'recent calls' menu option. The call he'd made to Dean on KA's upstairs porch had lasted all of two minutes and four seconds according to the numbers beside Dean's name. It was surreal, to him the call had felt as though it stretched on for hours.

Castiel had wondered if he should call Dean back and explain himself, if he should try to tell him why he'd called only to hang up without warning. But he hadn't, and had left the apartment not long after.

So here he was, only a few minutes away from the home he'd grown up in, sweating slightly and trying not to think of how it would feel to be back in his old room, his old second-skin of apprehension.

His family knew he was driving in; he'd called Anna a few days before and told her of his plans, and had called his mother when he knew she'd be asleep and left a message. That evening Michael would be showing up for dinner with Castiel, Anna and Naomi, and Luke would be staying with them for the holidays after they picked him up from the rehabilitation center the following day.

When Castiel pulled up before the two-story Italianate house, he was relieved to see that his mother's car wasn't in the pristine, white drive. Only Anna was parked in front of the tastefully painted garage door. Naomi would likely be at Novak Labs for several hours more, Castiel estimated. She had the habit of working late into the evenings and always had.

Upon parking beside the curb Castiel got out and slung his duffel bag over his shoulder. When he reached the front door, he jumped in surprise when Anna flung it open before he had the chance to close his hand around the knob. She smiled and leapt forward to wrap her arms around him, her wavy hair loose from its usual ponytail and falling in soft shades of red in front of Castiel's face. Castiel closed his eyes and exhaled deeply, allowing himself to rest his chin in the dip between her neck and her shoulder.

After a moment Anna released him and held him at arm's length, smiling.

“Are you tired?” she inquired as she took his bag without asking. “She's not home yet, it's just Tessa and I for now. Do you want to sleep for a little bit? Your room hasn't been touched since you left.”

“Tessa's here?” Castiel asked, looking around his sister into the house beyond for the dark-haired housekeeper.

Tessa herself answered the question, materializing from the hallway with her hair pulled back messily and her grey-green eyes wide and sunny.

“Anna let, him in!”

Anna laughed at herself as she realized that Castiel was still standing in the doorway. She backed up with his bag and let him come inside.

Tessa smiled at Castiel as she walked towards him, one arm outstretched. When she reached Castiel she hugged him, pressing her cheek to his for a brief moment before letting him go and surveying him much the way that Anna had.
“How do you like being away from home? We miss you,” she said, leaving the tips of her fingers on one of his shoulder blades.

Castiel shrugged. “It’s been...good. I’m learning a lot,” he said truthfully. “But I’ve missed you two.”

Tessa snorted. “I think you missed my food.”

Castiel laughed at the same time Anna did at the words, shaking his head. Tessa had been cooking and cleaning for the Novaks over a decade, having been hired on when Castiel was four and his parents had grown tired of maintaining the pretense that they had the desire or time to carry out such trifling domestic tasks. Tessa was older than her smooth skin betrayed, and possibly one of the most discerning people Castiel had ever met. He knew much less about her personal life than she did about any given member of the Novak household, and Castiel knew his mother was keenly cognizant of this fact.

Why Tessa continued to spend every other weekend preparing reheatable meals for the Novaks and straightening up a mostly impeccable house he wasn’t sure, but Castiel was grateful to her. He knew that he and Anna both appreciated her easygoing energy when she was present.

“Well, we're proud of you. I always figured you were a little too good at art to go into the sciences,” Tessa said, her angular jaw softened by another smile.

Castiel blushed as Anna laughed loudly and said, “Like the time you painted the Lion King mural on your wall and Mother left it up for almost a week before painting over it because it looked so much like them.”

“I was nine,” Castiel mumbled.

Then Tessa asked, “Are you tired? You look terrible.”

Tessa had also never been one to mince words.

Castiel didn't answer, knowing Tessa would probably hear one word of his explanation and know it to be an excuse as thin as the early-morning sunlight had been.

Said Anna, coming to his rescue, “I was just telling him he should nap.”

Tessa nodded. “Mhmm. I have to do laundry and start on dinner soon, you won't be missing anything.” She gave his shoulder a parting squeeze and headed to the southern end of the house, presumably to the utility room.

Castiel let Anna walk ahead of him down the first hallway to his room. Anna's was next-door to his, and at the very end of the hall was their mother's. He practically fell into his room after Anna opened the door and set his bag near the foot of his bed.

“I'm going to go read in the living room. I'll wake you up before she gets home if you aren't already by then,” Anna said before leaving him alone.

Castiel nodded and kicked off his shoes while stripping himself of his sweater after closing the door behind his sister. He cast an uneasy look around his old bedroom.

It was strange, how obvious it was that Anna had been telling the truth; his room was as untouched as she'd said. Perfectly even coatings of dust layered his dresser, the window sill, the tops of the dozens of novels lining his tall bookshelf, and even the dull, faux-silver of his outdated desktop.
The posters of varying sizes tacked on the walls were a welcome sight, the colors of Castiel's favorite paintings clashing nicely with the glossy blue of the walls and ceiling. The reinforced black-out curtains he'd bought when he was fourteen were pulled all the way to the sides of the single, gleaming window in the room. Before he settled down for his nap, Castiel tugged one of the sheaths of heavy fabric halfway over the panes of one side. Then he fell slackly forward onto his bed, inhaling the familiar scent of his house mixed with that of himself, of his own skin and hair and breath, though the latter was faded from his absence.

*Lavender, laundry detergent, furniture polish, soap, brine, sleep. Sleep, sleep...*

The black duvet he'd kept on the bed for the past two years pillowed around him, and Castiel was asleep before he had the chance to do much more than wish he'd bought some weed from Meg to help him get through the family dinners.

***

When Castiel awoke later, it was to his sister gently shaking one shoulder. He sat up abruptly, almost colliding with her.

“She's on her way,” Anna said, stepping back and giving Castiel some room to fully wake up.

He blearily rubbed his eyes. “How long was I asleep?”

“Almost four hours.”

Castiel groaned and shakily stood up, gesturing for Anna to move out of his way so he could walk across the hall to the restroom. She obliged, and once inside the bathroom Castiel took a quick look at himself. He definitely looked like he'd been sleeping, and more than that, dreaming.

*Dreaming of the room always cast in summer light and of the cotton, tangerine sheets wrapped around arms and legs and the soft presses of lips and cheekbones—*

Castiel sighed as he rubbed his hands over his face. He twisted the knob atop the faucet and smoothed a palmful of warm water over his scalp, trying to make his hair lie flat out of habit. When the effort proved unsuccessful he went back to his room where Anna was still standing, debating whether or not to change shirts. He'd brought a few he knew his mother would find suitable, and wondered whether it was worth it to rummage through his duffel bag for one.

As if sensing his train of thought, his sister frowned at him. “Your shirt looks terrible, and Michael will be over in less than an hour.”

Castiel tried not to think of what dinner would be like, of the thick silence that would swaddle them all as they sat together and not-together. Instead, he bent down to unzip his bag and got out the button-down he'd worn to Sam's celebratory dinner, thumbing at the metallic fastenings.

Anna took a look at the shirt and nodded in approval before leaving him to change. Castiel glanced absentmindedly out the window as he pulled his t-shirt off and slid his arms into the deep blue sleeves of the button-down. The sky beyond the steadily fogging glass was slightly murky, like a cold rain would soon begin frothing from the clouds that had formed while he slept. Castiel hadn't checked the weather forecast, but felt a bleak dread well up beneath his sternum at the thought of his mother driving home in such weather.

He shook his head and made sure he'd fastened the buttons on his shirt properly before heading down the hallway to the living room.
His mother had redecorated since he'd left for school, he noticed upon re-entering the room. He had to suppress an eye-roll. Naomi was forever redecorating, as if she wanted a different home without having to leave the one in which she and her husband had raised their children. The constant renovations were so commonplace that Castiel hadn't even registered the changes, though he supposed reuniting with Anna and Tessa had also kept him from seeing them. But he did the second time around, and he distractedly took in the sight of all the new furniture and brick-a-brack accenting the spaces around the heavily-decorated Christmas tree.

Castiel sat down beside Anna on the love-seat where she was curled up with a book in her lap, inhaling the scent of roasted chicken and spices from the kitchen where Tessa was almost finished with dinner.

“When did this,” he gestured vaguely around the room. “...happen?”

Anna looked over at him, her expression amused. “About two weeks after you left.”

Castiel sighed, not surprised. “What are you reading?”

Anna looked down at the book, holding it up wordlessly so he could read the title trailing down the thin spine. *The Doors of Perception*.

“I didn't know you liked Huxley,” Castiel said.

Anna shook her head. “I don't, really. It was on sale at Half-Price last week and I got it. I've been practically living there in my off-time, lately,” her words were whispered as if they sat in a library.

“It's a good book. If you like it, you should read the sequel, *Heaven and Hell*,” Castiel said.

Anna smiled faintly at him, her eyes holding a response she didn't verbalize.

At that moment, both siblings heard the sound of the garage door opening over the pleasant hum of Tessa's portable radio and the whoosh of the smoke hood above the oven. Then came the click of a tumbler and the soft swish of the side door opening and closing.

“Hello?” Naomi Novak called out, her voice and footsteps climbing in volume as she walked to the living room.

Anna was the first of the two of them to break the silence, saying loudly, “Castiel's here, Mother.”

Shortly after, Tessa greeted Naomi from where she was in the kitchen, saying dinner would be ready in a few minutes.

Castiel stood up to greet his mother when she entered the room, his heart beating quickly beneath his ribs.

“Castiel! Did you encounter any trouble on the drive?” Naomi asked as she started to wrap her arms around her son. Halfway through the gesture, Naomi seemed to realize just what she was doing and over-think it, stiffening and pulling back a little, only to jerk forward again and rapidly squeeze and release her son. Unlike Anna's comfortable clasp, Castiel didn't relax into it.

Naomi stepped back to look at him, her countenance indecipherable. Her eyes, the same blue-gray as Anna's, roved over him, doubtless taking in every hair out of place and stray wrinkle in his shirt and pants. Her look-over did not feel as gracious as Tessa's, but she stopped short of commenting on what she'd seen. Her reddish-brown hair was pulled up from her sharp features in its customary bun, and the light gray pantsuit she was wearing was immaculate on her trim frame.
“No trouble, no,” Castiel said, hoping he didn't sound as uncomfortable as he felt.

“Michael will be here soon,” Naomi said, already clearly unsure of what to say or how to make natural conversation with her son. Castiel felt a sort of strained compassion at the way her lips hung open after the words left them.

“So, Luke is...coming over tomorrow,” he said as he and Anna sat back down on the love-seat. Naomi took their cue, seating herself on the sofa adjacent. “Yes. He's been bored there.”

“So...he's...been doing well, then?” Castiel said, suddenly feeling that this might not be the best thing to have asked about, after all.

Naomi nodded again, more stiffly this time. “Of course. Things are very much improved.” Her tone left no room for further questions on the subject, clearing the way for another stretch of silence.

Anna said not long after, transparently trying to move things along, “Mother, Castiel asked me earlier about the experimental treatments for muscular dystrophy that we're testing at the lab. I'm not able to explain the nuances of it as well as you are.”

Castiel made himself smile and looked at at his mother, saying nothing of the fact that he'd asked no such thing. Naomi seemed relieved, then, and without preamble launched into a long explanation of what Novak Labs was currently focusing on, one of her legs bouncing and her eyes distant as she recited numbers and procedures. She continually folded, unfolded and re-folded her hands in her lap all the while, her wedding ring glinting in the light.

After the one-sided discussion of the current direction of the lab had run its course, Naomi excused herself to change for dinner, telling them that Michael would be arriving at any moment and to keep an eye out for him, as if she was afraid they wouldn't. Once she'd retreated to her room Anna and Castiel looked at one another.

“How do you live here?” Castiel asked his sister. She glanced down at the open book resting beside her on the love-seat and didn't respond.

Only a few scant moments after Castiel had asked the question, they both heard a knock at the door. Anna dutifully rose to answer it, smoothing a hand over her long hair and her slacks before she opened the door, much less enthusiastically than she had for Castiel.

At the sight of Michael standing on the front steps, his narrow frame silhouetted by the blue-gray clouds above and buffeted by the rain just beginning to yawn down from them, Castiel stood.

Michael looked exactly as he had the last time Castiel had seen him only a few months previous, down to the wary expression on his thin face. His sandy blonde hair was gelled into submission, his clear blue eyes narrowed as he took in the sight of Castiel behind Anna in the front room.

“Castiel. I take it your first semester away went well?” Michael asked as he entered the house. He didn't acknowledge his sister, who shut the door after him.

“It did,” Castiel replied. He looked at a point above Michael's shoulder rather than into his eyes as he tried to keep his tone one of impassivity. The question bruised unexpectedly.

“Good,” Michael said curtly, shrugging his coat off and draping it over the back of the sofa. “Will you be returning?”
Castiel didn't know if his brother was asking him if he planned on going back to school or ever coming to the house again. “Yes. I enjoy what I'm studying,” he said.

Michael's face was set in what Castiel would have read as a neutral half-smile had he not known his brother the way he did; he recognized it as an ill-disguised smirk.

Castiel wished he could cross his arms over his chest or put a hand over his throat without drawing attention to himself, experiencing a physical response to the vulnerability he felt as he stood before his brother. He was almost grateful to his mother when she re-entered the living room, an emotion he rarely felt where Naomi was concerned. She'd changed into a pair of jeans and let her hair down. She gave her oldest son a nod when she saw him, and Michael went to Naomi and kissed her cheek, asking her if dinner had already been started. Before he'd finished asking, Tessa came in to greet Michael from the kitchen and inform everyone that dinner was ready and the table set.

Castiel and Anna brought up the rear as the family trekked into the adjoining dining room, and Tessa touched both of the youngest Novaks lightly on the shoulder as they passed her, an encouraging smile on her lips that did little to ease Castiel's nerves.

Once everyone was seated, Tessa began to bring in the serving dishes and dole out food to each person. She hummed to herself as she made her rounds, seemingly determined to act as though there was nothing wrong in the wake of the stifling quiet.

The food smelled wonderful, and Castiel knew he should be starving, but every glance Michael shot his way made him wish he could somehow get away with faking a sudden illness. He caught Anna eyeing him sympathetically, and looked back down at the chicken and potatoes in front of him.

Dinner was awkward and devoid of sound save for that of forks scraping plates and the tree branches swishing and scritch-scratching against the nearby windows. Castiel could feel his family wordlessly staring at one another in turns over bites of food and the rims of their glasses. A few times Naomi or Michael opened their mouth to say something, only to shut it again as if they'd thought better of it.

As the food disappeared off the plates in steady increments and the water was drained from the glasses, the Novaks seemed to relax into the silence and content themselves with the fact that they didn't have anything to talk about.

Castiel thought to himself in the lull that had his father been present, he would have guided the conversation with an iron hand, steering his wife and children through topics with almost military precision. But without him, the muteness of an unacquainted group of people pervaded, and Castiel found he didn't care anymore. The desire he'd thought he'd feel to interrogate Naomi about Gabriel simply wasn't there. Now, he only wanted to make it through the holidays.

Almost thirty minutes later every plate was clean, and Castiel and Anna were standing up to clear the table. Tessa must have heard the scraping of their chairs, because she emerged from the kitchen to begin wrapping up leftovers.

Naomi disappeared back into her bedroom for the evening not long after. Castiel was stacking glasses in one hand with the breadbasket in the other when Michael came to stand beside him. Castiel looked at him expectantly, knowing that whatever Michael had to say, he'd be forced to listen. Anna and Tessa were both in the kitchen.

But Michael said nothing after one, two minutes passed in yet more dead-air, his face a mask of shifting expressions. Instead, he nodded, awkwardly patting Castiel on the shoulder and soon leaving without telling either his sister or Tessa goodbye. Castiel knew he was gaping after his brother, utterly confused by the encounter.
When the women heard the front door open and close they came out of the kitchen, looking unsurprised when they realized Michael was gone.

“He doesn't like being here, and it doesn't help that you're home,” Anna said frankly to Castiel, her hands wet to the wrists and her shirt-sleeves rolled up. Tessa stood behind her, her tote bag over her shoulder and her coat on and buttoned, ready to leave the house until the weekend after next.

“I'll see you soon,” Tessa said, choosing not to comment on Michael's departure. She hugged both Anna and Castiel goodbye, smelling like Windex, fabric softener and garlic. Anna went back into the kitchen to start loading the dishwasher and Castiel walked Tessa to the door out of habit; he always did whenever he was around.

When they reached the door Tessa took Castiel's dimpled chin in her hand, looking at him closely. She was somber, her eyes sympathetic.

“How you and Anna came from this family, I'll never know,” she said simply, releasing Castiel and letting herself out in one smooth motion.

Castiel couldn't fall asleep until late into the night, and lay in his bed for hours listening to the rain. All he saw when he closed his eyes was the one picture he'd seen of his father's car after the accident, the fender mangled and crushed, the only visible parts of the vehicle protruding from the cloudy green of the flooded creek.

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The next morning Anna took Castiel with her to the rehabilitation clinic to pick Luke up. She'd taken the day off from work at Novak Labs to make sure she'd be able to retrieve him before the oddly-scheduled visiting and check-out hours were over, and Castiel was simply along for the ride.

The clinic was about an hour away from the Novak house, a drive Anna had made once or twice before, and they'd driven almost the full distance in comfortable silence. Music from the radio thrummed softly through the car, and warmth from the heater made the air dense. The weather was still gloomy and drizzly, and Castiel fogged-up the glass with his breath to trace patterns through it with his fingers.

Upon reaching the facility, Anna parked the car in front of the administrative building and went to fill out the necessary paperwork. When she returned to the car about fifteen minutes later she looked exasperated, but said that all there was left to do was to drive to the building Luke was staying in and escort him to the car.

Within twenty minutes Anna and Castiel were leaving the premises with their older brother in tow. Luke had never been a terribly talkative individual, and that day was no exception. He'd said almost nothing when Castiel and Anna knocked on his door, simply nodding in way of greeting and grabbing his bag from the table behind him, already packed with his shoes on.

Luke sat in the back seat with his bag in his lap, his eyes distant and beset with deep circles. He seemed different than Castiel remembered him being, somehow smaller, as if he was contracting like wet leather. His usual proud demeanor had been dulled into a sullen listlessness. Attempts to draw him into conversation by both Anna and Castiel had proven futile, and he seemed as if he was content to reside within his own thoughts as he stared out the window.

The drive home was uncomfortably quiet where before it had been anything but.

That was the biggest difference between Anna and the rest of his family, Castiel supposed; whereas
with his sister silence was a sign of their easy closeness, with Michael, Luke and Naomi it was a strained void where there was no subject to smoothly bridge the gaps.

Luke fell asleep about a half hour after they'd been on the road, his dishwater blonde hair mussed and one of his hollow cheeks pressed against the damp window. Neither Anna nor Castiel wanted to wake him, and they managed not to until they arrived back home.

Naomi was not yet off work, and Luke said nothing to them as he led the way into the house and went immediately to the guest bedroom, closing and locking the door behind him.

“Is that...okay? To leave him alone?” Castiel whispered, not wanting to risk his brother somehow hearing him through the walls.

Anna shook her head. “We probably shouldn't...the last time he was here, Thanksgiving, he...well, come outside with me and I'll tell you.” She gestured to the back door.

Castiel followed her out into the back yard, the grass and flowerbeds fallow and the trees stripped. Around them the fence rose up like a wooden row of teeth, shielding them from the street beyond. Castiel was shocked when Anna took a pack of Menthol cigarettes out of the purse still over her shoulder and lit one up. He'd never known his sister to smoke.

“How long have you been smoking?” he asked, unable to keep the disbelief from his voice. Anna had always taken an avid anti-drug and anti-substance stance, which he would have assumed was likely only strengthened in light of Luke's issues. But apparently that wasn't the case.

Anna looked at him, the cigarette between her lips and the smoke drifting from its end blowing back into her face with the winter breeze. “Since you left for school.”

Castiel looked at his feet, “Anna...”

“But, anyway. Thanksgiving, Luke came home for about five days, I think. He seemed okay, I guess. Well, not really. But, I thought he'd be fine for a few days. Long story short, I walked in on him snorting coke the day before Thanksgiving. That's why he's still at that place. He was supposed to be released a few weeks ago, but I told Mom the second I saw it and she had him sent back. I honestly don't know if he's not planning on doing the same thing again.” Anna lifted the cigarette to her lips with almost imperceptibly trembling fingers, taking a deep drag while she raked her hair back from her face with her free hand.

Castiel sighed and reached a hand out, palm-up. “Can I have one?”

Anna looked at him for a minute or so, as if she was suspicious of his motives for asking, before digging in her bag for the pack again.

Castiel thanked her as he put the cigarette up to his mouth and lit it, finding that it wasn't as hard to inhale the minty smoke now that he was accustomed to smoking pot fairly regularly.

“What are we going to do if he does it again?” Castiel asked between drags.

Anna shook her head. “I guess we have to tell her. But I don't even think it'd make a difference. He's been angry since Dad died. He's still coming to work every day high if he hadn't crashed the car, and Michael's been telling Mom how much he needs Luke back to help handle the work-load. So much is happening at the lab right now.”

“You work a lot,” Castiel commented.
“It's been harder without him,” she admitted. “Mother's been trying to get me to go to school, says I need to do more than just assist, soon, that I have potential.”

“Anna—” Castiel started.

“She's right, you know?” Anna turned from him.

“You don't want to, though,” Castiel pointed out.

Anna changed the subject. “I can't find Gabriel. I've been searching his name. Nothing. No one named Gabriel Novak lives in Chicago, according to the internet.”

Castiel stared at her, his stomach roiling at the news.

As they looked at each other the unacknowledged question passed between them: How much does she know?

As if in response, Anna said, “We can't ask Mother, not yet.”

After that, Anna put her cigarette out beneath her foot in the damp grass, picking up the crushed butt and putting it back in the pack and erasing the evidence of her habit. Castiel did the same not long after, and they walked back inside the house together.

Luke didn't come out of the guest room for lunch or for dinner, and another silent family meal came and went that evening. Naomi acted as though she didn't even find it worth trying to make conversation, pouring herself a healthy glass of red wine and only asking Castiel and Anna if Luke had been happy to leave the clinic. They told her yes and that they suspected he was simply too tired to come out of his room at the moment. Their mother seemed content with the answer, and retired for bed immediately after dinner for the second time in as many days, telling her children that she hoped they slept well before excusing herself.

As he lay in bed several hours later, Castiel held his hands over his heart, the way he had after Dean left his apartment for the last time.

_I'm here for ten more days and everything is fine._

He was startled from his thoughts by his phone vibrating. Castiel was grateful for the small distraction and picked it up to see who'd contacted him. It was a picture message from Meg, who was holding a baggy of weed and smiling broadly, her brown curls messily grouped around her heart-shaped face. The text that accompanied it read, _'Look what I spent ur money on ;P'_

Castiel rolled his eyes and responded, _'You realize i left that for you, right'?_

He got a reply not long after. _'What can I say, wanted an excuse to talk to u. Whats up'?_

_'Nm. Hows Gilda? Did you ever ask Darren what happened?'_


Castiel wasn't so sure, but he didn't know what to say, so he turned his phone off and returned to struggling to fall asleep, his mind whirring faster than it had been before.

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The next week passed much the way the first two days had: Naomi and Anna worked at the lab until late in the evenings, Luke kept himself locked in the guest bedroom, only emerging to wordlessly
make himself meals and to occasionally take short trips around the block, Michael visited briefly once and then twice more, dinners were tense and disquieting. There were times when Castiel wanted to spring questions about Gabriel on his mother, but every chance presented to him seemed to pass too quickly to take advantage of. Beyond that, he wasn't sure what exactly he would ask her, anyway.

So, Castiel slept later than he normally would have, sketched dozens of miniature drawings with ink and oil pastels, walked to the nearby corner-store a few blocks away to buy cigarettes that he smoked by the half-dozen in the yard when his mother wasn't home. All the while, he kept himself from texting Dean, keeping his phone off most of the time even though it also meant he couldn't talk to Charlie or Meg.

Castiel had no real friends he could visit during the long, empty hours he spent alone in the house, having been a shy and home-schooled child most of his life, so he did his best to keep himself entertained. But with each passing day trapped in his hometown, the desire to run as fast and far as he could only grew, an itch under his skin that he couldn't ignore and couldn't get rid of. No matter how many of his old books he re-read and how many things he sketched in his leather-bound book, the aura in the house was suffocating.

Castiel knew that the questions dancing behind the closed lips of both Naomi and Michael were fraught with resentment; he could feel their unspoken words adding to the weight already stacked onto his spirit whenever he was in their presence. Castiel felt almost as if his family viewed him the way they did Gabriel: a defector and a traitor, a son who'd abandoned them in the throes of their grief.

But he was visiting, wasn't he? Wasn't he staying in his mother's house even though the very air circulating through the place made his skin crawl? Castiel wanted to tell them this every silent meal, every time Michael glared at him when he had the audacity to take a sip of his water too loudly.

He was nothing like Gabriel, practically speaking. Gabriel had never cared to be a part of Novak Labs, had never been even remotely good at research the way Castiel, Michael and Luke were. Their father had never paid attention to him the way he did his other sons, and Gabriel had never held up the pretense that he was going places with the family. Even when Andrew Novak had been alive.

Castiel had only wavered after his father's death. Had he not died, Castiel was convinced he would have gone to the local university for research and chemistry, not almost three hours away studying art.

He continually told himself that he didn't have much longer to wait, that Christmas Eve was in less than two days and as soon as he gave his family members their respective gifts and saw them opened Christmas morning, he could drive back to his campus apartment and see Charlie and Meg again.

And Dean.

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The day before Christmas Eve, Anna pulled Castiel into her room after Naomi had gone to bed, saying she had an early Christmas present for him. Castiel couldn't imagine what Anna wanted to give him that she didn't want to hand over in front of the family, and followed her into her bedroom, closing the door behind them.

“Alright, sit down and close your eyes.” Anna whispered, a smile in her voice as Castiel complied.

He heard his sister rummaging around in what sounded like the back of her closet. He kept his hands
folded in his lap and tried not to give in to the temptation to slit his eyes open just the tiniest bit and see what she was doing. In less than a minute more, however, he heard the sound of her light footfalls crossing the room to stand before him.

“Hold out your hands, together,” she instructed. Castiel immediately did, and felt the pressure of what seemed to be a large stack of papers placed upon his open palms.

“Can I open my eyes?” he asked. Anna told him yes.

What he saw upon looking at what Anna had put in his hands was what looked like a hefty manuscript printed on computer paper. It appeared to be a few hundred pages in length, with a homemade cover. The title read *Within the Winding Paths of the Mountains*.

Castiel stared at it, then back up at his sister. “Anna, what is this?”

“It's our book. I finished it,” Anna said.

“Our book? Do you mean...the adventures of Temil and Othras? You wrote the other half?”

“Well, my half is longer than your half by almost fifteen-thousand words,” Anna said, her cheeks flushing.

“When did you do this?” Castiel asked her in happy disbelief, holding the manuscript close and beginning to leaf through the pages.

“Off and on for a while, now. I know you forgot about it, but I've been working on it for a few years.”

Castiel stared in amazement at how intricate the story in his hands had clearly become.

“What happens? Does Temil fight the Dark Queen with Othras in the end? Do they ever find Othras' mother?” Castiel asked, noting with interest the names of the chapters he flipped past.

“You'll find out. This is the only printed copy.”

“Are you going anywhere with this? What I'm seeing so far is great,” Castiel said.

“I'm going to go to school for research,” Anna reminded him, her voice quiet.

“Anna, you don't even like research. You don't like the lab or any of it. I know you and Gabe used to talk about how you'd—”

“It doesn't matter, Castiel. You know I can't find him,” Anna said.

“That still doesn't mean you have to stay here, Anna,” Castiel pressed on, standing up and moving towards her, the book still in his hands. “You've always been a good writer, better than me, and you know it.”

“Castiel, stop. I'm fine here, and it's okay. You of all people should know—”

“Anna, it wasn't your fault. You have to let it go,” Castiel tossed the book on the bed and took his sister gently by her narrow shoulders, making her face him. “You have money, as much as I do, probably more, even. You can go to school for something you want, or...you don't even have to go at all. You can just move out and get a different job.”

“Castiel, stop,” Anna repeated.
“Anna, I couldn't stay, Gabe couldn't stay. If Luke keeps it up he's on the way out, too. You can't keep making excuses and waiting around for someone in this house to tell you that you weren't the reason—”

Anna twisted away from him, mumbling, “I need a cigarette. Leave me alone, Castiel.”

She practically slammed the door behind her as she exited the room, shutting Castiel in with their co-written book. He flinched at the echo of the loud crack, staying where he was. He wasn't planning on following her outside. He knew he'd said enough, too much, even.

Castiel sighed and sat back down on Anna's bed, cupping his head in his hands. The coolness of his fingers was a relief on the hot skin of his cheeks and eyelids. Beside him, their book—no, Anna's book—lay open, the pages settling from the draft the closing door had caused.

After a minute or so had passed Castiel stood up. He closed the book and gathered it in his arms again as he opened Anna's door and began to walk the few feet back to his next-door room. He gasped loudly as he felt a hand touch the small of his back, whipping around to get a look at who had startled him.

“Luke? What's wrong?” he asked, not expecting to see his older brother standing there in the darkness of the unlit hallway, his arms crossed as he leaned against the wall.

“Did you get in a fight with Anna?” Luke inquired innocently, his face inscrutable with so little light cast upon it.

“Why do you care?” Castiel heard himself asking, his voice tense and low.

“Got an attitude now, hmm? I know you didn’t get that from this house. And for your information, brother, I'm not the one you should be asking that question,” Luke sneered. Castiel realized then, as he looked at his brother and his eyes adjusted, that Luke's nose was beginning to bleed, his eyes stark and empty-looking. Luke looked high, and Castiel wished that fact surprised him.

“What do you mean?” Castiel was backing away from his brother, his grip on Anna's book tightening.

“You're the one who left us, Cassie.”

Whatever else Luke said next, Castiel didn't hear it. He turned and strode into his room, locking himself in. He began to throw everything he'd brought home into his open duffel beside the desk, sending a text message to Meg without thinking.

'I'll be back on campus in a few hours. Keep me company?'

Chapter End Notes

Please leave me comments and thoughts!!! =)
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Art by the lovely and talented cecy-barnes included in this chapter! Thank you so much, it's just beautiful!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was raining heavily, and wind buffeted the sides of his car as Castiel made the drive back to campus. Beyond the bridges of the turnarounds the sun was rapidly setting, and when Castiel got the call from Meg he answered it with one hand. He kept his eyes on the long stretch of highway before him as he took his cellphone from the cup-holder.

“Hello?”

“Clarence? You're coming back tonight? Thought you were gonna stay with your family for Christmas.”

“It worked out better this way. We already exchanged gifts,” Castiel lied.

“...Okay,” Meg didn't sound entirely convinced, but asked no more questions, thankfully. She said only, “Well, I'm solo-chilling at the apartment if you wanna come over.”

Castiel affirmed that he did and ended the call, setting his phone back in the holder. He caught sight of Anna's book beyond it, closed and solitary in the passenger's seat. He quickly looked back ahead, feeling shame pour through him like the rainwater collecting on the sides of the road. Anna had called him twice as he drove, the first time almost immediately after he'd begun the trip and the second only a few minutes before Meg's call. He hadn't answered either time.

When Castiel touched down on the university grounds the sun had set completely, and the bright pinpricks of stars were just barely shining through the rainclouds.

Castiel made sure his car was locked after he grabbed his bag from the back seat and slid Anna's book under his jacket, t-shirt and undershirt to keep it dry. He braced himself against the rain and wind as he walked to his apartment, and as he stood before his front door he almost dropped his keys. He managed to catch them before they hit the sopping wet concrete, and fumbled with them for a moment before he was able to enter. By the time Castiel stepped into his apartment he was soaked and trembling as he went back to his room and set his duffel down next to his bed.

He gently took Anna's book out from under his shirt and set it on the desk, praying to a nondescript higher power that it hadn't gotten ruined on the walk over. Castiel sighed with relief upon seeing that it hadn't gotten wet and that none of its pages were so much as bent. He ran a protective hand over its front before turning away and grabbing the Christmas present he'd gotten for Meg weeks ago from his dresser drawer. He left for her apartment after putting it in his pocket.

Castiel was grateful that she only lived a few minutes away as he strode a second time through the grim dark and heavy raindrops.

When he reached Meg's door and knocked, she came and opened it for him almost immediately. He
figured she'd been sitting in the living room again. Castiel wasn't expecting it when Meg came forward and wrapped her arms around his wet frame, her hair soft and warm against his face and neck as she pulled him inside.

“Jesus, you're soaked. C'mon, you can wear something of mine 'til you go home.”

Behind Meg, Castiel could see her colorful bong and grinder on the coffee table beside a stick of burning incense that wove a thin trail of smoke up to the light fixture in the ceiling. The living room smelled like pot and sandalwood. Meg yanked Castiel into her messy bedroom without comment.

Once past the threshold she began to dig through one of her dresser drawers until she found what she was looking for, and pressed a dry t-shirt into Castiel's hands along with a huge pair of pajama pants and a towel. The items were faded and bleach-stained but dry.

Castiel thanked Meg, but wasn't sure what to do when she didn't leave the room to let him change. She simply sat on her unmade bed and watched him where he stood, her eyes sharp.

“You okay?” she asked as Castiel peeled off his wet jacket.

Castiel hesitated, then said, “I have money for bud, if you'd like to throw-in together soon.”

Meg shook her head. “Nah. My ex is my dealer, sells it to me pretty cheap. I can ask him if I can give you his number, though. He always has good shit.”

“I'd appreciate it,” Castiel said before turning and facing the opposite end of the room to take his sodden shirt and blue jeans off. He wasn't very comfortable with the idea of Meg seeing him practically naked, but felt too miserable in his wet clothes to take issue with it.

Castiel stripped himself of both his shirts and then his pants, shuddering as air hit his damp skin. His boxers were wet as well, but there was no way he was even considering taking those off. He dragged the towel Meg had given him over his shoulders, wincing a little at the rub of the terry cloth against his chilled skin.

He jumped in fright when he felt Meg's hand on the center of his back, her fingers splayed wide. His brother had done almost the same thing only hours earlier.

Castiel twisted and faced her, the towel held loosely over his front. He could feel water dripping down his cheeks and eyelids from his wet hair, and wondered what he looked like. Considering Meg was a few inches shorter than him, he had to literally look down at her due to how close she was to him. A tendril of hair had fallen into her face. Castiel wasn't expecting it when Meg took the towel from him and backed away. She dropped it into a hamper in the corner of the room before sitting on her bed again and speaking.

“So, you met Drew at the party? He asked about you.”

Castiel was confused. “Who's Drew?”

“A KA, friend of Milo's, tall, blonde, friendly. Said he met you in the bathroom, you were looking for Gilda?”

Castiel blushed, grabbing the shirt Meg had given him and pulling it over his head to hide the redness seeping into his cheeks. He remembered Drew, and how awkward he'd probably seemed to the fraternity brother, not to mention spacey and rude.

He thought of Gilda, then. “Did Charlie say anything to you before she left?”
Meg shook her head. “Nah. She never does, though. Miss Priss doesn't like me too well.” Her voice was bitter.

“And Gilda...you're sure she's okay?” Castiel asked.

“Clarence, if I had a dollar for every time Gilda got too drunk at a party I'd drop out,” Meg answered.

“Where is she, by the way? Did she go home for the holidays?” Castiel inquired.

Meg nodded, and Castiel said nothing more. Soon he followed Meg into the living room where they both sat on the couch in front of the coffee table. Castiel had Meg’s gift in one hand and was considerably more comfortable in his dry, borrowed clothes. Meg reached towards the bong to load the bowl-piece, but stopped when she noticed the little jar in Castiel’s hand, a clear container painted with floral, organic-looking designs and rich colors.

“What's that?” she asked, her eyebrows knitting together.

Castiel held it out to her, saying, “I got a plain one from Spencer’s and painted it for you. It should be airtight. I figured you could use it for your weed instead of your old prescription bottle. I...uh, forgot to give everyone their gifts before I left to go home.”

Meg took the jar from him and held it in the palm of her hand, the bong momentarily forgotten. She looked at it for so long that Castiel almost asked if she didn't like it. But then she plopped it down onto the table and resumed loading a bowl as if nothing had happened.

Meg took the first hit, leaning back on the sofa to make more room in her torso, her chest and belly expanding as her eyes closed. Faint wisps of smoke unfurled from her nostrils. After exhaling a few seconds later, she idly batted a hand at the fading smoke hanging in the air above her like a cat.


“I'm fine, thank you.” Castiel didn't realize his hands were shaking until Meg handed the lighter and the bong to him after having taken the first hit. His phone was probably ringing in Meg's room again; if he thought about it he could feel the phantom buzz against his thigh.

I need a cigarette. Leave me alone.

You didn't get that from this house.

I'm not an angry person, Cas. I'm not.

Castiel inhaled as deeply as he could, the glass of the bong cool against his mouth while the smoke was warm and heady.

“I wish everything was different,” he said as he exhaled, the words painted with smoke.

“Me, too,” Meg said without inflection, not looking at him.

Castiel slept on the end of Meg’s bed that night, laid out horizontally at her feet like a dog, having fallen asleep after smoking so much that his vision went temporarily gray and he’d had to lie down. Meg had led him through the bedroom doorway, his hand held in hers.

You're greening-out, it happens to everyone sometime, just wait it out, Meg had said, her arms around him again.
The following morning Castiel awoke around nine am and changed back into his own clothes, going over to stand next to the bed and tell a sleeping Meg goodbye. Before he left Meg reached out for him sleepily, grabbing his wrist.

“What're you doing tonight? 'S Christmas Eve,” she said, her eyes swollen as she looked up at him groggily.

“I...I'm not doing anything,” Castiel responded, considering and deciding against asking Meg why she wasn't with her family. She'd been kind enough to leave well enough alone in his case.

“Me neither. If you get bored, hit me up. Oh, and Clarence? Thanks for the present,” Meg murmured, falling asleep again almost immediately after letting his hand fall from her grasp.

Castiel was soon back in his apartment, simultaneously wishing that he'd stayed with Meg a little longer and feeling that he needed to be alone. After showering and getting dressed in clean clothes he stood motionlessly in the bathroom, his wet toothbrush still in one hand.

He knew he needed to call home and give his family an excuse for his sudden departure, a reason. He'd never dared to do anything like that before. Naomi was likely furious with him and confused as to why he was so different from the son she and Andrew thought they had raised; she'd been annoyed enough when he showed a proclivity for art.

Castiel exhaled sharply and dropped his toothbrush into the sink as he accidentally twisted the hem of his shirt so severely he ripped a small hole through its seam.

He made himself stop worrying the fabric and went into the kitchen, turning on the coffeemaker and chiding himself for not having thought to get a new pack of cigarettes on his way home the night before. He could use a smoke, and soon. When the coffeemaker had churned out a full pot Castiel made himself a mugful, adding nothing to the black brew before bringing the cup to his lips and swallowing a few sips. He didn't care that he burned himself in the process.

An hour and a half and two more cups of coffee later, Castiel gave in to the urge to sate his nicotine fix and made the drive to the Wag-a-Bag. The weather was much less severe than it'd been the night before, though it was still very cold. Castiel wore his coat, a sweater and a long-sleeved shirt on his trip out. He'd purposefully left his phone at the apartment when it rang continuously with calls from Naomi, Anna and Michael. He still didn't know what he'd say if he were to answer and wasn't interested in seeing if he could improvise.

While at the gas station Castiel wandered up and down the aisles aimlessly, again twisting the hem of his shirt unconsciously, widening the hole with his thumb as he looked at the sodas and pre-made sandwiches in the refrigerator. The dull, metallic beep of the door opening and closing in the front echoed within the small space, startling Castiel more than once. Seeing as it was Christmas Eve, there were fewer customers making stops in than usual, and there were times that Castiel could hear the beating of his own heart in the intermittent quiet.

He was startled out of his aisle-perusing by the lone clerk in the place approaching him, a bored but good-natured expression on his face and a moth-eaten sweater hanging loosely off of his frame.

“Hey, man,” he said. His name tag read 'Andy' in thick black letters.

“Hello,” Castiel said, a little uncertain as to why he was being addressed.

“Lookin' for anything particular?” Andy asked, his eyes friendly.
“Not really, no.”

“You're a friend of Meg's, right?” Andy inquired, moving a little closer.

“Meg...Masters? Uh, yes,” Castiel said slowly.

“Castiel?”

He nodded.

“Awesome! I'm Andy, I'm a friend of her's, too. She mentioned you. Here, why don't I give you my number? If you're ever interested in uh, pickin' up some herb, I'm your man,” Andy said, his voice significantly lowered by the end.

Castiel's eyes widened, “Oh! You—I understand. Yes, I'd like that.”

Andy scribbled his cell number down on a stray piece of receipt paper after he rang Castiel up for his cigarettes, a sandwich, and a few Monsters at the front counter. He bagged the drinks and sandwich together while sliding the pack of menthols across the counter to him with the paper wrapped around it, telling Castiel to 'get at him' whenever he next ran dry. Castiel wasn't sure what to say, and simply nodded in response before heading out.

Castiel sat in his car for a few minutes outside of the gas station, the piece of paper with Andy's contact information and the blue and silver pack of Marlboros in his lap. He eventually put both in one of the pockets of his coat, starting his car up and heading back to campus.

As he parked, he wondered if Meg talked about him often.

Castiel was pulling the pack of menthols out of his pocket to light one up as he approached his apartment complex, and wasn't expecting it when he saw Dean standing outside his door. He hadn't seen or so much as talked to Dean for almost two weeks, and yet there he was.

The other boy was shivering slightly in the cold beneath his familiar, battered leather jacket, his short hair fluttering in the breeze. His hands were in his pockets, and from the current angle of his body Castiel could just see the bruised jut of his healing collarbone rising from beneath his upturned collar.

Castiel was so taken aback at the sight that he almost dropped his cigarettes; he shoved them back into his pocket as he approached him from behind.

“Dean?” he called out tentatively, his voice small.

Dean heard and turned around quickly, and upon seeing Castiel paused for only a second before he began to walk towards him. The look on his face was one that Castiel recognized. It was the determined expression he wore when he was working through a particularly difficult or time-consuming section of one of his paintings.

“What are you doing here?” Castiel asked, trying to minimize the sound of his chattering teeth as a strong gust of wind suddenly blew through all of his layers.

“I'm here to...to ask if you're spending Christmas here...alone,” Dean said. He stood only a few feet away.

“How did you know I came back?” Castiel asked.

“Meg told Gilda, Gilda told—”
“Charlie,” Castiel supplied, finishing Dean's sentence.

“Do you want to spend Christmas with Sammy and me?” Dean asked, stepping a foot, then two feet closer.

Castiel could feel Dean's body heat radiating off of him, could see the steam of his words in the air. He smelled the way he always did, the scent so steadfast Castiel would know it anywhere.

“I thought you were...I don't know if I should—” Castiel faltered, thinking of the way they'd last parted ways.

As if he were thinking the same thing, Dean shook his head earnestly. “Doesn't matter now.”

“But, I couldn't...your family, Dean. It's fine,” Castiel said. He looked down at the sidewalk beneath his feet and felt the chill of it seeping through his sneakers.

“You shouldn't be alone tonight,” he said to Castiel quietly.

“I'm tired anyway, Dean. I thought I would sleep today.” Castiel tried to sound convincing.

“Dammit, Cas. Would you just come over? I've...Sammy's missed you. So's Bobby. We're working on dinner right now.” The green of Dean's eyes stood out brightly in the dull black-and-white of the winter landscape, and Castiel sensed that the other boy would soon regret having come over to talk to him at all. The thought made Castiel's heart race.

“It's been too long, Cas. It feels weird not seein' you,” Dean admitted.

Castiel felt as though he'd lived this conversation before, perhaps more than once. He looked up and into Dean's face the way he hadn't let himself before. He saw the familiar way one of his front teeth crooked downward, the small crinkles around his eyes. He hadn't forgotten a single detail while he was away.

He answered how he'd known he would as soon as he saw Dean outside of his apartment.

“Oh, Dean. I'll come.”

Castiel went into his apartment to pack an overnight bag and retrieve his phone and the presents he'd gotten a few weeks earlier for Sam, Bobby and Dean. He made sure the coffeemaker was turned off as well as all the lights before meeting Dean outside and heading with him to the Impala, parked a block over. The actions felt so familiar, as if the past two weeks had been nothing more than a strange dream.

The drive to Bobby Singer's was mostly quiet save for the sound of a few familiar Led Zeppelin songs drifting through the space between them. Castiel asked Dean how his collarbone and surgical scar were healing, to which Dean replied that they weren't clearing up as fast as he'd like, and Dean asked how Castiel's time at home had been, to which Castiel struggled with an answer for a few moments before saying only, 'Good'.

When they arrived at Singer Salvage, Castiel was surprised to see that the front of the shop was decorated with festive twinkle-lights and a miniature Christmas tree. As the two of them got out of the Impala, Castiel asked Dean how long the lights had been up. Dean said he and Sam had helped Bobby decorate after the semester let out.

The inside of Bobby's house was just as cheerful, with a large, real evergreen in the center of the living room, its branches weighed down with strings of popcorn and cranberries, multicolored
strands of lights, and bits of red and white ribbon. It was a very traditional-looking tree, with little gaps and imperfections, a stark contrast to Naomi's impeccably-decorated designer tree. There were a few presents beneath it, wrapped prettily in red and green paper, and the rest of Bobby's living room was adorned here and there with red-bowed wreaths and a nativity scene on the mantle above the fireplace. The house exuded warmth, more so even than it had at Sam's celebratory dinner. Castiel could smell baked ham wafting from the kitchen.

“Bobby? Cas's here,” Dean called out. He took Castiel's bag from him without asking.

Castiel heard the sound of the refrigerator door closing and the hiss of a newly-opened beer before Bobby emerged. He was dressed in a flannel button-down and had his graying hair slicked back.

“Castiel,” he said, tipping the beer in his direction. “Glad you could come. We're still workin' on the food, should all be done in a few hours if you want to help us out here.”

Castiel nodded. “Of course. Thank you for having me.”

From the hallway, Castiel heard someone emerge from one of the rooms, and his name was called out by a familiar voice.

“Cas!” Sam said as he entered the living room. “Dean told us he was gonna ask you to come over! Merry Christmas!” He wasted no time approaching Castiel and hugging him. Sam was taller than him by a few inches, and Castiel's face was pressed into his shoulder for a few seconds before he withdrew. Sam's familiar, friendly smile was firmly in place, and Castiel felt a twinge at how happy this house seemed, how light and easy. The only person he could think of at his own home that seemed half as content or easygoing was Tessa, and she didn't even live there.

Dean chided his brother, “Don't scare him off, Sammy.”

Sam grinned and turned to look at Bobby, “Can I have a beer?”

Bobby rolled his eyes. “Not if you're still goin' to see Jessica tonight, ya idgit. Last thing you need is for her parents to smell it on you.”

Sam laughed, clearly having expected the answer he got, and nodded once at Castiel before going into the kitchen, presumably to stir a pot or tend to one of the dishes. Bobby did the same soon after.

Dean waited a moment before gesturing for Castiel to come with him, and he walked after Dean into the hallway. There were photographs hung here and there on the outdated wallpaper, some of Bobby with a young, attractive woman kissing his cheek, a blonde toddler on his lap, or in one case with a much younger-looking John Winchester, raising a beer with him in a toast at a poker table. Castiel looked at them all as he trailed behind Dean, both of their footfalls light on the brown carpet.

Dean stopped at the first room on the right, stepping inside. It was a guest bedroom, with a neatly made full bed pushed up against the far wall and a small dresser next to it. Dean set Castiel's bag on the bed, looking back at him after.

“This okay? I changed the sheets and stuff since I've been staying in here a few days,” Dean said. He lifted his hand to the back of his neck in that characteristic gesture of self-consciousness Castiel had seen before.

“Where will you sleep?” Castiel asked, assuming Sam and Bobby had their own rooms and unsure where Dean would bed down for the night.

“I'll take the couch,” Dean said, waving his question off.
“If you're sure,” Castiel said, looking around the quaint little room.

“I am. I'm—I'm glad you're here, Cas.” Dean touched Castiel quickly, his hand darting across the space between them to grip Castiel's shoulder as if he'd been waiting to do so the entire time. He looked as though he wanted to say something else, but he didn't, and soon he walked back down the hall, leaving Castiel alone in the room.

Castiel looked at his backpack, lone and small in the center of the brown and blue quilt, and then to the window across from it, closed to the wind whistling by outside. He felt his phone begin to vibrate in his pocket and took it out, seeing that he had over eleven missed calls, some from his sister, some from his mother. He slid his phone back into his jeans pocket without calling either of them back, following Dean belatedly back into the living room to see what he could help with.

The next hour went by without incident. Bobby pulled out an ancient cookbook held together by tape, staples and good faith and told Castiel to make chocolate chip cookies based on the recipe inside; Dean stirred and added cream continually to a large pot of mushroom soup simmering on the stove; Sam taste-tested and kept an eye on the ham in the oven.

Castiel hadn't gotten much of a chance to talk to Dean, but they worked comfortably side-by-side at the kitchen counter, Castiel folding together shortening and eggs and Dean grinding fresh pepper and chopping herbs with a flourish. It wasn't unlike when they'd shared a station together, and Castiel felt himself gradually relaxing beside him.

Then the front door opened, and a voice Castiel recognized as John Winchester's sounded through the house.

“I got the eggnog and then some, as requested!”

Dean stiffened a little beside Castiel, his motions becoming somewhat rigid as he lowered his head farther down over the cutting board.

“Dean, you wanna go out back and check on the—” Bobby began, only to be interrupted by the sound of John's boots clunking onto the linoleum of the kitchen floor.

“Dad, Castiel's here,” Sam informed him. Mr. Winchester was holding a brown bag under each arm, his nose too red to be from the cold alone.

“Hello,” John said to Castiel, who responded in kind.

“You have a better semester than this one?” he gestured to Dean with one of the bags, his mirthful tone both inappropriate and strange.

Sam got out only, “Dad—” before Dean hissed in pain and his knife clattered onto the table next to the cutting board.

Castiel put his wooden spoon down, abandoning the bowl in front of him to turn and look fully at Dean, who was holding his hand against his chest. The cut on his pointer finger was bleeding steadily and showed no signs of stopping.

“Shit, get me a paper towel,” Dean grit out. His and Castiel's eyes met before he obeyed and walked a few feet over to grab three or four sheets off the nearby roll. He saw John roll his eyes at the proceedings.

Castiel was not a violent person by any stretch of the imagination, but he very much wanted to wring John Winchester's neck.
Dean took the paper towels from him when he returned and wrapped his hand up, excusing himself to the bathroom to bandage it. He said nothing to his father as he passed him by in the kitchen doorway. Castiel looked at the few droplets of blood that had fallen beside the cutting board, and at the pile of chopped rosemary beside it, vividly green in contrast. Without thinking, he used the end of his sleeve to wipe the blood away.

John sighed. “Boy's so clumsy it's a wonder he c'n work with you, Bobby.”

Bobby turned to look at John, his eyes narrowing and his mouth opening as if he had a few choice words for Dean's father. But he closed his mouth and stared at him for a few moments instead, finally saying, “He does just fine, John... Gimme the eggnog, I'll put it in the fridge.”

In a few minutes more Castiel had finished setting the gobs of cookie dough on their sheet pan and loading them into the oven above the ham, John had left for the dining room and was sitting at the table, a glass of alcoholic eggnog in his hand, Bobby had gone outside to check on something in the shop he said was worrying him, and Sam was silently mashing potatoes, his expression brooding. He turned and looked at Castiel, saying only, “Sorry about that, Cas.”

Dean still hadn't come back from the bathroom, and Castiel felt a knot growing in the pit of his stomach.

He left the kitchen after he'd washed his hands and made his way down the same hallway in which his room was located, remembering from the last time he'd been over which room the bathroom was. He saw a light coming from under the door and knocked tentatively.

“Dean? How's your—”

The door swung open before Castiel could finish his inquiry, and Dean let him in wordlessly, his finger covered with a band-aid.

Castiel stared at him. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, Cas. Just bled a little more than I figured it would,” Dean answered, lowering his bandaged hand to his side. Castiel's eyes followed it.

A few hours later the food was all out of the oven and in serving dishes, and the five of them sat around the table. The tension had lessened somewhat since Dean came back from the restroom, a smile pasted on his lips and a request for a beer the first thing out of his mouth.

John had been drinking the entire time, and rather than getting steadily moodier and ruder the way he had the last time Castiel had seen him at a family dinner, seemed to be acting nicer, telling Dean he ought to relax more often and Sam that he took after his grandfather, which was apparently a good thing. Perhaps it was because it was Christmas, or maybe it was a fluke, Castiel wasn't sure. But Sam, Bobby and Dean all looked relieved, and none of them said anything every time John poured himself another drink.

A few minutes earlier John had taken out his wallet and begun passing around the pictures it contained, the most recent being of Sam and Dean as young children, their arms around each other as they stood in front of what looked to be a run-down motel.

“That was when Sammy was eight,” John said, “I'd just taught the boys to shoot. Naturals, both of 'em.”
“I remember that. We were in Michigan,” Dean said, a mostly-empty beer in front of him on the table as he took the picture from his brother.

“Was that the first or second time we were in Michigan?” Sam asked, looking at John.

“First, I think,” John said as he poured himself more eggnog before dumping a shot of Jack into it.

“You can shoot?” Castiel asked the two brothers, having taken the photo from Dean. Both children in the picture looked tired and unkempt, circles under their eyes and wrinkles in their shirts. It didn’t look like they were hugging so much as clutching at one another.

“Yeah. Good shots, too,” Dean said with a note of pride as he picked up his beer and drained it, getting up to go get another.

When he was back at the table Bobby asked, “Everybody ready for some grub? Should be cooled-off enough by now.”

The answer was a resounding yes, and soon everyone had put together their plates and gotten something to drink, with Castiel having said yes to a beer after Bobby verified he was of age. Sam was the only one without eggnog or beer, sipping on a glass of ice water.

Conversation flowed more easily this time, though Dean was rather quiet, giving Castiel a run for his money as the most antisocial person at the table.

At one point John reached over and ruffled Dean's hair, and Castiel held his breath until John's arm was safely pressed against his own side again.

If Dean flinched before relaxing into the touch, no one mentioned it.

After dinner was over Bobby announced that it was time for a few randomly-selected presents to be opened, and they all moved to sit around the tree in the living room, with John opening himself a beer before settling onto the couch with Bobby and Sam. Castiel and Dean stood beside them. Unable to stop himself, Castiel reached a hand out and lightly pressed it to Dean's elbow. Dean looked back at him, startled, but a small smile crossed his lips.

Bobby declared that since it was his house, he would go first, and unwrapped a new can opener from Sam. Then came John, who opened a Black Sabbath shirt from Bobby and Dean. Dean was next, and received a set of different colored inks and a new pen from Sam and Bobby. Sam went last, and looked dismayed at first when he was given an envelope from Bobby instead of choosing for himself. Bobby was beaming from ear to ear. The envelope he'd given Sam had obviously already been opened by someone, its flaps were ripped and a piece of paper peeked out from its top.

Sam was confused, and took out whatever letter it contained, reading silently to himself for a minute before looking back at Bobby, his mouth hanging open.

“Bobby, I got early acceptance to Stanford!”

“I know that, boy, I'm the one found the letter and read it first,” Bobby said, his voice betraying his pride.

“I can't believe it!” Sam jumped up and hugged Dean, then Castiel, then Bobby, and then his father in quick succession, excitement evident on his face.

“I knew you could do it, Sammy. Now that's something to be proud of,” John said as he embraced his son.
Castiel felt anger flare in him as he looked at John, sensing the joy that had been present in abundance sifting out of the room as the meaning of what he’d said dawned on everyone.

“Dad, I—” Dean started, clearing his throat. But he didn’t say whatever it was he was planning to, instead finishing lamely, “Congratulations, Sammy.”

“Um, well. I need to give Jessica her gift, and tell her about this, of course,” Sam said, looking uncomfortable as he locked eyes with his brother. Bobby and Dean nodded, and John chuckled.

“Atta boy, there, Sammy. You get her something nice?”

Sam nodded. “Dean helped me pick out a necklace for her at the mall. He got something for Lisa, too, Dad.” The last bit was directed at John, who looked surprised for a second, then clapped Dean on the shoulder and hooted.

“Look at that, Dean's got someone, after all! It's about time you found a girl...”

Castiel felt as if the blood was draining from his head, and after telling Sam how happy he was for him, left to go to the bathroom. He heard Dean say his name but didn't stop or turn around.

He sat on the toilet and held his face in his hands. He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, knowing only that he needed to stay seated until he no longer felt like he was going to throw up. He thought of Dean, sitting with him on his couch, his calloused hands framing Castiel's face as their foreheads touched; he thought of the warmth he'd generated beside him in his bed after the nightmare; he thought of orange sheets in a room that could never be.

Dean and Lisa. It makes sense. Dean and Lisa. Dean and—

When Castiel finally stood up again and walked out, he felt as if he was floating. His feet carried him back to the living room without his input. John, Dean and Sam were gone, with only Bobby still there. He sat on the couch with a cup of eggnog in his hand, appearing lost in thought until he became aware of Castiel's presence.

He looked at Castiel and said, “There you are. Sorry, son, Dean had to take John back home for the night and take Sam over to Jess's. He's probably givin' Lisa her present after. You can go on to bed if you want. I probably will in a couple minutes, m'self.”

Bobby got up and stretched, setting his empty cup on the table beside him. “G'night, Castiel. Glad you came over to keep Dean company, I know he appreciated it.”

Before Castiel could ask Bobby what he meant, the older man had gone down the hallway to his room, leaving Castiel alone to stand before the tree.

He sat down on the couch, clasping his hands on his lap not unlike the way his mother had a habit of doing, staring at the tree until the lights and red ribbon blurred into shapeless blotches of color. When his phone began to ring, Castiel answered it without bothering to look at the caller, knowing who it most likely was.

“Castiel? Where are you?” It was Anna.

“I'm near campus, with a friend,” Castiel said.

“I've been worried, and calling you all day! I can't believe you—just listen, Castiel, I told Mother your apartment was broken into and that you had to leave to make sure nothing important had been taken, but she's—they're all angry.”

“I figured. Honestly...I wish I was brave enough to leave, too. But, I'm not.” She sounded sad.

“I'm so sorry, Anna,” Castiel said again, whispering. He wasn't sure what else he could possibly say, but knew he owed her so much more.

“I have to go, Castiel. I hope you're with someone good for you. I'll call you tomorrow...Read our book, it has a happy ending.”

With that, Anna ended the call, and Castiel was left holding the phone to his ear, listening to radio silence and feeling more alone than he had even in his backyard, smoking as he sketched the birds.

Castiel sat on the couch longer than he had on the toilet seat in the bathroom, not moving. When Sam and Dean let themselves into the house half an hour later, they were both red-nosed from the cold. Sam was grinning widely, chattering to Dean about something Jessica had said, and Dean looked distracted, nodding absentely to his brother. The sight of him made Castiel feel as if his guts were falling to the floor.

Neither boy saw Castiel sitting there until he cleared his throat, then they both looked over. Sam checked his watch. “It’s almost eleven, Cas. You gonna go to bed? We get up early for presents here.”

Castiel looked at him and nodded. “I guess I should. Goodnight, Sam, Dean.”

He walked down the hallway as behind him he heard Sam go into the kitchen, likely to get some water or leftovers. He assumed Dean did the same. His backpack caught his eye as he entered the room, and he thought of the presents for the Winchesters and Bobby stored inside it. The thought was a strangely caustic one, as if he'd been betrayed by what the bag held. Castiel pulled his phone out of his pocket and turned it off, sitting on the edge of the bed looking down at the blank screen.

I don't belong here.

“I don't belong at home, either.” The remark sounded strange once said aloud, bleak and prophetic.

“What do you mean?”

Castiel looked up to see Dean standing there, and his stomach lurched terrifically. Dean looked lost, his jacket sliding off of one shoulder and his hair mussed.

“Cas,” Dean stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. Castiel quickly stood up and
walked around the bed, moving to stand in front of the window. He felt better facing away from Dean.

“Lisa's nice, but I don't...it's not that I—”

“I'm sure it was a good present,” Castiel repeated numbly.

When Dean stepped between Castiel and the window, he wasn't surprised.

Dean was so close, closer than he'd been as they talked outside of his apartment. Castiel could feel Dean's breath on his lips the way he'd been able to at the end of finals week as they sat together before he'd left. The similarity of the situations made his heart pound.

“What are you doing, Dean?” he asked, looking into the green eyes across from his. Dean's lips were parted and chapped-red from the weather, his freckles vibrant against the flush across his cheekbones.

“I don't know, Cas. What do I—how do I change things?” Dean whispered.

“I wish I knew what to say, Dean. But I don't know, either.”

Castiel was reaching downwards for the hem of his shirt with both hands to pick at its hem.

“I messed everything up the last time we—” Castiel's voice snagged and he turned away from Dean, who was now so close that at the movement his lips dragged across Castiel's cheek.

“Cas, you didn't mess up, that was me. Whatever's happened, you're good. You always are,” Dean said, reaching up and gently cupping Castiel's chin, moving his head back around.

Castiel gasped at the feeling of Dean's fingers on his face, closing his eyes. “It doesn't matter, Dean. Not now—you...” He couldn't bring himself to say it.

“Open your eyes, Cas,” Dean pleaded.

Castiel did, and tried to back away from the green staring him in the face, swallowing him whole; but Dean held onto him.

“It's not you, Cas. It's...everything else. Every time I'm with you I—I don't wanna leave.”

“I never want you to,” Castiel said, his voice little more than a breath.

Fear and tenderness warred on Dean's face as he leaned inward and pressed his lips to Castiel's.

Castiel's eyes slid closed again as Dean's chest came to press against his, warm and solid. Dean tasted like beer and spearmint and his mouth was soft, so soft.

Castiel was moving forward and wrapping his arms around Dean. He wanted to feel his body enfolded and crushed close to him like a pressed flower in the pages of a book, to hold him tightly and forget everything that had happened that day. He wanted to drown in him.

Dean held him tight, one hand cupping the back of Castiel's head while the other moved to the small of his back, caressing the long line of his spine. Dean was breathing hot into his mouth, and when he bit down on Castiel's lower lip a red-orange blossom of pain flashed through him from the coffee burn still marring the skin there.

But he wanted the hurt.
Castiel would not call this kiss stolen, that implied that it would be his to keep. This kiss was as much his as a library book.

Castiel opened to Dean, who sighed and slid his tongue into the space hollowed for him. Castiel was shaking so hard he feared Dean would notice, but the other boy simply held him closer, his hands somehow possessive and gentle at the same time.

Dean’s phone began to ring then, and he and Castiel parted. His green eyes widened in horror.

“It’s my dad,” he said quietly.

Castiel extricated himself from Dean’s arms, feeling as though he was severing a limb.

“Answer it,” he said, trying to ignore the pain on Dean's face.

Dean brought the phone to his ear after retrieving it from his jacket pocket.

“Dad? Yeah...uh, she liked it...uh, thank you...Yes, sir...I will...see you tomorrow.” He snapped his phone closed and put it back where he’d had it stored before.

“He said he was proud of me,” Dean said, his face disbelieving.

Castiel knew then that whatever had just passed between them, whatever honesty and openness there might have been, was now swept away.

“Cas...” Dean said as Castiel walked over to the bed to open his backpack, digging in it for his gift. Castiel said nothing when he came back to stand before Dean again, his hand outstretched with the gift held in it, a thick book titled *The Work of the Neo-Expressionists: An Overview*.

Dean made no move to take it, staring at Castiel instead.

Castiel finally took Dean's hand and placed the book in it, saying, “I hope it makes you happy, Dean.”

“Cas, please—” Dean started, but Castiel interrupted him.

“Stop talking. I can't. Goodnight.” He was looking down at his feet the way he had outside of his apartment, and after a few moments he heard Dean exhale heavily and leave the room, the click of the door signaling that it was safe for him to look up.

He felt nothing then, blessedly, save for the ache inside of him where once there had been naivety.

As he undressed for the night Castiel spotted the blood on his sleeve from earlier, when Dean had cut himself and he’d wiped up the mess.

Castiel went to bed trying not to think of the red splotches on his sleeve like poppy flowers. He thought instead of how much more he could have said and had chosen not to.

He was grateful for that, at least.
Christmas morning dawned far too soon, it felt, and Castiel sat beside Sam on the couch and smiled whenever he knew he was being looked at.

Bobby and Sam opened the presents Castiel had gotten for them and looked very pleased; he'd gotten a book of tips for incoming college freshmen for Sam and a more modernized Rolodex for Bobby. Dean held up the book Castiel had gotten him when they asked what he'd received from his friend.

From all three of them, Castiel was given a large tube of Cobalt blue oil paint and a book of historic still-lives. But from Dean alone he was given a handmade card painted with a sky full of stars on the front, with the simple phrase thank you written inside. Upon reading the words Castiel's eyes filled with helpless, furious tears, and he couldn't speak. He was only able to nod silently in Dean's direction while he busied himself with putting his gifts back in the bag they'd come in. No one noticed.

After a few hours Castiel managed to casually request that Dean take him back to his apartment, saying that he needed to clean and go grocery shopping. Technically, he wasn't lying. He needed to do both of those things.

Soon after, he bid everyone goodbye and a very merry Christmas, and he and Dean were sitting silently in the Impala as the short drive back to campus passed them by.

When the car was idling outside of Castiel's apartment he began to open the door to get out, but was stopped by Dean's hand on the inside of his elbow. It was a cautious, light pressure.

“Are you...are we still friends?” Dean asked as Castiel turned to look at him.
“I'll always come when you call, Dean,” Castiel said.

“But, I mean—”

“I know what you meant.” Castiel's voice was quiet. “I have to go, Dean. I can't...I need to sleep or something. God, I'm so tired.” His voice broke on the last word.

“I'm sorry,” Dean said, his eyes dull.

“Goodbye, Dean,” Castiel said as he let himself out of the car, walking to his front door without looking back at the Impala or its driver.

A few hours later, after Castiel had smoked the entire pack of cigarettes in one long session, he on a whim decided to log-in to his Facebook profile and see what all, if anything, was new.

He noted with curiosity that he'd gotten a message from a user he wasn't friends with on the site.

From Drew Miller: Hey, man. We met at a party a week or two ago? What's up? You ever find that chick u were looking for?

Castiel recognized Drew as the blonde guy he'd met in the bathroom from his profile picture.

He supposed he should apologize to him for his behavior. He began to type a response, thinking idly to himself that after he messaged Drew back he would call Andy.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave me a comment, thoughts, whatever have you =)
I also just want to say, thank you all so, so much for reading and sticking with me through this long journey =) It means the world.
Chapter 20

Charlie called Castiel the way she'd told him she would a day or two after Christmas.

He was smoking with Meg and Andy when the call came through, settled comfortably on Andy's old, faded floral couch. Translucent clouds of dust rose from the patchy cushions whenever any of them moved, and Castiel secretly felt lucky he didn't suffer from allergies. Andy, it turned out, lived only a few minutes away from the Wag-A-Bag with his fraternal twin brother, Ansem, someone who seemed to be around less than even Balthazar and was apparently the polar opposite of Andy. After Castiel had called Andy to ask if he could buy some weed off of him, the gas station employee invited him over to hang out for an hour or two before he left with his purchase.

Though Castiel felt as though there were few things he was less interested in doing than hanging out with a pot-dealer, especially one he wasn't well-acquainted with, he'd politely accepted Andy's offer. Besides, he told himself, it wasn't as though he had anything better to do besides sleep, smoke cigarettes, and sketch sub-par doodles that he almost immediately threw away, anyway.

Meg was already there when Castiel showed up, sitting on the couch as she and Andy passed a large glass pipe back and forth and watched anime on Netflix. Though Andy hadn't mentioned that she'd be with them, it relieved Castiel to see her. Meg said hello to him and patted the vacant spot beside her on the sofa when he entered the living room, handing him the pipe after he'd taken a seat.

Andy wasn't a terribly talkative person but was exceptionally easy to be around. If Andy had to be characterized as a color, Castiel thought somewhat randomly, he felt he would be a bleached yellow ringed with bright, clear blue. When he tried to picture the color he thought Meg would be, all he could generate in his mind's eye was a fast-moving, opaque off-white, like smoke or fog or both, quickly dissipating into whatever atmosphere it happened to find itself in.

Though Meg had told Castiel that Andy was her ex as well as her dealer, there didn't seem to be much (if any) tension between them; Andy even went so far as to put an arm around Meg when she began to nod off in the lull between episodes and vivid green bowls. Castiel thought of the way Meg had warily watched Darren's every move as he sat beside her before the party, how she'd shrugged him off and the tacit distrust in her actions. The way she interacted with Andy was entirely different, and she showed no discomfort when he supported her drooping head on his shoulder.

“You gotta sleep more. This'll be the second time this week you've crashed on my couch,” Andy joked. Meg opened her eyes and rolled them in Andy's direction.

“Shut up, you like making me breakfast.”

Not long after that was when Charlie rang, and Castiel ducked out to take the call on Andy's front
porch, leaving the other two where they were. He brought his fresh pack of cigarettes outside with him.

“Hello, Charlie,” he said as he struggled to light a Marlboro one-handed while also stoned, balancing the phone between his shoulder and his chin. He finally succeeded and took a drag so deep it burned his lungs. He noticed that the sun was out for the first time that day, dull and wan.

“Hey, Cas. What’s up? Heard you spent Christmas with Dean.”

Castiel took another deep pull of the cigarette held between his fingers, thinking of the book and card Dean had given him, both shoved beneath layers of books and papers in the bottom-most drawer of his desk. They might have been radioactive for the harm that even their hidden presence was causing him.

“I did. How’s your holiday? Are you still training the kitten?” he asked.

“She’s alright, fast learner. I’ll be sad to leave her here. Speaking of, why’d you leave your family? Gilda never said if Meg told her why you came back.”

“I left because I had things to do here,” Castiel lied.

“You did? Alright, I guess. Well, hon, I called to talk about Gilda and...you know.”

“Is she feeling better?” Castiel asked.

“Yes. No. Technically, yes, but not—well, she’s okay. The thing is, Darren didn’t hurt her,” Charlie said.

“Are you saying someone else did?” Castiel asked, concern making his stomach churn.

“Listen, don’t go around telling anyone else this, and I mean that, but when Gilda and I were first dating she went to a party at Pike house, didn’t get home until the next morning. I asked where she’d been, she said she’d fucked someone, so we broke up. I was pissed, didn’t bother asking her the how or why. A few weeks ago she told me the truth, and I—well, I—it turns out, when she went to Pike that night, she was...she didn’t want to have sex with him, but he—well, I think you can guess. It was a senior, and he’s gone now. But...she’s not really the same person anymore, not since that happened.”

Castiel froze at the words, feeling a sick, crushing swell of dread and sympathy at the news.

“I’m so sorry, Charlie. Did Darren—”

“No. He just got handsy and she was scared.”

“That’s awful,” Castiel said, feeling he should have something more meaningful to say but not knowing what that could be. He wondered if Meg was aware of Gilda’s assault, but knew he couldn’t ask after Charlie had cautioned him to keep the information to himself.

“It is what it is,” Charlie said bitterly. “I was the one who assumed she cheated and left her.” She seemed to take a few deep breaths before saying, “Anything go down with Dean and John?”

“I wish Dean’s father would drink himself to death already,” Castiel said, imagining a flowering vine blooming inside of John, eating through his organs and wrapping itself around his heart. He flicked ash from the tip of his cigarette.
When Charlie exhaled sharply on the other end of the line, Castiel realized what he'd said.

“I don't wish—I don't know why I said that, I don't want that,” he managed to get out.

“Are you okay, Cas? I meant to ask the last time I saw you, but I was so busy with Gilda. Be careful mixing substances, dude.”

“I will be,” Castiel said.

“Will you call me if you need anything?”

“Yes. When are you getting back?” he asked his friend.

“Next week.”

“Good, I—I miss you,” Castiel said, wishing he could tell Charlie everything that had happened.

“I miss you, too, Cas,” Charlie sounded surprised.

“Listen, I have to go, Mom's calling. Tell Dean to text me back, I think something's up,” Charlie said.

“I'll try,” was all Castiel said in response before Charlie ended the call.

As Castiel finished smoking his cigarette the sun began to shine, more brightly than anything had a right to before January.

When he went back inside, Andy was no longer in the living room and Meg was checking her phone, a curl of smoke issuing from her mouth as she texted someone.

“Was that Dean?” she asked Castiel, looking up at him after she closed her phone and set it down on the table beside her.

The question had a blunt, graceless weight to it that cleaved him where he stood. Castiel exhaled shakily. It'd felt easier with Charlie, she wasn't in front of him; he wasn't seeing Dean's name on her lips.

“What's up?” Meg asked, standing and walking towards him.

“He kissed me,” Castiel said, making himself look away from her. He held an open palm out for the pipe Meg was still holding. She handed it to him without comment, and he torched the still mostly-full bowl, taking a hit so heavy that he coughed violently for a minute before his lungs settled.

The desire to cry subsided as the effects of the weed worked their way through him in soft, pulsing waves. Soon enough, all Castiel felt was a sky-blue apathy that poured itself down the line of his body. He knew the respite wouldn't last long, but intended to follow its cerulean trail as long as he was able.

“He kissed you?” Meg asked when Castiel finally looked at her again.

He nodded. “I wish he hadn't.”

“I thought you had it bad for him. Why aren't you happier?” Meg looked incredulous as she sat back down and began to load another bowl, this one from her own stash.

“It was a mistake. He's dating Lisa,” Castiel said, distantly proud of how uninterested he sounded.

“What the fuck? No way. Are you sure——”
“Yes, Meg. I am.”

“I thought he liked you,” Meg mused, taking the first hit from the fresh bowl and passing it over to him.

“Not enough,” Castiel said, feeling a caustic edge before he lit the bowl for himself.

“That blows, didn't think he was the type. But shit happens, Clarence.” Meg took the pipe from him.

“It was a mistake,” Castiel said again.

“Did he say he was sorry?”

“Does it matter?”

Meg shrugged. “I guess not.”

Before either of them could say anything else, Andy re-entered the room, the flush of a toilet echoing in the hallway behind him.

“What'd I miss?” he asked as he sat down on the couch again, smiling at them.

“I gotta get going, guys,” Meg said suddenly, as if she'd just remembered something she had to do. She slipped her feet into her shoes and slung her bag over her shoulder, briefly hugging Andy goodbye and ignoring the startled cant of Castiel's head as she touched his shoulder.

“Call me, fuck knows I'll be bored out of my mind 'til classes start again,” she said to them before letting herself out without another word.

“What was that about?” Andy asked as he started to weigh out heavily crystallized nugs of pungent-smelling weed on a small scale on the end of the table.

“I'm not sure,” Castiel said as he sat back down beside Andy, well and truly stoned now.

Andy laughed. “She does that a lot.”

“How long have you known her?” Castiel asked.

“Since she came here for school a couple years back. She got my number from a friend, and the rest is history.” Andy smiled, “She's one of my best friends. She's a little tough, but she's alright. Don't let her fool you.”

Castiel had a hard time imagining Meg being anyone's best friend, but didn't disagree.

“She's consistent,” he relented.

A few minutes later he was bidding Andy goodbye and making the short drive back to his apartment, his weed in one pocket and his cigarettes in the other.

After he let himself in, Castiel turned his phone off and put it under his pillow before going back outside to take a walk, still high and wanting to move around some.

He knew Charlie wanted him to call Dean and ask him to contact her, but also knew he wouldn't be doing so. He knew Gabriel was somewhere in Chicago, but not how to find him. He knew John Winchester was proud of Dean for a lie after all of the truths his son had spent a lifetime breaking his back over.
Castiel kicked at a crack in the sidewalk so hard that a chip of cement broke off and flew through the air to land a few feet away, its jagged edge glinting in the midday December light.

***

The next week passed mostly without incident. Castiel smoked and slept too much or too little and drank coffee at all hours of the day, Charlie sent him pictures of the cat she had to leave behind in a matter of days, Anna called to say hello, Meg came over and smoked with him while they had meaningless conversations, Balthazar returned from Arizona and promptly slept for two days straight, Castiel finally gathered the courage to call Naomi and recite the apology he’d rehearsed. He wasn’t looking forward to the interaction, but knew his mother deserved to hear him say he was sorry, if no one else in the family did.

He smoked a bowl from the homemade water-bottle bong he’d fashioned before dialing her number, pacing back and forth next to his bed as the phone rang.

“Your apartment isn’t damaged, Castiel?” Naomi asked him curtly once she’d answered and they’d exchanged very brief pleasantries.

“It’s all right, I had everything of value with me when they broke in,” he lied. “I’m sorry I missed Christmas day. Did everyone get my presents? I left them in my room.”

“Yes, Anna handed them out. Yours should be in the post. Thank you for the subscription to BioChemistry Monthly, I’ve been meaning to subscribe for a while, now.”

An awkward stretch of silence passed between them before Naomi said tentatively, “You know, Castiel, I still think your help is needed at the lab, with us. I know you like to paint, but think of how much good you could do. I still have the paper you wrote on advanced genetic theory here, it competes with some of the things Michael writes.”

Exasperation flared in him at the calculated flattery, and he ignored what she’d said, asking instead, “Is Luke alright, Mother?”

“He, ah, he had to be returned to the facility after Christmas. It seems he isn’t fully recovered yet.” Naomi sounded as though it hurt her to talk about Luke, and Castiel felt an almost shameful satisfaction.

Before he could think better of it, he forged ahead. “Have you heard from Gabriel since he left? I’ve been thinking about him lately.”

“Castiel, it’s best if I go, now. Your brother is sick and he’s staying at the house. Please call back later.”

“No you mean Michael? Is he—” but Naomi had already hung up.

Castiel felt pitted and open as he sat holding the phone, not vindicated.

***

Castiel was flying, his arms outstretched as he swam through a milky sky, laden down around him with the density of coming rain and knowing that soon it would come, and soon he’d be swept away by it—

He woke up his phone going off where it lay on his bedside table, its screen casting blue-white light on the wall beyond and the ceiling. Castiel groaned and rubbed his eyes, reaching for it and
expecting Meg to be the caller. She had a habit of calling him up at odd hours to ask if he wanted to smoke a bowl or two with her, and the aimless days of Christmas break had done nothing to improve that inclination.

It was almost three-thirty in the morning judging from his alarm clock, and Castiel felt a wave of heat and nausea pass over him as he saw that it wasn't Meg calling, but Dean. He debated ignoring the call altogether, torn between the desire to hear Dean's voice and sheer self-preservation.

But his body chose for him, and he was bringing the phone to his ear after a few rings more. He said nothing after pressing the little green accept button, waiting for Dean to speak first.

“Cas?” Dean sounded strange and heavy, the way John did after a few beers.

“Yes, Dean?” Castiel said.

“I—I just wanted to ask how you were.” Dean was definitely drunk.

“Fine. Are you drinking?” Castiel asked, tasting bile in the back of his throat as the memory of Dean pressed against him in Bobby's spare room came rushing back to him, unbidden.

“Jus' a little,” Dean said, sounding more like he'd downed half a bottle on his own.

“Well, you've asked how I am, and it's late,” Castiel said briskly, feeling as if his heart was close to hammering out of his chest. He wondered if his mother ever felt this way, if it sometimes took as much out of her to keep her voice cool and tall and impartial.

“I don't think Dad's feelin' well,” Dean slurred, and Castiel heard something clank loudly on the other end of the line, as if Dean had dropped something.

“Does he need to see a doctor?” There concern crept in, and Castiel detested himself for it.

“Won't go, says he's okay. Listen, Cas, 's not why I called, though, I wanted to talk to you about—”

At that Castiel hung up, shoving the phone down beneath the covers and feeling a perplexed kind of guilt wash over him. He wished Dean hadn't called at all and at the same time that he would call back.

But when Dean did, only a few minutes later, Castiel left his bedroom and made himself a cup of coffee at a quarter to four. He held the hot cup between his hands and looked out the window into the early-morning darkness beyond.

He wished he could spread his arms and swim through the sky as he had in his dream, but the thought of flying too far away to help Dean if he truly needed it made him sick, and he went back into his room to smoke. He told himself that it wasn't because he wanted to be close to his phone.

Dean didn't call back a third time.

***

When Charlie returned to campus the next day Castiel almost didn't get her text, having spent an hour looking for his phone before finding it lodged between the sofa cushions in the living room. He rolled his eyes, unable to remember when he'd even sat on the couch long enough to have left it there.

When Castiel called her in response to her message he offered to help her unpack if she needed it and
keep her company a few hours. Charlie instantly accepted, and within a couple minutes Castiel was on his way to see her after having reapplied his deodorant.

Castiel was surprised when he first saw Charlie: she'd cut her formerly long red hair to only a little longer than her ears. It was cute, and 'a hell of a lot easier to maintain', as Charlie informed him breezily when he asked about the change. Other than the haircut, Charlie seemed the same as she'd been before the break, and soon dragged her friend to sit with her around the coffee table as she set up a new game of Magic.

“I doubt I'll have improved any, I haven't played since last time,” he informed her, but Charlie laughed and shook her head.

“That isn't the point, hon.”

Castiel nodded in agreement, then said, “Alright, but first let me give you your Christmas present.”

Charlie shook her head. “I only got you a card.” She sounded guilty, and Castiel reached out and touched her arm.

“That's fine, I don't want anything else.”

He meant it sincerely. If he was honest with himself, the idea of anyone giving him another present made him sad. But he soon pressed the thought from his mind and dug in the pocket of his hoodie, closing his hand around the card that contained Charlie's gift, a prepaid card for Jerry's Art-a-Rama in town along with a small collection of coupons for the store.

Charlie took the card from him tentatively, a faint smile on her lips as she opened it. When she saw what it contained, she thanked Castiel enthusiastically, throwing her arms around him and holding him tightly for a second.

“Thanks, Cas. I actually was just wondering how I was going to afford more paint.”

“The struggle,” Castiel said with a smile that felt real. He'd missed Charlie.

After that they sat across from each other at the table and began their game. Castiel, predictably, lost more than once over the course of a few hours. He laughed as Charlie stood up and did a little victory dance, playfully sticking her tongue out at him.

“Such a gracious winner, m'lady,” he joked as Charlie turned and went into the kitchen.

“How about a Blue Moon to celebrate my victory?” Charlie asked.

“It's too early for—oh. I didn't realize it was dark out,” Castiel said as he stretched and peeked between the blinds.

“It's easy to lose track of time when classes aren't in session,” Charlie said sympathetically over the clinking sound of the beer bottles she was taking from the fridge.

“I didn't check the time before I came over, and Balthazar isn't in,” Castiel admitted as he sat down on the couch.

“Been busy, then?” Charlie asked, carrying the bottles into the living room.

Castiel looked down at his feet, waiting a moment before answering her. “Not busy so much as tired.”
Charlie handed him his Blue Moon, the bottle already sweating. The bright smell of the hops was a welcome change from the jet fuel he'd been consuming for sustenance the past week.

“Castiel?” Charlie asked, her voice gentle enough to make his stomach drop.

“Will you be doing an independent study with Harvelle?” he changed the subject.

“I will be, yeah. Dean is, too. He didn't tell you?”

“I guess he forgot.” Castiel took a substantial sip of his beer.

“Are you taking one? I'd be surprised if Harvelle didn't hound you into it.”

“I am,” Castiel conceded.

“Are you gonna do more of your little studies?” Charlie moved closer to him on the couch, and Castiel noticed that he'd been speaking too quietly.

“Uh, yes. I will be.” Castiel didn't see the point in telling Charlie the truth, that in fact he was having immense amounts of trouble deciding what sorts of objects and ideas he wanted to utilize for his independent study. He felt completely adrift in regards to what he wanted to paint next, a problem that was relatively new to him.

“Cas?” Charlie said.

Castiel looked up at his friend, seeing the concern on her face and unsure how it made him feel.

“Are you sure you're okay? You seem...different. I don't know.”

In that moment, Castiel imagined himself telling Charlie everything, about Luke in rehab and Anna who was still at home and his dead father who somehow continued to run the show and Gabriel. He even imagined telling her about Dean, how he'd kissed Castiel and how good it felt at the time.

But he knew he wouldn't, and Castiel voiced the only other truth that he could spare. “I don't know if I'm good.”

Charlie looped her arm around him and pressed him to her side. “What makes you think that?”

Castiel took a breath. “I don't want to complain.”

“Listen, honey. People who stop caring whether they're good or not are bad, Cas, not people who beat themselves up over it,” Charlie said seriously.

“I—I care about someone, and they...they don't—” Castiel took another drink before continuing. “I don't know how to stop feeling the way I do, and I feel like, if I was good enough, they'd like me as much as I like them.”

“You can't define yourself by how other people treat you.” Charlie's voice was tinged with pain.

“What hurts the most is that they would be worth all of it,” Castiel whispered.

“If they are, they'll see how worth it you are,” Charlie said in turn, tightening her arm around Castiel for a moment before releasing him.

“I wish circumstances were different,” Castiel said.
“You're a good guy, Cas. I know you might not think so, but I'm not friends with people who aren't.”

Castiel looked at the dregs of the beer in his hands, wishing he believed Charlie.

***

The day before the Spring semester began, Castiel awoke from a dream in which he and Gabriel sat in the blue and gray seats of an airplane. Both of them were young and clambering to get a good look out the window as the plane began its trek down the runway. Gabe was in the seat nearest it and Castiel was in the middle; the outermost seat held Andrew Novak, who was already silently dozing after having taken his customary muscle relaxants and his Xanax. His usually stern face was lineless and calm.

Gabriel was staring raptly out the window as the midday sunlight poured through it, highlighting the worn surface of the tarmac. Castiel had one hand clasped on Gabriel's shoulder, his chin resting on the back of his knuckles as he looked with him. They marveled as the plane began to lift off of the ground.

In a surreal, shortened second the plane was sailing over matchbox cars, neat squares of green and black and the gray and red roofs of houses. Not long after that they were ascending still higher, soaring above the thick downy clouds of pearl-white with spidery kohl veins, little pockets of storm in the otherwise peaceful hills of ivory.

Gabriel had looked back at Castiel, leaning in and whispering, “One day I'm gonna fly away on one of these forever, okay?”

When Castiel woke up, he found he couldn't remember if the incident had ever actually occurred.

He turned over onto his side in the bed, his sheets as wrinkled and unmade as they'd been since he came home on Christmas Eve.

He missed Gabriel so much it hurt.

Gabriel, Castiel would have told everything, down to the last meaningless detail, without compunction.

***

When he logged in to Facebook to respond to Drew's latest message (they'd been talking off and on since Christmas, and though he wouldn't easily admit it, the contact bordered on flattering) one of the first things Castiel saw was that Dean had changed his status to 'In a Relationship with Lisa Braeden'.

Castiel went out to smoke three or four cigarettes after that, alone in a corner of the courtyard as a cold tear made its way down his cheek.

When Castiel came back inside he found Drew had politely asked for his phone number. Angry and hurt, he gave it without a second thought.

Chapter End Notes
Thoughts and comments so very appreciated!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who waits patiently for me to update! I apologize for the delay, I'll be totally honest: I just started working again and for whatever reason am also experiencing bad chronic fatigue, so it's been hard for me to get as much done in a day as I usually would be able to. But I hope you enjoy this chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Spring semester began with little fanfare, unlike the Fall semester with its freshman-safety seminars and and pent-up energy still surging through the campus from the golden Texas summer. Most of the student body looked the way they felt as they collectively trudged to their classes on Monday: cold, worn-down, and sleep-deprived.

During the November registration period Castiel had signed up for another art history course, the independent study with Harvelle, a print-making class, and a Black literature class. The independent study was scheduled to meet once a week for critique on Monday from noon to three-thirty, the art history class was on Mondays and Wednesdays, and the Black literature class and print-making courses fell on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The night before, Castiel hadn't been able to sleep longer than a few hours at most. He'd woken often enough that he'd finally given up the ghost and left his room to take a walk around campus at about five in the morning. He'd met a member of the campus police force while traversing the golf-course beyond the soccer field, having taken a pit-stop to sit in the gazebo and watch the sun come up. The uniformed man had asked him why he was out and about so early, his expression one of tired wariness behind a pair of sunglasses. Castiel imagined his looked similar. He'd told the officer he liked to get an early start the first day of each semester.

Castiel had breathed a sigh of relief when the cop drove away on his golf-car, feeling the weight of his pipe in his pocket.

Now it was almost noon and Castiel was pacing nervously, not unlike the way he had before his first trip to the Fine Arts Building a semester previous. A gnawing in the center of his chest plagued him at the thought of going back to the painting studio. As he pulled on his sweater and shoes for the second time that day he thought of his sister, missing her and making a mental note to call her later when he'd been to all of his classes.

The walk to the FAB at a quarter to noon was an unexpectedly refreshing one, the air crisping around faded yellow breaths of warmth that had grown stronger as the day wore on. It was beginning to feel more like mid-January every passing day. The stinging, fitful rain had begun to taper off within the last week, and soon the trees would begin to lose their layer of wind-toughened skin and grow their leaves and blossoms again.

When Castiel arrived at the studio he made his way to his space, finding it as immaculate as he'd left it almost a month before, with its neat piles of paint-tubes, its stacks of vellum and paper, and his completed works leaning against the far wall. A sour taste filled Castiel's mouth as he saw that Dean's things were still present on the opposite side, as scattered and disorganized as ever.
Castiel set his things down in his chair before crossing to the front of the room and gathering with the other painters already present before the power point screen. They were two girls he knew by first name but wasn’t personally acquainted with, and he politely responded when they told him hello before they began to talk to each other again, all of them waiting for Harvelle and the rest.

Soon Charlie made her entrance, excitedly hugging Castiel and taking her place beside him as Harvelle arrived from the side entrance to the studio attached to her office. She smiled warmly at the four students already present and checked her watch, rolling her eyes as she commented that they had a few stragglers, as always.

Not long after Harvelle's observation, Dean, with Lisa in tow, appeared with a clang as the heavy door closed behind them. Castiel felt a weak shock upon seeing Lisa; he hadn't been aware that she'd be taking an independent study that semester as well. She had a gentle arm around Dean, who appeared distracted. Castiel saw his green eyes rove the room, taking in first their shared space and then Castiel himself, where his gaze stopped. Lisa looked beautiful and happy, her long hair french-braided down her back and her smooth cheeks attractively flushed. She was smiling at Dean and saying something quietly to him as she dropped her hand from his shoulders to casually interlace her fingers through his.

Castiel felt himself begin to sweat beneath his shirt, and knew the back of his neck would soon be a brilliant red.

Charlie didn't seem to notice how Castiel had stiffened by her side or Dean's subtle uneasiness, and waved the new couple over to stand beside them.

“I didn't know you two were together!” she said to Dean and Lisa, a slight undercurrent of suspicion present in her voice that one might have missed had they not known her well.

Lisa laughed. “It's a recent thing. We went out a few times over the break and...the rest is history, I guess.” She looked toward Dean, who nodded and smiled. The grin didn't extend past his lips.

Dean looked directly at Castiel again, as he had when he first entered the room. He had a fading bruise on one corner of his full mouth, and a scabbed-over cut ornamenting his left eyebrow. Clearly, even John's pride hadn't exempted Dean from his abuse.

“Cas, did you know about this?” Charlie asked Castiel, touching his elbow and dragging him back into the conversation.

“It's on Facebook,” Castiel said. Dean flinched as if Castiel had screamed at him.

Seconds later Lisa began shushing them all as Harvelle bid them to sit down and listen to the introductory lecture on the independent study rules and overview.

Castiel promptly took a seat next to Charlie before anyone else could; she unknowingly acted as a buffer between him and the couple still holding hands on the other side. Castiel attempted to take notes as Harvelle spoke, but found it hard to stop himself from looking over to where Lisa's fingers were intertwined with Dean's. Her skin was a shade darker than his and smooth where his Dean's was mottled with scars.

Harvelle seemed to be in a charitable mood that day and did something Castiel had never known her to. She informed the students after the lecture ended that if they wanted, they could leave early. Castiel found himself thanking whatever deity existed for the small mercy, and began to walk briskly back to his space. He put his notebook back into his book bag, along with his pencil.
Castiel stopped when he felt a light hand on his arm. Expecting it to be Charlie, he turned to face her only to find that it was Dean. He was separated for the first time that hour from Lisa.

“Hey, I uh, just wanted to ask if it's okay that we're sharing the cubby,” Dean's hand was still on his shoulder.

Castiel tried not to look at the bruise on Dean's face.

“I don't see why it wouldn't be,” he responded, focusing on a detail of his bag closure and wondering why Dean was still holding on to him.

“How are you?” Dean asked.

“I'm well,” Castiel said, unsure if he should say more or leave it at that.

“It'll be cool to see more of your stuff this semester,” Dean said, inclining his head toward Castiel's finished works behind them.

“Likewise,” Castiel said slowly, not knowing where their conversation was going.

“Sam asked after you yesterday, I was wondering if maybe you'd want to come over and—”

“Balthazar needs help with something, Dean, I have to go.” The lie was blatant.

“Cas.” Dean's voice had dropped, and his fingers dug bluntly into Castiel's arm.

The hurt in Dean's voice almost made Castiel stop, but he didn't, instead mumbling, “I'm sorry, Dean.”

He shrugged his hand off and left.

He heard Lisa call Dean's name as behind him the studio door closed with a metallic thud.

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Castiel had been to all of his classes by Tuesday evening and decided that the Black literature class was shaping up to be his favorite of the bunch. It was taught by an intensely likable professor, Dr. Missouri Moseley, a woman who had doctorates in both American history and Black literary studies. She was from the first a formidably strident and complex lecturer, and seemed like a no-nonsense instructor who knew all of her points and takeaways like the back of her hand. Castiel hadn't read much in the way of Black literature beyond an unintentional foray into *The Color Purple* when he was a teenager, and was looking forward to gaining a new perspective of the genre.

To compound his interest in the class, one of the first things that Castiel had seen upon walking into the lecture hall was none other than the tall, blonde-haired fraternity brother who'd been messaging him since Christmas, Drew Miller. As it turned out, he was enrolled in the course for a general-education credit, the same as Castiel.

Drew smiled and waved at Castiel when he saw him, beckoning him over as they situated themselves next to each other at one of the rows of desks. They chatted until Dr. Moseley called for quiet, though Castiel saw Drew glance over at him out of the corner of his eye more than once as the next hour passed.

When the class ended and both boys stood up to leave, Castiel was surprised when Drew stopped him to ask if he could text him.
“Don't you have my number?” Castiel replied, feeling as though he was missing something.

Drew smiled. “Yeah, just figured I'd ask.” His grin gently creased the tanned apples of his cheeks, and his light hair fell into one of his eyes, green and blithe in a way that Dean's had rarely been.

Castiel felt his chest tighten at the uninvited comparison, and he nodded quickly. “Sure. I have to go, Drew.”

He slung his bag over his shoulder and left after that, nodding again as Drew called after him, “See you Thursday!”

A few hours later found Castiel sitting in his room, a cup of coffee in one hand and Anna's book open in his lap. He had become absorbed in it, putting off the short readings he'd already been assigned in Moseley's class to delve into the story he was remembering more and more of as he read.

The setting of the story he and his sister had conceived of as children was a quasi-modernized medieval fantasy world. In it, two young boys, Temil and Othras (runaways from the outskirts of one of the poorest villages of the North-Eastern hemisphere) traveled together looking for their parents while they rapidly became further and further entangled in a plot of the evil Queen's along the way by sheer happenstance.

He was startled out of an extended monologue voiced by Queen Lumina herself by the sound of his phone vibrating loudly on the bedside table. Wary of who might be contacting him, he waited for a moment before retrieving it, having wanted to make sure it was only a text rather than an incoming call. It turned out to be Drew, however, and Castiel opened the text message, curiosity getting the better of him.

Castiel?

Hello, Drew.

Howre you?

Alright, procrastinating. You?

Busy. Planning a mixer with TriDelta here and the budget is a nightmare.

I'm sorry.

Its ok, its like this every yr.

Not knowing what to say in response, Castiel turned his phone off and tried to resume reading his and Anna’s book. But after only a few minutes he found he couldn't seem to get back into the story, and went outside to have a cigarette. Smoke filled his lungs as he breathed in deeply, tilting his head back in the faint, dusky violet of the setting sun.

In the neighboring courtyard Castiel saw two people holding hands as they walked across to one of the apartments, silhouetted starkly as they leaned in to talk to one another, their voices lost in the breeze.

Castiel put his spent cigarette out beneath the toe of his shoe and looked down at his empty hands.

***
The rest of the first week of classes went by as smoothly as could have been expected: Professor Moseley had started them reading the most notable essays of W. E. B. Du Bois; in art history they were beginning by discussing the art of pre-revolutionary France; in print-making they were still learning about the historical import of prints and the most common types made. The independent study, on the other hand, had been something Castiel was willfully avoiding. He knew he needed to begin constructing his small canvases and picking out objects to collect and arrange as per the hypothetical list he'd made the previous semester. However, he felt, if anything, that he was more creatively blocked five days into the class than he'd been over the break.

The first Friday of the semester was simultaneously one of shared relief and dread across campus. It was both the first sanctioned respite and for many the first instance of mindful procrastination. Castiel spent most of his avoiding his assignments, appropriately.

When he got a call from Meg around six asking if he wanted to come over and hang out with her, Gilda, and Andy, he accepted the invitation without much convincing.

After shrugging on his customary cardigan and slipping what was left of his bud into one of its pockets, he left for her and Gilda's apartment. Castiel was relieved that he had something to do on an evening otherwise destined to be a solitary one. Balthazar had told Castiel goodbye and winked at him as he left an hour or so earlier on the arm of a very pretty blonde, and Charlie had texted earlier in the day to inform him she'd gone to Dallas for the weekend to play DND with a few friends.

When Gilda answered the door to let Castiel into Meg's apartment, he was taken aback to find that not only were Andy and Meg settled on the couch in the living room toking, but Arnold was, too. He was talking animatedly with Andy, and the two were standing close enough together that Castiel would have guessed they'd met before.

Arnold smiled widely when he saw Castiel, excusing himself from Andy's side to come over and give him a hug, pulling away and holding him at arm's length. He asked questions rapidly, “How was your break? What did you do? How are your classes?”

Castiel answered as thoroughly and quickly as he could, talking about his classes and pretending that he had some semblance of an idea in regards to his independent study.

Arnold listened excitedly, his expression politely rapt as he nodded at the appropriate times. When Castiel began to run out of things to say Arnold looked him up and down, his chin in his hand and his brow furrowed, before squealing, “I like the grunge look on you!”

Castiel was confused. “Sorry, what?”

Arnold gestured to his face, and then his hair. Castiel felt his face flame when he realized what the Iota brother was referring to. Castiel had been noticing how long his hair was growing but hadn't bothered to actually drive to the nearby Great Clips and get it cut, and he'd been unintentionally sporting a stubbled jawline more often than not the past few weeks. He hadn't given any thought to how noticeable these changes would be to others.

“Oh, I—yes,” he said, trying and failing to sound confident.

Arnold laughed awkwardly then, realizing his faux-pas too late. Meg said from across the room with a whistle, “It's true, Clarence, but you look good a little bit shaggy.”

She winked at Castiel from beside Gilda, and he took the opportunity to venture over to where they were and ask Gilda how her vacation had been. Charlie's ex seemed as out-to-lunch as ever, a beer in one hand and the pipe she'd just been passed in the other. Her long, wavy hair was disheveled, and
her cheeks more hollow than they'd been in recent memory.

“I'm good, thanks for asking,” she said to Castiel with a quick smile before exhaling a large plume of smoke to take a swallow of her Miller Fortune. Castiel was far from convinced.

Arnold had gone back to talking to Andy in Castiel's absence, and after a few minutes pulled two crisp twenties out of his back pocket to hand them to the dealer. In turn, Andy gave him a bag of green tied-off with a rubber band. Arnold began to say goodbye to everyone after that, kissing Meg and Gilda breezily on the cheek before nodding to Andy and coming over to Castiel.

“I'll see you around,” he said. “If you ever need to talk, you know where to find me.” With that, Arnold left.

The rest of the evening was a relaxed one, with several more beers consumed, YouTube videos watched and laughed at, and bowls smoked. Castiel bought another gram of pot from Andy while he was over, having smoked the last of his with them and not wanting to go home empty-handed when all was said and done.

Andy was as good-natured and level as ever, and as he had before seemed to soften Meg until she melded against his side. The bare skin of her arm was where Andy chose to rest his head, her fingers carding through his hair seemingly without much conscious thought. Castiel didn't say much over the course of the night, sitting beside his friends attempting to bask in the almost phosphorescent energy that surrounded Andy and Meg. He suspected that Gilda was trying to do the same thing. She, like Castiel himself, didn't smile whenever she thought she wasn't being looked at, staring somberly ahead while she used both hands to clasp the beer bottle in her lap.

When the room around him began to feel too hot, too close, and too loud, Castiel told the other three that he was going to go outside and have a cigarette, and they soon lost interest in him as he took a beer out to the courtyard in Meg's apartment complex.

The moon was a bright orb in the sky above him, blue bled through with white and gray and edged with a deep purple. Castiel looked up at it with wide eyes after he'd fished out a cigarette from the pack in his pocket and lit it. Smoke curled from his lips and obscured the view for a moment. The stars appeared few and far between, and Castiel wished he could see them, wherever they were.

He finished his last sip of beer and wiped his lips on the back of his hand, holding the bottle down by his side for a moment before he accidentally let it slip through his fingers and to the ground. It shattered as it hit the concrete. Castiel cursed and looked down at the pile of broken glass beside him, bringing his cigarette away from his face so the furls of smoke wouldn't impede his vision again.

He stopped as he looked upon the shards of glass, at the light of the moon reflecting brightly off their jagged edges. The effect was arresting, almost mesmerizing, and Castiel knew then what he'd be doing his first still-life of the semester on.

He bent to gather the pieces of glass, drops of amber lager still streaming down their curves and off of their points. Castiel ignored the bite of the cold and took off his sweater to wrap the shards so he wouldn't hurt himself. The precaution wasn't a successful one, however, and before he realized it he'd cut two of his fingers. But being stoned and intoxicated, he didn't care much, and focused on getting all of the glass together and carrying it back inside as quickly as he could.

Meg looked at Castiel sideways as he let himself in with one hand, the hazardous bundle in the other. On the couch next to her, Andy had fallen asleep, his chest rising and falling evenly. Castiel pretended not to notice that Meg had let go of Andy's hand as he came in.
“Care to explain that?” Meg asked, lifting her unfinished beer to her lips as she inclined her head toward Castiel's hands. Beside her, Gilda looked on with drowsy interest.

“I found a new item for my still-life,” Castiel answered simply, setting the sweater-wrapped glass down on the floor before going into her bathroom to rinse off his injured fingers. Meg didn't follow, and he heard her say something to Gilda as he rolled up his sleeves.

He leaned tiredly over the sink and ran the hot water. He held his hand beneath it and watched absently as drops of red hit the white porcelain beneath, only to be immediately diluted to a faded rose as they made their way down the uncovered maw of the drain.

As he stood there, his hand turning an angry pink from the scalding stream, Castiel thought of how easy it was to cut oneself when all one wanted to do was pick up the pieces.

***

Saturday was almost a quiet day for Castiel.

He spent the morning arranging his still-life in the studio, the reflective shards of the bottle arrayed on a piece of black satin borrowed from the prop-closet in the drawing studio. Above it he situated a light, draped with a bit of cheesecloth in an attempt to achieve the same soft cast of the moon the night before. All of this he placed on the same table which had housed his previous arrangements, rolling it in front of his easel. When Monday came around he was planning on building his canvases as soon as possible so that he could get an early move-on. He was already a few days behind.

Beside him in their space it appeared Dean had already built his canvas: it was a seven by six foot monstrosity that had the vague graphite outlines of a few shapes tentatively marked on its otherwise virgin surface.

Though Castiel wasn't looking forward to sharing a space with Dean, he'd be lying if he said he wasn't relieved Harvelle had decided to let him take an independent study with his peers despite the debacle the previous semester had ended in.

After Castiel returned to his room later, he spent an hour or two catching up on his assigned readings for class, and then, somewhat unexpectedly, wound up at Andy's.

Meg was busy with tutoring, or so Andy informed Castiel when he found himself knocking on the stoner's door, having accepted an invitation from him to smoke only twenty minutes earlier.

Castiel was surprised but tried not to let on. He didn't succeed.

“She's trying to branch out more and raise her grades,” Andy explained. “We've also been meditating together, and she's getting better.”

“I didn't know you meditated.” Or that Meg had any interest whatsoever in her studies.

“Been a few years now, I can teach you how if you want,” Andy offered with a smile as he stepped back and let Castiel into the house. The soft smell of fading smoke wafted out to greet him.

Castiel shook his head. “Thank you, but I'm fine.”

Andy nodded, and after that they spent a few hours sitting quietly on the couch together, watching Netflix and occasionally loading a bowl to smoke. Anselm, Andy's brother, came and went twice as he ran errands. Both times he said nothing to Andy's guest, though he asked his brother where Meg had gone, only to get the same answer Andy had given Castiel when he arrived.
After Anselm had gone back to his room, Andy and Castiel prepared the last bowl of the evening. As Andy gingerly packed the heavily crystallized nugs into the belly of the bubbler on his coffee table, Castiel asked him if he'd worked that day.

Andy nodded ruefully after a minute or two of contemplation, sitting back on the old couch with the bubbler held between his knees. “It was kind of shitty, if I'm honest.”

“How?” Castiel asked with concern. He'd yet to see Andy get so much as ruffled in the few weeks he'd known him.

Andy sighed. “Today, around one, this guy came in. I know him, kinda, he lives in town. I see him once a week usually, sometimes more. He's one of those guys I have to watch out for; he's almost always drunk when he comes in for more beer. Well, this time, I guess his son was with him, or...maybe just someone he knew? I'm still not a hundred-percent. But anyway, this pretty boy in a leather jacket's telling him to cut it out, that he's had enough, you know. It's not even one yet and I can tell the kid's right, the guy's wasted. And the guy—John? I think that's his name, maybe James, not sure—starts yelling and trying to twist his arm and, like, grab him. Says he can't tell him what to do, that he walked over and it's not like he's gonna wreck the car, that sorta thing. I had to threaten to call the cops before they left, it got so bad. Just made me sad. I think that kid had to be John's son, the more I think on it. I don't know, it was depressing.” Andy shook his head a second time and took a ponderous hit from the bubbler, his usually expressive brown eyes distant. "It must suck to have a parent like that."

Castiel had frozen where he was sitting as soon as Andy began to describe the drunkard's son, feeling a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach as his suspicions were confirmed when Andy said Dean's father's name.

He wondered if Lisa had any idea. He wondered if there was any way she didn't. He wondered if she, like everyone else in Dean's life, simply kept her mouth shut and worried for him whenever he left to go back home.

A half hour later, when Meg let herself into Castiel's apartment only minutes after he'd returned from Andy's, he wasn't surprised.

Meg's swimsuit was slung over one shoulder, and her brown curls were in a knot on the top of her head. She smirked at Castiel as she stepped past him into the living room, lifting her bikini top over her head and twirling it once before turning around and looking at him.

“Where are you planning on wearing that?” Castiel asked, eyeing the bathing suit.

“You do know there's an indoor pool on campus, right? Doesn't close 'til eleven. We're going swimming tonight,” she said as she began pushing Castiel into his bedroom, closing the door behind them. She took a pill bottle from her purse, setting it on his dresser before shutting herself in Castiel's bathroom to put her suit on. She was only gone for a minute or two, and Castiel took that time to examine the orange bottle, finding that it had no label and contained only a few pills. He was reminded vividly of the last time he'd taken pills with Meg. These weren't the same color or shape.

“Meg, what are these?” Castiel asked cautiously when Meg emerged from the bathroom, the bright pink strings of her bikini top standing out easily as they crept from the neck of her cable-knit sweater.

Meg took the bottle from him and shook a light blue caplet into the palm of her hand. “Legal speed.”
Castiel stared at her until she rolled her eyes and answered, “Calm down, it's just some Adderall. I got it from a friend.”

“Isn't that for people with ADHD?”

Meg nodded before she took a water bottle from her purse and unscrewed its cap, the smell of liquor permeating the room as she tossed the pill back and took a deep swallow of what Castiel suspected was white rum.

“Is it safe to take that with alcohol?” Castiel asked as she shook out another pill and tried to hand it to him.

Meg shrugged. “It's not safe to take hydro with booze, and we did that.”

Castiel shook his head. “Meg, I don't think I should—”

“Take this and put your swimsuit on so we can go,” Meg said impetuously, shoving the pill into one of his hands and pressing the bottle into the other. Castiel made no move to swallow either.

“Will you at least take a shot? I don't want to get fucked-up alone,” Meg said with a sigh, her eyes downcast as she felt around with her toes for her sneakers.

“I don't think I should, I'm still pretty stoned,” Castiel said honestly.

“That's actually perfect, it'll cut the chances of you freaking out. C'mon, Clarence. It'll lighten you up.” She sidled over to him, her breath smelling like rum and pot and her hair like cloying, flowery shampoo. Castiel thought of how Andy had smiled when he spoke of Meg, how proud he'd looked as he told Castiel about the progress she'd made.

“Does Andy know?” he asked her.

Meg turned away from him, busying herself with the task of slipping on her shoes. She didn't say anything for a few minutes. When she finally turned back around Castiel almost felt as if something had shifted between them, something not easily repaired but easily enough ignored.

Meg took the pill from Castiel without comment, holding it before his lips like a priest offering a communion wafer.

“You'll feel better for a few hours,” she said with a faint smile. “I always do.”

The caplet was bitter on Castiel's tongue, and the rum he chased it with made him gag. He coughed at the taste and shook his head, wiping his mouth on the hem of his shirt.

“Don't tell Andy,” Meg said quietly as she put the water bottle back into her purse.

After that they made their way to the gymnasium together, arm-in-arm and both wearing their swimwear under their clothing as they walked beneath stars that had finally emerged from the wisps of late-winter clouds. Castiel couldn't seem to stop himself from looking up and smiling at the sight of them. They were numerous, clear and bright without the distraction of security lights as they made their way along the dark edges of campus.

When they came upon the gym they used their school ID cards to gain entrance into the building. The student worker at the desk inclined her head towards them as they signed in, and Castiel held his breath as he bent down to scrawl his name, knowing he smelled of rum.
No one was at the pool when they arrived, though that wasn't surprising considering it was still cold out. The bright blue rectangle of water seemed to beckon them, and both Meg and Castiel took a few more swigs of rum each before stripping their clothes off and jumping in together.

Castiel was surprised to find himself laughing and splashing Meg, and when she tackled him and pushed him under the water, he easily shrugged her off and swam to the other side of the pool. Meg followed him, her eyes narrowed playfully as she held a hand out in a claw.

Almost two hours passed in this way, with the two of them taking turns dunking each other, followed by chasing the offending party around the pool until they started the process all over again. They periodically took breaks and sat on the side of the pool, passing the water bottle back and forth. It was almost empty by the time they got out for the last time, though Castiel didn't feel particularly drunk. If anything, he felt almost hyperactive, and found himself bouncing his leg or foot rapidly when he was still for too long.

Meg lay back on her towel, her eyes restlessly tracing the patterns of the scaffolding in the ceiling.

“Is this supposed to happen?” Castiel asked when he noticed his hands were trembling where they were draped across his knees.

“That's a side-effect. Adderall's an upper. You feeling okay?” Meg asked as she sat up again and took the last sip of the rum. She crumpled the plastic bottle and threw it into the nearby trashcan from where they were lounging.

“I feel...mostly good,” Castiel said, blinking at the words after he said them. It was true. He wanted to go to the studio and write a thorough examination of the aims of his piece and then go clean his apartment like he hadn't in weeks. He wanted to call Anna and talk to her about their book. He wanted many things that for whatever reason seemed doable in a way they hadn't before.

“What'd I tell you?” Meg said, grinning at him and looking for all the world the way she had the first night he'd met her, even without her red lipstick.”Want to go back to my room and have some more rum?” she asked as she stood up, toweling herself off.

Castiel was about to tell her that he wanted to go to the painting studio when he heard his phone begin to ring, still in his jeans pocket a few feet away. Not recognizing the ring tone as one for any members of his family, he reached for it without much thought.

“One second,” he murmured as he read Sam Winchester's name on the screen and put the phone to his ear.

“Cas?” Sam seemed to be a little out of breath.

“Sam? Is everything okay?” Castiel felt a dart of panic pierce the center of his chest, rupturing the bubble of calm euphoria he'd managed to stay in since he took the pill.

“Is Dean with you?” Sam asked.

“No. Have you checked with Bobby or your father? Lisa?”

“Yeah. He and Bobby...ah, had a disagreement, and Dad hasn't seen him since earlier today. Lisa said the same thing.”

“Well, he's not with me, Sam,” Castiel said. “I'm sorry.”

“It's fine. Just—if you see him, could you tell him to call me or come over?”
“Of course,” Castiel said, hanging up soon after.

Meg was looking at him with concern.

“I think I need to go,” Castiel said, getting up and rubbing his towel over his shoulders and arms, his hair still dripping.

“Are you sure you should—” Meg began, but Castiel shook his head.

“I need to go look for Dean,” he said, grabbing his clothes off of the blue and white tile and pulling them on over his swim trunks, heedless of how wet they still were and the water rapidly soaking into them.

“You're fucked up, don't drive or do anything stupid,” Meg said, pinning Castiel where he was for a moment. She looked closely at him as water continued to fall in thin trails down her pale face.

“I won't,” he said, knowing he'd wait until the following day if he needed to drive somewhere.

He bid Meg a curt goodbye and left the gym, shivering as he was hit immediately by the nighttime breeze; it had picked up speed and lowered in temperature since he and Meg entered the building hours previous. Castiel soon felt his hands begin to go numb.

He walked as quickly as possible back across campus towards the Fine Arts Center, his heart beginning to pound as the calls he made to Dean's phone along the way went straight to voicemail. He had no idea where Dean would be if he was indeed on campus, and his thoughts were rushing through his head far too quickly for him to take proper stock of them. But he knew on some level that the studio was as good a place as any to start to look for Dean.

The outside of the building was misleadingly dark, all but one of the security lights off as Castiel used his ID to unlock the back entrance and let himself in. The main lobby was only half-lit, as were the hallways branching off of it and the elevator. Castiel leaned against the brushed-steel plated wall of the elevator as it took him up. His arms were wrapped around himself as he tried to focus on finding Dean rather than on the painful numbness in his hands and feet and the cold wetness of his clothing.

When Castiel opened one of the heavy doors to the painting studio, the lights were already on. But to his dismay Dean was nowhere to be found, not in their space nor in any other part of the large room. The cool white lights illuminated the works-in-progress here and there throughout the studio, but there was no one present besides Castiel himself.

Cursing quietly to himself in a shuddering whisper, Castiel was about to turn and leave, his hand already on the large light switch board, before he noticed something that hadn't been present when he staged his still-life earlier that morning. On Dean's side of his and Castiel's space it looked as though someone had trashed his things. Dean's paints were scattered here and there, his sketchpads thrown on the ground with their pages bent and dotted with stray spots of charcoal and graphite, his silicoil shattered with the creamy, paint-glutted oil spreading to cover almost the entirety of the ground in their space.

Castiel stared dumbly for a moment, the dart of panic returning and sharpening as his breath hitched in his chest at the sight. He hurriedly turned the lights off and rode back down on the elevator, shaking as he was hit for the second time with a gale of wind upon opening the door to leave the Fine Arts Building.

The walk back to his apartment felt as though it took hours rather than the ten minutes it took in
reality, and Castiel called Dean several more times on the way. His anxiety mounted every time he listened to Dean's voicemail again.

When Castiel was only a few yards from his apartment, he spotted someone sitting on the arm of the bench in the courtyard just in front of it. As he came closer, he saw that it was the very person he'd been looking for the past thirty minutes. He felt almost weak with an exhaustion he was only suddenly aware of.

The collar of Dean's leather jacket was flipped up to guard his face from the cold, and he was wearing his work boots and a pair of ragged jeans. The quiet, still way that Dean was waiting there made Castiel think of Christmas Eve. When he saw that it was Castiel approaching Dean stood, concern coloring his handsome features.

“Cas?” he said as Castiel reached him. Dean's nose was red, his shoulders hunched inwards to stave off the cold.

“I thought—” Castiel began. “I thought you were hurt. Again. Your brother called, and I—

the studio,

your things, Dean.”

Castiel was abruptly angry. He'd been imagining Dean, beat-up at the bottom of a ditch somewhere, or perhaps back in his own bed at John's with another broken bone or ruptured internal organ. He'd feared the worst, and had trekked back and forth across campus for the better part of thirty minutes only to find Dean in front of his apartment, unharmed.

“I'm fine,” Dean said. “My phone's just dead and I...are you okay, Cas? You look sick—”

“Just please leave me alone,” Castiel said softly, his teeth chattering on the last word. His heart was pounding so rapidly it hurt, and as he stood beside Dean he couldn't seem to catch his breath.

“Why are you wet?” Dean asked. He cautiously stepped toward Castiel, one of his hands outstretched.

“I went swimming,” Castiel heard himself mumble as he tried to back away from Dean. He miscalculated and tripped over the leg of the bench, gasping as he began to fall backward.

Dean quickly took a hold of one of Castiel's hands as he fell, pulling him back before he went too far. Castiel pulled away and breathed shakily, trying to ground himself. It felt as if the world was shrinking around him. He hadn't felt like this since the night his father died, and he wished profusely now that he hadn't taken the Adderall.

Dean looked at him closely. “Did you hang out with Meg tonight?” The unspoken question lingered behind, Did you take something?

“I wanted to feel better,” Castiel breathed, his voice hollow.

Dean looked sad for a moment, but said nothing. Instead, he began to lightly steer Castiel towards the door, and Castiel let him, too unsure of himself to resist. All he wanted to do was go to sleep and wake up when the Adderall had run its course.

“Let's get you inside,” Dean said as Castiel reached for the keys in his pocket, almost dropping them with numb fingers.

When they stepped into the apartment Balthazar was nowhere to be seen, and the lights were off. Dean turned them on as they went, one hand still on Castiel's arm.
When they entered his room, it was so messy that he felt embarrassed. Dean looked around with surprise, clearly noticing the difference. But he again said nothing of what he saw, gesturing towards Castiel. “Do you need me to—”

“Just...wait in the living room,” Castiel said, shaking with frustration and other distorted emotions. Dean looked as if he wanted to say something, but after a moment or two he finally closed his mouth and nodded, turning to leave. Castiel waited until he saw Dean close the door behind him before turning to get a set of dry sweatpants and a t-shirt out of his drawers. He stepped into the bathroom and ran a shower, wanting nothing more than some form of comfort as he stood before the slowly warming water.

The heat began to calm him and the steam to open his lungs as he stood beneath the flow. Within a few minutes his hands and feet were no longer numb, the skin blooming a fiery red.

When Castiel dragged himself from the safety of the bathroom fifteen minutes later, still considerably anxious but somewhat improved, he found Dean waiting for him in the kitchen. A cup of soup was sitting in the center of the table, small curls of steam rising from its surface. Castiel wordlessly sat across from Dean, accepting the soup when it was pushed toward him. He swallowed a small spoonful before it was completely cool, burning his tongue and not caring much.

After a few minutes he asked, “Why were you waiting for me?”

Dean exhaled slowly, shifting in his chair before saying, “I wanted to talk to you.”

“What about?”

Dean looked relieved and uncomfortable at the same time. “I...got in a fight with Bobby today.”

“What happened?” Castiel asked, ignoring his soup for a moment to give Dean his full attention.

“I poured all his booze down the drain,” Dean said, shame seeping through the self-righteousness of the statement.

“Dean...”

“I just...I don't want him to—to do something stupid,” Dean said, looking down at his lap.

“Bobby's not your father,” Castiel said, knowing it was something he'd never have ventured if things had not been as they were.

“I know, I don't think he would ever—”

“Hurt you?” Castiel finished the sentence for him.

Dean flinched almost imperceptibly, and Castiel regretted stating the truth so gracelessly. Dean ran a hand through his short hair, his eyes closing for a moment before he spoke again.

“I know he always has a few after work. I just...saw the bottle of Jack out and did what I would've done if it were...if I was home. I just didn't stop there.”

“Is that why you trashed your things?” Castiel asked.

Dean shrugged. “I didn't—I don't know, I just came in, and I—everything was already such a mess.”

Castiel nodded, and Dean went quiet, looking down at his lap.
When a few minutes passed in silence, Castiel swallowed his misgivings and asked reluctantly, “Do you need somewhere to stay tonight?”

Dean looked up at him in disbelief. “You'd let me?”

Castiel couldn't meet his eyes. “If you have nowhere else to go.”

Dean's face fell, and Castiel didn't bother trying to convince himself that he hadn't seen it.

“I'll get you a blanket for the couch,” Castiel said as he stood and quickly moved to take the cup to the sink, turning the faucet on.

He heard Dean stand up from the table after him, soft footsteps that weren't entirely concealed by the sound of the running water.

“Cas,” Dean said, his voice right behind Castiel where he stood before the sink. The soup cup was filling quickly with water, its contents flowing over its chipped white rim, and Castiel wondered why Dean had thought such a small cup could hold as much as he'd tried to make it; he wanted to dash it against the side of the sink.

The hairs on the back of Castiel's neck were being gently displaced by Dean's breath, the warmth of his body an almost-there sensation, and he stilled, afraid to move, afraid to speak.

Dean clasped Castiel's shoulder from behind, the low sound of his steady breaths growing closer. Castiel wanted so badly to melt into the touch, to lean back, to press himself against Dean and let his head fall back onto one of his shoulders.

He wished that he'd been with Dean at the gas station that day and at the same time that he had never met him.

“I'm sorry,” Dean said. His hand was shaking.

“I know,” Castiel said, turning around and starting to pull away, forgetting about the sink and the cup with its chipped edges. Castiel's eyes ached as he pushed Dean away, the pressure behind them immense. He turned and walked briskly toward his room, the sound of the running water following him until he shut his door.

Castiel came out of his room only once more that night, and it was to silently hand Dean a blanket and pillow for the couch.

Hours later in the very early morning, while the delicate colors of the sunrise began to bleed through his curtains, Castiel heard the sound of Dean quietly leaving the apartment.

He tried to go back to sleep, and found that he couldn't.

Chapter End Notes

Sorrynotsorry for more angst -.-
Chapter Notes

Thank you for those who've waited! I apologize for the delay =) Please let me know what you think of this chapter.
And for any interested, I'll be updating Flower soon and also starting a new fic because I'm literally writing ALL the things right now.
More to come. This story is about three-fourths of the way done.

After Dean left his apartment, Castiel spent the last day of his weekend finishing up the readings he'd been putting off and texting Anna. She updated him on all that had happened that week a message at a time: Luke was still in rehab and had yet to visit the family again, Michael was spearheading the newest research project at the lab (an overly ambitious undertaking, if Anna was to be believed), and Naomi had reorganized the entirety of her state-of-the-art kitchen that weekend, resulting in Tessa being confused and annoyed upon coming in to find nothing was where it usually was because of her employer's passing whim to feng-shui. Anna said also that she'd met someone, a woman she bumped into (literally) at the grocery store who she hit it off with almost instantly. Though she said nothing more on the subject, there was been a lightness to her words Castiel was unaccustomed to.

When Anna asked him if he was doing well, Castiel said only that he was getting his work done on time.

Monday rose unexpectedly cloudless and bright, and when Castiel came into the studio a few minutes early he found that sometime on Sunday Dean had come in and repaired the mess he'd made of their space. Gone were the pieces of the shattered silicoil and the spilled mineral spirits staining the floor, and re-stacked were the damaged sketchpads and paints. It looked almost as if nothing had happened, so thoroughly had everything been reorganized and cleaned.

When class began less than ten minutes later and everyone had trickled in through the double doors, Dean and Lisa sat together for lecture as they had the week before, and Castiel sat beside Charlie.

“You start on your canvas yet?” Charlie asked him as he situated his notebook on his knees.

“I'm going to today,” he answered, catching sight of Lisa touching Dean softly the way she seemed wont to, her hands on the back of his neck or the tops of his fingers as Harvelle began to teach. Dean didn't reciprocate Lisa's touches, not really. He appeared distracted, his leg bouncing or his hands making their way to his notebook, where he tore at the edges of the pages or slowly unfurled the wire holding it together. Once or twice Dean turned and looked at Lisa, not a smile on his lips, but something halfway there as he met her eyes.

Castiel looked away then, scribbling nonsense in the margins of his journal until his pen tore through the paper.

When Harvelle instructed everyone to get to work until class ended and her students went their separate ways in the studio, Castiel busied himself with gathering ear-plugs and safety goggles from his supplies, readying himself for a few hours spent in the woodshop. He was considering making one large canvas for this project rather than more of his small studies. He wanted to capture every detail of the light-play on the pile of broken glass waiting for him on his table.
When Dean came to stand beside him in their space, Castiel felt the heat of his body before he saw him. He turned and faced the other boy warily.

Dean was already looking at him, his hands awkwardly shoved in his pockets. “Hey, Cas.”

The nickname twisted something inside him. “Hello, Dean.”

“How was your Sunday?” Dean asked, his voice quiet.

“It was fine,” Castiel said, hoisting everything he needed for the woodshop into his arms. “Yours?”

“It was okay,” Dean began, his voice trailing off as he realized Castiel wasn't meeting his eyes.

“Alright, then,” Castiel said as he looked pointedly at the door, wanting to get out of the compressed space before he said any one of the bitter things stuck in the back of his throat like burnt coffee.

Dean stepped forward, his voice lowering. “Cas...I don't want to make you be friends with me if it—if that's not what you want.” He raised his callused hands, his skin lightly dewed with sweat.

Castiel thought of how Dean's hand had felt in his at the hospital, how badly it had frightened him to see Dean so pale beneath the bandages and iodine stains, and said the truest thing he could admit to at that moment. He allowed himself to meet Dean's eyes for the first time.

“I don't want to stop talking, Dean. I just don't think you're happy.”

Dean's lips parted as he looked over his shoulder at Lisa where she was painting and talking to Charlie. For a moment, it looked as though he might say something else. A muscle in his jaw worked beneath the purple splotch still healing there, and his hands clenched and then relaxed only to clench again. But he was quiet, looking at the floor instead and saying nothing.

Castiel nodded sadly, pressing past Dean toward the door. It felt as if he was living Christmas Eve a second time, the wound salted anew as he walked out of the studio and into the adjoining woodshop.

When Castiel returned a few hours later, the glued frame of his canvas held together and drying in the hallway, Dean was gone. Only a few rough sketches left on his side of their space indicated he'd even been there at all.

***

In his Black Literature course the following afternoon, Castiel came to class to find Drew already seated with his notebook in front of him. He waved Castiel over when he saw him.

“Have a good weekend?” Drew asked as Castiel set his things down on the desk, his chin in his palm and his expression one of polite interest.

“Mostly. It was—well, I didn't really do much. I mean, I did homework but I don't know if that counts as doing something.” Castiel struggled through the words, having been unprepared for the question and realizing upon speaking that he wasn't sure how to describe his weekend in a way that made it sound either fun or normal. So, he deflected.

“How was yours?”

Drew sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Shitty. I hate mixers. Would've been funner if I had
someone interesting there.” He looked up at Castiel pointedly, a smile on his face, and Castiel found he didn't know exactly what Drew was trying to convey. Not wanting to say the wrong thing and put his foot further down his throat, he nodded and sat down, opening his own notebook as Professor Moseley made her entrance.

After class ended Castiel told Drew goodbye, pretending not to notice the way he lingered beside his desk.

He made his way to the studio quickly after. It was mostly empty save for Harvelle taking notes in one of the armchairs beside the squat bookshelves, and Castiel inclined his head toward her in greeting before retrieving the frame he’d built from where it was still sitting in the hallway. He laid the rectangle of wood down on an empty stretch of floor in the center of the studio, then began the repetitive task of pulling and stapling the bolt of un-primed canvas itself to its edges. It was easier to do so with a larger frame, and Castiel found he finished much sooner than he had with his small canvases the semester before.

“You aren't doing the small studies.”

Harvelle's voice cut through the thick of the quiet jarringly, and Castiel jumped and looked up from where he was still crouched on the ground. His professor had one hand on her hip and was staring down at him and his canvas. Her keen eyes were inquisitive and her thick hair was up in a lopsided bun on one side of her head.

“I thought a bigger canvas would work better for this particular still-life,” Castiel said, hoping she wouldn't ask for him to change it. He knew he wasn't doing what they'd talked about during his last advising appointment, and that as his independent study facilitator Harvelle had the right to call him on it.

But she didn't.

“Get some sleep before you come in next time,” was all that Harvelle said before going back to where she’d left her journal beside the chair, leaving Castiel alone with his thoughts as he began to gesso his canvas.

That evening Castiel smoked bowls of fine-ground green until he fell asleep, his blinds open as the red-orange of the sunset bathed his parted lips. Behind his closed eyelids Dean and Drew stood before him, their features merging and bleeding together until Castiel couldn't tell them apart, or even discern if they were still two separate people. He called their names, only to have one come toward him while the other left. Castiel couldn't see which one of them was advancing on him, and when a pair of arms wrapped themselves around his shoulders he found that it didn't feel familiar.

He woke up then, and after almost two hours spent lying awake in his bed left his apartment to walk around campus in the dark. The glowing end of the cigarette held between his lips was the only light guiding his path.

***

On Wednesday evening Castiel received a text from Charlie requesting that he come over so they could study Harvelle's latest assigned reading together. He read the message while seated before his easel, his fingers tipped with burnt sienna and his back beginning to ache. He'd gotten almost the entirety of the underpainting finished in one long session, having spent over six hours hunched in front of the canvas.
He hadn't seen Charlie since Monday, and figured he'd put in enough studio time for the moment. His eyes hurt from the bright lights, and he needed desperately to move around some. He responded in the affirmative to Charlie's text and cleaned his brushes as quickly as he could. He switched off the now-burning bulb hanging over his still-life before leaving the studio.

When Charlie let him in to her apartment ten minutes later, Castiel's heart sank at the sight of Lisa Braeden and Sam Winchester sitting on the couch behind her, talking easily together.

“Cas!” Sam exclaimed as he smiled and stood up, hugging Castiel as he had at Christmas, his gawky limbs enfoldling him for a moment before he stepped back.

“Hello Sam, Lisa,” Castiel nodded to Dean's girlfriend politely.

“Dean's birthday's this Friday, and we're gonna have a party for him,” Sam said as he sat himself back down beside Lisa while Charlie perched herself on the arm of the sofa.

“That's great,” Castiel said weakly, remembering the posts he'd read on Dean's Facebook profile. He doubted the oldest Winchester would appreciate any sort of celebration being held in his honor, regardless of the occasion.

“We figured you'd want to help,” Charlie said with a grin as she gestured for him to sit in the armchair across from the couch. “We think it's high-time Dean did something for his birthday.”

On the coffee table was spread a few cards, some party hats, and a scribbled list of supplies.

“We're gonna have it here, nothing too fancy, just some beers and a cake,” Lisa said as she jotted something down on a yellow notepad in her lap. Her long, straight hair fell over one side of her tanned face as she did.

“I'm gonna make the cake,” Sam said proudly. “Bobby said he'd help me. He has a really good red velvet recipe from when his wife was alive.”

Castiel hoped he looked interested. “What would you like me to help with?”

“You are going to ask him to come and hang out with us this Friday, and we'll spring it on him when he gets here,” Charlie said eagerly.

Castiel felt dismay plumb through him. He knew he wouldn't tell her no, couldn't tell her no, not in front of Sam and Lisa and their placid assumptions. He wouldn't be able to satisfactorily answer the question why not should his friend ask it of him. He felt trapped as Charlie continued to smile at him and Sam nodded happily at her words, neither of them having any idea how quickly his heart was beating.

“What time on Friday?” he asked.

After spending almost an hour at Charlie's going over party details and working out what all had to be done beforehand, Castiel was surprised to receive a text from Drew as he made his way to Meg's apartment, having called her upon leaving Charlie's to ask if they could smoke together.

_U busy this friday?

Kind of_, he responded.
Wanna come to the house when you're free?

When he and Meg were sitting together on her bed a few minutes later, the brunette already busy loading a bowl in her bong, Castiel stared at the posters on the wall. He thought of Gabriel and wished he could call him as easily as he did Anna.

“Earth to Clarence,” Meg said jokingly, pushing the bong into his hands.

“Sorry, what?” he asked, his voice hoarse from the relative silence he'd kept the last hour.

“I asked if you were okay. You look...I don't know. Did something happen?”

“Dean's birthday is this Friday and Drew wants me to come to KA and see him,” Castiel told her after he took the first bright green hit. The deep drag of smoke warmed him from the inside out, and he felt his eyelids grow heavy as they always did when he smoked.

“Fuck that, you don't need to do shit for his birthday,” Meg scoffed as she took the bong back from Castiel. “And Drew's pretty alright. You gonna take him up on the invite?”

“I don't think so,” Castiel said honestly.

“You might be missin' out,” Meg said meaningfully, raising a dark eyebrow.

“I already told Charlie and Lisa that I'd help plan Dean's party.”

“That's stupid,” Meg said bluntly before taking a hit of her own.

“I know,” Castiel said through his teeth, standing up and moving away from the bed as Meg exhaled, plumes of gray and white following him across her room.

“You want me to go?” Meg asked casually when Castiel didn't turn back around.

“To the party?”

“Sure.”

“I'd appreciate it,” Castiel said quietly, looking out the window through a hole in one of Meg's curtains. When she came up behind him to rest her chin on his shoulder she said nothing. She merely looked with him into the courtyard, where no one sat in its bleached wooden benches, nor walked over its gray cobblestone floor.

***

Castiel spent almost the entirety of his Thursday in the studio, carefully building the first thin layers of color over his finished underpainting. He took breaks only to smoke cigarettes and text his sister, who couldn't seem to stop talking about the woman she'd met in the store. Anna sounded elated as she described her laugh, the way she wrinkled her nose, her pretty eyes. Her emotion regarding the subject was palpable.

Beside his painting stood Dean's, now covered with bright, almost neon stripes of color layered over faint shapes defined in faint earth-tones. It looked sad, somehow, when it should have looked freeing. It should have looked like the colors were flying, breaking the tethers that had held them prisoner from the sky.

But it didn't.
Friday seemed to come too soon, and Castiel went through the first half of his day feeling like he was half-asleep, so immersed was he in his thoughts. He found himself biting the skin around his nails until his fingertips bled like they hadn't in weeks, and he could barely make himself sit still when he dragged himself to the Fine Arts Building that afternoon. He gave it up after barely an hour.

Castiel went into the bathroom down the hall and sat on the closed lid of the toilet. He checked the time on his phone almost every slowly-passing minute until he knew he couldn't put off texting Dean and setting the plan into motion any longer than he already had.

Would you like to come over? he typed and sent, forcing himself to leave the quiet of the bathroom and begin the walk back to his apartment instead of sitting there waiting for a response.

By the time Castiel reached his front door he'd gotten a text back, and was sadly unsurprised at the way his heart still leapt in his chest at the sight of Dean's name flashing across the screen.

Are you sure?

Yes. Come over soon, please.

Are u ok?

I'm fine.

K, Ill head over.

Something as minor as the way Dean had asked about him made Castiel hurt as he hadn't since their last face-to-face encounter. He swallowed thickly and sat down on the sofa in his living room, an already bleeding finger caught between his teeth again when he heard the knock on his door fifteen minutes later.

Dean had a nervous smile on his face when Castiel opened the door to let him in, but it quickly faded as he came close. Dean stepped forward into the apartment, the smell of him sweeter somehow than it had been even a few days earlier.

“You're bleeding,” he muttered with concern as he reached a hand out and thumbed at Castiel's bottom lip.

Castiel exhaled sharply and stilled for a moment before looking up at Dean with wide eyes, fearing the touch as much as he'd craved it.

“Fuck, I didn't—” Dean said as he pulled his hand away.

Castiel drew back as if he'd been struck.

“Don't,” he said softly as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, hoping he'd rubbed away the blood. “I'm fine.”

“You wanted me to come over?” Dean asked after a minute or two of strained silence, standing uncomfortably in the center of Castiel's living room.

“I was thinking we'd go to Charlie's,” Castiel said, reciting the words he'd been running through his mind all day.

“Charlie's?” Dean asked, clearly not expecting his answer.
“I think she had something she wanted to show you, and we haven’t spent time together since last semester.” Castiel knew he sounded as if he was reading a script.

Dean studied Castiel for a minute, almost visibly working out what was likely going on. The change in him as he connected the dots seemed to hollow him. “I thought you wanted—”

“She just texted me, we should probably head over soon,” Castiel interrupted, looking at the floor.

Dean’s voice was stripped and his eyes tired when he said, “Sure, Cas. Let’s go.”

Castiel led the way, and they walked silently to Charlie’s.

When they reached her apartment and she opened the door for them, a bellowing group-cry of ‘SURPRISE!’ rang out from behind her as everyone who’d been invited jumped out from various hiding spots and inside the walled-off kitchen.

“Happy Birthday, Dean!” Charlie said as she wrapped him in a tight hug, most of the people behind her echoing her sentiment.

Dean looked afraid and defensive for only a second before he let out a forced laugh and hugged Charlie back awkwardly. His face reddened as she pulled him inside with Castiel following close behind.

In the apartment stood Lisa, Sam, Jess, Gilda, Benny, Bobby, and Meg, most of whom had party hats on and cards in their hands. The walls and coffee table were adorned with multicolored streamers and silly string, and a white-iced cake surrounded by cards and poppers made a centerpiece in the living room.

“You told them it was my birthday?” Castiel heard Dean ask Sam quietly when his brother moved forward to take his turn hugging Dean.

“C’mon, it’s not like it's a secret,” Sam said with a smile, stepping back and looping an arm around Jess’s petite shoulders.

“You want a beer, babe?” Lisa asked as she leaned in and pecked Dean on the cheek, her pink gloss leaving an imprint of her lips on his skin. Castiel looked away before Dean answered her, seeking and finding Meg where she stood beside the coffee table and going to stand next to her.

“Want me to get you a drink?” Meg asked him sympathetically as from across the room Bobby waved at him with a grin on his bearded face.

“I needed one yesterday,” Castiel murmured as Meg left his side to go to the kitchen.

“I wish your ma was here to see you now,” Castiel heard Bobby say a few minutes later as he stood beside Dean, Lisa and Sam. Lisa was beaming, and Sam nodded fervently at the words. The only person who didn’t seem to concur with the statement was Dean himself. He nodded tightly and let Lisa lead him further into the throng of people in the living room.

Castiel watched as Benny raised a beer to Dean and toasted him with a knowing look in his ice-blue eyes, as if he knew Bobby's words had hurt where they'd been meant to heal.

After that, someone turned Charlie’s radio on, and the music with the beers being passed around made it easier for Castiel to pretend that he wasn’t avoiding the guest of honor and that he didn’t notice the way Dean kept looking over at him. But he was obviously scrutinizing him and Meg, how close they stood to one another, the way that Meg casually touched Castiel’s arm or leaned in to
whisper something to him in the hopes of making him laugh. Castiel continually found excuses to keep his distance any time Dean seemed to want to come over and say something to them, when Lisa was in the kitchen gabbing with Jess or cutting pieces of cake for the party guests who requested it.

But almost two hours into his party, Dean looked over at the wrong time entirely, literally just as Meg was raising an imaginary joint to her lips and pantomiming smoking it. With Lisa undoubtedly ensconced elsewhere in the party, Dean strode over to confront Meg and Castiel before they could take their leave.

“How's it going?” Dean asked them, the question seemingly directed towards both of them but his eyes latched onto Castiel's.

Meg answered Dean's inquiry before he could, her dark eyes narrowed, “It's a good party you got here, Winchester. We were just thinking of going to get something from Clarence's apartment though, weren't we?” She looked closely at Castiel.

“We were,” Castiel followed her lead, feeling cornered.

“You're gonna get high,” Dean said with a voice that cut through the comfortable pretenses Meg had tried to erect. His face was uncharacteristically hard as he kept Castiel rooted to the spot with eyes that Drew's could never hold a candle to.

“Yes,” Meg said firmly. She reached out and grabbed Castiel's arm.

“You don't have to do this,” Dean said to Castiel.

“I don't see why it matters to you,” Castiel said wearily, pulling his arm from Meg's grasp. Her eyes darted back and forth between the two of them nervously.

“You know how scared I was when I saw you last weekend, Cas?” Dean asked.

“I got myself sick because I thought you were hurt,” Castiel said, so quietly Dean had to lean in to catch it. As his words dawned on him, Dean's face fell.

“I didn't want for that to happen——” he started, but Meg cut him off before he could finish his thought.

“You can't say shit,” she hissed, grabbing Castiel's arm again. Dean turned on her then, his expression livid.

“You think I don't?” she retorted.

“No, you fucking don't——”

“I know enough,” Meg said. “You think you're the only one who gets hurt when they go home?”

Dean looked at her with panic and muted shame, and then at Castiel.

Castiel felt his mouth fall open at Meg's words. Before he could say something, she beat him to it. Her voice was a harsh whisper.

“Don't look at Cas, he didn't tell me. Jesus, you think it's a fucking secret?”

Meg snapped Castiel tightly to her side, and that time, he didn't pull away.
Dean's lips worked soundlessly as he stared at Meg and the arm she had around Castiel.

"You can go if you want," was what Dean said when he found his voice again, his green eyes looking anywhere but the person he was speaking to.

Castiel wanted to cry, but he nodded instead. He pulled Meg with him toward the door as Dean stood, motionless, where they'd left him in Charlie's living room.

Once outside they didn't speak to one another, Meg still holding him to her side. Her dark hair fell into his face with every step they took towards his apartment. When they reached the courtyard in front of Castiel's complex, they sat down together on the wooden bench. Meg held out a shaking hand for a cigarette.

"Is that why you don't visit your family?" Castiel asked after they'd both lit one of his Marlboros.

Meg nodded, and said only, "I'm gonna go to Andy's after we smoke a bowl."

An hour later found Castiel with Drew in the confines of Kappa Alpha house.

The two of them were upstairs in the fraternity brother's room. Castiel sat by his desk while Drew balanced on the edge of his bed. The large TV mounted to Drew's wall was on, and they were watching some reality television show while passing a bottle of Jose Cuervo back and forth in a relaxed rhythm. Castiel was feeling the tequila much more than he had the beers earlier, and was glad of it. His host was telling a humorous anecdote involving a drunk friend of his and a broken sprinkler, and Castiel was laughing, trying to think only of the way Drew's voice sounded and not how badly he wanted to text Dean and apologize.

But for what? He didn't know, and his thoughts were beginning to run together from the alcohol and the pot he'd smoked with Meg.

"Man, you're a trip outside the classroom," Drew said with a snort as Castiel made a dry comment concerning how he found the 'YOLO' trend vapid and dangerous.

"I am?" Castiel asked without much interest.

"Yeah, you're cool. You got a girl somewhere? She can come over, too, y'know."

"If I had someone, it wouldn't be a girl," Castiel said without thinking, he flinched as he looked over at Drew, bracing himself for the negative reaction his sister had gotten from their parents and regretting his words dearly.

But Drew only nodded, and Castiel felt his face flame with the realization that he'd just come out to someone for the first time in his life.

He wondered if Dean ever actually had.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNINGS:
Rape, nonconsensual drug use.
Skip this chapter or read with caution if those are triggers for you, and use self-care in deciding whether or not to do so. You can also inbox me on tumblr if you would like a safe summarization of the chapter and what you missed if you don't think you can read it.
This chapter was extremely hard for me to write. There were so many things I was going to say in this note, and all of them escape me now. All I will say is know that there's a happy ending for these two, and that even in the darkest times, there is always hope.
This story is as much mine as it is Castiel's and Dean's, and rape and sexual assault on college campuses is very common; in the interest of depicting college life accurately I made the decision to include this. Though the majority of assault survivors are female, male persons can and are victimized by sexual predators as well.
Be well, readers.
Oh, and if you'd like to listen to a song that very much spoke to me while writing this, here's a link.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Charlie called Castiel a few times over the weekend, but he couldn't bring himself to meet her halfway and answer his phone.

He didn't know what had happened after he and Meg left Dean's birthday party, if anything had at all. If he was honest with himself, he didn't want to find out. As he lay awake in bed the next few nights, he heard over and over again what Meg had said to Dean before they left.

You think it's a fucking secret?

Had he?

***

Castiel went into the studio a few times and worked on his still-life both Saturday and Sunday, the imperfections and various plays of light replicated painstakingly beneath his hands. He lost himself for hours at a time in the details, the dappled glitter of moonlight here, the faded shadow of an overlapping glass edge there. The familiar pain in his back and his neck was only a faint vexation at times, so completely did he immerse himself. It was turning out to be one of the most alluring and eccentric works he'd ever created; it was taking on a hyper-realistic quality as a result of the ruthless attention Castiel was paying to any and every aspect, and more than one of his fellow painters had made a point of telling him how impressed they were by his progress when they happened by.

Dean never came into the studio when Castiel was there that weekend, and his painting hadn't progressed in the slightest by the time Monday morning dawned. It simply remained perched on its easel, as indescribably sad as it had been before Charlie's ill-fated surprise.
Monday was the final session for the independent study class before the first critique of the semester, and there was to be no lecture that class. Harvelle was away at a conference in Houston and had emailed the students to tell them to use the entirety of the period to work on their projects. Garth was there to help with any technical issues the painters might experience, and was walking around asking each of the students how their works were coming along with an easy smile on his thin face.

Dean was distinctly absent, as he'd been that weekend, and Castiel caught Lisa staring at his empty chair after she came to class alone.

Charlie arrived a few minutes late, immediately making her way to Castiel's cubby, a distracted frown on her usually genial face.

“You okay?” she asked as she sat herself down in Dean's chair.

“I'm fine,” Castiel answered quickly. He narrowed his gaze to the patch of shimmering blue he was laying down on the canvas before him so that he wouldn't have to look at her.

“You didn't answer my calls, and I can't get a hold of Dean. Do you know what happened at the party?” Charlie asked.

“What did Dean say?” Castiel asked carefully as he dipped his brush into the dollop of cerulean on his pallet.

Charlie shrugged. “Well...nothing. He left an hour after you did and never came back, I haven't talked to him since Friday.”

“I'm sorry he was upset,” Castiel said.

“Cas, did you see what happened?” Charlie dragged her chair closer to his with a screech that grated on Castiel's nerves.

“Meg made him mad, so I thought it would be a good idea to go.”


“Meg says things before she thinks sometimes, I don't know what else you want me to say,” Castiel replied, trying to paint a perfectly curved line with an unsteady hand and failing.

“I want you to say that you care that your 'friend' hurt my bestie's feelings.” Charlie's disdain for Meg was clear, and it made Castiel angry. Red dripped into the anemic calm he'd uneasily kept for days.

He exhaled harshly as the misapplied line grew even more unruly under his brush. His back and shoulders were suddenly so tense they hurt. He turned to face Charlie with irritation.

“I don't care.”

He was lying, and from the look in Charlie's eyes Castiel could tell she was aware.

“What's your problem?” Charlie asked, hurt evident in her voice. "Bullshit, you don't care.”

“I'm tired,” Castiel said, turning away again.

*I'm tired of keeping Dean's secrets. I'm tired of drowning in both his and mine.*
I'm tired of being tired.

He didn't stop Charlie as she walked away without responding again, though he wanted nothing more in that moment than to tell her the truth.

Across the room, Castiel caught Lisa watching him, and didn't miss the flash of a question in her eyes.

***

When Anna called Castiel at seven am the following morning, he answered on the third ring. He was in bed, dreaming uneasily after having fallen into a shallow sleep only an hour or two before.

“Anna?” he said sleepily.

“I called Victor,” Anna's voice was low. Castiel concluded she was likely at home with the amount of secrecy she seemed to be employing.

“You what?” Castiel mumbled as he sat up gradually. He rubbed sleep-dusted eyes and shivered as a draft wafted over the bare skin of his chest.

“I called Victor, Victor Henrikson,” Anna repeated, her voice firmer the second time. “Do you remember him?”

Castiel blinked a few times; he actually remembered Victor Henrikson very well. He and Naomi Novak had had a dinner date together more than a year before. The man was a private investigator and product analyst who had worked for Novak Labs briefly a few times over the years, usually regarding possible law-suits or product liabilities. How Anna had gotten his number, Castiel wasn't sure.

“What did you talk about with him?” he asked his sister.

“I...I asked him to find Gabe for us. I have a little saved up, but he said he'd do it on his own time as a favor.” Silence followed her words for a few leaden moments over the line, and Castiel sensed that both of them were thinking of how Naomi and the PI’s last encounter had ended. Victor had mistakenly brought up the late Andrew Novak and Naomi had flown off the handle, already a little drunk on expensive dessert wine. The evening had ended with their mother angrily holed-up in her large, solitary master bedroom and a dumbstruck Detective Henrikson standing awkwardly outside the front door in the sticky summertime breeze. Both Anna and Castiel had apologized profusely to him and sent him home with the salvageable leftovers, mortified by their mother's antics.

Naomi didn't speak of Victor Henrikson after that, and hadn't been on another date since. That night had been the one time since his father's death that Castiel had seen his mother display any kind of obvious emotion, and he still wasn't sure if he ever wanted to see her do so again.

“Does Victor think he can find him?” Castiel breathed.

“He says it shouldn't be too hard unless Gabriel changed his name or something, which admittedly he might've. But he says he thinks he can locate him. I told him what we knew, the city, that he's going to school, all of it.”

Castiel realized he'd been clutching the phone tightly enough to leave purple-gray impressions of his fingers on its touch-screen.
In his Black literature class that day Drew greeted Castiel with an enthusiastic high-five. Castiel sat down beside him with a stinging palm and a heavy heart.

Drew had texted Castiel a few times over the weekend, mostly to ask him how his day was going or to send him a funny observation concerning an aspect of fraternity life. While Castiel hadn’t answered as consistently as would have been polite or understood every reference, Drew’s messages had filled the silence of his time in front of his still-life. The conversations they had were beginning to remind him of—

Castiel pushed Dean and the recollections of their first exchanges from his mind.

“What’s up?” Drew asked as Castiel sat down. His eyes were open and friendly as he flashed one of the dimpled smiles Castiel was coming to know.

“I think I may be sleep-deprived,” Castiel said in response.

“Story of my life,” Drew groaned emphatically. “This entire weekend I got maybe, like, ten hours total.”

Castiel nodded. “I can’t seem to sleep much lately.”

“It’s called bein’ in college, man,” Drew said with a laugh. Castiel found he liked that explanation better than the truth, and said nothing else before Professor Moseley came in and started the class session.

When class ended, Drew again seemed reluctant to part ways; he stood beside Castiel expectantly, his t-shirt stretched tightly over his shoulders as he braced himself against the desk with one arm.

“Do you, ah...want to come to the studio with me? I have some work to do, but could spare a—a moment,” Castiel said after a few minutes of increasingly pregnant silence, not sure if he was reading the situation correctly.

But he needn’t have worried; Drew nodded instantly with a pearly smile, and Castiel began to lead them across campus to the Fine Arts Building. He took out a cigarette to smoke along the way to hide the awkwardness blooming in the lengths of his limbs.

It had been one thing to sit on Drew’s bed together and talk, lit only by the green-blue glow of a television screen, the edges of their interactions smooth and indistinct with the steady, clear drip of alcohol. It was proving another matter entirely to walk together in the daylight, arms swinging in unison as if they were friends.

“Do you like being an art major?” Drew asked conversationally as Castiel took a deep drag of his lit Marlboro.

He looked over at Drew as he exhaled the swathe of smoke. “I’ve given up a lot to come here.”

Drew nodded as if he understood the weight of his words, and when they reached the studio a few minutes later Castiel ashed his cigarette in the sand just outside before they went in through the spotless glass doors together. The linoleum beneath their feet was newly-waxed, and a few of the lights in the main hallway beyond the lobby were off in the name of energy conservation. The overall effect was a strangely unfamiliar one, and Castiel almost felt as if he were in a new building as he led the way to the elevator. The ascent to the third floor was short and without conversation, and Castiel watched as Drew looked at the many prints and posters decorating the inside the lift.

When they stepped out of the elevator Castiel opened one of the heavy double doors of the studio,
narrating without hearing himself, “The door across from us is the drawing studio, and this is the painting studio—”

Castiel's words caught in his throat as they stepped inside and he saw that not only was Dean Winchester present in the studio for the first time in days, he was in the process of moving his supplies from his and Castiel's shared cubby.

Black headphones were pressed into Dean's ears, his face partially turned away from the two of them, and he had a wrinkled grocery bag filled with paint tubes and brushes hanging off the crook of one arm as he supported a large painting with both hands. He was wearing the torn and paint-splattered Led Zeppelin shirt he'd worn the very first time they met, and Castiel stopped in his tracks without conscious thought. Drew bumped into him from behind, having been preoccupied taking in the sights of the studio.

“Dean?"

The other boy turned to face them at the sound of his name, one of his earbuds falling out only to be caught short by the collar of his t-shirt; Castiel could faintly hear the sound of heavy guitar riffs emanating from its small, black speaker. The expression on Dean's fine-boned features was one of dread and surprise, obviously as caught off-guard as Castiel had been. His green eyes widened almost comically as he fumbled with the large painting he was clutching. The muscles of his tanned arms were taut and corded with the exertion of transporting it.

Drew moved to Castiel's side, asking Dean with an ease Castiel would pay dearly to possess, “You need any help carrying that?”

Dean shook his head curtly in response, though Castiel doubted he'd really heard Drew's question. He was reminded of the birthday party, of how Dean had looked straight through Meg to Castiel even as he spoke to her. Drew may as well have not been there at all, and Castiel wanted to hide from the intensity of Dean's gaze as it stripped him down to bones and aching sinew.

“I'll be outta your hair soon, Cas,” was all Dean said aloud.

Dean turned and began lugging his painting toward the door again, brushing past Castiel and Drew wordlessly. He still smelled as he always had of linseed oil and worn leather.

“Wait,” Castiel called before he could stop himself, taking a step forward. One of his arms was outstretched.

Dean turned around and faced him again at the entreaty. The dark pink of a healing cut still marred his bottom lip, and his pulse pounded visibly on one side of his neck. He looked almost expectant, even with his paints in a bag and his last work in his arms.

Castiel found he didn't know what to say to him, even as he knew he needed to say something, anything. Dean was staring at him, one foot poised as if to move forward at the right words.

But Castiel opened his mouth, and nothing issued from it; all that stretched between he and Dean was his hand.

Dean looked sad for a moment, perhaps less. Then, just as quickly, he made his way to the door.

Castiel realized that he loved him.

The clang of the closing door resonated through him with sickening irrevocability. Castiel felt as if something had been shaken loose inside of him; he was gathered from a field unripened. He knew
then and only then just how long his love for Dean had been there, silently absorbing him.

Castiel had loved Dean since before he met him; he'd loved him since he first saw his painting in the lobby of the Fine Arts Building the first day of classes.

Castiel loved Dean, and he'd thought of nothing good to say to him as he moved his last painting out of the space they'd shared for months.

“Who's that?” Drew asked after Dean conversationally.

“Someone who used to be my friend,” Castiel said, rooted to the spot as he stared at the door Dean had passed through.

Drew whistled. ‘I've been through some situations like that. Is he leaving or something?’

“Or something,” Castiel said dully before remembering what he'd been about to do and leading Drew numbly to his cubby. He no longer cared if the KA brother saw his work and liked it.

The empty space where Dean's paintings used to be felt as if it was inside him.

Drew whistled appreciatively when he saw Castiel's work-in-progress on the easel. “Damn! This is great, dude. I didn't know you were so good.”

Castiel thanked Drew mechanically and turned away under the pretense of straightening the paints and pallet cups already mercilessly cataloged on his table.

He wanted to turn and sprint after Dean, to tell him that Castiel would hurt as much as he had to if it would keep him there.

Castiel didn't realize that Drew had come close behind him until he felt warm breath on his neck and a hand on his side, heavy and splayed in a way that felt somehow like a claim.

“Are you okay, Cas?”

Dean's nickname for him on Drew's lips made Castiel wish he'd never told anyone else to call him that, but he forced himself to turn and face him.

“I'm fine. Thank you for seeing my work.”

Drew looked doubtful. “You look like you're gonna pass out. Do you need to sit down or something?”

Castiel shook his head. “No, I'm not tired.”

“I'll leave you to it, then. Text me if you wanna chill,” Drew said.

Castiel nodded, grateful that he would soon be alone. But Drew surprised him by moving forward swiftly before he could stop him and hugging him.
Castiel froze, smelling expensive cologne and Old Spice deodorant and having no idea if he should hug back or not. Drew was practically flush against him, his shirt soft and his hair tickling Castiel's cheek.

“You could do better, dude,” Drew said into his ear before letting go and leaving the studio with a wave.

***

On Wednesday Castiel didn't go to either of his classes, electing instead to stay shut-up in his room and make a little headway on the many readings he’d opted out of the past week and a half. He came out only to heat himself a can of soup for lunch and to smoke a few cigarettes in the courtyard.

Neither Charlie nor Dean called or texted.

Castiel trekked to the studio to work on his painting in silence after the entirety of the day had passed him by, pretending he hadn't been hoping one of his friends would be there when he opened the door only to find that they weren't.

***

Castiel was a child, not yet six years old, and it was mid-summer in the park. He was with his father (just the two of them, a special indulgence), and the tops of the heads of the other adults were high above Castiel as he walked between their sweat-dampened bodies and their bare, dangling arms. The sun was shining on Andrew Novak’s face in vivid, butter-yellow slats crafted by the wooden arches of a scenic trellis disappearing behind them. Castiel felt like the bird that sang outside his window each morning, tawny brown and full of tuneless melody.

Andrew had taken Castiel to 'stretch his legs a little' after seeing him stare longingly one too many times out the living room window. A fair had been passing through by sheer happenstance, taking up a brief, weekend residence in the nearby park. The tents housing the rickety wooden rides were colorful and tacky, torn nylon and red, tattered silk, and the smells of oil, popcorn and spun-sugar were heavy in the warm air.

Castiel wasn't entirely able to convince himself that the trip to the temporarily enchanted park was actually happening, that his father was with him, him alone and neither Mother nor Michael or even Anna was there to tag along and spoil it. In Castiel's young memory the only time such a thing had happened before was...well, never.

Andrew Novak looked out of place in the crowd of cargo-short and crop-top-clad people in the park, all of them smelling of sunscreen and coconut-scented tanning oil. Even though his father had put on a pair of dated Bermuda shorts and a linen button-down he stuck out like a sore thumb, his dark hair a little too neat, his posture a little too rigid.

But Castiel wasn't thinking overlong about that. No, he was five-and-eight-months old and in line to say hello to a clown with a red smile painted on his face and blue hair in curling tufts above his ears.

“I'm gonna ask him what he does as a clown and where he sleeps,” Castiel said seriously to his father, wanting him to be abundantly aware of the fact that he was using even their casual outing as a research opportunity. Andrew didn't answer his son verbally, but nodded and looked out over the considerable line they were in the middle of.

When they made it to the clown a little over ten minutes later, the man bent down and shook Castiel's small hand with fingers white-gloved and thick, his face smelling of lotion and adorned with a red
rubber nose.

“What’s your name, son?” the clown asked, and Castiel wrinkled his nose and tried to take his hand back.

“You smell like Mother after dinner,” he said with confusion. Behind him he heard Andrew apologize hurriedly.

“Castiel, we’re leaving now.” Andrew took Castiel's hand and pulled him away without gentleness, and he felt the eyes of the people around them heavy on him.

“He smelled like the red stuff in the bottles in the kitchen,” Castiel babbled, almost nauseous with the knowledge that he'd made his father angry.

“Hush,” Andrew mumbled.

“Why did the clown smell like that? I thought clowns didn't do anything but clown things, like juggle stuff and—”

“Just because someone wears a mask doesn't mean that's who they are, Castiel.”

“But—”

“Castiel, we're going home. Not another word.”

“Castiel? Cas—”

“Cas?”

Castiel was awoken by a light hand on his shoulder where he'd fallen asleep in front of his painting. Half of his body was numb from where he'd cut off his own circulation on the edges of his chair.

He was not in the park with his dead father, he was in his partitioned space and it was past three in the morning and now Thursday. He couldn't remember whether the weekend carnival trip with his father had actually happened or not, and found himself hoping it hadn't.

It was Gilda of all people who had woken Castiel from his impromptu nap beneath the still-burning fluorescents of the studio. Her wavy hair was draped over her thin shoulders, and her hand was cool on his arm. The light cast unflattering shadows in the defined hollows of her cheeks, and Castiel wondered how long he'd been sitting there. It was only he and Gilda in the studio, and Castiel didn't know when the other two painters burning the midnight oil alongside him had left.

“Gilda? How did you get in here?” Castiel asked her with a yawn he tried unsuccessfully to stifle.

Gilda dropped her hand from his shoulder and glanced at the door before looking back at him. She had a plastic grocery bag filled with brightly wrapped baubles of candy, Pocky sticks, and a bag of Lays potato chips.

“What's that?”

“It's for Charlie. The security guard on duty tonight knows me from when I was her—when we dated,” Gilda said.

Castiel nodded, and when he didn't respond immediately Gilda hastened to fill the silence. “It's some of her favorites, nothing special. I just know it's stressful to be in here all the time, and sometimes I come in and leave some of the stuff she likes...”
Gilda looked somehow different, and it caught Castiel by surprise when he understood that the reason why was because she was sober. She had been high, drunk, or otherwise intoxicated every time he'd interacted with her before, but she wasn't now. Now, she was herself and herself alone, and she looked tired.

“You should go to bed before you fall asleep again in here,” Gilda offered with a motion toward the door. The candy in her bag rustled.

“I should. I'm basically done, finished before I fell asleep,” Castiel said as he turned back to look at his painting. He was practically blind to its electric colors and shifting reflections after spending so much time perfecting, working and re-working its every detail. He knew that another examination would reveal nothing new to his exhausted eyes.

“It's wonderful,” Gilda said sincerely.

“Does Charlie know it's you who leaves the candy?” Castiel asked without facing her.

She was quiet for a long time, then,“I don't know, but she's never said anything.”

“Have you ever asked?”

“I haven't talked to her in a few days,” Gilda admitted.

Castiel hadn't talked to Charlie since Monday, and knew she didn't owe him a thing after the way he'd brushed her off. Guilt flushed through him, washed-out violet and lukewarm. He stood up quickly.

“I'm sorry.”

He left the studio without cleaning his brushes, and Gilda didn't say anything more to him as he passed her.

As he walked by Dean's things where they were set up in the hallway, Castiel's heart clenched like a fist in his chest.

***

Castiel's Black Literature class crawled by at a snail's pace on Thursday afternoon, and Drew's bright, bubbling energy felt almost abrasive where before it had been enervating. Castiel found himself only pretending to listen at times when he leaned in to whisper an observation or joke to him during class. When the session finally ended and Professor Moseley had wished her students a safe and happy weekend, Drew stopped Castiel at the door before they could head their separate ways. Castiel wasn't completely surprised by the action, but hoped that whatever Drew had to say, he'd say it quickly.

He hadn't been able to stop thinking of Dean.

Even when he smoked until the air in his room was hazy and tried to read or study, the regret he felt didn't ease, and his insomnia had grown even worse since Tuesday despite the mental health day he'd taken. He knew the effects were beginning to show on his face.

He felt as if he'd lost his best friend, and the absurd dream of what could have happened had he simply asked Dean to stay ate at him.

Even the remembered feeling of Dean's arms around him made Castiel's stomach twist.
Castiel tried to give Drew his full attention as he faced him in the classroom, bringing himself back to reality.

“Hey, man, you feeling any better?” Drew’s skin was almost perfectly clear, free of bruises and scrapes and healing scars.

“I'm alright,” Castiel lied. “How are you?”

“I'm good. Listen, I have just the thing to make you feel better,” Drew said with a smile.

“I don’t know if I need cheering-up, but appreciate—”

“This Saturday's the first registered party at KA house this semester. It's gonna be a hell of a night!” Drew said.

Castiel shook his head. “I don't know, Drew. I don't think I'd be comfortable at a party like that, I would only know you anyway, and I wouldn't want to keep y—”

“Nah, man! I don't mind, it'd be fun. You're funny as hell when you're sippin' on something. I think you should come.” Drew looked at him intently.

Castiel nodded slowly. “I mean...I guess I could come for an hour or two. But then I would probably leave.”

Drew grinned and dragged a hand over his back, and Castiel wondered if he was planning on hugging him again. But he didn't.

“Awesome! Text me before or whatever you wanna do, and I'll find you.”

After Drew left Castiel turned to wave goodbye to Professor Moseley, whose expression was difficult to read.

Friday was the first truly beautiful day of Spring and the last day of January. It loomed on the gold of the sunrise cloudless and halcyon as only a Friday could be. The chill, ultramarine bite of its morning breeze was suffused with a stream of balmy copper that ruffled Castiel's hair as he walked off his sleeplessness through the golf-course.

When he got back to his apartment almost two hours after he’d set off, Castiel wasn't expecting to find Balthazar out of his room and awake, seated at the little table in their kitchen with a cup of coffee in his hands.

Castiel checked his phone. “It's not even eight. What are you doing up?”

Balthazar looked at him as if he hadn't realized he was there, his eyes far-away.

“I think your insomnia's catching,” was all he said before retreating to his room, leaving Castiel alone with the smell of cigarette smoke clinging to his clothes, listening to the sound of the wind outside.

A few hours later found Castiel sitting on his bed, a stick of heady sandalwood incense lit beside him on his dresser to mask the rich, green-grass smell of the bowl he’d just smoked, and Anna's book was open in his lap. The adventures of Temil and Othras as they made their way through mountains of black stone and blistering desert plains was one that mostly absorbed him on the condition that he
smoked enough before reading it.

He was startled by his phone vibrating on his thigh. Andy's name crossed the screen, and Castiel opened a text asking if he wanted to come over and spend a few hours with him and Meg.

He didn't know why a text from his friend made him feel a stinging disappointment until he understood that he'd been hoping, against all rationality and reason, that it was Dean messaging him.

Castiel exhaled unhappily and propelled himself from his bed to put his shoes on.

When he arrived at Andy's fifteen minutes later, Meg was sitting on the sofa next to the him, one of her arms around him as the TV blared 90's cartoons and the faint scent of smoke wafted through the air. They were obviously comfortable together, Andy leaning into Meg's embrace with an ease that belied how often they'd done that very thing before, and Meg's heart-shaped face was devoid of its usual wariness. They looked as if they'd been sitting beside one another forever on Andy's old couch; one curve fitting inside the bend of another as naturally as Castiel had seen their fingers interlock when they thought he wasn't looking.

“Hey, hon,” Meg said to Castiel as she smacked Andy on the arm, wordlessly prompting him to move over a foot or so on the couch so that Castiel could sit beside them.

“Hello, Meg, Andy,” he said as he took his usual seat on the far right end of the old sofa. Meg put her free arm around his shoulders, her brown eyes narrowed and watchful, as if she expected the true state of Castiel's well-being to be visible if she but looked closely enough.

“How're you?” Andy asked from beside her. His brown hair was unkempt and his t-shirt a little rumpled.

“I'm fine,” Castiel said for what felt like the millionth time that week. Without noticing that he was doing so he lifted a finger to his lips before Meg slapped it away.

“Don't do that, you're gonna make it bleed again,” she said to him with concern.

Castiel shrugged and took the pipe that Andy handed him without comment.

“Winchester ever get at you?” Meg asked after they'd gone through two bowls and an hour of relative silence together, her legs on Andy's lap now with his hands draped over her knees.

“He moved his things out of our cubby, and I haven't spoken to him in days,” Castiel said with careful enunciation as he picked at a loose thread on the sofa near his leg.

Meg sat up straight in surprise. “When?”

“Tuesday,” Castiel responded.

Perhaps it was the way he said it, or the fact that Meg was all-too aware of her involvement in the present manifestation of the situation to say anything else, but neither of his friends asked him any more questions after that, and soon a fresh bowl was being again passed from hand to hand as Ren and Stimpy came on and the minutes ticked past.

Meg left a few hours later to go meet up with one of her friends on campus, lightly brushing her lips across Castiel's forehead and admonishing him to text or call if he wanted to hang out before she bent and whispered something into Andy's ear.

“I'll see you two later.”
Castiel stayed behind with Andy, halfway between asleep and awake.

“Why did you two break up?” he asked Andy after Meg had been gone more than half an hour.

“Why do you ask?” Andy said without looking at Castiel. His eyes were on the yellow-green blades of grass waving in the wind beyond the open window.

“You like each other,” Castiel said, not certain the words conveyed the meaning he sought.

“She likes people at arm's length. I think I...got too close,” was all Andy said before raising his pipe to his lips and taking a deep hit.

Castiel looked at the smoke that trailed in thin white blossoms through the air, thinking of the tattoo on Meg's back and the scars on his own fingertips.

On Saturday morning Castiel got out of bed at nine after sleeping for less than two hours, his back sore and his throat dry.

He padded into the kitchen to make himself some strong coffee, only to find that he was completely out. After a cursory look in both the cabinets and the refrigerator, Castiel saw with annoyance at himself and his roommate that they were out of almost everything, not just coffee. He went back into his room to get dressed so he could make a quick run to the store.

The aisles of the grocery store were surprisingly empty considering it was a Saturday morning, prime errand-running time, and Castiel couldn't shake the irrational unease this struck in him. The cashier was a woman he didn't know, and she said nothing to him as she rang up his purchase ten minutes later. She simply nodded when he asked for a pack of his usual cigarettes from the case above the register, and handed him his change without looking directly at him.

It was a noticeably chillier day out than Friday had been, and Castiel hugged himself as he took his bags out to the car. He cast a glance around the back seat looking for his hoodie, and was irritated when he didn't spot it amidst the empty cigarette packs, gas receipts and other bits of paper. When he couldn't find the item of clothing in his room upon his return, either, he sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, realizing there was a ninety percent chance he'd left it in the painting studio.

He shoveled his phone into his pocket and swept past the groceries still out on the kitchen counter and through the front door, uncharacteristic ire at the small inconvenience making his steps snap loudly on the sidewalk.

He reached the studio in record time, noticing without intending to that Dean's painting, still out in the hallway as it had been since Tuesday, looked haphazard and angry where before it had looked quiet and mournful. The colors were now layered so densely on top of one another that the original intent was almost lost beneath the agitated strokes and careless dabs. Castiel wondered why the abrupt change had taken place before he made himself look away and stepped inside the studio, his skin dotted with goose pimples from the breeze he'd walked through.

The first thing he saw upon entering was his hoodie, draped over the back of his chair. He purposefully took the last few steps separating himself from it and slipped his arms into its worn sleeves.

He gave his painting a glance while he was there, standing beside it and leaning in closely to view with rested eyes the details of his work. He found with relief that he was still pleased with it.
He was still looking at it when he heard the studio door open. He didn't think much of it until Dean's voice wafted forward into the room, preceding the painter himself. Castiel's heart began to hammer in his chest, and it suddenly didn't matter that he'd wanted to speak to Dean for days; he acted before he could stop himself and scurried a few yards deeper into the studio to stand behind the partition that blocked off the brush-washing station from the rest of the space.

When Castiel heard Charlie's voice join Dean's he was surprised to hear that it sounded as if they were arguing.

“—don't see why you won't let this go, Charlie.”

“What? The fact that your shit's out in the hallway and Cas looks like a lost puppy every time I say your name? What happened?”

“Nothing,” Dean sounded as though he was walking away from her.

“I'm about ninety-nine percent sure something happened and neither of you will say a fucking thing.”

“Fuck, Charlie. What is this, an interrogation?”

“Did something happen, Dean?”

“What?”

“You and Cas used to be close, I...honestly kinda thought you were a thing, and suddenly you stop talking right when you get with Lisa? c'mon, do I have to spell it out?”

“You don't know what you're talking about, Charlie,” Dean spat.

“You've been telling her no for years,” Charlie said firmly.

“Lisa's great, and even if I wasn't dating her, I doubt it matters to him.”

The hairs on the back of Castiel's neck stood on end at the emotion he heard in Dean's voice.

“What do you mean?”

“I...I saw Cas with someone in here yesterday.” Castiel had to strain to hear, so quiet was Dean then, and his heart sank.

“What? Like, showing someone around in here?”

“No, Charlie. Some other guy was...hugging him.”

“Cas? Hugging some random guy? Come on.”

“Look, things are finally goin' the way I want them to. Let it go,” Dean said with a sigh.

“Are they, really?” Charlie asked.

“Goddammit, Charlie, yes.”

“Do you love her?”

Castiel wanted to cover his ears or run out into the studio and interrupt Dean and Charlie's talk, anything to stop what he feared would be said next.
Then, “Of course I do, Charlie.”

Castiel didn’t hear the rest of their conversation. He turned and took the exit beside the row of metal sinks, knowing the door was slamming behind him and not caring as he stepped into the stairwell.

He practically ran down the flights of stairs, his feet moving so quickly he felt they were flying away from him. He was breathing raggedly, his vision blurred. He sprinted back to his apartment, his lungs burning with the cold air he’d breathed in too quickly as he stood in front of his own front door. He leaned heavily against the chipped paint of its surface, the world spinning and him with it. He slid down and sat on his haunches as the early afternoon breeze cooled his skin, willing his heart to slow and his breaths to calm.

They didn’t, and Castiel knew they wouldn’t for a while, yet.

Castiel bought a bottle of cheap vodka from the liquor store next-door to the Wag-A-Bag a few hours later. He saw Andy through the dirty window, but didn’t stop in to say hello to his friend.

As soon as he got back to his apartment he threw back a few swallows of the rotgut alcohol, using the lid as a cup, and decided that he wasn’t going to call Meg and ask if she wanted to come over that night the way he’d been planning to. He was going to go to the party Drew had invited him to. Castiel hadn’t been interested in going before, if he was honest with himself. He’d assumed he’d simply spin a believable excuse, text Drew his regrets and spend the evening with Meg and the two grams of Blue Dream he’d bought from Andy the day before.

That had been before his trip to the studio.

Dean’s words ate at him like turpentine through enamel, and he wanted to rip from the trenches of his chest the red hand wrapped around his heart.

The only person he wanted to talk to was Dean, and he knew he’d lost the chance to.

Around eleven o’clock that evening Castiel was a little past buzzed and dressing himself in the same get-up he’d worn to the Halloween party at Iota house. The navy blue shirt that made his eyes stand out looked as if it had stretched on his frame, and he pretended he didn’t notice as he slipped into his dark jeans and worn sneakers.

The walk across campus to Frat Row was a solitary one, and the moon had become mostly obscured by heavy gray clouds at some point within the last few hours.

Castiel was wearing nothing but his v-neck and jeans, the last thing he wanted on his skin the hoodie that had drawn him to the studio. He knew the only reason he wasn’t shivering in the nighttime draft was the vodka he'd knocked back. Its liquid warmth coursed through his loosened limbs as the world gently swam around him with every drop of his feet on the sidewalk.

He heard the sounds of a raucous party coming from the frat house before he even arrived at their front step. The porch was brightly lit in the night and populated by people brandishing red cups and cigarettes. Over the door hung a sizable homemade sign that read *Heaven and Hell at Kappa Alpha House,* and was decorated theatrically with flames of bright red and orange tissue paper and cotton balls dusted with silver glitter. The students on the front porch were loud and oblivious, dressed as angels in dirty white pants or short skirts or as devils in cheap red vinyl and polyester. They were drinking punch that Castiel could smell the liquor in from a few feet away, and a cloud of smoke
hung over their heads, trapped beneath the porch roof like carcinogenic morning mist.

Castiel didn't see Drew mingling outside with a drink or loitering in the open doorway, and soon stepped past them and inside to look there. Once in, he found that the large front room of the house was divided down the middle, one half lit with red lights and the other with baby blue. The Heaven and Hell theme carried over into the decorations on both sides of the room, the red with more paper flames and plastic pitchforks hanging from the ceiling, and the blue with clouds of white smoke curling over the floor as it was belched from a machine in the corner and a few large, white bean bag chairs that resembled clouds.

The music was almost deafening, and a few strobe lights in addition to the red and blue mood lights cast eerie, flickering shadows on the floor and walls. Dozens of students were dancing wildly in the chaotic mixture of lights bathing every exposed surface, and Castiel recognized no one as he took quick inventory of those present in the immediate vicinity. Whether that was a result of the masks many of them were wearing or coincidence, he didn't know.

The party here had a distinctly different feeling than the ones he'd attended at Iota. Where Iota was relaxed and comfortable, KA was impersonal and intense. There was more liquor than beer being circulated in this party, and most of the couches had preemptive plastic coverings over their black leather exteriors. The sheer amount of people present was impressive; everywhere Castiel looked he saw students grouped together, drinking or dancing raunchily as red punch spilled from their cups onto the expensively-tiled floor.

Deciding that he'd looked around enough without finding his friend, Castiel took out his phone to text Drew that he'd arrived. He got a response soon after, not via text, but by Drew himself emerging from the crowd of writhing bodies on the dance floor. He energetically bounded towards Castiel over various puddles and discarded solo cups. He had a goofy smile on his face, and his blonde hair was slightly damp with sweat, presumably from dancing. He was wearing white pants and a white button-down, obviously moonlighting as an angel.

“You made it!” he yelled to Castiel over the noise. He reached out and put a hand heavily on his shoulder as he had a few times before.

“This is crazy,” Castiel said with a tentative laugh he knew was lost in the cacophony of music and voices.

“When'd you get here?” Drew asked, gesturing for Castiel to follow him upstairs to his room. Castiel followed without much thought, remembering the last time he'd been in Drew's room.

“Less than five minutes ago,” Castiel said. He was relieved when the noise lessened as they ascended the stairs and he didn't have to shout.

The upstairs hallway was crowded with people as it had been the last time he attended a party at KA, and Castiel heard half a dozen separate conversations as he and Drew walked past clusters of fraternity brothers drinking with their female counterparts. A few of them waved to Drew or said his name as he and Castiel passed, clapping him on the back or high-fiving him. They looked at Castiel with passing curiosity, more interested in asking their friend how much he'd had to drink than asking who the quiet person by his side was. Castiel didn't bother trying to introduce himself, he simply let them think whatever they wanted.

Some of the bedrooms in the hall were open to whoever might care to walk inside, others were closed with socks looped over their handles. It sounded as if each room had a different song blasting from beneath its door. The effect was one so discordant Castiel had a hard time concentrating on what Drew was saying to him until they reached his room, hearing at one moment Lil' Wayne, the
next moment Jason Aldean.

Drew shut the door behind them once they crossed the threshold. The small room was cleaner than it had been last time. The bed was made and the dresser had been cleared of papers and textbooks. Drew sat on the edge of his desk, looking at his guest expectantly. Castiel sat cross-legged on the bed, his hands palm-up on his knees.

“You want a shot or something?” Drew asked after he saw that Castiel had made himself comfortable.

Castiel nodded thankfully at the offer, checking his phone as the blonde got up to go to the little fridge in the corner of the room. Anna had called a few hours earlier, he saw. He supposed he'd been too busy sipping vodka to hear his phone.

“It's been crazy here today, y'know. We’ve been cleaning and getting things ready since eight this morning.” Drew's voice interrupted Castiel's perusal of his phone, and he put it away.

“How's your day been, man?” Drew asked him.

“Shitty,” he said as Drew handed him a full shot glass.

Drew looked back at him and raised his eyebrows at the response, still in the process of pouring his own shot at the desk.

“Care to explain?” he asked.

“It's best not to become emotionally attached to people who don't give a shit about you,” Castiel said as Drew sat down on the bed beside him with a shot of his own. Even as he said them he knew the words weren't true, but he didn't care. The memory of Dean's voice blistered the inside of his skull, and he wanted to allow self-indulgent resentment to sweep him away for a few hours.

“Amen,” Drew said seriously, raising his shot glass to his lips. Castiel did the same.

After emptying his shot Castiel noticed that Drew's leg was pressed against his, so close had he sat beside him on the bed.

“You're cool, y'know. And you're cute, you'll find someone,” Drew said with the ease Castiel was becoming accustomed to from him, his full lips reddened from the alcohol. Drew's thigh was hot against Castiel's where he hadn't moved it, and his breath was warm on Castiel's stubbled cheek.

Castiel stood up jerkily. “I'd like to smoke a cigarette, and I can give you one, too, if you want.”

Drew nodded readily, unfazed, “You want a drink to take out?”

Castiel said yes, and five minutes later they both had a mixed drink in hand and were outside on the upstairs porch Castiel had wandered onto weeks before, high on hydrocodone and shots of Sailor Jerry's. It looked different now that Castiel's blood was clean of painkillers. Now, it seemed smaller, almost claustrophobic with its round shape and high stone railing.

The muffled noises of the party drifted out from under the closed door a few feet behind them, but the two of them were silent almost the entirety of the time they stood there together, one of Castiel's Marlboros lit in their respective free hands. Castiel watched as the thin, pearl-white trails of smoke that drifted from the end of his cigarette swirled slowly down beyond the balcony railing. The moon had escaped from behind its shroud of gray sometime while Castiel was in Drew's room, and its pale light poured over the concrete beneath their feet and the party-goers below in the yard.
Castiel wondered what Meg was doing, if she was annoyed he hadn't called the way he said he would. He knew she'd probably just gone to Andy's, where they'd watch cartoons as they sat together, wrapped in blankets and smoke on the sofa, neither of them thinking of him because they had each other.

He took a long drink from his cup then, the moon lonely in the sky where only seconds before it had been elegant.

When Drew spoke, both cigarettes had burned down to their orange filters and Castiel was feeling the familiar burn of the tequila in the center of his chest. His fingertips and cheeks tingled with it.

“What you said earlier, was, uh...was it about that guy I met yesterday?”

Castiel nodded.

“What happened?” Drew asked cautiously, turning beside Castiel to face him fully after throwing his ashed cigarette over the balcony.

Castiel took out another cigarette and a deep breath before answering. “He kissed me on Christmas Eve, the same night I found out he'd started dating a girl in our class. Now we don't talk.” The words came quickly with little inflection, and left Castiel feeling heavier, not lighter the way he'd heard one was supposed to feel after divulging secrets.

Drew shook his head and scoffed derisively. “That's some bullshit, man. You shouldn't have to put up with crap like that.”

Castiel felt as though Drew's answer should have made him feel vindicated, comforted in the fact that the things Meg had said to him regarding Dean and his character flaws appeared to be correct. But it didn't. If anything, Drew's casual dismissal of Dean made Castiel want to explain exactly why Dean wasn't a selfish person despite the dubious circumstances in which the kiss had happened.

But, “That's what my friend Meg thinks, too,” was all Castiel said in response before putting out his cigarette beneath his shoe.

They went back inside not long after.

“Let's take another shot,” Drew said once they'd returned to the quiet of his room. When he began to pour two more for them, Castiel resisted the temptation to take out his phone and text Meg an apology he knew she wouldn't read.

Castiel wasn't sure how much time had passed and how many more shots he'd taken, he knew only that it hadn't been many and he felt wasted.

His skin was tight and hot over his muscles, as if he were running a fever the way he had when he'd been sick with the flu. His shirt was soaked through with perspiration under his arms and in the divot of his sternum, and he was having a hard time sitting up straight. His spine felt like silk rope under his clammy skin. He couldn't help but imagine for an illogical moment that it was as long as the reclining woman's in Ingres' Grande Odalisque.

Drew had a hand on Castiel's side and was saying something about how hard people were to understand and how he shouldn't take anything personally. His grip was inflexible over Castiel's ribs. Castiel pictured Drew's fingers leaving imprints on his skin, thought of those he'd seen on Dean and felt his stomach lurch unpleasantly. He stood up haltingly on knees reluctant to support him only to
roll his ankle with a sharp exhale of pain. He dipped gracelessly back onto the bed behind him, his arms outstretched stupidly.

The shot glass fell from from his fingers (he'd still been holding it?) and shattered on the floor, and Drew didn’t move from where he'd been sitting or look angry about the shot glass. The door to his bedroom was still closed, three different songs were still playing somewhere outside, and Castiel's head was beginning to ache.

“Fuck, sorry—” Castiel's words were badly slurred, and formless dread pulsed through him at the sound. He'd never been this intoxicated before, not even when he'd mixed Adderall and rum with Meg at the swimming pool.

He wanted to lie down and sleep. His body was heavy and covered with skin that felt like fire.

“Drew?” Castiel said around a tongue vast and dry in his mouth. The KA brother's face looked slightly distorted as he slid an arm around Castiel's shoulders to steady him as he struggled to stay upright.

“I think you might have had a little too much to drink.”

“I...I don't know—has this ever...happened with that before?” Castiel pointed clumsily to the bottle of tequila still out on the dresser. Every word felt as if it took vast amounts of strength to force from his lips, and he felt drowsier and more confused with each passing second.

“I think you might just be a lightweight. You want some water?” Drew asked, his arm feeling as though it weighed a ton on Castiel's shoulders. Castiel clutched at Drew with hands he couldn't quite close in an effort to keep from falling back onto the bed.

Drew reached behind them and grabbed a bottle of water from a shelf beside the bed. Castiel fumblingly attempted to unscrew its lid until Drew did it for him. Only a small amount of the water made it into his mouth, the other half splashed down his chin and onto the v-neck of his shirt. Castiel blushed, a spike of pain in his head making him wince.

“You want to lie down?” Drew asked. Castiel shook his head as emphatically as he was able.

“Want to...go home. Don't know why I'm so—so fucked-up,” he muttered, but Drew didn't seem to hear.

Castiel wasn't pressed down onto the neatly-made bed, he slumped back on his own when Drew let slip the arm he’d had around his shoulders. The sheer weight of his body pulled him like an anchor into the mattress. The smell of Drew and his cologne encompassed Castiel like the stifling hum of the air conditioning.

His body was alien to him, unwieldy with an immense pressure he couldn't explain or identify. He didn't understand why he couldn't shake it off, why he couldn't wake up enough to sit back up. When Castiel felt a pair of lips on his, wet and cool, he stiffened and tried to turn away. He tasted his own cigarettes and tequila on Drew's mouth.

When Drew wrapped a hand around his wrists and held them above his head, Castiel understood what was going to happen. He twisted weakly underneath the solid body on top of his, feeling fear wash over him. Drew unconcernedly sucked a mark onto his neck.

“Please, take me...home. Need to...sleep.”

Drew shushed him.
Castiel lost track of time. His world narrowed itself down to the feeling of stale air hitting the tops of his thighs as his jeans were tugged down around his knees, the deafening beat of his own heart, the warmth of the blood pounding in his ears.

Drew was biting Castiel's bottom lip.

Their chests were touching.

Their thighs were awkwardly slotted together as Drew touched him, his fingers cold and blunt.

Castiel closed his eyes again. He wanted to stand up and run as far and as fast from Drew as he could. He wanted to go home and pretend the party had been a dream. But his body betrayed him, and did none of those things even as he wordlessly begged it to.

When Drew pushed inside him, the pain of it was red, red in him and through him.

Castiel held his breath.

I'm not here and never was.

I'm still in my room, sick with a fever, and Dean is bringing me Thanksgiving leftovers.

At the thought of Dean, Castiel cried out and Drew put his free hand over his mouth, his palm tasting of alcohol and sweat.

Castiel couldn't tell where Drew ended and he began, so close were they in that awful, endless moment. Drew was all that he could smell and taste, all that he knew. It was a caricature of intimacy, Drew's breath pushed into his lungs as un-apologetically as his body into Castiel's.

Just because someone wears a mask doesn't mean that's who they are, Castiel.

After, Drew buttoned his jeans back up for him when he'd finished.

Castiel hated someone for the first time in his life as the fraternity brother crawled off of him.

He returned to his dresser and poured himself another shot, downing it quickly and looking back at Castiel.

An endless why lay on Castiel's tongue. He needed to get out of that bed, out of that room, back to his own apartment and the shower he could spend hours in below scalding water. The thought was all that rattled through him in the silence.

“Need to...leave,” Castiel said at last, his voice small in his throat.


Castiel whispered with a voice little more than a rasp, “Please...take me down—downstairs.”

The thought of Drew so much as laying a finger on him again made a surge of nausea barrel through him, but Castiel knew he couldn't make the trek down the stairs on his own. Tears gathered in Castiel's eyes as Drew pulled him from the bed. His hands trembled as he fought with every fiber of his being not to throw up when Drew's hair brushed his cheek, when his arm encircled him again.

People stared at them as they made their way slowly down the stairs, asking one another aloud how
much Castiel'd had to drink. Drew smiled at them with good-natured humor.

“The sign of a good party, am I right?”

When they reached the first floor after what felt like hours, Castiel pulled away from Drew as forcefully as he could. He stumbled until his back mercifully hit a wall, his arms and legs still rubbery and benumbed beneath him. He swayed dangerously on his feet, scrabbling at the wall as he tried not to slip down to the floor.

Drew didn't leave him where he stood, standing back and looking at him with arms crossed over his chest.

“Go...away,” Castiel whispered.

Drew stepped forward and gripped his arm so tightly Castiel knew he'd be bruised later, holding him up where he was about to fall again. “Calm down, we had fun.”

“You hurt me,” Castiel said, praying that someone, anyone, would notice them there, would see him pushed up against the wall in the shadow of the stairwell.

“I gave you a good time. We both know that,” Drew said.

He let go of Castiel and left to retreat up the stairs again, his shoulders the last Castiel saw of him that night.

Castiel sagged weakly against the wall, the entire house vibrating with bass drops and auto-tuned vocals he couldn't understand. He slid down, down, the textured stucco of the wall scraping his back as he fell to the floor.

His rolled ankle throbbed as he stretched it out in front of his body, and had he the presence of mind he would have checked it to make sure he wasn't seriously hurt. But he didn't, and he felt his eyes closing again before he could tell himself why he'd so desperately wanted to come downstairs.

When Castiel became conscious of someone was pulling him up off of the floor a few minutes later he tried to pry himself from their grasp, thinking Drew had come back for him.

At the sound of a prominent Louisiana accent, Castiel realized through the haze who it was that had him in their arms.

“Easy there, brother. I think you've had a few too many,” Benny was saying to him. He steadied Castiel easily, his burly arms dense and sturdy where they wrapped around him, almost lifting his feet from the sticky floor.

“Need to leave,” Castiel said hoarsely. “Please—”

“I don't know where you live, Cas, and I doubt you're in the right shape to tell me. I think I know what to do, though. Let me call Winchester and get him to come help you. He should be awake.”

Castiel shuddered and closed his eyes, seeing through the skin of his lids stinging light clawing to get in.

“Dean? I'm at KA, and your boy Cas here needs some help...” Benny was saying into his phone.

When had he dialed it? Castiel didn't know. Everything was running together and Castiel was a raw nerve still being touched and prodded and chafed. It was so hot, and there were far too many people
in the room surrounding them.

“Let's get you outside,” Benny said softly. Castiel realized he was gasping for air, his fists wound tight in the front of Benny's t-shirt. Benny firmly hefted Castiel back to his side and brusquely walked the two of them toward the door.

“Sorry,” Castiel whispered into Benny's shoulder as he leaned against him, cool night air hitting his face and easing slightly the burning of his skin.

“S' okay, brother. Nothing to be sorry for. We all have a little too much fun sometimes. Dean'll understand.”

Castiel wanted to tell him that he didn't have any fun, that the last thing he had at that party was fun, but said nothing. An emptiness filled him as he stood beside Benny, making of Castiel a bone without marrow; he hoped to god it swallowed the blurred memories of the last hour and a half.

Castiel didn't know how long they stood there with Benny holding him up.

He saw Dean coming towards them before Benny did, but didn't bother attempting notifying him. Dean's steps were rapid, his hands in the pockets of his jeans as he walked toward the fraternity house. When he spotted Benny and Castiel he made a beeline for them, stepping roughly past a few students drunkenly blocking his way. His face was closed-off, his features like stone as he came to stand beside them. He greeted Benny as if Castiel wasn't there.

Castiel didn't hear what Benny was saying, all he was aware of in that moment was Dean, standing next to him for the first time in days. He had a fresh bruise high on one cheek, and his hair was carelessly finger-combed, as if he'd just woken up. Castiel wondered what time it was, if Dean had been dragged from the warmth of his bed to drive the ten minutes to campus, all to walk Castiel home because he was too fucked-up to tell Benny where his apartment was. Castiel bit his bottom lip only to realize that Drew had already left him a cut there.

“How long has he been like this?” Castiel heard Dean ask Benny.

“I don't know, I ran into him like this twenty minutes ago, maybe. I think he was upstairs with someone.”

“Why didn't you tell me it was this bad?” Dean asked as Castiel tried to adjust his injured ankle and stumbled like a new-born foal. Dean looked at him as if he'd never seen him before. His green eyes were dark with what Castiel realized with a sick twist in his belly was disappointment.

“I figured you'd seen worse,” Benny answered dryly.

“Whatever. Guess I'll get him home and text you later,” Dean conceded before he carefully replaced his own arm where Benny's had been around Castiel. He took his dead weight on without comment. Castiel let his head fall onto Dean's shoulder, the sleep-softened smell of the other boy so familiar he wanted to cry.

Just get home, Castiel told himself with each breath. He repeated the mantra until it became meaningless.

Dean was steering them both down the sidewalk that led back to his apartment. From a few yards behind them Benny called out a goodbye. Dean waved back, his body twisting with the motion under Castiel's arms.

Castiel's steps were shuffling and uneven, and the journey was a slow one, with Dean supporting
almost the entirety of his weight as Benny had ended up doing. But he didn't let him go or crumple under the burden, he simply kept his arm wrapped around Castiel, kept propelling them forward while beside him Castiel struggled to move the way he knew he'd been able to just hours before.

“How much did you have to drink?” Dean asked him when they'd been walking for almost five minutes. The campus around them was eerily silent after they were out of earshot of Frat Row. Dean sounded as though he didn't really want to hear the answer.

Castiel didn't answer before he tore himself from Dean's grip to fall to his knees on the ground. He threw up over the edge of the sidewalk, what felt like gallons of half-digested booze and bile passing between his open lips. The fresh cut on his lip burned. He dimly heard his own labored breaths over the sound of his heart hammering wildly in his chest at the exertion. He tried to count in his mind how many shots he'd had and couldn't. His memories of the party seemed as if they were scrambling themselves. The harder he tried to recall them, the less distinct they became.

“Did you take something again?” Dean was asking, sounding as if he was speaking from behind teeth clenched in anger. His voice was distant as Castiel threw up a second time, his throat on fire and his arms shaking. Dean had one hand on his back and another bracing Castiel's shoulder, his fingers wrapped beneath the joint where Drew's had been not long before.

“Oh, god,” Castiel gasped between dry-heaves. The words tasted like vomit and cigarettes.

“Did Meg fuckin' leave you at that party like this?” Dean asked indignantly. Castiel shook his head, his breaths shallow and stinging.

“What did you take, Cas?” the gruffness of Dean's resentment and the heat of his hand on Castiel's back made him want to scream.

“Need sleep, please, sleep—” Castiel wasn't sure how many times he said the words before Dean helped him up off the ground. He clasped him tightly to his side as he had before, practically carrying him over the bleached concrete of the sidewalk. It looked so clean, the neat squares so bare and moon-white as Castiel's feet traversed their worn surfaces.

Castiel couldn't look at Dean even as he held onto him, was supported by him. He looked at the sky as he had before instead, at the plumes of gray chasing the moon again. The empty felt as if it was draining from him where he couldn't staunch its flow, horror and weariness taking its place.

“Jesus, Cas, feels like you're running a fever,” Dean mumbled.

“Sorry,” Castiel said, not knowing if he was apologizing to Dean or to himself.

When they arrived at the apartment almost ten minutes later Balthazar was home, sitting at the kitchen table with Castiel's bottle of vodka open in front of him. He looked up in surprise when Dean and Castiel entered, the door flung back into the wall with a loud bang after Dean opened it with one hand.

As Dean turned to close it again his grip on Castiel's arm loosened, and it only took a moment for his rolled ankle to fail him in its absence. He fell forward heavily, hearing Dean curse behind him while at the same time the door closed with a click. Dean managed to grab Castiel around the waist and hoist him back up before his knees could take the brunt of his tumble. Castiel's head sagged back over Dean's shoulder, and he heard a sound escape his own lips that sounded like a broken word. His ankle felt swollen and dense.
The kitchen light was on, too bright and hurting his eyes. Castiel tried to turn away from it, shifting fitfully in Dean's hold.

“What the fuck happened to him?” Balthazar asked as Dean started to help Castiel across the living room towards his bedroom door. His fingers were again clamped where Drew's had been. Castiel began to tremble, nausea making his saliva thick in his mouth.

“I don't know,” Dean snapped, concern evident in his voice where before there had only been bitterness.

“Put me under water,” Castiel bleated. His skin was tacky with dried sweat, and the space between his legs was slick. He needed to rid himself of every trace of Drew on him, in him, needed to boil the bacteria from his skin and cleanse the insides of his lungs out with scalding steam. He needed Dean to move his hand, first, though, more than anything else, had to make him move it from where Castiel already felt bruises blooming under his shirt sleeves.

“Get—off me, get—off,” he tried to free himself, suddenly feeling as if the arms holding him up were holding him captive, wrapped too tightly around him, closing the airway already half-collapsed with his own anxiety.

“Can't breathe—”

Dean half-lifted him off of the ground to take him to his bathroom. He sat Castiel down on the closed lid of the toilet after flicking the light on, his eyes wide as he looked at him closely, taking in the sight of whatever Castiel looked like at that moment under the unforgiving glow of the fluorescents.

“You...you have a bruise on your neck, and your lip...it's bleeding again...” Dean trailed off. “Who were you with upstairs?”

“Doesn't matter.” Castiel didn't let himself meet Dean's eyes.

Dean bracketed Castiel in with his arms on the toilet lid where his body was balanced precariously on its smooth surface. Castiel exhaled sharply as the movement shifted him where he sat, jostling the tender spaces Drew had violated.

“Fuck,” Castiel gasped.

He didn't want to be looked at anymore, he wanted to slip into the tub beside the toilet and draw the shower curtain. The cold tank of the toilet was digging into the middle vertebra of his back where he was leaning against it.

“Are you hurt besides your ankle?” Dean asked, as if the possibility had just occurred to him then.

He began to pat Castiel down carefully, the lightness of the touches not enough to disguise the fact that Dean's hands were trembling, now, too. He started with Castiel's upper torso, his shoulders, chest, ribs, moving from part to part with an eye on Castiel's face.

When Dean's hands reached his hips, Castiel tried to push him away with arms still weak and shaking.

“Don't,” Castiel whispered as Dean drew back.

Castiel only realized he'd started to cry when he felt Dean's fingers on his face, swiping away the wet trails on the hot apples of his cheeks. His hands were cool on Castiel's skin.
“You have to tell me what you took,” Dean said urgently.

“Nothing,” Castiel said. “Shots.”

“Did you drink something someone else gave you?” Dean asked, framing Castiel's face with firm, callused hands, attempting to make him meet his eyes.

Castiel tried to look away, his stomach churning as he thought of the shots he'd taken from Drew. He hadn't watched Drew prepare them, never followed the fraternity brother's hands as the alcohol was poured into the glasses. He'd simply taken them without question, had thrown them back and asked for another each time. He closed his eyes.

“Castiel, did you drink something someone else gave you?” Dean was speaking loudly, now. His hands tightened around Castiel's face in his efforts to get answer.

Castiel nodded at last, opening his eyes and wondering what Dean saw in them.

“Did something happen?” Dean asked, his voice lowering as he leaned forward.

_I gave you a good time._

Castiel pitched forward and tried to cover his mouth, gagging loudly. Dean moved quickly and helped Castiel get to his knees on the floor without hurting himself, lifting the lid right before he threw up again, cold sweat beading his brow.

“So stupid,” Castiel rasped, clutching at the front of his own shirt.

“Did someone hurt you?” Dean asked. He was sitting on the floor beside him, pressed against the bathtub with his hand around Castiel's arm again. His fingers were digging into the same goddamn place as before, and Castiel jerked away clumsily.

“Stop...touching me...there.”

Dean let go of him immediately, saying nothing as Castiel slumped against the toilet. When Castiel felt Dean lift his shirt sleeve a few minutes later and heard the sharp intake of his breath as he saw the red shapes of fingertips, he didn't say anything.

“Cas, you have to tell me if something happened,” Dean said shakily.

“Sorry I did—didn't stop you earlier,” Castiel murmured as he wiped his wet mouth on the back of his hand.

Dean shook his head. “Cas, why are you—”

“Was wrong,” Castiel said.

“What happened?” Dean asked again, anxiety making his handsome features sharp and peaked.

“Thought—” Castiel began haltingly, his throat sore and his eyes aching. “—thought it was fine. But...could—couldn't move—” His voice broke, and he took a breath and tried to continue. “I think I'm—bleeding.”

Dean shuffled forward on his knees and pressed Castiel's head to his chest, holding him tightly. He didn't move to stroke his back or pet his hair, but simply locked his arms where they were, as if he needed the embrace as much as Castiel.
“Oh fuck, Cas,” Dean breathed onto the top of Castiel's head. “Fuck...”

Castiel clung to him, pressing his cheek to the warm, solid surface of Dean's chest.

“Who? I'll fucking kill them,” Dean said, his arms shaking where they wrapped around Castiel.

“Don't ask,” Castiel said numbly.

He wanted to burn the clothes he was wearing. He wanted to take a shower that lasted for days, but instead, he fell asleep on the floor with Dean's arms around him, the cold of the tile leeching into the bottoms of their legs.

Castiel was in a bed, he could feel the softness of it under his body.

Panic seized him.

Was he still in Drew's bed? If he was he had to get out, had to get the fuck out—

“Cas? Castiel, you're fine,” Dean was saying to him, and Castiel realized he'd been saying the words aloud, his voice no longer slurried.

He sat up ramrod-straight in what he realized after a cursory look-around was his own bed before turning to face Dean where he was seated on the floor, a pillow supporting his back and one of Castiel's blankets thrown over his knees; he looked awful, as if he'd been awake for days, his freckles dark on uncharacteristically pale skin and his green eyes half-lidded in exhaustion.

The realization that Castiel could move his body again with the ease he was accustomed to hit him like a sonic wave, debilitating and devastating when it should have been a relief. He rolled his arms in their sockets and felt bile build in the back of his throat.

Castiel shuddered as scattered, blurred memories came unbidden and unwanted to him, a choked breath leaving his lungs as if he'd been slammed into a wall.

Castiel's eyes were watering and his hand was twisting at the hem of his shirt the way he could never seem to stop himself from doing. He was in the same clothes he'd worn at the party, he was still dirty, he could smell Drew on him, and the scent made him want to claw at the seams of his skin until he drew blood.

Dean had seen everything, had seen Castiel and walked him home and held him as he cried. He knew. He knew that Castiel had been stupid enough to get himself drugged at a frat house.

The sun was rising outside, the faint, pink-gold of it flooding Castiel's messy room through the spaces in his blinds.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“Almost six-thirty,” Dean answered immediately. “Cas, how're you feeling?”

“I'd like for you to leave,” Castiel said quietly. A migraine throbbed in the confines of his skull with every word.

“Please, let me stay here and take care of you—” Dean began, standing up from the floor. The blanket fell from his knees to pool around his feet.
“No,” Castiel said as he looked not at Dean, but through him.

“No, we should probably take you to the hospital. I can’t just leave you—”

“You already did,” Castiel reminded him.

“I...I didn't want to hurt you more than I already had,” Dean said.

“Just go,” Castiel said, his voice almost inaudible.

Dean's lips parted as if he were about to respond, but Castiel stopped him before he could.

“Please.”

Dean looked at him for a long, long time, perhaps the longest silent moment that had ever passed between them in the months they'd known each other. But Castiel kept his eyes focused on the slight swelling of his ankle beneath the leg of his jeans.

“I won't be far off. Call me, Cas, please. Don't...don't push me away.”

After Castiel heard the front door close behind him a few minutes later, he stripped himself of his clothes and ran a shower so hot the steam stung his skin.

He showered for almost two hours, scrubbing himself everywhere that he could reach until his skin was reddish-purple and tender and he could see the myriad, spidery traces of broken capillaries decorating the raw surfaces of his arms and legs. After he'd thoroughly washed and rinsed himself, wincing as he lowered his body gingerly down, Castiel sat beneath the stream until it was like shards of ice pouring over him.

His head was still pounding when he finally clambered over the edge of the tub and dressed himself in clean clothes. He took his discarded party outfit to the dumpster behind the apartment complex, tossing it over and onto the rotting bags filled with old Ramen wrappers and essays on social justice. He forced himself not to look at the v-neck he used to wear to bring out the color of his eyes where it lay beside his torn jeans.

He took a few aspirin when he got back in, plugged his dead phone into its wall-charger, tried to eat a slice of bread only to throw it up, sat down before standing back up and taking a few more aspirin.

When he checked his phone after it was charged enough to turn on, he saw that he had over a dozen missed calls and a few text messages from Anna, the last of which read, Call me, Castiel!!! =) I have good news that I can’t talk about over text!

He didn't.

Three hours later, when he got a call from a number he didn't recognize, Castiel answered it without thinking.

“Hello?”

“Hey, kiddo.”

Castiel's mouth fell open at the familiar voice.

“Gabriel?”
"The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone." - Cormac McCarthy
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Thank you, all those who've waited and continue to read this story. My apologies for how long it took to write. It honestly took me to a very dark place. But, here it is, and here is the start of the actual Destiel in this story. Again, thank you to all who support me as I write, your comments and kudos mean so much to me. Trigger warnings: vomiting, PTSD-like flashbacks, descriptions of anxiety and emotional trauma, and vague body horror (very vague, in my opinion, but read with caution if this is a trigger for you, regardless).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel almost dropped his phone into his lap at the sound of his brother's voice.

As it was, he jerked the device away from his face as if it had shocked him, looking at it with detached surprise. The number blinking across the screen had an area code he couldn't place, and the strangeness of it made sense now that he'd answered. It was likely a Chicago number. Castiel licked his parched, stinging lips, still staring with a mute intensity at the phone in his hand.

Anna and Victor had found Gabriel, and she had wanted to tell Castiel. The night before, while he had been at KA, his sister had been trying to reach him. She'd been trying to tell him to drop what he was doing and call his older brother. If Castiel had just picked up the phone, he might not have—

Castiel felt a pulse of nausea at the thought. The weight of comprehension felt at once unbearable and unreal, as if he were merely dreaming. Gabriel's voice in his ear could be nothing more than the absurd final twist in the nightmare that jerked him back into consciousness. Castiel half-expected Andrew Novak to open the door to his room and let himself inside, his tall frame filling the doorway.

But Gabriel was saying his name, and Castiel hadn't put the phone back to his ear.

"Cas? You there?"

Castiel answered quickly, his voice hoarse and his throat tender. "I'm here."

"Anna gave me your number after Victor gave me hers," Gabriel was explaining. His voice sounded almost exactly as Castiel remembered it, mellow and lilting, a half-smile always somewhere in its honeyed edges. The only real difference Castiel could discern was the slight deepening that had come with age.

"You're in Chicago," Castiel said slowly. His throat clicked loudly as he swallowed, and he heard it echoed in the connection.

"I've been here about a year, I live with my girlfriend, Kali. We met on a bus the first day I went out job-hunting."

The blitheness of his brother's voice was like sandpaper on torn skin. "Anna and I, we...we spent months looking for you. I thought—we thought maybe you couldn't come home, Gabriel."

"I'm not sure I can," Gabriel admitted. "I know Mom probably still hates me a little."
Castiel knew that rationally he should be feeling something, anything, now that his brother was on the phone with him. He'd spent months hoping so fervently for this exact moment. But as it was, he felt only hollowness.

“It's been...it's been years, Gabriel.” Castiel's lip was bleeding again. He lifted a hand to his mouth to staunch it, his eyes trained on the emptiness of the far wall.

“You didn't get my letters?” Gabriel asked in surprise.

“I didn't know you gave enough of a shit to write any.” Castiel dragged himself up from the end of his bed with the edge of his shirt again twisted in the fingers of his free hand. He tore the hem without noticing.

“I sent them to the house a few weeks after I left—” Gabriel began, but Castiel cut him off.

“I thought you never wanted to talk to me again, Gabe. I thought maybe...I thought you couldn't call, that something had happened and you were dead, or maybe you were sick and you were scared to tell us.”

“I'm not sick,” Gabriel supplied, as if that was what Castiel wanted to hear.

“This whole time, you've been making cakes?”

“Not the whole time, just the past year,” Gabriel said sheepishly.

“You haven't changed. Everything is still a joke to you,” Castiel said dully. He rubbed his dry, itching eyes. He could feel something growing in him then, painful and thick like housing spackle in the base of his skull. His head throbbed.

“I'm sorry, Cas, but I couldn't stay,” Gabriel was saying to him defensively. “After Michael—”

“He had no right to say what he said.”

“I didn't care, don't care. I needed to leave...I couldn't do it anymore,” Gabriel said quietly.

“He was hurt, Gabriel. I don't think he meant it,” Castiel said, not at all sure if he believed what he said.

“I know. I was, too.”

“You should have called sooner.” Castiel needed to end the call before he said something too close to the truth.

“In the letters I told you and Anna that I was just gonna be gone a while, that I needed to leave and clear my head after all the...all the bullshit. After Dad died I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I was never gonna be gone forever, Cas,” by the end Gabriel's voice had turned earnest, which somehow hurt more than the lackadaisical tone he'd had before.

“We didn't get those letters.” Castiel wanted a cigarette.

“I didn't know.”

“It doesn't matter. Nothing's changed. Three years later, and we're still alone.”

“That's not true, Cas. Anna told me that you left for art school, that you paint now.” The smile was back in Gabriel's voice. “She says you have friends, that you're doing great, that—”
Castiel said nothing as he ended the call, throwing his phone listlessly across the room where it thwacked loudly against the far wall. A crack appeared in its glass surface, and Castiel made no move to pick it up and check if it still worked.

Four aspirin hadn't made a dent in his headache. Every breath he took was punctuated by a judder in the center of his head that made him feel as if he was on board a ship, the carpet beneath his feet shifting like sand. Castiel noticed the half-full pack of Marlboros on his desk next to his wallet, and the blue and silver of the small paper box caught his eye as he reached for both items. He shoved them into the pocket of his sweatpants. He didn't know if Dean had moved them from his pockets while he slept, or if he himself had placed them in their usual location out of some pointless dedication to normalcy.

Castiel let himself out of the stifling enclosure of his bedroom a few seconds later, finding that the small kitchen and living room bore no sign of Balthazar save for a sticky ring of vodka on the dining room table. He was grateful.

The courtyard was empty and spectral, and his usual spot on the wooden bench was strewn with leaves that fell apart under his hands as he swept them aside. Castiel took out a Marlboro from the pack in his pocket and began to light it. His fingers were shaking so badly he almost dropped the lighter.

The smoke unfurling from the cigarette was warm as it drifted gently over Castiel's face, and he put the it to his lips and took a deep drag.

When the smoke hit the back of his throat, Castiel gagged at the familiar taste. He gasped as he bent over the edge of the bench, clutching at it with one hand as his body was racked with attempts to empty the nonexistent contents of his stomach.

He'd given Drew a cigarette from the very pack still in his hand. The other boy's smiling mouth had tasted of it.

Castiel threw the cigarette onto the ground beside him without putting it out, its orange tip glowing on the pink-brown of the worn stones as he staggered a few steps over. He only just retained the sour water and bitter, white dregs of half-digested aspirin caplets still in his stomach.

He tosses the pack of menthols onto the bench, knowing he'd never be purchasing them again. He dug his nails into his palms as he looked at how innocuously the tiny box sat there on the graying wood.

Castiel turned back toward the apartment just in time to see Balthazar peering out at him through their front window, the concern on his face obvious even through the torn screen. Making a decision in less time than it took him to inhale, Castiel made sure his keys were still in his pocket and spun on his heel, taking the adjacent sidewalk to the parking lot he'd left his car in only a day or two before. He hoped he was walking in the right direction. It felt as if it had been weeks since his trip to the grocery store. He kept his head down as he walked, wanting nothing less than to see or talk to anyone. The air around him was cold and still, not even the slightest breeze present that Sunday.

When Castiel made it to the parking lot a few minutes later, he almost wasn't surprised when he saw that someone had side-swiped his already dented Nissan.

Castiel pressed his fist to his mouth as he took in the sight of the half-crumpled passenger door, the scraped paint, the spider-vein cracks on the side-window. He found no note left for him as he inspected the damage, no phone numbers or insurance information.
A listless resignation swept over him as he unlocked the driver's side door and slid inside, not feeling the support of the seat beneath his legs. He reached out and touched the cracked window from the driver's seat, the glass cool under his fingertips, before turning back around and staring out the windshield. An absurd desire to laugh made the corners of his lips quiver.

Castiel was aware that the most sensible course of action would be to return to his room immediately and call his insurance provider, but he made no move to do so. Instead, he sat, unmoving, as the lights on the inside of his car gradually dimmed and then went out.

Castiel heard a shuffling sound coming from outside and realized that he wasn't alone. He shifted a little in his seat to cast a glance around the parking lot, looking for the source of the noise. When Castiel caught sight of Arnold, standing not three yards away and leaning on one of the light poles, he stilled. Arnold's usual easy smile was noticeably absent.

Castiel felt himself shaking and noticed that he'd begun to laugh. He was repulsed by the thought of what he must look like, sitting in a half-wrecked car laughing so hard Arnold could probably hear him from where he stood. He couldn't seem to stop.

Arnold was staring at him as if he were afraid to approach him, and Castiel didn't blame him.

When Arnold opened his mouth to address Castiel, he jammed his key into the ignition and started his car before he could hear whatever it was Arnold had to say. Castiel backed out of the lot erratically, not knowing where he planned to go, if he'd even known when he left Balthazar and their apartment.

He took turns down random streets, passing houses filled with people he didn't know. All the while he thought of the broken bottle he'd painted, the shards of it still sitting in his studio as if they belonged there.

Why?

Castiel was jerked from his thoughts by the long, ear-splitting blare of a horn. He swerved sharply to avoid colliding with a pick-up truck driving straight towards him. The shrill keen of his tires screeching over the worn surface of the asphalt made the pounding in his head intensify. Castiel drove off of the road onto dead grass, seeing the stop-sign he'd mindlessly driven past in his rear-view mirror.

The driver of the pick-up truck rolled down their window and emphatically thrust their middle finger at him, their horn still baying as they drove away.

Castiel closed his eyes and hugged the steering wheel, his skin damp with sweat and his breaths jagged in his chest. He imagined what would have happened had he not moved at the last possible second. He heard the tooth-cutting gnash of metal crumpling, smelled the acrid scent of airbags deploying, heard the empty, uncomplicated snap of his own neck as he was jerked forward in his seat. The thought that he might have died the way his father did made a terrible kind of sense. That he'd avoided it by a clumsy twist of a steering wheel seemed a cheat.

Castiel didn't consciously decide to drive his car the short distance to Andy and Anselm's. But he'd already parked and turned the car off by the time he realized he had.

He could see Andy reclining on the couch just inside, smoke swirling around him. Castiel wanted to turn around and head back home at the sight of him, knowing he was upright and dry-eyed on borrowed luck alone. But before Castiel could start his car again and slip away unnoticed, Andy saw him and stood up quickly. He waved him over through the window with his familiar sleepy smile.
Breathing shakily, Castiel got out of the car. He wondered how long it had been since he ate and remembered the slice of bread he'd tried and failed to choke down that morning. He walked slowly toward Andy's house. Half of him was still on the verge of running back to the Nissan.

Castiel reached the front door more quickly than he'd hoped, and he stood back as he waited for Andy to let him in. He was trembling from the adrenaline released at the almost-collision not ten minutes before. His chest ached as he fought his lungs for their expansion.

“Hey, man. I wasn't expecting you here today,” Andy said genially once he opened the door, stepping aside so that Castiel could walk past him into the living room. Andy was wearing faded pajama pants with Patrick the Starfish adorning them and a rumpled black t-shirt. His soft brown hair was messy, like he'd just woken up; Castiel didn't doubt he had.

“Oh, shit, dude. What happened to your car?” Castiel heard Andy ask from behind him once he'd entered. Castiel didn't answer the question or turn around to survey the damage with his friend, wanting nothing less than to see the remnants of someone else's mistake.

He said instead, “Do you have a few grams I could buy from you?”

At that, Andy closed the door behind them and came to stand beside Castiel. “You already smoke all the Blue Dream from a few days ago?”

Castiel nodded, not wanting to explain that he wasn't planning on sobriety for the foreseeable future. His head throbbed painfully.

“Alright, man. Well, I only got some more of that strain right now. That cool?” Andy asked.

Castiel nodded again, the reality of the room and the situation itself suddenly a sharp and merciless thing. The floral sofa he'd spent hours on looked old and half-broken now, its sunken cushions uncomfortable and its orange and green blossoms tacky where before they'd been pleasant. The pile of laundry in the corner looked slovenly, the old fingerprints on the television screen oily and unsanitary. Andy looked tired and Anselm looked fat, words more unkind than sleepy and chunky ever had been.

Andy invited Castiel to have a seat on the couch before he left the room to retrieve his stash from wherever he kept it elsewhere in the house. Castiel didn't sit, and Andy returned quickly and deftly weighed out a generous heap of compact nugs on his small scale. Its silver surface was smudged and sticky with residue from previous transactions.

Castiel was still standing tensely a yard or so from the front door when he stretched out his hand to give the dealer two crinkled twenties. He didn't bother asking how much he was buying or if it was enough.

“You alright, man?” Andy asked when he reached for the bills. Castiel didn't answer, moving his head to the side noncommittally.

When Andy took the money from Castiel, the tips of their fingers brushed. Castiel pulled away more forcefully than he meant to, practically wrenching his hand back before awkwardly shoving it into one of his pockets. Andy's eyes flashed with something like hurt.

“I have homework to do,” Castiel mumbled, looking at his feet again. “I'm sorry.”

“It's fine,” Andy said, his brow furrowed. “Just...hit me up if you need more, I guess.”

Castiel nodded and backed away. He stiffly bid Andy goodbye before going back out to his car and
driving away, actively struggling with keeping his focus on the road.

He made it back to campus ten minutes later, choosing a different parking lot to leave the Nissan in this time and knowing that it made no difference in the grand scheme of things.

When he let himself into his apartment, the baggie of pot heavy in one of his front pockets, Balthazar was the first thing he saw upon entering. The Brit was standing in the kitchen, a mug of coffee in one of his hands while the other clutched a cellphone he was currently checking. He straightened up and shoved his phone in his pocket when he saw Castiel, his expression inscrutable.

“Castiel,” he said after clearing his throat somewhat awkwardly. “When did Dean go home?”

“This morning,” Castiel said. He tried to circumvent his roommate without saying anything more.

“Are you—is everything alright?” Balthazar asked uncertainly. He took a few steps so that he stood in Castiel's way.

Castiel's voice faltered for only a second. “I...got too drunk. I'm fine. If you'll excuse me, I need to —”

“I just—your ankle, I thought...” Balthazar interrupted as he set his cup of coffee down on the low table in the living room. Castiel noticed a chip in its handle.

“I don't see how that's any of your business,” Castiel said sharply.

Balthazar's mouth opened and closed once, twice, three times, before closing for good. At last, he stepped out of the way to let Castiel through. Castiel felt tension leave his body that he hadn't even been aware he'd taken on when Balthazar blocked him in, and pushed his way past his roommate.

Once inside his bedroom, Castiel locked his door behind him before roughly tugging open the topmost drawer of his desk. He threw his new stash down into its disorganized depths as he took the older baggie out, only about three-fourths worth of bud remaining in it. He dumped it unceremoniously into his palm and loaded a bowl in his water bottle bong, not bothering to break anything up or pack it down the way he usually would have.

Less than thirty seconds later he was taking deep, burning inhales of smoke and coughing so violently white sparks appeared in the corners of his vision. His throat felt blistered from how many times he'd vomited within the last twenty-four hours, and the first few hits were excruciating. Had Castiel been sober, he wouldn't have been able to continue.

But he wasn't, and smoked and coughed until he tasted the copper-red of blood in the back of his throat.

“Wake up, baby brother.”

“Gabe, it's the middle of the night, what are you—”

“You know I love you, right?”

“I—where is this coming from?”

“Just tell me you know.”

“I know, Gabriel.”

“Go back to sleep.”
Castiel scratched trails down his arms, not feeling them, only seeing the small beads of blood which sprang forth in their wake.

Why?

A little later, after making sure that Balthazar wasn't in the kitchen or living room, Castiel crept out of his room to the kitchen. He poured himself a cup of cold coffee and attempted to eat another piece of bread. It tasted of nothing, and this time he found he was able to keep it down. He ate almost three slices before making himself stop.

He smoked almost continuously. His textbooks were strewn beneath him on his bed where he lay, suspended in smoke and cheap yellow light as he stared at his ceiling. He knew on some level that the books were digging into his back, but didn't seem to feel the pinch of them.

He had upwards of three-hundred pages worth of reading to do for his art history course, a miniature print to finish for his print-making class, and a short essay due the following day in his Black literature class, but he did none of those things. Instead, he collected the lamps from the common spaces of the apartment and arranged them in his room so that he was surrounded by a circle of unnatural light.

He sat silently within it. The only darkness left in Castiel's room was that which filled his aching head.

When his cellphone began to ring where he'd left it flung onto the floor near his desk, Castiel tried to ignore it. He recognized the tinny sound as an alarm rather than a call or text. But soon he found that it grated on his nerves too much to overlook, and forced himself up off of his bed and over to it. He shut the alarm off quickly, not bothering to check and see if anyone had contacted him. He feared seeing Dean's name or Gabriel's new number.

He wondered if Anna had ever forgiven herself for being in the car with Andrew Novak the night of his death, for surviving their father with only a concussion, a broken arm and fractured rib.

As Castiel stood there with his silent phone in his hand, he reached out with his other to open his blinds for a moment, peering into the courtyard beyond.

It was sunset, he saw, the feathery wisps of cloud outside dappled with sorbet orange and vermilion. The courtyard itself was empty save for a figure Castiel found familiar as he looked at them with more intent.

It made his heart seize in his chest when he saw the outline of a leather jacket he recognized, the shoulders he'd cataloged in his mind for months. The person sitting on what used to be Castiel's smoking bench was Dean. His hands were in his pockets, his body somehow smaller-looking than it had been before.

Castiel wondered how long he'd been sitting there, looking for all the world like he belonged. Part of him wanted to step outside and tell Dean to go home; another part wanted to ask him inside. But Castiel did neither. He shut his blinds and crawled back into bed atop his books. He sucked in a breath as the corner of one of them dug into his ribs. He needed to sleep.

Sleep didn't come that night.

***

When Monday morning dawned, Castiel knew he wouldn't be attending any of his classes. He didn't want to see his painting. He didn't want to talk to Charlie, or Professor Harvelle, or even Meg. He
didn't want to listen to Professor Moseley lecture about the cumulative legacy of white masculinity on black men. He didn't want to sit for three hours in the stale air of the attic-level print-making classroom. He didn't want to pretend he was paying attention to a lecture on post-World War II art in Northern Europe.

It was the first critique day of Castiel's independent study course, and missing it would have a considerably negative affect on his grade, but he felt no desire to talk about his work. The effort Castiel had put into a painting of a broken bottle seemed implausibly stupid now. What did he care if the class didn't get the full theoretical explanation of a piece of canvas directly from his mouth? The painting was finished and its meaning hadn't changed for anyone but him.

Castiel sat on the edge of his bed for almost an hour, twisting his hands in his lap. He felt a twitching near his right eye and reached up to touch the skin beneath it, feeling the muscle spasm under the pad of his finger. It didn't stop, and Castiel went into the kitchen for a cup of coffee, saying nothing to Balthazar when he passed him by.

Around the time the critique was scheduled to begin, Castiel's phone started to vibrate on his desk. Castiel knew without looking that he would find Dean's name flashing across its screen, and that he was calling to ask where he was.

Castiel thought with a bitter pang of the many times that he'd done the same for Dean in the past.

Dean called once, twice, three times.

Castiel didn't answer. He smoked a bowl as he mutely watched his phone rattle across his scattered papers, over his pencils and weeks-old post-it notes.

That night, Castiel showered for a long time, scraping his nails over his skin and rubbing soap into the divets he'd made.

He shampooed his hair three times and used the last of his body wash.

He slid a hand between his legs and pressed his fingers deep inside himself, shutting his eyes tightly at the pain and fear he felt.

His heart pounded in his chest.

He made himself focus on ridding his body of anything but soap and water. The cuts around his fingers sang at the stretch, and Castiel let out a broken gasp. When he brought his fingers back up, he saw that they were red and hurriedly washed it away.

Why?

Castiel realized he was saying the word aloud and clamped a shaking hand over his mouth.

When he went back out into his room, water still dripping down his face, Castiel pulled one of his last clean shirts on. He knew he needed to do laundry soon, but also that he wouldn't.

He crossed the room and looked out through a slit in his blinds.

Dean sat outside Castiel's apartment as he had the evening before, still and silent like a marble chess piece. The slow movement of his breaths were the only sign that he was real.
Castiel pressed his hand to the cold glass, something like anguish eating through him.

***

Castiel emailed Professor Moseley on Tuesday morning to tell her he would be dropping the class, a spark of regret flashing through him as he pressed the send button. As much as Castiel loved the class, there was no question as to whether or not he’d continue taking it; there hadn’t been since the moment Castiel thought of seeing Drew in person again and dry-heaved over his sink.

He hadn’t been able to get any kind of REM sleep since the involuntary sedation the drugs had induced in him on Saturday. When he’d managed to drift off during the past few nights, Castiel had nightmares in which he was drugged again and couldn’t move. He called soundlessly for someone to help him, to take him back home, and all the while dozens of faceless people passed him by none the wiser to his predicament. Terror flooded him, sour and yellow, the taste of cigarettes and bile filling his mouth. He usually woke up talking.

Anna had called him eleven times since Sunday. Meg called him three times. Gabriel called him twice.

Dean called him every day.

Castiel answered none of them and didn’t spare a look for his inbox as it filled with texts and email notifications. He spent hours sitting motionlessly in his bed, his hands open on his lap as he thought about a time he remembered from his childhood: he’d thrown a rock into an open sewer grate. He’d listened to it clang noisily down to the dark bottom of the maze of fetid tunnels. He had no memory of why he’d done it beyond the simple impulse of a child. He’d merely wanted to see what would happen.

He wondered now if he hadn’t thrown it if he would still be sitting in his room, if perhaps he would have had a different adolescence, chosen a different university, different friends, maybe even had a different calling. The inevitability of his life stifled him as night covered everything outside the furnace of his lamps. The unfathomable alignment of the stars had never been so clear, and it crushed Castiel as, piece by piece, it all fell into place. He felt distinctly that all had built to this terrible, irredeemable moment.

When Castiel took the drink from Drew, he had done as he was meant to since the moment the rock left his fingertips.

***

Wednesday morning Castiel forced himself out of his rumpled bed. He avoided looking at himself in the mirror as he carelessly dragged his razor over his angular cheekbones. He was unsurprised and unconcerned when he accidentally cut himself.

He didn’t encounter Balthazar when he went into the kitchen to pour himself a cup of coffee. The apartment looked almost abandoned, as if no one had been inside it for days. Dust motes swirled through the air, and a piece of paper fluttered idly from the living room over the threshold of the kitchen.

Castiel donned his sweater and shoes as if they were armor, his hands trembling.

All was uncommonly quiet as Castiel took the short walk to the Fine Arts Building. There was no distant throb of music, no ambient hum of the groundskeeper’s lawn mower, no far away snatches of conversation as people made their way across the campus. A breath of wind and the creak of the
outdated back entrance opening before him were the first sounds Castiel heard, and they were almost a relief.

When he stepped out of the elevator and into the painting studio a few minutes later, he found it looked the same as it had the last time he'd visited it almost a week before. Castiel was the only one there, it seemed, likely due to the earliness of the hour.

His painting had been moved from his cubby for the critique two days previous, and still sat in the center area of the studio, undoubtedly forgotten after class had been released. It looked small, alone on its tall easel surrounded by stretches of stained linoleum floor and half-removed strips of blue painter's tape. Castiel began to move it back toward his space, sliding it across the floor as quickly as he could. He stopped in his tracks as he drew near his cubby, hearing his painting fall with a muffled \textit{thwack} to the floor below as the easel rocked with the motion.

Dean's things had been moved back into his and Castiel's space. The piles of unorganized artist's accoutrements, the cracked silicoil perched precariously on his stool, the bent sketchpads and broken pencils, all of it was in place again as if it had never been moved.

Leaving his painting on the floor and his easel awkwardly situated just outside of his cubby, Castiel turned and took a step toward the various props he'd been using for his still-lives that semester. They were stacked neatly in the corner. He hastily began grabbing a few items at a time, a detached lightbulb here, a gnarled tree branch there. He gathered as many as he could fit into his arms, knowing he wouldn't be using them anymore. He dumped them into the trash without ceremony, hearing the tinkle of shattering glass and knowing one of the lightbulbs had met its end.

It took three trips to rid his space of the props, and once he'd finished Castiel stood before his cubby for a moment, staring at the symmetry of his and Dean's work areas. He imagined for a second that he might wait in the studio, that in an hour or two Dean would step through the door and see him sitting in their space as if the last month hadn't happened.

But Castiel knew things wouldn't ever be that simple again.

He didn't bother retrieving his painting from off the floor before he left.

On the walk back to his apartment Castiel crossed paths with Gilda, who was wearing a thick yellow cardigan and baggy jeans. She had a grocery bag over her arm again, undoubtedly full of Charlie's favorite snacks as she made her way to the studio. Her natural roots had grown out a few inches, Castiel saw for the first time. The dark, chocolate brown of her un-dyed hair was far lovelier than the fake, amber blonde she'd colored it however many months before.

Gilda began to smile when she saw him, but stopped abruptly when they had come face-to-face on the sidewalk. Her eyes widened as she took in whatever Castiel must have looked like in that moment. Though he hadn't looked recently he could imagine the cut on his face, the messiness of his dress, the irritated patches of skin peeking out from under the collar of his t-shirt from where he'd soaped himself raw.

The surprised look on Gilda's face turned slowly to comprehension. “Castiel...” she began, reaching a hand out.

Castiel backed away, aware in that moment that Gilda somehow \textit{knew} what had happened to him. The thought filled him with revulsion. Revulsion at himself or at her, he didn't know.

He walked away as rapidly as he could, feeling her clear gaze on the back of his neck.
Thursday afternoon Castiel received an email from Professor Moseley inquiring as to why he was dropping the course.

He was taken aback by her questions, not having expected any reply from her beyond a simple acknowledgment of his withdrawal.

Castiel had selected his current university for the very reasons that it was both much smaller and had an impressive student-to-teacher ratio, and knew he should be grateful for Professor Moseley's concern on his behalf. It should have been an affirmation that the school he'd chosen was superior to the more sizable, better-known universities that had also accepted him. But as it was, he only felt guilty and somewhat resentful. It would have been better had she let him drop the course without comment.

"Do you feel like you're struggling with the material, Castiel? Because, in all honesty, you seem to have a firm grasp on it judging by the short essay you turned in last week. If you truly feel you cannot continue in my class, I understand, but I have to tell you that it disappoints me.

Best, M. Moseley."

Castiel ignored the painful twist in his belly as he stared at the words.

Around eight in the evening Castiel began to drink the remainder of the cheap vodka he'd bought before the party at KA. Considering he'd only had a few shots, and Balthazar had at the most downed one or two, the bottle had about two-thirds of its 750mL contents left.

Balthazar was out, as he always seemed to be, and Castiel sat at the sticky dining room table, stray crumbs and hair sticking to the undersides of his arms as he eyed the vodka. He finished his last can of soup and smoked a small bowl before taking the first shot. He had to chase it with tap water to keep it down.

After the third shot the liquid began to go down and stay down more easily, and Castiel stopped keeping track of how many shots he had taken at all after the fifth or sixth.

The liquor burned his throat and tasted like permanent marker, and Castiel's belly sloshed with it every time he so much as turned in his chair. He put his head down on the table, not liking how his vision swam every time he moved too quickly. He'd hoped alcohol would deaden his nerves and stop his constant trembling, but he felt flayed, pierced and open for all the world to see and perforate at its leisure. So he drank more.

He went back to his room at some point, almost all of the vodka drained from the bottle. He powered up his computer and put on a playlist of his favorite Shins and Beatles songs, laying flat on his floor beside the desk and knowing distantly that if he didn't turn the volume down his neighbors would complain.

Half an hour or so later, Castiel wasn't sure, Balthazar opened the door to his room and turned down the music.

“Get out,” Castiel slurred from below him. He covered his face with his hands after he saw the concern and disgust on his roommate's face. He knew what Balthazar thought of him, could sense it between them in the room. Castiel could feel his own heart pounding, and wished for a moment that it would simply give out in his chest.
“Did you drink all the vodka? The bottle's practically empty, mate,” Balthazar said. He dragged Castiel's hands from his face and pulled him upright, his grip tight on Castiel's wrists.

Why?

“Let go, I d—don't want to, please, I don't want to...” Castiel felt himself shaking, felt the vodka struggling to slip back up his throbbing throat. Everything was spinning and his wrists hurt.

“You've gotta get up, get some water or something,” Balthazar said as he started to tug Castiel toward the door.

“Don't touch me.” Castiel could feel tears gathering in the corners of his eyes and bent his head to wipe them on his shirtsleeve before they could fall.

He was aware on some level that he'd had far too much, but needed Balthazar to leave him alone, to stop breathing on him.

Why?

Castiel didn't realize he'd struck out blindly at Balthazar until his hands were suddenly released. He fell like a ragdoll back against his bed. He heard his bedroom door shut as though through a swathe of cotton, the bang and click distant and muffled.

He stumbled to his bathroom, his arms outstretched as he tried to get his bearings. He almost collided with the corner of his bathroom countertop, the palm of his hand taking the dig of it instead of his abdomen at the last second. He managed to clumsily bend his body over the edge of his bathtub, vomiting cloudy liquid and the greasy yellow of canned chicken broth.

An hour or two later, as Castiel lay in bed, still very, very drunk, he wondered if Dean was waiting outside as he'd been doing the previous few nights. Perhaps he'd heard Castiel's music blasting a hole in the perpetual silence of the apartment complex. He'd never looked out the window to check.

One of the lamps beside him shuttered briefly, and then went out.

***

Meg texted Castiel almost daily.

*Tuesday February 4 th , 1:31pm: Everything good, C? Call me back*

*Wednesday February 5 th , 9:26pm: I got a g with ur name on it, come to my place tonight*

*Thursday February 6 th , 4:10pm: U okay? You sick again or something?*

*Friday February 7 th , 7:58pm: Wtf, man? Are you mad at me or something? When I went to ur place earlier your roommate made me leave*

Dean waited faithfully outside his apartment Friday night, as he had every other that week, and Castiel pulled at his hair until strands of it came loose in his fingers.

***

Castiel spent Saturday morning sitting in his bathtub fully clothed. He hadn't gotten more than a few hours of decent sleep since the preceding weekend. He felt vaguely as if the walls of his room were closing in around him, the heat from the lamps intensifying the feeling even though another had
partially gone out since Thursday night.

He decided to make a drive to the store and buy two replacement lightbulbs.

As he tried to button his sweater a few minutes later, he realized that his fingers were shaking too violently to properly do so. He left it open instead. Once he had his wallet and keys stowed in his back pocket, Castiel stepped out of his room and to the front door. He opened it quietly, dreading the creak of the hinges he was accustomed to.

He wasn't expecting what he saw in front of him when he tried to step outside: there, a half-foot or so beyond the doorstep, was a worn canvas bag filled with canned soup, twenty-five cent noodle cups, and Nescafe instant coffee. Castiel knew Balthazar would have had to take the time to step over it before going on his merry way to wherever it was he made a habit of disappearing to, but had apparently left it outside anyway.

Castiel's head throbbed as he stared down at the bag and its contents, knowing already that the delivery was Dean's doing. He felt a lump rise in his throat, and his plans for a trip to the store were forgotten as he grabbed the bag and turned to go back inside. He shoved it between his desk and the wall, not wanting to look at it.

The remainder of Saturday seemed to pass as if in a dream.

If Castiel had believed that he was sleep-deprived before February, he'd been mistaken. Getting four hours a night seemed luxurious now that he was getting practically none, and he could tell that it was beginning to take a toll. He sat in the corner of his room for an indeterminable amount of time, slowly smoking the last bowl of Blue Dream he'd bought from Andy, trying to get it to last him the rest of the night.

The sky beyond his window was so very blue, cloudless and bright the way Saturdays were in movies and postcards.

The day of Andrew Novak's funeral had also been uncharacteristically sunny and temperate. Castiel remembered the way the light had fallen over his mother's face as she spoke at the front of the small church, her manicured fingers gripping the sides of the podium tightly enough that they'd gone white. Her voice had been even, her back straight. Anna, Castiel and Gabriel had sat together in one of the front-most pews. Castiel's miniature notebook had been heavy in his front pocket, a pen poking from the inside fold of his suit jacket. He hadn't written a word in it since the few days before when Anna had been rushed to the hospital and their father to the morgue.

Not ten minutes later, he'd left the journal beside his father where he lay in his casket. His usually stern face had been unnaturally beatific, his once glossy, chestnut-colored hair lank and over-styled to fall around his head on the glossy white pillow beneath it.

Andrew and Gabriel had always had the most beautiful hair, Castiel remembered thinking as he lay the little booklet by his father's elbow. The white satin had been soft under his knuckles where it grazed them.

Castiel wondered what had become of that journal, if it had rotted away to nothing under the earth and all of his words with it.

Castiel slowly pulled himself up off of the dusty carpet as night fell a few hours later, his limbs stiff
from how long he'd been there. He checked the clock beside his bed, seeing that it was already almost nine in the evening. He wished he'd gone to the store earlier and gotten the lightbulbs like he'd wanted.

The twitching under his right eye started up again when he caught sight of the corner of the bag he'd stowed away that morning peeking out from behind his desk. Castiel knew he'd have to eat at least some of its contents. He hadn't gotten much of anything the week before at the store, and the last thing he felt like doing was going out to restock.

Castiel felt the red tinges of anger curl hot in his stomach, unreasonably vexed that Dean had known him well enough to predict his needs.

Even though he hadn't yet gone to his window to check, Castiel knew that Dean would likely be stationed outside his apartment again like he'd been every other night. Castiel wasn't sure if the thought was a comfort or an inconvenience.

He was about to go into the restroom when his phone began to vibrate on the edge of his bed. Castiel looked down at it without much thought, expecting it to be Meg or Anna texting him again as they'd been the past few days, though he still hadn't responded to either of them.

When he saw Drew's name flit across the screen Castiel froze, his breath catching painfully in his throat and his eyes widening. Castiel stared at the name for one second, two seconds, three seconds.

Then he reached for the phone.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting. Perhaps it would be an apology, or maybe a request to talk in person. There was no way of knowing until he read the message. But Castiel knew that he wanted it to be an apology. He wanted to tell Drew that he could go to hell and take his words with him, wanted to tell him to go fuck himself and lose Castiel's number forever, wanted to type out the letters with deliberate motions and—

'Things aren't gonna be weird, r they?'

This time, when Castiel threw his phone across the room, he threw it hard enough to shatter it, its glass surface cracking into countless smithereens against the wall. Castiel roughly opened the door of his room, the knob slamming into the wall vigorously enough to leave a dent as he strode through the living room and to the front door for the second time that day. He threw it open with enough force to rattle the dated window-screens.

Dean was sitting on the bench just outside, as Castiel had assumed he would be.

Only a few yards separated them from one another, and the observation was one that Castiel hadn't been expecting. With excruciating clarity he saw how insignificant the distance between them had been that week, how easy it would have been for him to pick up the phone and answer Dean's calls, to simply let him in.

But Castiel crushed the thought without mercy. He wanted to hurt someone, and if that person ended up being himself, it made no difference now. He kept his legs moving, walking toward Dean.

Dean stood up to meet him, fingerling the edges of his leather jacket nervously. He had a bruise on one side of his nose and a sickly yellow ring around his left eye. It tore at Castiel to see them, but he thought of the bruises on his own hips, the healing cuts invisible to everyone but himself, and felt a bitter anger.

“Cas? What's—"
Castiel cut him off. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Dean looked wounded, and Castiel took another step forward. “Do you think sitting out here helps me?”

His chest was rising and falling rapidly now, the ever-present ache in the back of his skull intensifying.

“I want to help. I just—I wanted you to know I wasn’t going anywhere, I’m not,” Dean said earnestly, stretching out one of his hands. His face fell when Castiel recoiled from him.

“You being here doesn’t change anything,” Castiel said.

“I’m sorry for the shit I pulled, Cas.” Dean looked almost desperate, both of his hands now halfway extended to Castiel, his green eyes wide and his skin pale and cleansed of its freckles beneath the security light. “You didn’t deserve it. I never should’ve—”

“Why won’t you let me go?” Castiel asked bluntly. He met Dean's eyes directly then.

Dean looked somber, and contemplated the question for over a minute before he said quietly, “You deserve someone who won't let you go.”

Castiel closed his eyes at the words. The person Dean was speaking to was gone; he'd never come back downstairs from Drew's room.

“You're just another thing I'll pretend never happened.” Castiel swayed slightly on his feet.

“Have you been sleeping?” Dean asked softly.

“What difference does it make?” Castiel said as he took an unsteady step back.

“You don't look like it,” Dean said.

“None of it matters. Don't you understand?”

Dean was moving towards him carefully, his motions gradual. “I should've been there when—this...this is on me,” he said.

“This was my fault, Dean,” Castiel said, slowly shaking his head.

The words shattered something in him.

“I went upstairs.”

Castiel managed to say the entirety of the sentence before he began to cry.

Dean took the last two steps, stopping directly in front of him. Castiel could see the freckles on Dean's cheeks, the hazel rims in the centers of his eyes.

“This wasn’t ‘cause of you,” Dean said with certainty.

Castiel shook his head.

Dean cupped Castiel's chin, compelling him to meet his eyes again. Castiel tried to turn away from his gaze, but Dean pressed his other hand lightly to the side of Castiel's face. The gesture reminded Castiel of the time he'd done the same thing months before as he cleaned dried blood from Dean's
“You can't do everything by yourself, Cas,” he said.

Castiel shook his head again, closing his eyes as more tears seeped from beneath his eyelids. He was afraid to let another wall crumble and discover it had been the last one holding him upright.

Dean released Castiel's chin and wrapped his arms around him instead, pulling him gently to his chest. Castiel stiffened as he was held steadfastly in arms buffered by the worn leather of John Winchester's old jacket. He heard Dean heave a deep sigh once he had Castiel in his arms, felt the brush of it on the top of his head. Dean's skin gave off heat that warmed Castiel through the jacket, and he felt the rise and fall of Dean's chest against his own. The sensation of it grounded him the longer they stood there together. Castiel exhaled shakily as he raised his own arms to hold onto Dean in return, pressing trembling hands to his capable back. He clung to him like a child as he nuzzled his running nose into the warm hollow of Dean's neck, felt Dean's fingers as he carded them through Castiel's unwashed hair.

Castiel had been afraid that being this close to Dean again would make him feel shameful, that he would know the depth of his naivety should he give in and fall into his arms the way part of him had never stopped wanting to. But all he felt now was an indescribable exhaustion.

“I missed you,” he sobbed softly into Dean's shoulder.

“I'm not going anywhere,” Dean whispered as he cupped the back of Castiel's head.

They stood outside like that until they heard an approaching group of students making their drunken way to the apartments. Castiel led Dean inside, hearing behind him the click of Dean shutting and dead-bolting the door behind them.

When they reached Castiel's room, he saw as if for the first time the messy nest of blankets and books in the middle of his bed, the artificial daylight created by the lamps grouped around the room, the dirty clothes piled in the corner, the shattered phone on the floor beside the far wall.

Dean said nothing of the lights or of the mess, he merely crossed the room and began moving Castiel's textbooks, stacking them on a corner of his cluttered desk before silently remaking the entirety of the bed, straightening his wrinkled sheets and blankets without comment.

“Why don't you try and rest?” Dean asked as he pulled Castiel's chair from where it had been pushed under his desk, situating himself near the foot of Castiel's bed.

Castiel nodded wordlessly, toeing off his dirty socks before climbing into the newly-made bed.

He wasn't sure when he drifted off into a fitful sleep, but was awoken less than an hour later by the usual nightmare that had plagued him since the assault. He sat upright rigidly, his hair lank and wet with perspiration on his forehead.

But what separated this time from the others was Dean, sitting beside him on the bed, a warm and solid weight on the mattress as he took Castiel's hands.

“You're okay.”

The second time Castiel woke up, Dean already had his arms around him once more, stroking his shoulders and his back as Castiel pressed his face into the dip where Dean's arm met his chest.

"You're okay."
The following afternoon, Dean roused Castiel carefully, a light touch on his shoulder all he employed to do so.

“You slept a couple hours,” Dean said quietly, his green eyes tired.

“I did?” Castiel asked, watching as Dean nodded.

“Hey, Cas?” Dean asked slowly.

Castiel looked at him expectantly.

“Is it okay that I...uh, moved my stuff back? In the studio, I mean,” Dean looked at his hands as he asked the question, not meeting Castiel's eyes.

Castiel nodded, feeling as if a weight had been lifted from his chest as Dean looked up at him again, a moment of understanding passing silently between them.

Chapter End Notes

Please give me your opinions on how this whole thing is playing out, I would very much appreciate that.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Holy shit, guys. It's been a while, I know, and for that I'm sorry. I really am. However, I am now returning to this story and very excited about it! I hope you enjoy this chapter and continue to read and engage with me as the story develops =) Btw, if you happen to see a censored curse-word that I've missed, please let me know! I worked on this draft on my office computer and had to censor it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean didn't leave on Sunday even though Castiel knew he likely had things to do, errands to run with Sam, messes of his father's to clean up at the house, work to do for Bobby in the salvage yard. But Dean made no mention of any of those obligations, not when Castiel felt well enough to get out of bed and into the shower, or when he dressed himself in the last clean shirt and pair of jeans he had, or even when he began to straighten his room with an almost obsessive zeal.

Dean only helped Castiel clean and reorganize without complaint, and they worked silently together for the better part of the day. Dean took loads of dirty laundry to the campus center, found clean sheets in Castiel's closet to put on his bed, and took out the overflowing trash, while Castiel bleached the tub and the toilet and scoured the dust-covered countertops and the smudged mirrors. He made himself move the pilfered lamps still in a circle around his bed back to their assigned places in the apartment, and did his best to erase all signs of the past week spent holed-up in his room like some sort of neurotic hermit. If at times Castiel threw away things that were still useful, or scrubbed at surfaces and items that didn't need it, Dean didn't comment on his choices. He also didn't mention the long night he'd just spent holding Castiel to his chest as they slept together. He only asked Castiel where things went, the contents of this drawer or that, or if something was his or Balthazar's.

Castiel felt raw with the tension still heavy and obvious between them. He couldn't stop thinking of how tightly he'd held onto Dean, drinking in the warmth and safety found in his arms. Last night his touch had been a balm, but in the light of day Castiel felt shame. He wondered what his father would have said had he been alive. He had no idea. He'd never spoken to Andrew Novak about something as vapid and inconsistent as emotion.

The cleaning wasn't something done quickly, and it was almost three in the afternoon when Castiel opened his last desk drawer to purge and reorganize its jumbled contents. He could hear Dean as the other boy moved behind him, pushing the bed a few feet over so as to get underneath it. Castiel bent to pick up one of his art history textbooks from the previous semester, and set it on the desk for later. He sucked in a startled breath when he saw what he'd uncovered.

In the bottom of the drawer were his can of mace and his small pocketknife, both of them forgotten and unused.

"Cas."

Dean's voice cut through the sleepy light and the low hum thrumming in Castiel's ears (a noise that had rarely quieted since the previous weekend). He turned to face him, both objects in his hands. He didn't remember reaching in and grabbing them, but there they were. Dean was looking at him from across the room, a bare pillow in one hand and a clean linen case for it in the other. When he saw
what Castiel was holding, he immediately set both down on the bed beside him.

"Cas," he said again.

Castiel took a step forward, dropping the knife and cylindrical black container into Dean's hand, which was outstretched. He somehow felt relief at no longer being responsible for them. He turned back around to look out the peaked blinds again. His chest felt filled with stones.

"I—" Castiel began. He felt his throat fill, and closed his mouth.

"You want to go for a walk?" Dean asked. "It looks pretty good around here, now. Maybe you need some air."

Castiel turned back around only to flinch as he came almost directly face-to-face with Dean. He guessed the other boy had moved close behind him as he spoke, as he'd always had a habit of doing. Castiel made himself inhale slowly, feeling his heart pound in his chest.

"Sorry," Dean said hurriedly as he took a few steps back. "I didn't—I wasn't thinking."

"It's fine," Castiel mumbled as he looked away from the green eyes still too close to his. His throat was dry from how little he'd said that day. "Let's leave."

Dean nodded.

Five minutes later he was following Dean out the door and onto the sidewalk as a chill draft bit at his chin and the tip of his nose. Everything looked like paper in the empty courtyard, flat and dull and unreal.

The quiet between them felt amplified outdoors, and Dean was solid and tall as he cut a swathe through the pale February day for the both of them. Castiel felt as if he was looking into the sun when he tried to keep his aching eyes on the other boy, and soon he gave up and looked down at the ground disappearing under his feet. He wrapped his arms around himself to shield against the chill, shivering as Dean placed a light, careful hand in the center of Castiel's back.

They said nothing to one another, and soon took a detour to the golf-course, improvising a path amidst the winding trees behind it.

"How was the critique?" Castiel asked when he couldn't stand the oppressive soundlessness surrounding them in the shelter of the wood any longer.

Dean clearly wasn't expecting the question when it came, and he took a second to think to himself before he answered.

"Long, mostly. Nothing too interesting. Everyone loved your painting, though. Said it was beautiful." His hands were jammed into his pockets, the touch he'd guided Castiel with gone now. Castiel wasn't sure if he wanted it back or not and didn't know what to say.

In the distance, he could hear the sounds of someone on their phone and the crunch of the dry leaves under their feet as they jogged down one of the many paths that wound its way around the golf-course. The ground underfoot was soft, slightly damp, and squelched a little under Castiel's sneakers with every step. He and Dean walked through the shadows of branches and leaves, a careful foot of space between them, now.

How long had it been since he and Dean walked together on campus? Castiel found he couldn't even remember.
"I...I want to throw it away," Castiel admitted after a few more minutes had passed.

"Cas," Dean said in disbelief. He went so far as to stop beside him where they stood under a tall, gnarled oak. "Man, you can't do that. It's a great painting."

"You used to," Castiel pointed out.

Dean looked away from him for a second, clearly unsure as to what he should say in response.

"My stuff wasn't like yours, Cas," was what he settled on at last.

When they returned to Castiel's apartment, Dean immediately began heating them up two of the cans of soup he himself had left for Castiel a couple of days prior. He dumped them both into a small pot they'd just cleaned that day, warming them together on the stove. Castiel didn't bother telling his friend that he doubted he'd be able to eat, and sat at the table a few feet away instead. He felt numb, now, as he had when Gabriel called.

When the soup was hot and portioned out in bowls, Dean set them on the table as he sat down across from Castiel. The soup reminded him vividly of the cloudy yellow broth and bile he'd thrown up after drinking the rest of the vodka, and he struggled through a few spoonfuls. He didn't want Dean to try and cajole him into eating more. He knew he was getting sick from hunger, but the liquid felt unpleasantly hot in his belly. He didn't notice that Dean was speaking to him until he caught his own name.

"...wish you had more here, Cas, I'd actually make you something. You need something more filling. This ain't gonna do shit for you, it'll just tide you over," Dean was saying in-between spoonfuls of soup.

"Does Lisa know you're here?" Castiel asked tiredly. He asked knowing that the question dug at an open wound, but wanted to know all the same. On some level, he was aware that he should probably feel anger at Dean for all that had passed between them. But he felt only a strange surreality instead, dripping over everything around him like garish, colored wax as outside the sky slowly darkened. He needed days more of sleep, still. His eyes burned and his back ached as he picked at his soup some more, waiting for Dean to answer.

After a few minutes, Dean slowly nodded. "She knows I'm helping a friend."

If Dean knew why Castiel got up to pour the rest of his soup into the sink, he didn't say.

That night, Dean arranged himself in the chair beside Castiel's bed, his arms and head next to Castiel's feet. The lights were off as they hadn't been in days, and Castiel hated that the darkness made him feel like an animal hiding in the hollow of a tree. He grit his teeth and focused on the feeling of Dean beside him, warm and solid.

I have to move on. I'm almost twenty-two. I have to sleep in the dark.

Dean exhaled and stirred, turning his head to the other side as he rearranged his arms to get more comfortable. Castiel closed his eyes and pressed his hands to the slight softness of his own belly, digging his nails into his skin as he willed himself into garbled unconsciousness.

I have to sleep in the dark.

When Castiel awoke from a nightmare however long later, Dean wordlessly crawled into bed beside
him. Without asking he wrapped his arms around Castiel as he had the night before, the carefully-measured distance they'd kept from one another that day abandoned as Castiel trembled and clung to him.

"Oh, fuck," he gasped into Dean's shoulder even as he scrabbled at Dean's arms with blunt nails, breathing in the smell of him and feeling one second away from slipping back down into the deep water of his terror.

"I'm sorry, Dean."

Perhaps if he said it enough, Dean would understand.

Dean held him tighter.

***

On Monday morning Castiel awoke far earlier than he needed to.

He felt nauseous as he turned and saw Dean still asleep in the bed beside him, his chest rising and falling slowly as sunlight drew pale slats on his freckled skin. Castiel got out of bed without waking him, unsure of what to say or do. He was shaking, badly, and fumbled his way to the bathroom.

He brushed his teeth and splashed warm water on his face before forcing his gaze up and taking a look at himself in the mirror for the first time in days. His eyes were dull and glazed, and there were deep purple bags under his eyes. His cheeks were alarmingly pale beneath the stubble he'd allowed to grow there, and he looked as if he'd lost weight. His collarbones were deeply shadowed under the harsh lights mounted above the mirror.

Castiel grabbed the Gillette from his medicine cabinet and the razor beside his sink and began to shave. He carefully, carefully pressed the titanium to his skin, trying not to leave a mark this time. His hands were still unsteady, and it took twice as long as it would have before.

_Before_—

Castiel dropped the razor into the sink once he was finished, not bothering to retrieve it as he dried his face with the hem of the shirt he'd slept in.

By the time he went back into the bedroom, Dean had woken up as well.

"Hey, Cas," he murmured, rubbing his hands over his face as he sat up in the bed.

Castiel crossed the room to take a seat at his desk. His back felt as if someone had smashed the center of it with a hammer, a throbbing knot of tension making every movement an exercise in will power.

"I think I'll make coffee. Do you want any?" he asked without looking back at Dean.

"...I'm good. It okay if I, uh, use your shower?" Dean asked in return. Castiel nodded, and Dean went to rinse off in the bathroom. Castiel made a trip to the kitchen, microwaving a mug of water and mixing instant coffee into the scalding cup.

Once back in his room with his coffee Castiel pulled up his university email and began to check his messages, feeling the familiar twitch under his right eye threatening to return as he read message after old message in the order they'd piled into his inbox. He'd missed a small due-date in his print-making class and one in his art history class, and Ellen Harvelle had sent him an email asking if he was ill and reminding him he owed her an artist's statement. The old message from Professor
Moseley caught Castiel's eye, and with an irritated twitch of his finger on the mousepad, he deleted it.

"Are you gonna go to class today?" Dean asked from across the room.

Castiel jumped, turning in his chair to look at the other boy; his light hair was still wet and dripping onto his broad shoulders, his hands shoved somewhat awkwardly into his pockets as he ventured the question. Behind Dean, steam was wafting out of the bathroom.

Castiel nodded immediately.

"I've taken too many absences, I can't justify more," he said briskly, hoping he sounded more like himself.

More like himself. What did that mean?

Dean took a few steps toward him. "Cas, I...you know you can talk to them, right? Harvelle's really cool, she's always been—"

"I don't need to talk to anyone." Castiel shook his head and Dean immediately stopped speaking.

Castiel had no desire to go to class, but felt that he needed to get back into a routine, needed to move forward regardless of how unprepared he felt to do so.

"I know you don't have a phone right now, but here's my number," Dean was saying as he scribbled something on a corner of notebook paper and set it on Castiel's desk. "I have to go, but I can walk you to the independent study this afternoon if you want. Do you think you'd--"

"I'm fine," Castiel said with finality.

Dean left for class soon after, wishing Castiel a good day before he did.

Castiel forced himself to write an email to Anna once he was alone, telling his sister that he'd dropped his phone and had yet to get it replaced. He lied and said it had been broken longer than it actually had, using it as an excuse to hide the humiliating truth of the last week. He closed his computer before he could stall while waiting for a reply from his sister and miss his first class. He stood up slowly from his desk, his back smarting.

He cared too much about finishing his education to jeopardize it in such a blatant fashion, he told himself over and over as he slipped into his hoodie and shoes.

His limbs were sore and his head was throbbing painfully again. Ibuprofen and aspirin seemed to make no difference to the pounding in his skull, and he'd stopped trying days ago. The only thing that seemed to ease the aches was a good, deep bowl, and he'd smoked the last of his stash on Saturday. He needed to see Andy for more, but felt an abiding dread at the very thought.

Castiel poured the coffee he hadn't drank into a thermos. He used it to warm his hands as he left his apartment, seeing neither hide nor hair of his roommate.

Castiel said nothing in his print-making class or his art history class, both times situating himself as far in the back of the room as he possibly could, a stark contrast to the habit he usually had of sitting in the front row to better take his compulsively-detailed notes.

He wanted to go back to his room and crawl into his bed with all of his clothes still on, wanted to get a hold of Dean and tell him that he'd changed his mind about being walked to the painting studio.
But he sat stiffly at his desk throughout both classes instead, making sure his breaths were shallow and measured, that he didn't look like he was hyperventilating. His hands were clenched on the edges of the desks, his fingertips red and white.

*My education is important*, he told himself when he wanted to cry.

He could hear his classmates breathing, could hear the sounds of them pushing their hair behind their ears and the drag of their shoe heels across the floor as they crossed and uncrossed their legs. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the sound of the professors' voices each time.

How the hours dragged.

When it was time to go to his independent study later in the day, Castiel set off somewhat hesitantly. He reached the Fine Arts Center after what felt like hours of forcing his body to remember what movement required.

Castiel wanted to turn and walk back to his apartment again as he opened the pendulous double doors of the painting studio, the creak of the hinges loud enough to make him wince. The familiar smell of turpentine and sawdust hit him as he stepped inside.

His stomach roiled unpleasantly when he saw Charlie and Lisa waiting together near the front of the room. Charlie's red hair stood out like a beacon, almost indecently bright under the lights of the studio. Lisa was saying something, her fingers outstretched as she lightly touched Charlie's shoulder, probably complimenting something she was wearing. They made a strangely idyllic picture there, smooth and put-together and confident the way they always seemed so effortlessly capable of.

Castiel heard Professor Harvelle enter the room behind him before he saw her, the thud of the door against the wall startling him as he and the other students turned around.

"Alright, everyone, it's two past-time. Let's take our seats. I have a presentation for your next short writing assignment, and we need to go over due-dates for the month," Harvelle said breezily as she cut a path through her students.

Castiel quickly shuffled a few steps to the chair nearest him in the room and took a seat, his eyes tracking Charlie and Lisa as they sat not far from him. He wished he had a phone for a second, if only to get it out and call Dean and ask where he was. He'd said he'd be attending class that day, but perhaps something had come up. Maybe Sam had gotten into another fight or John was drunk at the Road House or Bobby needed Dean for something. Really, anything could have happened in the few hours that had passed between their goodbye that morning and now.

Castiel didn't realize he was a few seconds away from getting up and leaving until Dean arrived two or three minutes after everyone had gotten situated. He surprised Castiel by sitting in the seat next to his rather than his customary commitment to sitting beside Lisa. Dean's body made a soft *thwump* as he took his place in the old wooden chair, and Castiel breathed in slowly.

He turned to look at Dean, hearing that the other boy was saying something to him but unable to parse out just what it was. He focused on Dean's lips as they shaped words meant for him, nodding and pretending he'd heard. Dean took out a pen and paper before setting his bag down beside his chair.

Lisa chose that moment to turn around in her seat and catch Dean's eye from a few rows ahead. Her delicate features were somewhat pinched-looking, though she mostly hid it with a smile. She gave both boys a polite little wave before turning back to the front as Harvelle got the Powerpoint apparatus set up and took out a laser pointer. Dean said nothing about the interaction.
Castiel mimicked Dean and took out his notebook, staring into its blank margins. He could hear Harvelle talking as she moved the little red dot across the images on the screen, but couldn't seem to concentrate on what exactly she was saying. He dragged his pencil over the blue lines of the notebook paper, willing the time to stop crawling by so he could go back to his apartment. In his peripheral vision Dean's hands were moving reliably over the notebook in his lap, the scratch of his pencil a constant. Castiel marked the seconds with it, letting the sound and the sight of Dean's hands ground him.

Harvelle quickly and efficiently gave them the information and deadlines regarding their second independent project of the semester, and Castiel managed to jot down that the next project would be due on March fourteenth. They had almost a month to complete their next work or the option to break up the time in-between if they wanted to do several smaller projects.

When the lecture ended a few minutes later Harvelle remained at the front of the room as her students dispersed to begin preparation for their projects. Beside him, Dean stood up somewhat slowly and Castiel followed suit, feeling as if he was moving in a dream as he gathered his things in his arms. Before he could return to his and Dean's space, however, Harvelle beckoned to Castiel with her binder and pen in hand.

"I'd like to speak to you in my office," she said as he approached her. Her eyes were already focused on whatever her binder held as she made a ticking motion with her pen on a piece of paper.

Castiel imagined her checking off a list of items for the day:

1) answer emails
2) finalize dates
3) talk to the dysfunctional failure in my class who missed an important critique day and couldn't be bothered to—

"Castiel?"

Harvelle was looking at him expectantly. He realized that he was still standing motionlessly by his chair and moved quickly toward the door. He wondered if Dean was still behind him.

"I'm sorry," Castiel mumbled as he hastily followed her across the hallway.

Her office door was propped open with a rubber stopper, and she gestured for him to close it as she took a seat behind her desk.

"Sit down, Castiel," she instructed, spreading a few papers out in front of her like a hand of cards. Castiel did as she asked; his back throbbed with the motion.

The messiness of Professor Harvelle's office usually bothered him when he had appointments or office hours with her; the scattered piles of old artifacts here and there, the tribal masks and clay paper weights and woven baskets, the books stacked haphazardly on the edges of her desk. Today, though, Castiel found that he didn't give two fucks about the shit his teacher liked to surround herself with. She had good taste in rugs, he thought dryly to himself as he followed blue and red and black and yellow threads under his feet.

"Castiel, you did well on this project, but I would appreciate it if I'd gotten to hear your theoretical aims directly. Have you written an artist's statement for this piece?" Harvelle asked him.

"I haven't," Castiel said, picking at the edges of the skin around his nails again.
"I'd appreciate if you did. You'd have gotten an A had you been present in class and explained it to us, but as it is I've had to dock your grade to a B. I trust you find this reasonable." She was looking at him closely, Castiel saw when he looked up at her.

He quickly redirected his gaze back down to his lap. Could someone tell by looking at him? Gilda had.

"I find it reasonable," Castiel agreed while speaking to his ankles. He winced slightly as he drew blood without meaning to, lifting the injured finger to his lips to suck it away.

Harvelle looked surprised at his answer, but didn't comment on it directly. She said instead, "What are you planning for your next piece? I know we discussed generalities the last time we were here, but you missed our meeting last week for talking more specifically about your aims with the second project, so I think we should talk about that today."

"I'm sorry I wasted your time. I don't know what I'll be doing for this project," Castiel said.

"But you're going to do the still-lives, aren't you? I was under the impression you had a series in mind, one we agreed was theoretically and philosophically sound," Harvelle said.

"I don't think I'll be painting still-lives anymore," Castiel said. He watched as the blood seeping from beneath his nail pooled in the crevice of his finger, dull and slow-moving.

"What?" Harvelle asked. She leaned forward in her desk chair in surprise. The gesture was entirely unlike her, and Castiel wondered briefly if he should have lied.

"I don't think I'll be painting still-lives anymore," Castiel repeated. His bleeding finger was in his mouth again, now.

"Then what are you going to do? We've structured your independent study and its aims around that still-life series. That was what you said you wanted to do originally. Changing that at this point in time might make for a disjointed collection of works," Harvelle informed him sternly.

Castiel shrugged, focusing on a point above Harvelle's shoulder where a large, copper mask hung on the wall, its hollow eyes huge in its oblong face.

He felt thin and fluid. He wanted to go to the bathroom and sit alone there for a while, to put his hands over his ears and shut out the constant ambient hum of air conditioning and drafts passing through vents and the low buzz of the light bulbs glowing.

He didn't realize he'd stopped paying attention until he heard Harvelle say his name again.

"Why are you changing your mind now?" she asked.

Castiel looked directly at her then, at her honey-colored hair, the laugh-lines beside her eyes, the serious set of her lips.

"I don't see the point."

Castiel had no memory of what he said to get out of Harvelle's office, or if she'd made him leave. If she'd told him to rethink his ideas or get some rest or piss off, he hadn't heard. He was simply conscious of being back in the studio not long after that, standing in his and Dean's space staring at a white patch of wall above his painting table. Dean wasn't there, and Castiel didn't know if he wanted...
him to be or not, now.

As if he'd been summoned by Castiel's thoughts, he heard the other boy speak from behind him. "How'd it go?"

"I don't know," Castiel said as he turned to face Dean, feeling the absurd desire to laugh as he had in his damaged car. He could feel himself starting to sweat as a corner of his mouth threatened to twitch upwards. He wanted to throw up.

Dean looked concerned, and took a step toward Castiel. "You look like you're sick again," he said quietly, reaching out to touch Castiel's arm. When Castiel started and shrank back, he didn't miss the hurt that flashed through Dean's eyes.

Castiel took an uncertain step forward only to take two more back, his feet unsteady.

"I'm sorry—it's not that I don't...I just don't think I—I thought..." he trailed off, waiting for Dean to walk away, to tire of Castiel's behavior.

"Please, don't leave me," Castiel whispered to his own feet, hating that he meant it.

"Shit, Cas—don't worry about it, please," Dean said. "That was me. I messed up."

Castiel felt as if his face was on fire, and cast a glance around the painting studio for Lisa or Charlie and saw neither.

"Why'd you move your still-life props?" Dean asked him after they stood there for a few moments together, silently watching everyone move around them in the studio.

Castiel looked at the spot on the wall again, contemplating his answer for almost a minute.

"I moved them back to the prop closet. I can't make them anymore." His voice was hoarse, like he'd been yelling.

"What?" Dean asked. He began to lean in toward Castiel and caught himself, a muscle in his jaw twitching as he made himself stay where he was.

Castiel shook his head. "I don't want to hear how stupid that is, I already know."

"Cas, I wasn't trying to—"

"I know," Castiel cut Dean off softly. He wrapped his arms around himself, suddenly cold instead of hot. He didn't know how it was possible to feel exhausted after doing so little.

"Do you...want to leave?" Dean asked cautiously.

"Where's Lisa?" Castiel asked.

"She's in the woodshop," Dean said, not meeting Castiel's eyes.

"I want to leave," Castiel assented then.

Dean nodded, and crossed the studio to tell Garth that he and Castiel would be going to the library to look for reference materials. The gangly instructor gave him the okay easily enough, giving Castiel a smile over Dean's shoulder, and they left after gathering their things.

When they made it to Castiel's apartment Balthazar was still nowhere to be seen, and Castiel felt a
guilty sort of relief. He hadn't run into his roommate since getting wasted-drunk and shouting at him, and was dreading the inevitable time when he'd have to talk to the exchange student again. He had very faint memories of what had happened, but knew it couldn't have been good based on how Balthazar was avoiding him.

"You need to eat. You have anything this morning?" Dean asked Castiel as they came to stand in the living room. The blinds had been slatted open since he left the apartment that morning, and outside a breeze blew handfuls of crinkled leaves across the stones of the courtyard.

"I forgot," Castiel admitted quietly, picking at his fingers again.

Dean nodded and crossed the few feet to the kitchen to pull another can of soup from the pantry to heat on the stove.

"We need to get you some actual food," he reiterated, more to himself than to Castiel as he looked inside the barren refrigerator.

Castiel didn't say anything to that, unsure just how he felt as Dean set a bowl in front of him a few minutes later at the small table. He did it the way he had the day before, clearly expecting him to eat its contents.

It still hadn't sunk in for Castiel that Dean was present in his space, close to him and smelling of leather and soap, warm like a real person and not a memory. Yet there he was, acting as if the last few weeks had never happened.

"Can you please try?" Dean was asking from across the table, like Castiel was a child he needed to coax. Castiel looked down at the soup in front of him, the yellow and pink of its contents the farthest thing from appetizing.

He tried, if not for himself, for Dean.

Later that evening Dean had to leave to pick John up from the Road House and put him to bed, and Castiel made sure that he said nothing as his friend walked out the door. He only bid him goodnight, forcing himself to wave as Dean began the short walk to where he'd parked the Impala in the nearby student lot.

Dean promised to come and see him the following day, and Castiel closed the door after him with shaking hands. He felt the darkness behind already clawing at him, wrapping fingers around his throat and shoving jagged nails into the well of pain in his lower back.

Once in bed, he pulled the covers over his head, remembering the promise he'd made to himself over and over.

It was time to move on.

It was time to grow up.

***

The following day Dean took it upon himself to drive Castiel to the grocery store. It was an unexpected errand, and Castiel had little time to process the circumstances of it when he saw Dean pull up in front of the apartment not long after his last class of the day ended. As if magnetized, he left his room and locked the door behind him to go to the car, something pulling itself tight in his
chest as Dean gave him a shy smile.

Castiel tried to feign insouciance as he opened the passenger door of the Impala and climbed into its familiar leather seat next to Dean. He knew he must have failed if the careful look his friend gave him from across the seat was any indication. Dean was wearing a Metallica shirt with a large hole near the collar and his hair was windswept, Castiel noticed as Dean leaned in toward him when he spoke.

"Cas, look, if you don't want to do this, we don't have to," Dean said as he idled the car in front of the apartment. "I just...want you to have something better than soup to eat."

Castiel shook his head. "It's fine, Dean. I...I need to get groceries. This is fine." He was lying, and felt Dean probably knew it, but reminded himself that Dean was right. He was almost completely out of food.

The drive to the HEB was short, and all too quickly Castiel and Dean were getting out of the car and walking in through the automated front doors together.

Castiel felt cold and tired as they trekked through the produce section, realizing that he'd forgotten to don his pullover before leaving the apartment.

Dean had a list of items that he pulled out of his back pocket early-on in the trip. He'd written down indulgences he bought for Sam that Bobby wouldn't supplement, noodle cups and bottled water for his father, Wonder Bread and canned tuna for sandwiches for himself, and a host of suggestions for Castiel.

"You might feel more like eating if we get you some new options," Dean explained as they walked up and down the many aisles. "When Sam was little, he wouldn't eat for days for a while right after —well, he was sick a lot, and I got him to eat by making him weird shit, kinda shocking him is what I did, I guess. Now, he's fine. You're just bored with what you've got, I think."

As he spoke, Dean selected item after item from various aisles and displays, holding them up for Castiel's inspection as if it really mattered what he thought about the food he'd just shove into the trash later. Castiel's stomach lurched at the thought, and he nodded at everything Dean held up as if it hadn't. The cart was filled with crackers and tortillas and yogurt cups, little things more like snacks than meals, and the sight of all of it there, piled beside Dean's Ramen and water and Cheeze Whiz and generic brand lunch meat, made Castiel feel like he was going to be sick. He blindly reached a hand out, his fingers brushing over plastic sacks of rice and lentils as he turned to walk the opposite direction.

In the men's room it was almost completely quiet, and he was alone. Castiel pressed his forehead to the cool blue tiles of the far wall, struggling to breathe. He wanted to close his eyes and open them in his room, away from the myriad of choices and colors and options. He wanted both to be alone and for Dean to come find him—

Castiel gagged and threw up water and bile in one of the nearby toilets, shaking as he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. He made himself stand up and splashed cold water onto his face, raking his wet fingers through his hair. It was far too long now, curling at the ends and utterly unkempt. Soon he'd look like Gabriel. Their father had detested how long Gabriel wore his hair.

Dean's voice startled him out of his reverie, a whisper of Castiel's name almost lost in the sound of the water still running and the dizzying pounding in his ears.

Castiel turned around to face him. "Why are you here?"
He braced himself against the cool white edge of the sink. The words were double-edged with a meaning he hadn't intended.

"I wasn't sure if you were—it's been almost ten minutes, and I—I'm sorry. Do you want me to go back outside?" Dean asked, stepping toward Castiel slowly. He had a bruise Castiel hadn't noticed on the upper part of his exposed arm, the light gray of it suddenly stark on the soft gold of his skin.

"Can we leave soon?" Castiel asked.

Dean nodded. "Let's pay and we'll head back. Okay?"

He was holding out his hand, the knuckles scarred, and Castiel took it. He exhaled heavily as Dean's fingers were laced through his in a seamless motion. Dean pulled him to his chest for a moment as brief as a breath, pressing his chin to the top of Castiel's head and squeezing his hand gently. Castiel wished impractically that he could cling to him, breathe him in. But he let go after only a few seconds.

When they made it back to the apartment less than twenty minutes after, Dean organized the food in Castiel's cabinets so that it was arranged by size, color and designation. Castiel ran his hands over the items, over the large-to-small and red-to-violet of them on the shelves, and thanked Dean as the motion soothed him. Dean only nodded.

That night, Castiel began to try and catch up on the work he'd missed and spread everything out on the coffee table in the living room of the apartment, arranged by subject and date.

Dean took out a book he was reading for his survey of Edwardian literature, sitting on the sofa behind Castiel. In front of them the TV was on, a grainy local channel playing reruns of Between the Lions on mute as the two of them sat there working.

When Balthazar unexpectedly let himself in around ten at night, he startled both of them from the quiet lull they'd settled into.

The Brit's hair was messy and his high cheeks pink. His bookbag was slung over one shoulder, and he seemed as surprised to see the two of them as they were to see him. He froze in the open doorway for a few seconds, cool air filtering in behind him.

"Castiel, Dean," Balthazar said curtly, then. He inclined his head briefly before quickly walking past both him and Dean and going to his room and closing the door behind him. The tension was palpable in the room even after he left.

Castiel set his pencil down, guilt swarming him as he thought of how he'd treated his roommate when he'd only wanted to help. He felt an irrational terror that Dean would ask him what Balthazar's problem was, but he didn't.

"You want more water?" Dean asked instead.

"I told Charlie I didn't care that Meg hurt your feelings at the surprise party," Castiel blurted in response.

"I, uh...I know," Dean said. "She told me. Don't worry about that, Cas. Not now."

"You're my friend, Dean," Castiel said. "I didn't mean it, and I shouldn't have said it to her."

"There are plenty of things she's forgiven me for that I shouldn't have said," Dean assured him.

"You'll talk to her soon, don't beat yourself up over it."
"That's what I'm good at," Castiel said as his pencil rolled off of the table and onto the carpet.

***

Wednesday was a day spent almost entirely alone, a contrast to the many hours spent with Dean over the course of the week, and it was long.

After Castiel's print-making class ended, he decided that it was time for him to replace his shattered phone. He knew he'd put it off for far too long and that he needed to call both his sister and his mother, but that didn't make it any easier to walk out to his car where he'd parked it over a week previous.

Castiel felt both apathetic and overwrought as he stood beside the compact shape of his car, reaching out to run his fingers over the damage etched into the dark blue paint. He wanted to turn around and return to his apartment, to wait until a day or two more had passed and he could ask Dean to come with him. He didn't feel ready to drive again.

For almost ten minutes Castiel stood there beside the car. His back and head throbbed in tandem. He wondered what Gabriel was doing right this very moment in Chicago, if perhaps he, too, was standing motionlessly somewhere in the city, waiting for his feet to move again.

It was cool when Castiel unlocked the driver's side door and finally slid into the chilled seat. He'd lost track of time as he stood by his car, and when Castiel at last put it in drive and began the drive to the nearby shopping center the sun was beginning to set.

He drove five miles under the speed limit for the entirety of the trip, and made it to the shopping center without incident, though he was sweating heavily beneath the cotton of his undershirt by the time he parked his car outside the Apple Store.

He walked with what he hoped looked like purpose rather than desperation to the entrance of the crowded shop. The faster he got this over with, the sooner he could return to his room.

Everything inside the store was silver and white and smooth, blonde wood, and it was filled with people speaking loudly both to one another and to the Apple employees in blue shirts. Castiel found himself holding his breath as he walked through the squirming throng of consumers, smelling perfumes and shampoos and the scent of unwashed skin trapped underneath layers of fabric. People brushed up against him unconcernedly, bumping his sides with their elbows and his shoulders with theirs. It reminded Castiel of the last time he'd been in a space this crowded, and the thought made him nauseous.

Dean had things to do at the salvage yard for Bobby that day and was unable to see Castiel until later in the evening, and he wished the other boy was with him. When he finally reached one of the workers it was a relief, and soon he was handing his phone over to be diagnosed and backing out of the store as quickly as possible to wait the estimated thirty minutes in his car.

He almost fell asleep while he sat there, and only just caught himself before he drifted and missed his scheduled appointment. Rubbing his tired eyes, he straightened and headed back into the store, dismayed to see that the number of people there had only grown.

The Apple employee who met with Castiel at one of the tables near the back was a young man with a name tag that read 'Alfie'. He had light, sand-colored hair and pale blue eyes. He had large front teeth that gave him the appearance of a particularly human-like rabbit.

"Hello!" he said brightly as he set Castiel's phone down between them. "So, it looks like your phone
is actually okay on the inside, we just need to replace the screen. That'll take an hour or so, and we have time to do that today. Did you want to just do it now?" He beamed at Castiel after asking.

Castiel nodded. "Yes, please. Let's do it now."

Alfie instructed him to return to the store within an hour and a half.

Castiel was going to return to his car for the time needed to repair the phone, but saw at the last second that the cafe next door to the store was entirely empty, and made a beeline for the place. He took a seat at one of their booths after sparing only a cursory glance around the interior. When he saw an employee with a red apron wrapped around their waist coming over to ask him if he wanted to order anything, he asked for a glass of water before setting his head down on the table, feeling a migraine blooming in the base of his skull. He was grateful for the relative quiet after the cacophony of the phone store.

When the waitress placed the ice water beside his elbow, Castiel heard her say that if he needed anything else she'd be behind the counter. He didn't acknowledge her.

After spending the allotted time forcing himself to stay awake as he sat at the booth, Castiel somewhat reluctantly left the cafe, his glass of water untouched.

Castiel was soon sitting across from Alfie at one of the tables at the Apple Store again, nodding at the appropriate times as he made the payment for the repair and listened to Alfie recite a few common-sense tips for keeping his phone from becoming so severely damaged again. His voice took on something of a droning quality as he listed them, and Castiel felt a flash of irritation.

"I know what not to do. I threw it at a fucking wall," Castiel said sharply before realizing exactly what he'd said. Alfie's eyes widened at the outburst.

"I...I'm sorry. Thank you for helping me," Castiel said guiltily, looking down at his hands.

"It's...fine," Alfie said in response, his voice clipped in a way it hadn't been before. "Here you are." He flashed a cold smile and handed Castiel the phone before turning and disappearing into the throng of customers without so much as a glance back.

Castiel glanced down at his phone. It looked better than it had the day he got it, its brand-new surface glassy and smelling faintly of lens cleaner.

The first person he called when he exited the store was his sister.

"Castiel?"

"Hello, Anna," Castiel said.

"Your phone's fixed?" she asked. "I got your email on Monday, but I've been kind've worried about you. It's been almost two weeks."

"Yes, it's fixed. I'm sorry for how long it's been, things are just so hectic here with my assignments," Castiel said, hoping she didn't start to poke holes in his explanation.

"Are you sure you're alright, Castiel? Did you get my message about Gabriel? He said he was going to call you. I haven't told Mother or the others yet."

The mention of Gabriel made Castiel's stomach sour. "He did, and we spoke. But I think I...I think I need some time before I talk to him again."
"I know it's weird, Castiel, but he and Kali want to move down here to Texas. They're saying—"

"I don't want to talk about him," Castiel interrupted her. He kept his tone soft as he thought of how he'd snapped at Alfie.

"I get it, you need time, Anna said with a resigned sigh. "I'm sorry, Castiel. I've just been dying to tell you about it. I've been thinking about visiting you soon."

"I need to go now, Anna. I just called to tell you my phone was back on," Castiel said, hating himself as he hung up without giving her a chance to respond.

He checked his message inbox and missed calls log next, and saw that he had a half-dozen more texts from Meg, three missed calls from Gabriel, one from Naomi, and a text from Charlie asking him if he was busy from four days previous.

He made no effort to respond to any of them, biting his lip until he tasted blood as he scrolled through the messages.

***

Castiel couldn't breathe. He was going to die. He couldn't breathe and he was blind already. He couldn't see anything even with his eyes opened wide. Only darkness filtered through, viscous and cold. He tried uselessly to drag air in through a throat that felt raw and narrow.

"Cas—"

He was going to die if he didn't get a real breath in soon. Castiel threw his hands out, desperate and afraid. His fingers bumped someone, and he drew back, thinking of people who smelled like flowers and booze and who led their friends up winding staircases that never ended.

"Cas, come here—" someone beside him said. "Come here—"

"I—I can't b—breathe," Castiel gasped out with effort. "Can't—"

"You're okay, Cas."

It was Dean who was talking. Why was Dean with him in the frat house? Did he know Drew was there, too?

Castiel blinked rapidly as light, bright and sharp, unexpectedly flooded his vision. He brought his hands to his face to rub at his eyes, still struggling to breathe as he touched his face.

"Cas, it's okay, it's okay."

Castiel was sitting in his dorm room bed with his back against the wall, gasping for breath. Dean was walking back toward the bed from where he must have flipped the light switch. He was reaching out for him, his green eyes wide.

"You had a nightmare," Dean said slowly. He lightly laid his hands on Castiel's shoulders as he leaned forward toward him.

Castiel's chest was pulled tight as his head spun.

"You're okay. You had a bad dream and it's kinda hot in here," Dean rubbed his hands up and down Castiel's goose-pimpled arms, the touch firm and warm.
"Dean—" Castiel gasped as the other boy obliged him and tugged him closer. He breathed in the scent of Dean's skin as he pressed his hot forehead to his shoulder.

"Just breathe in slow, okay? Slow," Dean instructed. He pressed a hand to the back of Castiel's head.

Castiel tried, his chest heaving as he struggled to regulate his breaths. He couldn't seem to remember the breathing exercises he used to have memorized for anxiety attacks this severe. All he felt at that moment was fear, pressing down on him from every corner of the room. He could still feel Drew's hands on him, and a phantom pain throbbed between Castiel's legs. He clung to Dean.

"You know, when Sam and me were little, Dad used to leave us alone," Dean began, his voice quiet. “Sometimes it was for a few days, sometimes a week. The longest was almost two weeks, I want to say. He'd just...he'd just kinda check out, hit the road for a while. Well, one time he'd been gone for a couple days and Sam started doing, y'know—that, saying he couldn't breathe, taking his shirt off 'cause he thought the collar was choking him. He had to've been seven or eight. I was so scared, thought he was sick. I made the front desk lady at the hotel come up and take a look at him. She knew what was going on and helped calm him down, though. He had 'em more when we were kids, but he still has 'em sometimes, he just thinks I don't know," Dean said as he rubbed his fingertips over the nape of Castiel's neck.

Castiel's breathing was slowing gradually, the sound of Dean's voice bringing him back to the present bit by bit. His eyes had mostly adjusted to the light, and he was no longer squinting. He was sitting cross-legged on the bed, his knees pressed against Dean's as they faced one another.

"I didn't know that," Castiel said into Dean's shoulder when he felt he could spare the air, his throat still sore and somewhat tight.

"That Sam has 'em? Yeah, not like he broadcasts it. No one does. I figured you had 'em, too, but wasn't sure—"

"That John left you and Sam alone in hotels," Castiel clarified. He didn't want to hear that Dean had always known how crazy he was.

"My dad, uh...well, he wasn't all there for a few years after...well, you know," Dean said, his breath warm on the top of Castiel's head. “Shit, I still don't know if he is now sometimes, but it was worse when Sam was little."

_When Sam was little._ What of Dean? Did he refuse to remember that he was once young, too? Castiel didn't ask.

After a few minutes more, Dean asked Castiel if he wanted to lie down again, and he agreed easily enough. He was bone-tired, and his legs and arms trembled as he lowered himself back, not protesting when Dean pillowed Castiel's head on his chest.

His hair was damp with sweat and stuck to his forehead, and he was too drained to care.

"I'm sorry," Castiel said into Dean's t-shirt. He felt Dean shudder against him, and kept himself from tilting his head up and seeking out his eyes.

"Don't tell me sorry," Dean said firmly.

"It used to be you who had nightmares," Castiel said as if it made a difference.

"You were there for me," Dean said.
“Thank you,” Castiel murmured as his eyes closed.

He hoped Dean left the light on for the remainder of the night, but didn't stay awake long enough to find out.

***

It was almost two in the afternoon on Thursday when Castiel literally ran into Meg's friend, Milo, as he left his last class.

He wasn't paying attention as he made his way down the long-memorized path to his apartment, and didn't move in time when he realized he was in someone's way. Before he could avoid it he shoulder-checked the other boy and sent him sprawling a few steps back, his walking stick clattering loudly to the ground. Realizing that he'd essentially bulldozed someone with his carelessness, Castiel apologized so quickly he stuttered over his own words. He bent to help whoever he'd knocked over gather their things. He didn't recognize Milo until he heard him say Meg's nickname.

"Clarence, right? It's been a minute."

Castiel looked the other boy in the face as he finally connected the dots and remembered the student who had given him hydrocodone a few weeks before.

"It's Castiel," he murmured as he handed Milo a textbook, half of its pages bent back from where it had fallen. "Meg just calls me that."

"Sorry, Castiel, then. How you been?" Milo asked him with an easy nonchalance. His eyes were red-rimmed and his pupils blown, and Castiel guessed he was currently on something to be as relaxed as he appeared.

"I'm fine, thank you," Castiel said somewhat awkwardly. "Uh, yourself?"

"I'm always good," Milo said casually. One second of silence passed between them, and then two. When he gathered that Castiel wasn't going to say anything else, Milo spoke again, "Well, I'll catch you later, man. Tell Meg hel—"

Castiel didn't consciously interrupt Milo, but realized it must have been him who said, "Do you know anyone selling green? My guy's dry right now."

The slang felt strange on his lips, and he knew he probably sounded ridiculous, but Milo didn't seem to notice.

He immediately nodded, a slow smile on his lips. "Sure. My guy lives on campus. You want his number?"

"Do you have directions to his place?" Castiel asked.

He knew well that Andy likely wasn't dry, and wanted nothing less than to pretend to be okay long enough to forge a semblance of a rapport with a new dealer. But the thought of seeing Andy any time soon made Castiel feel ill.

Milo nodded again. "Sure, man. I can probably just take y'over now if you want. He should be home right now, and he re-upped yesterday."

“Please,” Castiel said.
Less than an hour later found Castiel sitting in his unmade bed, smoking a sizable bowl from his water bottle bong. The foil at its rim was old and oxidized and the plastic was warped, but it worked well enough for Castiel's purposes. Normally, he would have invited Meg over so they could share her pipes and his bud, but he knew he wouldn't be doing so that evening.

His eyes were slipping closed as he exhaled a large plume of smoke into the air. He felt as if his head was growing lighter, the ever-present pain there slowly fading into the hazy background. Castiel hadn't taken his books or any of his assignments out of his bag when he'd gotten in twenty minutes previous. He'd just set everything down by the door as soon as he entered his room and took his place on the bed with his lighter and baggy.

Milo's dealer had been a heavily-tattooed junior named Raph who lived a block away from the university cafeteria, and his roommate was none other than Darren Willoughby, Gilda's ill-fated date from the same night Castiel had met Milo. He'd made no effort to greet Castiel or acknowledge that he remembered him at all, and Castiel had been glad of it.

Raph had sold Castiel a few grams without much in the way of conversation. He'd told Castiel the name of the strain and where it had come from, but Castiel remembered neither now. Raph also hadn't seemed fazed when Castiel explained that he didn't have any cash on him at the moment; he simply gave Castiel his email and instructed him to send a payment via PayPal. From the casual way he spoke, Castiel could tell Raph wasn't afraid of being used, and had little concern that Castiel would gyp him. He'd disappeared back into what Castiel assumed was his room after bidding Milo an abbreviated goodbye.

Raph was nothing like Andy, who would have invited Castiel to stay and smoke a bowl or two of the pot while they watched something on Netflix.

But that didn't matter, Castiel reminded himself. He'd wanted weed, not an awkward hang-out session with a drug dealer, and he'd gotten it in abundance.

Castiel lay back against his rumpled pillows as he inhaled more smoke, forcing his eyes open with effort as the almost deafening thrumming in his ears began to quiet by degrees, settling into a muffled buzz. The ache in the center of his back twinged as he exhaled, and he winced. He took another deep hit in the hopes that it would lessen the pain there as it had in his head.

He'd inhaled more than he meant to and began to cough forcefully as he exhaled, his frame wracked with the effort as the high began to peak. It had been almost six days since he last smoked, and the feeling of it was as familiar as it was strange. Soon, he could no longer pinpoint where his back ached the most, or his head; it all blended together in a general feeling of looseness. He felt distanced from himself, as if he could pick himself apart and see the separate pieces and what they contributed to the whole. He felt different now than he had the last time he smoked, and he wondered dimly if it was because the strain he was smoking was different or if it was simply because more time had passed.

Castiel stopped wondering as he sagged back into the bedding, the sheets cool against his warm skin.

Dean was due to come over within the next few minutes, and when there came a knock at the door Castiel sat up and slid off the edge of his bed, landing on feet light and flat. He passed through the living room, seeing that Balthazar's room was empty and the light off inside of it. Castiel found that it was easier now to put this thought aside for later contemplation as he placed his hand on the doorknob.
He knew Dean had just left Lisa's dorm room, and Castiel realized how high he was as he opened the door and stared unabashedly at his friend where he stood outside.

Dean looked tired, his full mouth set in a thin line and his skin a washed-out white under his freckles. He had his familiar leather jacket on even though it wasn't quite cold enough to necessitate it, and the shirt he wore beneath was so faded that Castiel couldn't tell what its logo said.

Castiel moved to the side to let Dean into the apartment, wondering then how it was possible that Dean had become a part of his life again. The implications of it seemed almost insurmountable, suddenly.

Dean smiled softly at Castiel, though it didn't quite reach his weary eyes. He was quiet as Castiel led him to his room, and they sat on either end of his bed without speaking to one another. Smoke was still swirling around Castiel's ceiling fan above them, and the smell of herb was heavy in the room. Castiel watched as Dean took in the sight of it, his green eyes darting to and fro. He looked like he wanted to speak, opening his mouth and closing it more than once as he contemplated what to say.

"Are you alright, Dean?" Castiel asked after an additional few minutes had passed in this way.

Dean shook his head quickly, smiling in a somewhat pained way. "I'm fine, Cas. Just...tired. Y'know?"

Castiel nodded without responding, and Dean rubbed a hand over his face. "That was dumb, I'm sorry. I know you are, too. How're you?"

Castiel looked at Dean for a long moment. He did indeed feel very drowsy, and was having a hard time remembering what it was Dean had asked him the longer he stared.

"Better," he said at last.

"I," Dean began. "Cas, are you...does this," he gestured toward the general vicinity of the smoke pooling near the ceiling. His knuckles were scraped, and Castiel wondered how they'd become so. "Does this help you feel better?"

Castiel nodded. "You do, too," he said truthfully.

He moved to lie down on his side facing Dean, looking up at his friend through eyes already closing.

"We should both sleep," he said quietly. "We need it."

Castiel felt empty and still, filled with nothing but the desire to fall into the lethargy already settling in his limbs. Sleepy midday sunlight was pouring in through the cracked blinds, and Dean looked half-awake, himself.

"We should," Dean agreed. "But, you go first."

Castiel didn't argue, and soon drifted off.

***

The following day Castiel drove to the nearby Michael's and bought a large canvas for his next painting assignment, not trusting himself to handle the saw in the woodshop. He hauled it to the studio with some difficulty, but managed after a long ten minutes of effort to get the thing into the elevator.
Once upstairs, he set the canvas up in his and Dean's shared space, not knowing what he would do with it but knowing that he had to do something.

Castiel was the only person present in the studio that Friday afternoon, and the silence filled his ears like murky river water as he set up his paints and brushes the way he liked them. He felt almost as if he was performing an exercise in futility, but made himself do so all the same. He poured mineral spirits into the pallet cups dried and empty on his table; he spread out a sheet of wax paper and mixed rudimentary shades from black to white and red to green; he pilfered one of the throw pillows from the small reading nook in the studio and shoved it between the chair and the painful knot in his lower back.

Then, he sat in front of the huge canvas for almost twenty minutes, staring at the unblemished white of its tall expanse until it was all he could see. He had a vague idea of what he wanted, and knew that was all he was going to get.

When he finally began, he didn't bother creating an underpainting. He simply got up and retrieved a mirror from the prop closet and set it up before his stool, dipping a large brush into a well of burnt sienna and dragging it across the blank space without hesitation and without ceremony. He laid the framework for a self-portrait in navy blue and dark brown without pause, layering the paint until he lost sight of where his skin was supposed to end the background to begin.

He painted bones under flesh, white and yellow and pale pink, flashes of skeleton under his paper-thin skin. The bones were bright and leered like a Cheshire grin, exposed things that made Castiel's face look ghostly and alien.

He was a monster on canvas, and this he found he didn't mind.

He layered brown on blue on gray on black on bright, bright red. He painted blood and flesh and human waste to wreath his high cheekbones like colored smoke in a jagged sea of black and white.

*I need to sleep in the dark.*

Castiel almost fell out of his chair when a gentle hand came down on his shoulder.

His back was stiff from the hours he'd been sitting before his canvas, and the motion made the locked muscles shift uncomfortably. He whipped his head to the side, surprised and somewhat fearful when he saw that it was Charlie who had touched him. He wasn't sure when she'd come in, so absorbed had he been in his work. He hoped she hadn't been there very long, watching him make a nightmare of himself.

His friend's short hair was swept back by a headband with Gryffindor colors adorning it, the scarlet clashing slightly with the red of her tresses. She had her messenger bag slung over one shoulder, and her eyes were wide as she stood beside Castiel and his work.

"Cas?" she said. "What is this?" she gestured timidly to his frightening painting, taking a step back so as to more fully look at it.

"Me," he answered honestly.

"Why aren't you doing your still-lives?" Charlie asked.

"They're stupid," he said.

Charlie leaned in to look at him, putting her hand on his shoulder again. He tried not to flinch from the touch.
"You okay, Cas?"

Castiel wished he'd smoked more before leaving his apartment.

"I'm sorry for what I said," Castiel said instead of answering what she'd asked. "I didn't—I don't know why I said it."

Charlie's voice was low when she spoke, "It's okay. I know Meg's your friend and that..." she trailed off for a moment, clearly wondering how much to say. "Things were weird, I know," she settled on at last. "You look like you need some sleep, Cas. You almost ready to go home?"

Castiel nodded. He hadn't noticed that he was shaking with exhaustion until Charlie wrapped her fingers around his wrist, pulling his paint-stained hand to her chest and bringing her other hand up to clasp it as well.

She smiled at him. "Missed you."

Castiel closed his eyes and breathed in, feeling the beat of her heart beneath his wrist.

***

On Saturday afternoon, Castiel was startled from his and Dean's quiet study session by the sound of someone knocking loudly and persistently on his door.

When he went to answer it, he wasn't surprised at who stood outside.

"Hello, Meg."

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Leave me a comment or inbox me on Tumblr. It makes me very happy to hear everyone's thoughts/feels/suggestions.
Meg didn't say anything to Castiel, but instead marched past him into the living room with a disapproving look shot in his direction. Castiel closed the door behind her, feeling a distinct unease at his friend's unexpected presence. While he couldn't say he'd been entirely blindsided by her forced visit, he still felt unprepared for it.

Meg's dark hair flounced angrily as if it had a life of its own as she threw her bookbag onto the couch and then herself down next to it. She looked expectantly to Castiel once she'd apparently gotten comfortable, her legs crossed and her elbow resting on the armrest beside her. Castiel could smell pot and the familiar, heady scent of her body spray as she sat before him. She looked tired, and he wondered if she was having trouble sleeping, too.

Behind her, Dean emerged from Castiel's bedroom. He still held a book in one hand and in the other a pencil from when he and Castiel had been poring over their respective class texts in the quiet.
"Meg," Dean greeted in a clipped voice.

"Where've you been?" Meg snapped at Castiel, opting to ignore Dean entirely.

"My phone broke," Castiel said.

Meg's look of annoyed disbelief made it clear she knew he was only telling her a half-truth.

"You've been avoiding me," she retorted as she crossed her arms defensively over her chest. Her chin was thrust up, a bit of hurt seeping through the mask of disdain almost always present on her delicate features.

Castiel knew Meg deserved an explanation, though there were few things he wanted less at that moment than to give her one. But he nodded and turned to Dean, who was still regarding their interaction with wary eyes, "Dean, I need to speak to Meg."

He wasn't sure how Dean would react; he was well-aware that his friend thought Meg was a bad influence, and remembered all-too clearly the last interaction Dean and Meg had with one another at his failed birthday party. But to his surprise, Dean nodded in understanding, straightening up slightly where he still stood in the doorway to the bedroom.

"I'll head over to Bobby's. You call me if you need me." His words were heavy with meaning, and Castiel was grateful for the out he implicitly offered.

"Thank you, Dean," he said sincerely, meeting Dean's eyes.

Dean only shrugged awkwardly before turning to gather his things from the room.

Meg said nothing as she and Castiel waited, the silence bordering on uncomfortable as Dean slung his bag over one shoulder and passed between them to reach the door.
"Bye, Cas," Dean said before letting himself out.

"You've been MIA for two weeks," Meg said once Dean was gone, leaving them alone with one another in the small living room. She looked almost angry, now, her dark brows furrowed and her hands balled into fists by her elbows.

Castiel felt himself start to turn inward at the sight, wanting to retreat to his room, away from her anger and her clenched fists. But instead he moved toward one of the armchairs across from the sofa she occupied, sitting gingerly. His back smarted, as did his head. It wasn't yet nine in the morning, and he'd only been awake for an hour or so.

"I've...I've been busy—" Castiel began before Meg cut him off, her hand coming up to silence him.

"No, you haven't," Meg said curtly. "You look like shit. What's going on?"

The words stung unexpectedly coming from Meg.

"I've been having trouble sleeping," Castiel said, raising a hand to run it self-consciously through his hair. Why was he letting it grow so long?

"That's nothing new," Meg said slowly. She leaned forward to look at Castiel more closely. Her deep brown eyes were sharp as they raked him over, her heart-shaped mouth pursed in something like concentration.

"What's wrong?" Her voice was soft, then, and Castiel found that was worse.

"Do you want to smoke?" Castiel asked her. He stared at his hands, hoping her keen eyes didn't catch the things he was hiding.

"Sure," Meg said noncommittally, unfazed by his pivot.

Castiel stood, moving a hand to hold the small of his back as he led her to his room. She followed without complaint, and sat herself at her customary spot on the edge of his bed once they passed the familiar threshold. She cast an appreciative glance around the room as she crossed her legs indian-style beneath herself. "It looks good in here," she commented. "Better than it used to."

"I hadn't realized how disorganized I'd let it become." Castiel had no interest in admitting that the reason he'd cleaned so thoroughly and so suddenly had been because he'd thought it would help maintain the illusion of normalcy.

He said nothing as Meg took the baggy from him and dumped a few nugs into the grinder she produced from her bag. The rich, skunk-like smell permeated the room around them as a few seconds later she emptied its contents into a bright blue and purple glass pipe balanced on one of her thighs.

"I've never seen that one before," Castiel said as she set it down on the bed between them, its bowl-piece fully loaded.

"Andy gave it to me," Meg said with a small smile.

The sound of the dealer's name made Castiel uncomfortable, and he didn't respond.

"So, it's story time. Where the hell were you?" Meg asked from beside Castiel when a few minutes had passed between them in more silence. "You went to KA's party a few weeks back, right?"
Castiel flinched, and hoped she didn't notice.

"Why do you ask?" he said.

Meg looked away for a second, her lips turned downwards in what could only be described as a frown.

"I heard you got fucked up," she said at last, fiddling with a loose thread on Castiel's comforter.

Castiel felt as if he was going to throw up.

"I had too much to drink. It was a mistake." He picked the pipe up from where it was sitting on the bed and handed it to her.

"Have greens."

"Wanna tell me what happened?" Meg asked as she exhaled a large cloud of smoke. "I know you're not crazy about shots. Did you do 'em on an empty stomach or something?"

Castiel took the pipe from her, torching the bowl and taking a hit so large he was unable to breathe, coughing out smoke and half-successfully dragging in air. Meg rubbed a hand over his back in what was supposed to soothe him. He forced himself not to move out from beneath the touch.

"I was stupid," Castiel said at last.

"Everybody gets fucked up at parties, babe," Meg said as she lay back on the bed, her hair fanned out around her head in dark waves. "I did a bunch when I first started living on campus. It happens. Think of it as a rite of passage. People'll get over it soon, I promise. And I don't think any differently of you, okay?"

Castiel nodded numbly, wanting nothing more than to tell Meg the truth, but fearing what she would say.

He had been weak.

Drew had been able to do what he did because Castiel hadn't been strong enough to prevent it.

"I won't be doing it again," he said.

***

Castiel spent almost all of Sunday in the studio, sitting before his self-portrait. He didn't have a particular artistic aim for the work and knew it likely showed, but couldn't find it in himself to care. There were large swathes of white canvas peaking through the composition in multiple areas, and Castiel was less than concerned with covering them the way he knew he would have normally been.

The way he was working on the large piece was entirely different from the usual slow, methodical way he'd tackled past paintings. Before, he'd spent hours perfecting the most minute details, and had almost obsessively seen to uniform textures and flawless color saturation, achieving a photorealistic quality with more than one of his paintings. For this piece, however, he was arbitrarily slapping on layers of color one on top of the other, all of them mixed thick and heavy with medium. They made glossy stripes of contrast over a backdrop of discordant hues and scattered designs scrawled in graphite.

Castiel also wasn't working the piece as a whole the way he normally would have, but instead
moving jerkily from part to part, seeing but not caring about the disconnects in proportion and inconsistencies in color. It was coming together as an image in random bursts, the jagged frame of his doppelganger's jaw first softening and then slashed into harshness again, his cheeks slapped with red and then blue and then a cold, translucent gray, his eyes closed and then open and then closed again, a spectral echo of pupils left visible that was both disturbing and muddied.

Beside Castiel all the while was the mirror in which his own face was reflected. He imagined that he was painting someone else's thin, pale visage, someone else's dark blue eyes and red-rimmed lids. It was easier that way, and soon he didn't recognize the person looking back at him.

He worked for hours, until his hands trembled and his back felt like an old man's. He took only one or two breaks in all that time, venturing out into the hallway to drink from the water fountain or taking small hits from a pipe Meg had lent him in the empty men's room across from the drawing studio. He was well-aware that someone could easily walk in on him and smell the tell-tale scent of pot in the air, but didn't care when waves of calming blue washed over him, quieting the humming in his ears and slowing the pounding of his heart.

But he needn't have worried; no one came in, anyway.

When Dean arrived at the studio later in the evening and found Castiel still there, he was obviously struck by the large work. In the mirror behind him, Castiel could see the shock on Dean's face. His full lips were parted in an unspoken question, his grass-green eyes wide as he took in the details of Castiel's huge canvas. It almost rivaled in size a few of Dean's works, an obvious departure from Castiel's habit of doing smaller pieces. Dean lifted a hand to touch it, having to stand on his toes to reach the top of it.

"Cas," Dean asked once he'd stepped back down. "What is this?"

Castiel watched the other boy in the mirror as he spoke, tracking the movements of Dean's eyes, the fading bruises on his skin, the iridescent pink-white of the scars left by his father. He turned to look at his friend, after, knowing that he looked disheveled and was obviously stoned.

"What do you think?" Castiel asked in response.

Unable, or perhaps unwilling to come up with an answer, Dean situated himself beside Castiel to begin work on his own assignment, taking out his large drafting sketchpad and silently laying out the bones of his composition.

That evening, they sat down together to eat sandwiches Dean had made them at the small table in Castiel's kitchen.

It was easier to make himself eat when he was high, Castiel had discovered the night previous. It wasn't too difficult to ignore the taste and texture of the food on his tongue after he'd reached a comfortable buzz, and he'd been able to eat more over the last day than he had the past two weeks. He took mechanical bites of his sandwich as he sat there across from Dean, admitting to himself that it probably would have tasted good had everything not felt cumbrous and strange in his stomach. He told Dean so.

"I'm glad you like it," Dean said with an uncertain smile once Castiel had eaten almost all of it.

"Thank you," Castiel told him.
It was dark out, and beyond the window Castiel could hear a cat mewing somewhere in the nearby courtyard. He wondered if he'd be able to find it if he walked out the door right now and—

"Cas?" Dean said. Castiel hoped it was the first time he'd tried to get his attention.

He looked toward Dean expectantly.

Dean hesitated, looking down at his lap and then briefly out the window before he spoke.

"Meg wasn't...she wasn't with you when—she didn't leave you there alone, did she?" He was unmistakably apprehensive as he asked the question, one of his hands partially outstretched across the table as if to touch Castiel's, to keep him there if he decided to leave.

But Castiel made no move to get up, nor did he say anything immediately.

He was quiet for a long time, so long, that he could tell Dean was growing uncomfortable and fidgety in the silence.

"No. She didn't," Castiel whispered. "If she had been there, it...it wouldn't have happened." The words cost him to say.

Dean let it go, then, and Castiel had to stop himself from thanking him for it.

***

On Monday, Dean and Castiel made the trip together to the studio for their weekly seminar class, arriving a few minutes before the session began. From just behind the red metal containers filled with mineral spirits and turpentine, Garth greeted the two of them with a wide smile as they let themselves in. Dean gave the lab instructor a wave for the both of them, his other hand an anchor between Castiel's shoulder blades.

Castiel's energy was flagging; the night before he'd slept incredibly poorly, even after smoking enough pot to render him virtually insensate. Dean had been there all the while, sitting in the desk chair beside the bed. He'd done his best to soothe Castiel the four or five times he woke up, but it had been a long night nonetheless. Castiel hoped that the coffee he'd been drinking all day would be enough to keep him awake.

This class session was to be one spent working on their assignments without interruptions from lectures or powerpoints, and Professor Harvelle had situated herself in the reading nook near the back of the studio, sitting on the window seat beside the pair of drab armchairs. She'd announced as everyone was arriving that she would be available for consultation should she be needed, but for now appeared absorbed in the thick, dusty art text open in her lap. Castiel wondered if she'd seen his work, and reminded himself that there was no way she hadn't. Even a cursory glance around the studio would have shown her all she needed to see where his painting was concerned. He knew she likely had a wealth of things to say to him about it (not one of them positive) and felt sick to his empty stomach.

Lisa's voice cut through the haze of Castiel's anxiety. "Dean? Can I talk to you for a second?"

Castiel turned and saw Dean's girlfriend standing beside the partition that walled off their space from those of the others. It was something that Castiel had seen her do more than once throughout the few months he'd known her, but today it felt different. She wasn't smiling the way she would have been even a few days prior, though she didn't look displeased. If Castiel had to describe Lisa's expression, he would say she looked tired. It wasn't obvious, but Castiel could read it faintly in the darkness of her eyes, the tension in her lips; she was as worn-down as he was. She didn't spare so much as a
glance for Castiel as she waited for Dean to acknowledge her, which was unlike her.

Dean set his sketchpad and pencil down on his painting table and turned toward Lisa, deferring to her as he waited for her to speak. But she apparently didn't want to discuss whatever it was in front of Castiel, and said curtly, “Let's go outside.”

She didn't wait for Dean to answer before leaving their space and making toward the doors.

“I'll be back soon,” Dean murmured as he passed Castiel by in Lisa's wake.

Castiel watched silently as they left the studio, turning back toward his painting once the doors had clanged shut behind them. He sat down slowly, his hands shaking where he clasped his own knees. The tall, metal stool creaked underneath him as he attempted to adjust until he was comfortable. He wasn't successful.

Charlie startled him when she crossed the studio to greet him a few minutes later, a bright trill of his name the only warning Castiel got before she was standing in front of him. She was wearing a blue and green checkered flannel that complemented her hair nicely, a wide grin on her face. "Hey, Cas," she said as she nudged him with her shoulder, pressing herself into his space without hesitation or thought.

"Hello, Charlie," Castiel said in response. He forced a smile onto his face and hoped he didn't look as tired as he felt.

"This is pretty epic," Charlie said conversationally, gesturing in broad strokes to his large painting.

"Thank you," Castiel said, not believing her in the slightest.

"You know, I think it's good to try new things," Charlie ventured.

Castiel knew she was likely just saying that to comfort him, but he nodded all the same at her words.

"What are you doing for your project?" he asked in an attempt to change the subject.

"More makeup renditions of sexist assholes," she said cheerfully as she gestured enthusiastically with her hands. "This time it's Monet and liquid eyeliners!"

Castiel nodded, "That sounds interesting."

"Anyway, I'm gonna go work, but we should hang out again soon outside class. It's been too long," Charlie said meaningfully.

Castiel realized she expected an answer when she hadn't moved from his side, and said hurriedly, “Of course, it has been. We will have to.”

He had a feeling he wasn't selling his second fake smile of the day, and when Charlie reached out to gently clasp one of his tense shoulders, was proven right.

Her words were a promise. “You can count on it.”

She turned and left to head back to her own cubby.

When Dean and Lisa came back in from the hallway not long after that, neither of them seemed happy. Both wore identical downtrodden expressions, and parted ways in the middle of the studio to head to their respective spaces without saying anything to one another.
Castiel wondered what they had spoken about, but was afraid of what he would discover if he asked.

***

Castiel was perpetually tense.

When he walked across campus to one of his classes; when Dean spoke too loudly without notifying Castiel of his presence; when he passed any of the fraternity houses; when he saw someone with chin-length blonde hair and a muscular build. The tension never left, nor did it abate.

Tuesday and Wednesday passed him by in jumbled masses of color and distantly-heard voices. Castiel ached everywhere, the tightness of his muscles bordering on painful. His head throbbed, and his back locked when he moved too suddenly. Smoking helped, but didn't solve the problem. Both Meg and Dean asked him more than once if he was feeling okay when he winced as he sat down, or moved gingerly to stand or turn, and since then he'd tried harder to hide the pain he was in.

There was always a low-lying fear circling the back of his thoughts that he would run into Drew somewhere on campus, or that he would show up at Castiel's door, smiling.

He dreamt of that very thing almost every night.

In the dreams, Drew laughed at him, reaching out to good-naturedly clap him on the shoulder when Castiel asked him why he had slipped a drug into his drink, or why he hadn't just asked Castiel if he wanted to have sex. Drew never directly answered his queries. He asked Castiel if he was sleeping; he told him he shouldn't have had so much to drink; he asked him if he'd bought condoms and if he liked the way they felt. He never answered anything Castiel asked, though, and he awoke from the dreams sweating and shaking with an anger so intense it brought tears to his eyes. It was a feeling almost foreign to him, and he hated it as much as it was almost shamefully freeing to let the rage course through him, unadulterated for one second, two seconds, three seconds, before he forced it down again. It was growing harder to do so, but he managed.

Castiel didn't see Drew as he went about his day-to-day activities, however, and reminded himself that they hadn't crossed paths often before, it was unlikely that they would now.

The tension remained, as did the seething pit of anger somewhere inside him.

***

On Thursday, Castiel continually fielded calls from what he knew to be Gabriel's number.

He had woken up at a decent time and made himself a piece of toast. He'd answered Dean's text and told him that yes, he was feeling fine, and that Dean should help Bobby out that day. He'd tried to read a dense, philosophical wall of text for his art history class on collective cultural consciousness and put it away after less than an hour. All the while, calls from his brother remained constant and consistent, and he was unable to bring himself to answer a single one.

Around mid-afternoon he decided to leave his phone in his room for a while, and made the short journey across campus and spent almost three hours in the print-making studio near the volleyball courts, working on a woodblock carving due the following Wednesday. Though he dutifully put the time in and made some headway in his design, the project wasn't one his heart was in, and he was distracted and tired. He almost cut his finger with the carving tool he was using as he nodded off where he sat, and tossed the sharp blade away with irritation, watching it as it clattered onto the dusty floor. The last thing he needed was to open another cut on his already scabbed fingertips. He decided then to leave the emptiness of the print-making alcove and go back to his apartment, regardless of the
missed calls he might come home to.

When he checked his phone upon returning he found that his older brother hadn't left him voicemails or text messages, only endless strings of attempted calls. Castiel felt sour irritation and fear bubble like bile in his shrunken stomach at the thought of calling Gabriel back and hearing his laughing voice.

It didn't stop him from wondering what Gabriel was doing, though.

As Castiel made a pot of coffee, he pictured Gabriel doing the same in a school kitchen somewhere in a city hundreds of miles away.

Was he in a class at the culinary institute, icing cakes or oiling sheet pans or dressing pastries? Was he talking to his girlfriend, Kali? Was she as beautiful as her name made her sound? Was Gabriel laughing at something someone had said to him? Was he at home, shoving his shirts into a washer at a laundromat?

Castiel didn't know, and was torn between wanting to change that and to remain ignorant.

What would he even talk to Gabriel about if he answered the phone, anyway? How would they begin to bridge the gap that three years of radio silence had carved, a bitter maw deep and wide?

Gabriel had always had a way of getting Castiel to say things he hadn't planned on, and that was something he didn't think he could bear, not now.

As he and Dean sat together on his bed later that evening, Castiel's phone began to vibrate with yet another phone call from the Chicago area.

“What's up?” Dean asked, glancing at the phone where it buzzed near Castiel's pillow. His freckled skin was dirt-smudged from whatever it was he'd done at the salvage yard with Bobby, and his broad frame sagged slightly where he sat near Castiel. It was after seven, and it was clear he'd had a long day.

"My brother wants to speak to me," Castiel said tiredly to his friend as he shoved the phone beneath his pillow, muffling its insistent vibrations. He had a short visual analysis due in his art history class the following week that he needed to get started on, and had his notebook open in front of him. There was less than half a paragraph written on its crisp page. He'd been having a hard time concentrating over the past two weeks, and it rankled him more as each day passed and the problem seemed to worsen rather than improve. Castiel was accustomed to being able to sit still for hours at a time and get large amounts of academic writing done, but he'd been entirely unsuccessful in that endeavor over the last few days.

"The asshole?" Dean asked, the bristling protectiveness gathering in him at the thought almost visible as he straightened up and looked closely at Castiel.

"No. Gabriel, the one who—" Castiel had to pause there. “He left.”

Dean's lips parted at that, but he didn't say anything immediately, obviously unsure what the best response was.

Castiel moved to the edge of the bed, lowering a hand to the small of his back as he did. It was a gesture that was becoming habitual.
"You're not gonna answer?" Dean asked as he watched Castiel. He had a streak of dirt on one cheek, and Castiel wondered why he hadn't told him so.

Castiel shook his head, closing his eyes as an ache passed behind his eyelids. He grabbed his pipe from the bedside table and lit its half-full bowl of green, taking a deep, fragrant inhale. He felt the pain in his back subside just enough for him to relax somewhat into the pillows behind him, and didn't realize Dean was still staring at him until he opened his eyes again.

"I can't talk to him, not now, Dean," he said quietly.

"Maybe now is the best time, Cas," Dean said. "What's the worst that could—"

Castiel interrupted Dean in a voice sharper than he meant it to be, "He could leave again."

He slowly lay back on the bed with his legs still hanging off its edge, closing his eyes again and imagining the ceiling above him.

"Maybe he wants to tell you he's sorry," Dean said softly.

Castiel thought of John Winchester, slurring his words at the Roadhouse as Dean tried to get him to come home, and knew he wasn't the only one who deserved an apology.

He turned onto his side, taking in the edges of his dresser and bed from the new angle as the affects of the weed set in. Beside him, he heard Dean exhale heavily.

"You have dirt on your face from the yard," was all he said in response.

***

True to her word, Charlie called Castiel early the following day to ask if he wanted to come hang out with her later on in the evening. His first response was to inquire if Dean had been invited as well. Charlie seemed surprised at the question, but hid it well enough.

"Sure, that sounds fun. You want to tell him? I can send him a text, too. I don't know if he works that night."

Castiel sighed, he hadn't so much as thought of that. "You're right. I'll ask if he is."

He ended the call not long after, returning to the email he'd been composing to Naomi where he sat in front of his open laptop. He knew Anna had somewhat explained his reasons for not contacting her, but figured it was best if he sent a message himself. He didn't know when he would feel like speaking directly to his mother again, but knew it wouldn't be any time soon if he had his way.

'Mother, I've been busy with my assignments and forgot to replace my phone when it was first broken. I'm sorry for not telling you sooner.

Sincerely, Castiel.'

Dean, as it turned out, would be able to make it to Charlie's after his shift at the salvage yard ended at seven that evening. Castiel purposefully timed his arrival to coincide with his friend's.

The short walk to Charlie's apartment was cool, a light breeze ruffling Castiel's hair as he made his way across the courtyards and the familiar, winding sidewalks. In his jeans, the small can of mace lay cool and stiff against his skin in the worn cotton sling of his pocket. He periodically reached down to
touch it every other step, as if to reassure himself that it was still there. He knew there was no way it
could have gone anywhere without him feeling it slip out or hearing the crack of it against the
sidewalk, but couldn't seem to stop himself from checking.

It was Castiel's first time in almost three weeks walking across campus by himself so late in the
evening, and by the time he made it to Charlie's door he was regretting saying yes to the outing at all.

He didn't knock immediately, casting a look around the nearby courtyard and wide main street for
Dean, who had texted him only a few minutes earlier to tell him he was close by.

Castiel was both surprised and ashamed at the solace he took in the sight of his friend as he walked
over from where he'd apparently parked the Impala.

"How was your time at the salvage yard?" Castiel asked as they came to stand outside together. He
wondered if he sounded as nervous as he felt.

Dean had showered and re-dressed before coming over, and he smelled of soap and something akin
to patchouli, earthy and dark. His light hair was slicked back with water, his skin almost dewy in the
muted yellow light from beside the door.

"It was fine," Dean murmured as he rapped on Charlie's door. "Nothin' special."

He reached out briefly to touch the small of Castiel's back, as if he sensed the discomfort Castiel felt.

When Charlie emerged from her apartment she smiled widely at the two of them, leaping forward to
wrap both boys in her arms for a few seconds before stepping back and enthusiastically waving them
inside. She was wearing a black shirt with a Storm Trooper emblazoned across the front, and glossy
onyx lipstick.

"It's been too long since we all got together," she exclaimed as she shut the door behind them.
"Seriously, it's been, like, what? Since your birthday at least, right, Dean?" She cast Dean a look that
bordered on blatant curiosity, but covered it quickly with a smile.

Dean nodded, looking somewhat uncomfortable with the casual way Charlie brought up the surprise
party debacle. Charlie gave him a pat on the shoulder, not saying anything else on the subject.

The living room was surprisingly festive-looking when Castiel was able to tear his eyes away from
his friends. Charlie had arranged strings of white lights over the windows and door frames, and little
colored lanterns now hung from the ceiling, looking strangely like floating gems beside the twinkling
new additions. Following Castiel's gaze, Charlie came to stand beside him as he surveyed the
decorations.

“Pretty, huh? I rewatched Firefly last week and might have gotten a little inspired.”

Castiel nodded. “It's lovely.”

"Do you guys want some drinks? I have vodka and orange juice," Charlie offered as she turned to
face both of them again, her black lips turned up in a smile.

"I would, please," Castiel said quickly, wishing already that he'd smoked more before leaving his
apartment. As it was, his high was fading rapidly as he stood in his friend's living room, and he felt
his stomach lurch uncomfortably.

Charlie looked toward Dean, who nodded as well, and retreated to the kitchen to mix all three of
them screwdrivers. She wasn't gone for very long, and when she returned with their drinks less than
five minutes later Castiel immediately took a large swig of his. Dean was less enthusiastic, and took a small sip from his in contrast.

“Alright, bitches. We’re watching Lord of the Rings, it’s been decided. We’re also doing drunk trivia, I have the cards out already,” Charlie said as she pushed them toward the sofa and familiar coffee table a yard or two away.

Dean groaned into his cup as he took a seat. “Which one?” he asked. “Can it at least be the one I like?”

“I bought the booze, so it’s my pick,” Charlie said matter-of-factly.

“Which is?” Dean asked.

Charlie rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Obviously the first one. I gotta see my girl.”

“Pretty sure Galadriel was married,” Dean pointed out. Charlie punched him in the shoulder.

Everything seemed to move too quickly for Castiel to track all of it: the movie was started, Charlie pulled out a deck of green and black trivia cards and begun explaining how they worked, Dean was laughing and pointing at something on the screen. Castiel had knocked back half of his screwdriver in less than twenty minutes, and felt the drowsy pull of tipsiness slowly begin to take the edge off of the fists trapped inside his stomach. He tried to pay attention what all Charlie was saying and the images that flashed across the screen, but found it easier to take sips of his screwdriver.

While Charlie was away mixing the second round of drinks, Dean leaned inward toward Castiel where he sat beside him on the sofa. In the background, the hobbits were making their way through the Mines of Moria.

"You okay?" Dean asked.

Castiel turned to look at him. "Are you asking if I'm going to freak out?"

Dean drew back in surprise, his expression one of dismay and hurt. "No," he said. "Cas, I was just—I wasn't asking that."

"I'm fine," Castiel said as Charlie returned with his and her fresh drinks.

"I should have brought my sweater," Castiel was saying. He knew he sounded drunk, that his words were running together.

Dean was walking beside him as they made their way back to his apartment, and it was an inky, black night that surrounded them as the bleached squares of the sidewalk disappeared under their feet.

"We'll be back soon," Dean murmured as he reached for Castiel, his hand warm where it closed over his arm to steady him.

"I know," Castiel had had a third drink on an empty stomach, and was feeling it keenly now. Charlie hadn't seemed to notice his intoxication, and the night had gone well enough, except Castiel was hyper-aware of how he'd probably looked and sounded. Had he said anything stupid? He couldn’t quite remember. He’d gotten most of the trivia questions wrong since he was unfamiliar with the Lord of the Rings series, but Charlie had told him more than once that she knew he was and that it
was okay. She'd hugged him tightly before they left, and Castiel had closed his eyes and breathed in the smell of her shampoo, of the black gloss on her lips. He liked Charlie, and hoped to god she knew it even if he fucked up every time he tried to interact with people and couldn't say the right things.

"Dean," he said stupidly.

Dean pulled Castiel close, the movement gentle and slow. "What?" he asked.

"I know it was my fault," Castiel whispered. He was grateful to say the words into the warmth of Dean's shoulder rather than the air so carelessly blowing them by.

Dean shook his head, but Castiel continued, "I can't do this, Dean. I'm—I'm so tired," he finished lamely. He'd lost track long ago of how often he'd said some iteration of the sentiment.

"You'll get some sleep soon," Dean placated. "I promise, you'll get to sleep soon."

When they reached Castiel's door and let themselves in, he saw almost immediately that Balthazar had chosen that evening to return to the apartment; he was sitting on the couch in their living room, watching television.

Castiel tripped over the entryway in his surprise at the sight, stumbling obviously and catching himself somewhat clumsily on Dean's shoulder.

Castiel's roommate rolled his eyes, and turned back to his show without acknowledging either him or Dean as they passed between him and the TV set to get to Castiel's room.

Dean closed the door behind them without comment as they entered. Both boys sat and took their shoes off, though Castiel's movements were clumsier than Dean's.

"You want to take a shower before you crash?" Dean asked after Castiel's socks and sneakers were deposited beneath the bed.

Castiel shook his head, suddenly wanting nothing more than to sleep for days or weeks, or perhaps forever.

He climbed into the bed with his shirt and jeans still on. His head spun a little, and he closed his eyes to make it stop. It was only a half-successful endeavor.

He felt the edge of the bed depress as Dean took a seat on it. "You want me on the floor?" he asked Castiel.

"Can you—can you come here?" Castiel asked slowly. He knew he probably sounded pathetic.

His heart was pounding dully in his chest, and he felt a muted panic that Dean would leave before he could touch him, before he could ground himself.

"I'm sorry I drank the third one. I just—I can't...I needed to leave but we couldn't yet and I didn't want to disappoint her," Castiel said. His own voice was thick and difficult on his tongue.

Dean shook his head. "You did good, Cas. It's okay."

“Can you tell me more about when you were little?” Castiel asked as Dean lay down next to him. The heat of his body seeped languidly over the cotton sheets to warm Castiel, followed by the firmness of Dean's calloused hands as they encircled his shoulders. They were very close to one
another, practically nose-to-nose in the rumpled cocoon of Castiel's blankets.

“Let me think of a good one,” Dean said. He rubbed his fingers in random patterns over Castiel's back as he closed his eyes and thought.

When he spoke again, his voice was deliberate, his words painting a clear image that took Castiel away from his bed, away from his room and from Balthazar sneering at the thought of him in the living room.

“Alright. So, this one time I wanted to do somethin' good for Sammy's birthday. He was gonna be seven, and that year was a big one because we'd been in the same town long enough to go to school and everything. So I'm thinking, there's gotta be some way I can get him something awesome. It was a rinky-dink little town, though, and I had a tough time trying...”

Castiel didn't hear the end of the anecdote, so quickly did sleep come as Dean touched him and told him the story of Sam's seventh birthday in Lavernia, Texas.

***

On Saturday, Castiel felt out of his mind with something he didn't understand.

Dean was at work that day, and Castiel fidgeted and paced the apartment until his feet were sore. He tried and failed to do more of his essay. He opened the sides of his fingers with his teeth. He cleaned the immaculate floors of his bathroom with bleach and sat back against the wall breathing in the fumes, light-headed and drowsy. He considered calling Gabriel back, but resisted the urge. God only knew what he would say if he did.

He didn't have the attention span for much of anything, and finally sat motionlessly in his empty living room as the hours passed, as night fell around him and he waited for the dreams that would inevitably come once he finally tried to sleep.

***

It was almost 10 at night on Sunday when Dean came over to Castiel's apartment with his lower lip bleeding, his left eye bruised, and a fine tremor present in his movements. He immediately bypassed Castiel for the kitchen after mumbling a greeting, grabbing a strip of paper towel and wetting it before pressing it to his mouth. His free hand acted as a brace on the edge of the kitchen counter, and Castiel noticed that one of Dean's boots was partially unlaced.

“What happened, Dean?” he asked.

"Dad's been mad at me lately," Dean said with a shrug as he turned to face Castiel. He said the words as if nothing made more sense. The paper towel piece was becoming a light pink as Castiel looked at it.

“Was he drunk?”

Dean laughed bitterly. “Yeah.”

“Was he...angry about something specific?” Castiel inquired warily. He wondered if the other part of his question was legible, the unspoken query as to whether or not Dean had tried to take the booze from his father and indirectly started the altercation.

Dean shook his head too quickly and winced, lifting a hand to his temples to massage them as he closed his eyes for a moment.
"Did it have anything to do with you staying with me so often?" Castiel asked. He hadn't thought of the possibility before, but now it seemed incredibly obvious, and he derided himself for not thinking of it sooner. What gave him the right to take so much of Dean's time, to jeopardize his relationships and complicate his already complicated life? It wasn't as though he provided anything in return.

Dean looked at Castiel for a while, lowering the paper towel from his mouth before he finally answered.

"I, uh...broke up with Lisa this morning. Then I went back to the house for some clothes, and Dad was there. We got into it. I was stupid, he asked where I'd been, and I told him 'cause I was—I don't really know why I did. I didn't think it through, I guess," Dean said.

Castiel blinked. Dean's response was not in any way what he'd been expecting.

"You broke up with Lisa?" Castiel asked slowly. The significance of it set in as he took a slow breath. He lowered his hands to his sides.

He didn't know how he felt as he stood there, staring at Dean. He was full even though he hadn't eaten, sick even though he wasn't feverish. He was muddled and sore and glutted with something he couldn't name, something dark and massive taking hold of him from the inside. The unfathomable shape of it made a home somewhere under his ribs, and it hurt badly.

"I messed up," Dean was saying. Castiel forced himself to pay attention to his words.

"She was pissed we didn't do anything for Valentine's Day. We just...it wasn't gonna work. It—it's better this way, honestly," Dean said, looking anywhere but at Castiel.

On February fourteenth Dean had spent most of the evening at the apartment with him, and Castiel hadn't even considered the date and what Dean could be missing with his girlfriend somewhere else.

"You were with me," he said faintly. "I didn't realize. I...I'm sorry, Dean."

Dean's expression was one of dismay. "You're not the one to be sorry here, Cas."

Castiel had no idea what to say, hyper-conscious of the darkness inside him beginning to claw its way up. He asked instead, “Do you want to study—”

“Are you going to say anything?” Dean interrupted, taking a step forward into Castiel's space. His eyes were wide with something Castiel couldn't identify, and the sloppy, marred red of his lip was almost vulgar against the pale amber of his freckles. Behind him, the blinds on the kitchen window were open, and Castiel saw two people pass in front of it as he stared, both of them laughing at something he wasn't privy to.

“What do you want me to say?” Castiel asked, taking an equal step back from Dean and making contact with the wall as he searched for something to hold onto.

“I want...” Dean paused, the cut on his lip starting to bleed anew. “I want you to be honest, Cas. Tell me how you feel.”

Castiel pressed himself more firmly back against the wall as Dean took another step forward, feeling the imperfections of it through the paint under his fingers. If he'd thought he had no idea what to say earlier, the feeling had been intensified three-fold now. He wanted to push past Dean and shut himself in his room, or to somehow make it so that this conversation had never started in the first place.
He tried to feel relieved that Dean and Lisa had broken up, to tell himself that he was glad Lisa was no longer caught in the middle of their strange situation, but it wasn't gladness that was building to a sharp, painful peak in his chest.

"Dean," he began at last. "I don't...I can't talk about that, not now. Not when I..." His voice caught in his throat and he shook his head. He looked down at the bit of floor that shone between his bare feet.

“What do you want to say?” Dean asked. Castiel could hear him take another step forward. He closed his eyes.

“I don't want to say anything,” Castiel said quietly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“That's not true. How do you feel?” Dean asked again. He was almost directly in Castiel's space now, his breath warm on Castiel's face as he spoke.

“You act like everything's fine when I know it's not, Cas. Can you please just tell me something?”

Castiel was shaking, water welling in his eyes. He pressed his fingers over them with enough force to cause himself pain, bright red and yellow and black blooming behind his eyelids.

“Why are you doing this?” he said when he finally looked back up, meeting Dean's gaze head-on.

“Cause I know you're pretending,” Dean said.

Castiel went still, thinking of the many times he'd held his tongue while Dean did the very same thing. How often had he wanted to say something, and how rarely had he actually done so?

“How is what you're doing any different, Dean?” he demanded. He knew as he said them that the words were likely a mistake.

“What do you mean?” Dean asked.

Castiel scoffed in disbelief at his reaction. “You know exactly what I mean. Like you don't pretend your father doesn't beat the shit out of you every time he has too much to drink. You've been doing it since the day I met you.”

“How do you feel about it?” Dean asked almost immediately. He held his hands out palm-up as he waited for Castiel to answer.

Castiel felt the anger he'd been shoving aside for days bubble up to the surface, ugly and squirming. There were the hours spent restless in bed as he tried to push the dreams of Drew from his mind; there were the slow moments passed in silent, corrosive ire as he contemplated what he could have done differently that night, what he should have done differently. It punched its way up from the many times he had shoved it down, and it was a force of its own.

“He hit you when I was fucking there one time, Dean. I've been acting like I don't know when all I want to do is tell you to stop giving him chances!” Castiel said, taking a step forward of his own.

Dean didn't shrink back, didn't cower, his jaw set and his eyes open. “That's on me, I know,” he said at last.

“You—” Castiel began, gesturing helplessly at Dean's wounds. “You let your father treat you like trash, Dean. You bend over backwards for him, and I don't think he'd bother to do the same for you.”
“I know,” Dean said. “But there's more than that going on here,” he insisted.

“What? Do I have to have _more_ to be angry about?” Castiel asked indignantly, slamming his hand down on the wall still close behind him once, the sting of it radiating up his arm.

Dean shook his head. “I know you are. Talk to me, Cas. I'm not gonna tell you not to be mad, but I know you _are_. Jesus, after what—” he stopped and re-started. “I know you're hurting, bad, and you don't tell me unless you're talkin' in your sleep.”

“You want to know what I'm angry about?” Castiel was aware that he was speaking loudly, almost yelling, and didn't know how long he had been. He felt hot and sick, his skin radiating an uncomfortable heat.

“Yes, Cas, _please_,” Dean said, his hands still out as if in supplication.

Castiel wanted to grab his offered hands and shake them, to wrench Dean forward by them and scream his frustration into his face, but the thought even a second later made him feel awful, as monstrous as the face he was painting on a store-bought canvas.

He tried to speak calmly, forcing himself back against the wall and clutching at it.

“I'm angry that your father has _no_ idea how lucky he is to have you as a son, and that he thinks your art is garbage when it's some of the best I've ever seen.”

Dean nodded, waiting for more, and Castiel gave it to him.

“I'm goddamn sick of my back always hurting, and the fact that I can't do shit anymore without getting tired and stopping halfway through. I—I'm angry that my brother insists on calling me non-stop after he didn't give enough of a fuck to for years,” Castiel continued, knowing he was rapidly losing the battle to speak calmly and evenly. His voice was broken and loud in the silence of the tiny kitchen, a far cry from the normal timbre of his speech.

Dean looked like he was about to cry, and while that very thing had evoked tenderness in Castiel before, today it did not. Today, it broke something in him, and he abandoned the wall again. He reached out to grab at the edge of the kitchen counter as his blood singed like flame through his limbs, through the numb fingertips that clasped the smooth, cool shape of a plate balanced on the rim of the sink.

“My family acts like _I'm_ the traitor, like it's me who deserves to be treated like the fucking prodigal son when I never asked for them to!”

Castiel smashed the plate on the edge of the counter, feeling the cut of one of the shards on his skin but not caring enough to stop. The sound of the glass coming apart was a relief, a song in the strained quiet surrounding his words.

“I tried so hard for so long, and it meant nothing to anyone. I came here and thought things were different, that I found people who saw me for who I am, not who they wanted me to be, but they fucking didn't.” Castiel's throat burned.

“I _knew_ you didn't want to be with Lisa, Dean. I knew it. But did I say it? Did I make you hurt the way—” Castiel cut himself off, unwilling to finish the thought, but Dean shook his head, his hands still out, still searching for him.

“All of it,” Dean whispered.
“The way you hurt me,” Castiel practically spat the words into Dean's face.

Castiel only realized he'd knocked another plate off of the kitchen counter a few feet to his side when the shards of it went everywhere on the dirty floor, the crash and clang of their demise earsplitting.

“I spent so much time trying to tell myself that I mattered, that I deserved to be in your life. I told myself that my family was wrong, and now I know they weren't.”

He was throwing things, now, whatever he could reach. Coffee mugs and plates and cereal bowls and juice glasses, all were thrown without finesse or aim, the delicate glass of them breaking and breaking and breaking as the pale fluorescent light from the ceiling panels filled their pieces like water.

“They told me I was better off at home, that I didn't understand the way things worked. I told them they were wrong, but I—” Castiel faltered, there, for only a moment, before saying the thing that had plagued him for days. “I was weak, and he knew it.”

He'd stopped moving, and one of his hands was bleeding. There were pieces of acrylic and porcelain and dented plastic splayed over the floor, white and red and sky-blue and yellow.

Dean was staring at him, his eyes still red.

“I'm so fucking sorry, Cas,” he said. “None of this is good enough, not for you.”

Castiel didn't realize that he'd at last held his arms out for Dean in return until his friend took the two or three careful steps across the cluttered floor to do as he'd been bidden. He moved carefully, his eyes on Castiel all the while as he carefully took Castiel's injured hand first, clasping it gently as his blood stained their skin.

“You're not weak,” Dean said as he wrapped his arms around Castiel and held him tightly. He cupped the back of Castiel's head with one hand as he'd done before, the other pressed to the center of his aching back.

Castiel had been so angry such a short time ago, and now he just wanted to sleep. The red had burned through him unchecked like brush fire, and he was almost grateful for the blank, scorched quiet of his mind left in its wake. The red was gone, bled out of him like the red pooling on his fingertips in droves, leaving him empty. Though he knew it wouldn't be forever, the brief respite was a relief.

“I don't know what to do,” Castiel said into Dean's neck.

“You don't have to know right now,” Dean said. “I'll help you. We'll make it through this.”

The words were ones Castiel hadn't known he needed to hear until they were said, and he choked on something like a sob as he buried his face in Dean's chest, pressing his nose into the space beside his healing collarbone.

He grabbed fistfuls of Dean's shirt, closing his eyes tightly.

Too tired to do anything else, he let himself be held, relaxing gradually into the strength of Dean's arms, the two of them still surrounded by piles of broken glass.

***

On Monday, Dean came home with Castiel after a studio session spent with Lisa pointedly ignoring
the both of them. Castiel had felt a pang of guilt every time he saw Dean's former girlfriend from across the large space; the one instance she'd turned to the side enough for him to get a good glimpse of her face, he'd seen that her eyes were puffy and red. It was obvious she'd been crying, and she was dressed in a loose shirt and dark blue sweatpants. Castiel had never seen her in attire like that, and felt it safe to assume she wasn't taking the break-up particularly well.

Even Charlie was directly rebuffed when she went to say hello to Lisa, and almost immediately came over to talk to Castiel and Dean, confusion and no small amount of hurt clear on her face as she asked the two of them what had happened. Dean told her he didn't want to talk about it with her right then, only convincing Charlie to go back to her space after promising her more than once that he would call her later in the evening and tell her all that happened since they left her apartment a few days prior. Charlie had insisted on giving them both hugs before leaving, and Castiel hoped that the unease he felt at the touch didn't show on his face. He wanted nothing more than to get in Charlie's good graces again, and did his best to ignore the fact that anyone's touch besides Dean's felt like slime on his skin.

Harvelle was at another conference that day, and Castiel felt relieved beyond description that he still had time before he had no choice but to hear her critiques directly. His portrait was shaping-up, but into exactly what, he had no idea.

When they reached Castiel's apartment, the tension seemed to leech out of both of them as they crossed the threshold into his room. They'd spent more than an hour cleaning broken glass off of the kitchen floor the day before, and Dean had simply stayed over after all was said and done, migrating from the chair to Castiel's bed at some point during the night so that when they woke up, it was together.

Dean cast his things onto the floor beside Castiel's desk as they closed the door behind them. The motion was practiced and familiar after the many times he'd done so over the past two weeks they'd spent mostly with one another.

Castiel sat on the edge of his bed, wondering if he should smoke a bowl or not, though the thought was mostly a formality; he'd likely have loaded and smoked one within the next half-hour to relax himself enough to study. His back was stiff and painful from the time he'd spent in front of his self-portrait, and he wanted nothing more than to feel it loosen incrementally as he took a few hits.

Dean interrupted his ruminations, though, taking a careful seat beside Castiel.

"Cas?" he began cautiously.

"Yes?" Castiel asked, doing his best to focus on his friend. He felt tired and preoccupied, though he'd gotten better sleep the previous night than he had in days.

"I think this room has...I dunno, bad energy, or something," Dean said uncertainly. His lip was scabbed-over, now, and Castiel found himself staring at it as he nodded habitually at Dean's words.

"I didn't think you were a new-age type," Castiel said absently as he reached for his homemade bong and almost-empty baggie of weed. He began to load a fresh bowl for the evening.

"I was thinking, and just hear me out, okay? I know your stuff's here, but, do you think you'd want to come stay with me and Sam at Bobby's? Not forever, I know you'd get sick of us eventually, but just for a while, maybe? I think it might help, and I...I want you with me," Dean said quietly. He was looking intently at Castiel as he waited for an answer.
When Castiel told him yes, Dean smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Suggestions? Criticisms? Complaints? Comments make this all worthwhile =)
By Tuesday evening Castiel had packed a small bag to bring over to Bobby's. It didn't contain much, just enough clothing for a few weeks, a toothbrush, and a razor.

Balthazar had been shut up in his room listening to loud hip-hop earlier in the day, but was nowhere to be seen as Castiel gathered his things and did a final survey of the living room and kitchen. He briefly considered staying until his roommate came back to tell him directly that he'd be living elsewhere for a while, but reminded himself Balthazar had made it clear he had no interest in speaking to him. So, Castiel opted instead to leave a note taped to the fridge with a brief explanation of where he'd be and his number.

As he stowed his bag and laptop in the backseat of his car a few minutes later, Castiel accidentally reopened one of the cuts on his hands from Sunday. He tasted copper and salt when he brought his finger to his mouth.

It had been almost two days since Castiel lost his temper in the kitchen, and the things he'd let slip to Dean preyed on the edges of his thoughts, jumbled together with things Andrew Novak had said or written or perhaps had only implied.

"How you feel is no one else's concern, Castiel."

"Keep your thoughts to yourself."

Castiel shook his father's words from his mind and slammed the car door shut, a nauseous, jittery irritation powering his movements.

He began the short drive to Singer Salvage as the sun began to set.

It was a pleasant day out, and Castiel rolled his window down as he drove up the main road of the college town. The sun's fading light painted the inside of the car a bright, tacky yellow, and beyond the horizon the clouds glowed hot pink and neon orange.

When he made it to the house, Dean was waiting for him on the front porch beside Bobby's old rocking chair. As Castiel pulled into the driveway Dean stepped forward to greet him. His eyes widened noticeably as he drew close enough to notice the damage done to the side of Castiel's car.

"When did this happen, Cas?" Dean asked. He looked as if he'd only just woken up; his shirt was noticeably wrinkled and he had a red mark pressed to the left side of his face.

"A few weeks ago. They didn't leave a note," Castiel said as he let himself out of the car.

Dean bent down to look more closely at the streaks of paint scraped off of the side of the car, at the
indentations and damage to the door handle. He reached a hand out and traced a few of the ugly marks on the surface, then straightened up to peek into the interior through the still-open passenger-side window and test the door handle.

"Y'know, I don't think it's too bad, just looks like shit and won't open," he informed Castiel. "But Bobby and me could probably fix this up for you." He raked a hand through his disheveled hair as he watched Castiel open the door on the opposite side to grab his things.

Castiel felt heat flooding his face, and busied himself adjusting the strap on his bag. "It's—it's fine, Dean. Please don't worry about it."

As if he understood, Dean didn't say anything else about the car. He came around to grab Castiel's books and help him get everything into the house.

The cluttered entryway of Bobby's house was just as it had been the last time he visited. The outdated, floral wallpaper was still slightly bubbled from heatwaves past, the faded brown carpeting was still matted and badly in need of replacement, and the knick-knacks on the coffee table were still mismatched and ugly. The house smelled of dust and ink and expired cooking oil and somehow, just barely, of Dean.

Castiel closed his eyes for a second, breathing it in. From behind him, he could hear the quiet press of Dean's feet on the floor as he came to stand next to Castiel.

"It's good to have you here," Dean said.

That night Dean and Bobby worked together in the small kitchen to make a pot of chicken and dumplings for themselves, Castiel, and Sam, who'd be home soon from Jessica Moore's.

Bobby's little pocket radio was parked on the windowsill of the dining room as he and Dean chopped and pinched and rolled, blasting classic rock so loudly Castiel could hear it from the guestroom down the hall. The bed he'd slept in before had been dressed with fresh sheets, and the same old quilt was draped over its end in a neat, folded square. Castiel hung his clothes in the closet and stowed his jeans and sweatpants in the dresser drawers before placing his computer on the small desk near the window and stacking his textbooks neatly beside it.

The room was still empty-looking, but Castiel reminded himself that he was there now, somewhere. He jumped a little when he heard Bobby's front door open and close as he sat on the bed. Before Castiel could wonder who'd arrived, Sam answered his question as he said gleefully for all to hear, "I'm gonna marry her!"

Dean and Bobby laughed at his exuberance, and Dean responded playfully, "Yeah, if she can put up with your goofy ass longer than another month."

Castiel felt his stomach clench when Sam then asked without missing a beat, "Is Cas here? I saw his car outside."

"He's unpacking, he'll be out soon for dinner," Dean said over the din of the music and Bobby's laughter.

Steeling himself, Castiel took that as his cue to leave the room and go to the kitchen like a polite house guest. When he did, he saw Sam standing by the counter as Dean stirred a large pot with a wooden spoon. Bobby opened a beer with a pop where he stood by the window, and all three of
them turned to look at Castiel as a floorboard creaked conspicuously beneath his feet.

"Hey, Cas!" Sam said with a wide smile as he took two long strides toward him. He seemed taller than he had the last time they'd met, and Castiel shrank back from the other boy without meaning to. His eyes flitted over the broadness of Sam's shoulders and the almost looming spectre of his height.

Castiel realized a second too late what he'd done.

Sam froze where he stood, his arms falling awkwardly to his sides.

"I—I'm sorry, Sam, I—" Castiel began hurriedly, but Bobby cut him off.

"Don't be sorry. Boy's like a dog, doesn't know when to get down," he said unconcernedly as he took a swig of his Miller High Life, giving Sam a disparaging glance.

"I'm sorry, Cas," Sam said seriously, cowed by his surrogate father's words. A blush spread over his angular features.

"It's okay, Sam, really," Castiel said at the same time his stomach gave a loud growl. He looked down at it as if he'd never seen it before at the sound. He hadn't consciously noticed that he was hungry at all.

Dean smiled almost bashfully at him. "It should taste as good as it smells."

When they sat down together to eat, Castiel caught Sam looking at him from across the table over the top of his water glass. He said nothing that wasn't strictly casual table conversation, but it was clear he was curious as to why Castiel had suddenly appeared at the house after weeks of distance.

Bobby, on the other hand, seemed entirely nonplussed by the new arrangement. After everyone had served themselves he turned to Castiel and said, "Dean told me your roommate's been giving y'some trouble, so you'll be stayin' with us for a while. We're happy to have you."

"Thank you," Castiel told him sincerely.

After the meal ended and the table had been cleared, Bobby poured himself a whiskey and took it out onto the porch. He sat there in his usual place as he enjoyed the cool nighttime breeze with a tumbler in hand. Castiel could hear his chair creaking through the door.

Sam bid Castiel and his brother an early goodnight, saying he had homework to do before retreating down the hall. As soon as his brother was out of earshot, Dean said conspiratorially to Castiel, "That means he's gonna go call Jess so they can talk for three hours even though they just saw each other."

"I take it they're getting along well, then?" Castiel asked.

Dean smirked. "You could say that. He's over the moon about her and I think it's mutual."

Castiel nodded. "Sam deserves it."

Dean smiled at Castiel. "Yeah, he does."

They were standing near the archway that separated the kitchen from the living room, the hum of the dishwasher a background to their conversation.

Both Castiel and Dean turned toward the source of the sound when Bobby came back inside a few seconds later, the screen door rattling as it slammed behind him. Castiel took a step back from his friend as he noticed how close they'd been standing to one another. Their arms brushed even as he
tried to distance himself.

Bobby gave them a smile, brandishing his empty cup in their direction as he made his way to the kitchen.

"'Night, boys. Don't stay up too late."

"Goodnight, Mr. Singer," Castiel said before turning to look down the darkened hallway to his left. It was suddenly a million miles long before him.

"Do you want me to—" Dean began.

"It's fine," Castiel said for the second time that day. "I'm fine. Goodnight, Dean. Thank you for—" his voice caught in his throat. "Thank you for letting me stay here. I'm grateful."

It was enough that he'd broken his own dishes and upset Sam.

Castiel turned and walked briskly back to the guest room before Dean could say anything else to him, shutting himself in and locking the door behind him.

He changed into sweatpants and an old, soft undershirt to sleep in before crawling beneath the cool, sky-blue sheets. He exhaled slowly as the muscles of his strained back were gradually stretched flat over the soft expanse of the mattress. He wished he'd smoked more before making the drive earlier. Everything was simultaneously both too loud and too quiet as he lay there. He didn't bother pretending he'd be turning off the bedside lamp, and stared up at the popcorn ceiling as the small clock beside him ticked off the slow seconds.

It was almost two hours after Sam had finally gone to bed that Castiel found himself wandering down the hall into the living room where he knew Dean lay on the couch.

His friend was already awake and sitting up expectantly when Castiel came to stand beside the sofa. His grass-green eyes were visible even in the scant moonlight.

"Cas?" Dean whispered.

"I can't sleep," Castiel said.

Castiel sensed Dean's arms reaching for him before he felt them.

When Dean tugged him down onto the sofa, Castiel went without complaint. He breathed in the familiar scent of him, of soap and skin and the acrid hint of turpentine and smoke. Dean was warm against Castiel's skin, his hands soft on Castiel's back as he held them both together, almost flush against one another on the narrow sofa.

Dean pressed his nose to the crown of Castiel's head. His breath painted the slope of Castiel's nose, the bow of his upper lip.

"What are you afraid of, Cas?" he asked.

Castiel didn't answer, a wave of shame hitting him so forcefully that all he was able to bring himself to do was pull Dean even closer. He closed his eyes.

Dean didn't ask a second time.

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The next few days passed quickly in the Singer household.

Over the past couple of weeks Castiel and Dean had developed the habit of waking up at more or less the same time, something that immediately came in handy living together at Bobby's. In the mornings the two of them were usually washed-up and dressed well before seven, and invariably found that Bobby had made a large pot of coffee for the house and done them the courtesy of leaving the loaf of Wonder Bread out by the prehistoric toaster while he readied the shop for a day's business. After that, it was customary for either Dean or Bobby to run Sam over to the nearby high school around seven-forty five. When it was Dean's turn, Castiel would duck out the back door with his baggy and water bottle bong to smoke a little in the side yard as he waited for his friend to return, and when it was Bobby's turn Dean bid the old man goodbye and drove himself and Castiel to campus for the day.

Dean always knew when Castiel was stoned. It was in the way his eyes softened as he greeted him, how he leaned over the Impala's front console to hold the door open for him when Castiel fumbled stupidly with the handle, how he reached for Castiel's shoulder or the aching small of his back to steady him when he stumbled. Dean didn't make snide comments on the smell that clung to Castiel's hair, or poke fun at the redness of his eyes or the slow way he chose his words when he was high. He only did as he'd always done and asked Castiel if he was hungry or tired or wanted to sit down. Castiel had been accepting those kindnesses more and more often.

His and Dean's schedules didn't always match up when they had only the Impala to get to and from Bobby's, but Castiel hadn't yet felt inconvenienced while waiting for Dean's classes to end. For his part, he'd found it mostly a good thing where his study habits were concerned since he more often than not had no choice but to spend time in the studio adding to his painting as he waited, or in the library working on assignments for other classes. As it was, his painting was nearing completion and he was slowly catching up on the readings and assignments he'd been lagging behind on.

Though not everything about this arrangement was positive. Twice already, Castiel had ended up shutting himself in a bathroom stall and calling Dean with a whispered request for his friend to come get him. The sheer volume of other people in the library was easily enough to push Castiel into the throes of an anxiety attack if he wasn't adequately prepared for it, though he never blamed Dean for this.

Lisa completely ignored them without exception the one or two times Castiel and Dean encountered her in the studio, the hurt she felt obvious in her actions. Castiel could tell Dean regretted the way they'd ended things if the way he looked at his feet when she was around was any indication. But Dean said nothing of the oddity of the situation, instead throwing himself into the painting he was currently working on for their seminar. His was a large abstraction of cadmium blue and various shades of green. It completely dwarfed his and Castiel's cubby, taller than even the oversized canvas Castiel had bought at Michael's. Dean's usually bold lines had been swapped for delicate, almost translucent washes of color layered one on top of another, and the high-gloss finish he tended to use was forgone in favor of a soft, matte look. Castiel wasn't sure what all he felt when he looked at the painting, but it was a sight to behold in its enormity and scope.

When he was back at the house, Castiel found that Bobby was as friendly as he'd ever been toward him. He didn't seem to mind that suddenly Dean's friend was using his tiny hall bathroom to shower in the mornings, or that he was now one of the people seated around his dinner table in the evenings. He took it all in stride, telling Castiel at least twice to let him know if he needed anything else to feel at home, even though it was clear Castiel had no intention of asking anything more of Bobby. On the contrary, Castiel insisted on giving Bobby extra money to take with him to the grocery store, which the older man accepted easily enough.
Sam adjusted to Castiel's presence in the house with the sort of ease only people his age have the capability of embodying, and before long made Castiel forget almost entirely the awkwardness and guilt he'd felt over their initial encounter Tuesday night. By Wednesday, Sam was coming straight to the guest room once Dean or Bobby had picked him up from school, sitting himself on the edge of the bed and asking Castiel about this or that, how his day had been and if he wanted anything particular for dinner. It was all mostly superficial small-talk, though Castiel quickly learned he was easily overstimulated by Sam's eagerness when he spoke and discomfited by his habit of positioning himself very closely to whoever he was speaking to. He did his best not to let his discomfort show, though, and soon realized that smoking before Sam came home and cornered him was the best way to get through their conversations. Dean was well-aware Castiel was often incredibly stoned when he and his brother spoke, though he never did either the discourtesy of pointing it out. Sam so far had been none the wiser, and Castiel hoped it remained that way.

John, however, Castiel quickly found, was not so welcoming.

He'd come over once in the past three days, and regarded Castiel with poorly-concealed suspicion when he learned that he was staying with Bobby and his sons. While John hadn't gone so far as to directly comment on how the situation made him feel, Dean had obviously guessed and was clearly uncomfortable during their interactions over the short visit. Sam and Dean's father hadn't said anything rude to Castiel as they stood somewhat tensely in the kitchen, but it'd been a relief nonetheless when it was finally late enough for Dean to ask if John wanted a ride back.

When he'd returned Dean had apologized to Castiel, and that night they'd lain pressed together in the guest room bed. Castiel had kept his hand on Dean's chest as he dozed, feeling the steady rise and fall of him, unable to sleep himself as he thought of the way John had looked at his son when he realized Castiel had wormed his way into Dean's life even further.

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On Friday, Castiel drove himself to campus around six in the evening to spend a few hours with Meg, who'd been pressuring him to come and hang out with her since the weekend before. Dean had been asked by Bobby to provide a little extra help at the shop that night, and he bid Castiel goodbye from the yard as he watched him pull out of the driveway. Castiel waved uncertainly back. He didn't know how it made him feel that Dean had actually stopped working for a moment, just to make sure he backed into the street safely.

When he'd arrived at the university and parked in the lot near Meg's apartment, the walk to her door only took a few minutes. Castiel barely had a chance to rap his knuckles on its drab surface before it was flung open before him to reveal an impetuous-looking Meg. Her right hand was on her hip while her left was already beckoning him impatiently inside with a mascara wand. Her dark hair was in a messy bun on the top of her head, and she was dressed in only a bright orange sports bra, jeans, and a pair of mismatched socks.

"A little birdie told me you're shacking up with Winchester. Wanna tell me why?" she asked Castiel as she closed the door behind him.

"What do you mean, shacking up?" Castiel felt his stomach lurch at the insinuation. He'd read it in books, but hadn't expected to ever hear it aimed at himself.

Meg's ski-slope nose wrinkled as she laughed. "You have a perfectly good room, but want to sleep in Dean's? C'mon, I think you know what I'm getting at."

She poked him in the arm.
Castiel opened his mouth to respond, and Meg quickly raised her hands as if in surrender. "Hey, don't give me that. I'm happy for you, just use protection." She nudged Castiel with her shoulder as she passed him, leading the way to her room.

"I—I've been having issues with Balthazar—" Castiel began as he followed her through the doorway.

Meg's next words caught him off-guard. "Fine, fine. I get it. You're as pure as the driven snow and all that jazz. Spare me, Clarence."

She had a smile in her voice, and Castiel knew she meant nothing by it, but her words froze him where he stood, ice tamped down into the bellows of his lungs.

Castiel felt sick.

"Cas? Castiel?"

Meg's hand was cool on the side of his face, and Castiel pulled away from her touch with more force than necessary, feeling his back hit the wall of her room. The cold handle of one of Meg's decorative daggers dug into his shoulder.

Like Sam, Meg looked surprised and slightly hurt at Castiel's reaction, backing away from him.

"Sorry," she said. "You just...I don't know. You okay? You look like you're about to puke."

Castiel shook his head, but Meg wasn't convinced. "Go to the bathroom if you are," she demanded.

"I'm fine," Castiel mumbled. "Where's Gilda?" he asked in what was likely a transparent attempt to change the subject.

"She'll be back soon, she's hanging out with Charlie," Meg said as she sat on the edge of her bed. She dipped the mascara applicator back into its black tube and picked up a small mirror, holding in front of her face as she applied a layer of dark brown gunk to her lashes.

"Are you going somewhere?" Castiel asked as he took a seat beside her. He watched as she lined her eyes with a black pencil.

"Can't a girl wear some makeup without it being a special occasion?" Meg said defensively as she reached up to free her wavy hair from its tie before getting up to rummage through her closet. When Castiel didn't answer she said, "Andy'll be over soon, and he says he has some to sell. I figure you probably need it."

"I don't have any cash on me," Castiel said from where he still sat on the bed.

Meg scoffed at him from inside the closet, a shirt in each hand as she looked from one to the other. "He knows you're good for it, man. Just get him back later."

Castiel nodded without agreeing, smoothing his hands nervously over his denim-clad thighs. He was sweating again, he could feel it sticking his shirt to the hot skin beneath his collar. He slid a finger under the neck of his shirt, lifting it away from his body as he closed his eyes tightly for a moment. He breathed in through his nose, focusing on the smell of Meg beside him and the faded orchid of her fabric softener.
I think you know what I'm getting at.

Castiel swallowed back a surge of bile.

When he opened his eyes again, Meg was staring at him. She was wearing a loose black t-shirt, now.

"You...wanna smoke a little before he comes? I have some," she said, her voice uncertain for the first time in Castiel's memory. He nodded, taking the pipe when she held it out to him. He inhaled deeply after he'd lit the bowl-piece.

True to Meg's words, Andy arrived at the apartment within the next ten minutes.

He let himself in without knocking, and entered the room with a small smile. He greeted their hostess with a kiss pressed to the round apple of her cheek and a brief hug. Meg grinned a little to herself at the contact, and Castiel understood then the care she'd taken with her makeup and clothes.

When Andy looked at him, Castiel found that he couldn't read the other boy's expression. Andy stopped just short of the bed where Castiel sat, as if debating whether or not it was alright to sit beside him the way he would've without a thought less than a month before.

Castiel barely remembered what he'd said to Andy the last time they saw one another, if he'd even said anything at all. All he could recall now was that he'd walked away from Andy and Anselm's feeling like he'd made a mistake.

"Hey, Cas," Andy said at last as he apparently made a decision and took a careful seat on the edge of the bed. His voice was soft, just the slightest hint of awkwardness laced through his words.

"Hello, Andy," Castiel said, dragging his damp palms over his jeans again.

Meg threw herself down unconcernedly beside Andy, reaching over him to grab her pipe from Castiel. Either she didn't notice the uneasiness between her friends or she didn't care, but she made no attempt to fill the silence, and soon the room was instead filled with smoke.

Andy and Meg were in a happy world of their own soon enough, and Castiel preferred it that way as he sat silently beside them. He lay back on Meg's bed, thinking of white sheets and clouds and the crisp, eggshell pages of books, lineless and smooth. He thought of dandelion seeds in perfect white spheres. He thought of pearls on strings, and the unbroken half-moons of pretty, clean fingernails.

"You doin' okay?" Andy asked him an hour or so later when Meg had left the room to grab sodas and chips.

Castiel couldn't bring himself to look into Andy's eyes when he turned his head to answer. Andy was staring down at Castiel where he was still flat on his back beside him, his perpetually-sleepy eyes red and half-lidded.

"I'm..." Castiel paused. "I'm feeling better."

It wasn't the truth, but Castiel didn't have the energy to lie more effectively.

Andy said nothing more, and soon Meg had returned, declaring it time to load another bowl.

As he drifted slowly to sleep later that night, Castiel thought of snow, cold and perfect and beautiful beneath imaginary moonlight.
Castiel ran into none other than Professor Moseley Saturday afternoon.

He was making his way from the Fine Arts Building to Charlie's apartment, where he'd been planning to spend an hour or two with his friend. Considering it was a beautiful sunlit weekend, Castiel briefly wondered what his former teacher was doing on campus when he saw her, then figured she'd likely come from hosting extra office hours.

When she spotted him headed toward her on the sidewalk, Professor Moseley gave Castiel a smile, lifting a hand to wave him over. Her dark hair was pulled back from her face with a tortoiseshell headband today, and she looked more relaxed than she had the last time he'd interacted with her in the classroom.

"Castiel," she greeted cheerily as they came to stand side-by-side just shy of the university gymnasium. She smelled of cherry blossoms and looked genuinely glad to see him. Castiel could feel the sun bright on the back of his neck, a degree away from sweltering in the thick of the Texas midday heat. He shifted his weight from one foot to another in an attempt to hide the awkwardness he felt standing there. He gave her what he hoped looked like a true smile. His hands were clenched by his sides.

"Professor Moseley," Castiel said with an incline of his head.

Seeing her made Castiel think of the last lecture of hers he'd attended. It had been only a little over a month ago, but looking at her now, all-too aware of how much had changed in that time, it felt more like a few years had passed since Castiel dropped the class.

He wondered if Drew was doing well in the course, then, absurdly, if he was making good grades on his essay responses and offering insightful answers when Professor Moseley called on him in class.

Castiel cast a furtive glance around the surrounding area at the thought, taking in the tall buildings and the green stalks of grass wavering quaintly in the warm breeze. His campus looked like a postcard, and he felt suddenly cold as he stood there. The colors of the day ran together into a muddied sepia the longer he tried to remember what he'd been looking for in the first place.

He didn't notice that Professor Moseley had responded to him until he felt her lightly tap him on the shoulder.

"...been missing you in my class the past few weeks, but I understand that it's better for you this way," she said. "Sometimes life gets the best of us, doesn't it?"

She made a sweeping hand motion that encompassed the concrete path before them and the stone architecture beyond, as if it was their encumbrance on the landscape she was referring to.

He nodded. "It...it certainly does."

"Well, perhaps you'll take another class of mine sometime in the academic future," Professor Moseley was saying brightly as she adjusted her purse where it was slung over her shoulder. "You have a good day now, Castiel."

Professor Moseley gave him another smile, and began to walk away from where he was still staring vacantly in her direction, his timid feet anchoring him to the sticky warmth of the sidewalk.

"I didn't want to," Castiel blurted to her retreating back.
Professor Moseley turned to face him again, then. "Pardon?" she asked.

For a horrifying second, Castiel wasn't sure what exactly he'd been referencing. He struggled silently to rectify the situation as Professor Moseley stood there, clearly awaiting an answer.

He clarified hurriedly, "I didn't want to drop your class. I'm sorry."

She nodded slowly, though she didn't appear entirely convinced by his fumbling explanation. Her brown eyes were narrowed slightly, now, her lips pursed as she looked at him longer than anyone had in months other than Dean.

"Well, I'll be seeing you soon, Castiel. You be sure of that," she said at last.

The sun framed her silhouette as she walked away from Castiel the second time.

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On Sunday Dean announced he'd be making dinner that night, and made a quick trip to the store to get fresh ingredients around four in the afternoon. He asked Castiel if he wanted to go along for the ride, but he declined Dean's invitation, stoned and inert where he sprawled over the guestroom bed with a book for his art history class open in front of him.

Dean returned twenty minutes later, and over the next few hours Castiel's high gradually faded as the bright smell of fresh herbs doused in oil and the salty, yellow smell of cooking chicken grew stronger. It wafted down the hallway to reach him where he still hadn't moved from the bed.

Castiel tilted his head back and closed his eyes at the thought of fixing himself a plate of whatever it was Dean was making, realizing he was actually hungry.

“Bobby, will you go pick Dad up? I know he hasn't eaten today.” Dean's voice carried from the living room as he spoke to the older man, and Castiel sat up at the words, rubbing his fingers over his sleep-swollen eyes. He somewhat clumsily reached for his phone where it lay a few inches away from him on the wrinkled comforter, swiping the lock screen to the side to find that it was almost seven-thirty. He must have fallen asleep at some point; the last time he'd checked it had been just after six.

The front door closed loudly as Castiel swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and he stood up and stretched carefully. He'd been half-sitting, half-lying in the same position slowly working his way through a few chapters for longer than he'd kept track of. He held his breath as he raised his arms over his head, hearing a snap somewhere in his lower back.

Outside his window night was falling, and Castiel shrugged out of his hoodie and into his last clean button-down before silencing his phone and leaving it on the charger. He paused as he heard Sam and Dean speaking to one another a few feet ahead, motionless where he'd been about to enter the den from the darkness of the hall.

“Who gives a shit if Dad hasn't eaten?” Sam was asking with badly-disguised annoyance.

“I do,” Dean said sharply to his brother. “I spent three hours making this goddamn meal, and if I want him to have some, he will. You suck it up.”

“I just don't...whatever,” Sam grumbled. Then, “...you bought beer, didn't you?”

Dean exhaled slowly, and Castiel knew with a sickening certainty that he didn't want to hear the answer. He quickly took the last few steps forward into the foyer.
“Hello, Sam, Dean,” he greeted the brothers, watching with a sinking feeling in the center of his chest as Sam gave him a strained smile.

“Hey, Cas. Dad's headed over, and then it'll be time to eat,” the youngest Winchester said, his voice too loud in the tense silence of the room.

“I see,” Castiel responded. “I...I look forward to it.”

Dean didn't look Castiel directly in the face as he ushered him and Sam to the kitchen after that.

Bobby soon arrived back at the house with John in tow, and they were all sitting down together at the long table to eat a few minutes after eight. Sam had taken a seat across from Dean and Castiel, and Bobby and John each occupied one of the table ends.

Outside, it had become a cool and pleasant night. Whenever Castiel chanced a look out the window he periodically saw the yellow flickers of fireflies as they fluttered by beyond the dusty glass panes, their glowing tails like fire in the darkness.

John Winchester looked hungover and smelled like two day-old body odor. Castiel could tell that Sam was doing his best not to say anything to his father, if the tight set of his mouth was any indication. John's gray-streaked brown hair was uncombed, he had deep circles under the eyes that looked so remarkably like his sons', and he was wearing a sweat-stained wife-beater underneath a torn mechanic's shirt. The frayed, blue tag on the breast read Robert. If the Robert who'd once owned the shirt was the same as the man sitting on the other side of the table, Castiel wasn't sure, and no one clarified over the course of the meal.

Castiel could tell John was taking advantage of the fact that Bobby would likely give him a ride back to the house after dinner ended; he'd just opened his second beer of the evening and showed no signs of cutting himself off any time soon.

Bobby had turned the kitchen and living room lights off before taking his seat, leaving the dining room illuminated only by the old, fogged glass fixture hanging above the table. Its pink-tinted light was soft and almost ambient as it glinted off of the full water glasses and the white rims of the plates in front of each dinner guest.

Castiel wondered if Bobby had turned the lights off for more than atmosphere as John took a long pull of his Bud Lite and Sam shot an irritated look at his brother from across their place settings.

It felt almost indecently quiet in the absence of the usual selection of party rock and classic ballads streaming from the crackling radio speaker. After bringing everything to the table from the kitchen, Dean suggested rather fumblingly that they help themselves while the food was still hot. Soon, the sound of forks and knives scraping over porcelain filled the small space, and Castiel stared down at the piece of chicken on his plate next to a mound of colorful mixed vegetables. It looked like a picture from a magazine and smelled delicious.

John was already shoveling food into his mouth by the overfilled forkful, doing so too quickly to savor the tastes and textures of the mound of food he was consuming.

Dean had a strange, sad smile on his face as he watched his father.

Castiel found that his appetite was gone again, and made himself look away.

In a clear attempt to fill the cramped silence, Sam set his fork down with emphasis a few minutes
after he'd eaten a little and began to speak. “I've been working on my senior project for my physics
class.”

Dean and Bobby looked up almost immediately to focus on Sam as John shot him a blase glance.

“How's that goin', Sammy?” Dean asked. “Been a while since you updated us.”

Bobby mmhm'd in agreement and John said nothing.

“Well, it's actually going pretty good now. We're almost done, and Jess' been getting the details
ironed out while I work on the model where we have it in the school basement...”

Sam spoke animatedly about the large model he and his team were building with twine and plywood
in-between bites of what Dean had made. Throughout his spiel, Bobby and Dean regularly
interrupted him to offer their input or make some sort of joke at his expense. John said close to
nothing about his youngest son's project or his older son's cooking, focused more on the liquid still
left in his beer bottle.

Castiel spent most of his meal looking mutely from one person to another where they all sat around
him, wondering if the weakly lighthearted feel of the evening would remain. The conversation was
starting to peter off since Sam's project had been all but discussed and guffawed into oblivion, and a
restlessness was slowly seeping in from the quiet corners of the old house.

Sam leaned forward and began to help himself to seconds from the serving dishes still on the table in
the midst of the burgeoning silence, and John chose that moment to speak for the first time that
evening.

"Save some for the rest of us, will you, Sammy?"

Sam cleared his throat and paused as he turned to look at Dean. "Should I? I didn't—"

Bobby shook his head before Sam could continue, a strained look his face as he looked toward John.
"He's just givin' you a hard time, son. There's more than enough. Cas, you want any more?"

When he looked at his plate Castiel was surprised to find that it was almost empty, and noticed that
he was still clutching a fork in one hand. He felt a distant flash of relief. He had no memory of eating
most of his dinner, but it appeared he had. Castiel set his fork down on the table, folding his napkin
and tucking it under the rim of the plate shortly after. Dean watched as he did, an approving
expression on his face alongside the barest hint of a blush.

"I'm stuffed. Thank you for doing this, Dean,” Castiel said. He met the luminous green of Dean's
eyes as he complimented him.

Dean smiled almost shyly at Castiel's words, looking down at his own empty plate instead of
responding. His blonde lashes cast shadows onto cheekbones flushed pink under the soft light, and
Castiel found himself unable to look away.

For the past few weeks Castiel had been by Dean's side as often as he'd been alone, and he'd looked
at him from every angle, side, and vantage point. He'd been held and touched and soothed by him,
and yet it was in this strange, crowded moment over two empty plates that he appreciated anew how
beautiful Dean was.

From the end of the table, John Winchester let out a noise that sounded something like a cough. The
small smile slipped from Dean's face as easily as it had come.
Castiel felt doused with cold water as he remembered where they were and turned away too quickly, his head throbbing with the movement.

Dean cleared his throat, his back stick-straight as he looked at his father. "You want any more, Dad?" he asked.

John shook his head, lifting his beer to his lips without comment.

Castiel felt some of the anger he thought he'd gotten rid of in his kitchen days before rise in him again, and he stood up from the table to take his plate to the kitchen with shaking hands.

After Bobby had left to drive John home, Castiel and Dean stood together in front of the deep metal sink doing dishes, their hands submerged in hot, soapy water as they scrubbed at the plates and glasses. Jess had picked up Sam up ten or so minutes before so that he could spend the remainder of his evening with her, and Dean and Castiel were the only two present in the house.

Without introduction Castiel turned to his friend and said, “Dean, I've been thinking.”

Dean quickly gave him his full attention. “Yeah?”

“I...I think I need to be able to hurt someone if they mean to hurt me first,” Castiel said slowly. The words were almost deafening in the relative quiet of the kitchen, and Castiel was painfully aware of the way Dean was looking at him, now. He'd stopped what he was doing when Castiel spoke, the watery *thwump* of the serving platter he'd been cleaning falling back into the sink the only sound that passed between them for a few tense minutes.

"You mean, like...self-defense?” Dean asked haltingly.

Castiel nodded.

"I know enough to show you some pointers, probably. Nothin' professional, though,” Dean assented after a minute or so of additional silence. “Are you sure you want to?”

“Yes,” Castiel said.

"When did you want to...uh, start?” Dean asked Castiel, one still-wet hand coming to rest on the edge of the counter.

"Tomorrow."

Dean bit his lower lip, his eyes full of doubt. But he agreed.

“Okay.”

***

"When you strike, you gotta brace yourself, and you have to put your thumb...here, or you'll hurt yourself,” Dean explained as he took Castiel's right hand in both of his. He positioned it in the formation he'd suggested, the callused tips of his fingers as rough as his touch itself was easy.

"Like this, okay?" Dean said, looking to Castiel for affirmation as he let go.

Castiel nodded, examining the way his thumb fit behind his forefingers in the ball of his fist and
attempting to commit the look and feel of it to memory.

He and Dean were standing in an unattached garage a few yards out to the east side of the house and salvage yard. At this very moment the place was almost entirely empty, but it usually housed Bobby's project cars when he had them (though it had been a few years since his last undertaking), Dean had explained as he let them in ten minutes or so ago.

The walls of the vacant structure were a drab tan color beneath a fine layer of dust, and the floor was pockmarked gray cement. There were rows of industrial-grade fluorescent lights above their heads, but more than a few of the bulbs were in need of replacement, and Castiel could see the dark shapes of dead insects trapped in their plastic casings. Beyond where they stood, Castiel could make out an arrangement not unlike what Bobby had also let accumulate in his living room. He spotted rows of disorganized shelves crammed with boxes of screws and tools and outdated instruction manuals and cans of paint and old, dusty car parts haphazardly grouped here and there in the cobweb-ridden corners. It smelled of carcinogens left over from a poorly-ventilated paint job.

A cool draft passed through the small space, and Castiel shivered at the chill of it on his skin, bringing his hand to his chest as he looked at Dean. They were both wearing faded pairs of basketball shorts and baggy t-shirts that Dean had retrieved for them from his closet, and it was almost nine o’clock on a Monday night.

"I don't think we'll get there today, though," Dean said as he took a step back from Castiel. "First, I want to show you how to get out of a hold."

"A hold?" Castiel repeated.

Dean nodded. "Yeah. Like, if someone grabs you, you want to be able to get out of it. Right?"

Castiel felt like the moisture had been drained from his throat at the thought, and nodded his head in lieu of speaking.

"Okay. Wrap a hand around my neck and hold it there," Dean said as he unfussily turned his back to Castiel. His stance was relaxed as he waited for him to do as he'd asked.

Castiel hesitated at the sight before him, at the fine, blonde hairs on the back of Dean's neck, the piece of lint stuck to the tag inside his t-shirt collar.

The sound of the wind buffeting the metal covering outside the garage was unpleasantly loud, and Castiel could still hear the thudding of his own heart in spite of it as he at last reached out and loosely wrapped an arm around Dean's neck.

Dean's hair smelled freshly-washed where the side of his head was now pressed to Castiel's cheek. Once his elbow was loosely secured over Dean's throat Castiel stilled where he was. He felt unsure of what to do.

“Okay, good,” Dean murmured as he lifted a hand and gently clasped the curve of Castiel's biceps, anchoring him there. His touch was warm.

"You're gonna want to lift both arms, hard, and twist under and around."

Dean gave Castiel only a few seconds to absorb what he'd said before he swiftly threw his arms forward and up. He loosened Castiel's already-lax hold and quickly extricated himself without much resistance. In a second or two he'd backed a foot or so away and was facing Castiel again. There was no sign in the evenness of his breaths or the steadiness of his bearing that he'd been affected at all by
"It's your turn," Dean said. "I'm gonna put you in a really loose hold, and you're gonna shove me off the way I told you. Okay? You ready?" He was looking at Castiel intently, his full lips parted as he waited for his response.

"Yes, I—yes," Castiel managed, flexing his tingling fingertips.

He'd asked Dean to do this with him, but had no idea if it was even something he should be doing now that they were here, staring at one another.

As if sensing his misgivings, Dean came a little closer, extending a hand to touch Castiel's shoulder. When he spoke, his voice was earnest.

"If you want to stop, you tell me and we will. Okay? Please, just...tell me if you want to stop."

"I want to try," Castiel said with more conviction.

"Then turn around, Cas," Dean said softly.

It was easier said than done, and Castiel clenched his hands in front of his belly as he turned and faced the far wall. He exhaled shakily as Dean's arm came to wrap itself around his neck.

He'd been right, it was a loose hold he had on Castiel. But he was less still than successful at doing what Dean had so easily, and struggled to free himself. It took him twice as long as it had taken Dean.

The second time was easier.

So was the third time, as well as the fourth and fifth.

But by the sixth, the feeling of Dean's arms crossing over his neck and chest were beginning to make Castiel feel claustrophobic. He took deep, almost desperate breaths as he threw his arms up and worked to free himself each time, feeling as though he was swimming. The air was dense and old and humid on Castiel's skin. He was sweating now, the shirt Dean had lent him sticking to his skin. He was obviously the less stronger of the two, and had gone through the drill multiple times before he was able to ascertain something resembling a strategy.

Each time they began again, Dean tightened his hold on Castiel's torso, and had started switching the placement of his arms when they got into position, finding new ways to test Castiel's limited capabilities.

By the time he'd stopped counting the number of attempts they'd run through, Castiel was using all of his scant reserves of strength to twist out of the holds Dean continued to come up with. He made himself focus on a stray drop of blue paint dried onto a rusted can a few feet ahead of him as he moved, trying not to think, just to do. He was breathing heavily, his chest tightening with every labored inhale.

He had to work through this, he reminded himself. He couldn't ask Dean to stop and let him go and defeat the purpose of the exercise. If someone tried to overpower him in any environment, Castiel had to be able to free himself from them, had to be able to get himself out.

But what if he was drugged again?

Castiel thought of the shot glass Drew had handed him, of the clear liquid that he'd thrown back
without a second's hesitation.

It hadn't mattered that he didn't know any self-defense methods then. He'd been almost completely immobilized and he'd as good as done it to himself.

Castiel shut his eyes tightly as he tried to twist away from both the thought and Dean's grasp, reaching out blindly in the garage. He could still see the blue paint and the light glinting off the shot glass, even with his eyes closed.

“No,” he panted.

It had tasted strangely sweet, and he should have known then that something wasn't quite right—

"Cas, we're stopping." Dean released Castiel and turned him around so that they were facing one another, loosely taking hold of his shoulders.

"No," Castiel said again, grabbing at Dean's forearms. "Again," he said. “Again.”

"Cas, I think we've done enough for today," Dean said, his eyes wide as he slid his hands down Castiel's arms to the joints of his wrists and then to his trembling hands, closing them into fists inside the warm, firm cages of his fingers.

"Let's sit down," Dean said.

"I should be able to do it," Castiel ignored Dean, his breath coming in sharp jabs. "I shouldn't have to stop."

"It's not the easiest thing to get the hang of, and you were doing good," Dean assured him. "Are you okay?"

Castiel wiped his brow with the back of his hand. Sweat was dripping down his face and into his open eyes, stinging and hot. The garage was spinning around him, and he didn't ask Dean to let go when his friend gripped him, guiding him carefully to a sitting position on the cool concrete floor.

"Cas, if this upsets you, we don't have to do this ever again," Dean said quietly once they were both situated, their backs against one of the sets of shelves.

"I need to know how to do this," Castiel said, his voice stiff.

"You're learning," Dean answered matter-of-factly. He was sweating too now, Castiel noticed.

"Not quickly enough," Castiel said as he covered his face with his hands and slipped forward until his head was almost between his knees. His breaths were gradually slowing.

"What's wrong, Cas?" Dean asked, leaning in to better catch Castiel's words.

Castiel thought of his father, sitting alone at the long dining room table in the house he and his siblings had grown up in, his hands clenched in front of him and his mouth a thin, hard line as he stared into the distance. He thought of the many things Andrew Novak had taken to his grave, of the thoughts he'd never shared with his own family.

“Cas?” Dean prompted.

Dean had told him that he wanted honesty, and it was almost ten at night in a detached garage.

Dean had said they would get through this, and Castiel felt dull and hollowed-out with weariness.
"I'm fucked up," Castiel said without delicacy into the space between his thighs. He was shaking, the sweat on his skin cooling, now.

“You're upset,” Dean corrected from beside him.

“I don't know myself, not anymore,” Castiel said numbly.

"Cas..." Dean said, a hand coming up to rest between Castiel's shoulder blades.

Castiel struggled to find the correct words, tugging at his overlong hair until it hurt as he stared at the bit of dirty floor between his feet.

"My first night here, you asked me what I was afraid of," he ventured at last.

Dean was silent, waiting for Castiel to continue.

“I'm afraid of a lot of things, Dean. I'm afraid all the time,” Castiel whispered. “When you asked me, that night, I was afraid of waking up with him, but right now I'm afraid of it happening again, and of losing more of...of me.”

It felt like stripping naked in front of Dean, admitting this to him. It felt like tearing his heart from its home behind his ribs and pinning it to his sleeve.

Castiel slowly straightened from where he'd been crouched, though he was still unable to look at Dean as he continued to speak, not knowing what he would see.

"I dream of it happening again, in a different place, a different time of year, but the thing itself, that part's the same. That's the part I know I can't live through again. I don't know how to talk about it. I wasn't raised knowing how to talk about anything,” Castiel said bitterly.

"Cas,” Dean said quietly. “You're not alone. I'm scared, too.”

“What are you scared of?” Castiel asked, finally turning to face his friend again.

“A lot,” Dean muttered with a strained, caustic hitch of laughter. “That Sam'll figure out I'm not shit, that I'll never do anything with my art, that Dad'll drink too much to puke up one day. It's normal to be scared, Cas. But I'm not gonna let you be scared alone.”

Dean closed the distance between them, moving until he and Castiel were touching, pressed almost cheek-to-cheek. "And I will never let someone hurt you like that again," he said, his voice graver than Castiel had ever heard it. “I'd rather fucking die.”

Dean's words made a vow as they sat there together on the floor of the garage, and Castiel let his head fall until his friend's shoulder caught it.

“I wish you'd protect yourself, too,” Castiel said as Dean wrapped his arms around him.

“I got us,” Dean promised. “I got both of us.”

***

Castiel spent most of Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday in the painting studio finalizing the last details of the huge self-portrait overtaking his side of the cubby.

It was nearing completion, now, the caricature of his own, angular features dark and defined and unmercifully planar. The eyes were a bright, pale blue, so light in color that they appeared blind or
filmed with cataracts, and the mouth was an angry slash of red and black across the pale expanse of Castiel's jaw; it was almost Joker-like in its width and brightness, and looked like blood beneath the right light.

It was beautiful, terrible, and the most dramatic work that Castiel had ever produced.

"Will you be doing more like this?"

Professor Harvelle's voice startled Castiel where he stood motionlessly in front of his painting, a paintbrush held loosely in one hand as he slowly turned to face her. He did his best to breathe out slowly as his back showed its reluctance to comply with the movement. He was stoned, or he knew he would have winced at the flash of pain he felt.

His painting professor's honey-colored hair was pulled back into a messy bun and she was wearing a paint-stained smock that smelled strongly of mineral spirits. She must have only just been working on a painting of her own in her office before she decided to come and survey the class's works, Castiel thought to himself as he looked at her, trying to remember what exactly she'd said to him.

As if she knew, Harvelle repeated the question, one hand on her cocked hip and the other already coming forward to grasp the edge of the painting, pulling herself a few steps inward to examine the work more closely.

"I don't know," Castiel told his teacher honestly as he followed her keen gaze where it darted over the huge face before her—eyes, mouth, eyes again, ears, nose, eyes for the third time—

Harvelle looked at Castiel, and then back at the painting, a furrow etched down the center of her brow. "Is it supposed to be similar to Freud's work?" she asked.

Castiel shook his head. "It's not supposed to be like anything."

"It has to have an artistic purpose. It can't just be frightening," Harvelle said with concern.

Castiel nodded, "I know. It will. I'm working on the nuances of my theory, but it's sound."

He was lying.

Harvelle only nodded once at his explanation, her expression something unreadable as she stood beside him.

"I'll wait for your explanation, Castiel," she said simply before letting herself out, a ponderous look still present on her face.

Castiel sat back down in front of his painting with a slow sigh, jumping a little when his phone vibrated in his back pocket.

Pulling it out to check it, he was relieved when he was that it was only a text from Sam: Deans asleep in ur room, just lyk for when u come back

Castiel was grateful that Spring break was beginning in just a few days. He knew he wasn't the only one who needed the rest.

***

When Naomi Novak called Castiel on Friday morning to inquire as to whether or not he'd be visiting for Spring break, his response was a flat no that he gave without hesitation.
"Excuse me?" Naomi asked, her tone one of shock and dismay.

Castiel could see his mother in his mind's eye, her lipsticked mouth in an 'o' of displeasure, her ice-blue eyes wide. She was probably gripping the back of an expensively upholstered chair, angry that her youngest son was defying her yet again since he'd gone to get his liberal arts education.

"No," Castiel repeated calmly. "I'll be staying here for the break, Mother. Everything is—" he paused there, then, "It's too much right now. I...I'm sorry."

He hung up before she could argue, not sure if he felt better or worse for having at least told his mother some semblance of the truth.

It was more than he could say for Anna, Gabriel, and Michael, all of whom had tried and failed to talk to him more than once over the last week and a half.

Castiel knew well that he couldn't run from his family much longer, but kept deleting Anna's text messages, anyway.

***

Castiel awoke shortly after sunrise Saturday morning, opening his eyes to see Dean curled into his side as he dozed in the guest bed next to him. He looked almost peaceful there, his freckled features smooth and his full lips relaxed as one of his hands still lay entangled in the blanket wrapped around Castiel's waist.

Castiel was trembling.

He'd just surfaced from a dream in which he'd been pinned beneath Drew, the other boy holding him down as he had at the party, his hands forceful as he shoved handfuls of condoms into Castiel's denim pockets, the collar of his shirt, the palms of his hands.

The corners of the plastic squares had dug into Castiel's skin, and he'd asked, "Why bother? You didn't."

"Do you know what God's favorite color is?" Drew asked him, and Castiel had known the answer, had known it with certainty.

Castiel pushed lank, sweaty hair back from his forehead, creeping out of the bed and to the nearby window, parting the curtains just enough to take a peek outside. It was still pale and cool out, the newly-risen sun hiding behind a wreath of gray-white clouds.

Wanting Dean to get as much sleep as he needed, Castiel carefully turned around and exited the room, closing the door behind him as quietly as he could before making his way to the kitchen to tidy up before Bobby got out of bed to begin his weekend.

It was the first day of Spring Break, and Castiel scoured plates with scalding hot water as he thought of snow, stepped into and pissed on and mixed carelessly with dirt.

White.

White.
Lucian Freud is a well-known figure painter, I am not referencing the shitty, sexist psychoanalyst in that last section. Lol.
Questions? Comments? Thoughts?
Please feel free to inbox me on Tumblr or comment here, you truly have no idea how much your comments keep me going =)
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

I hope you enjoy this chapter! We find out a few things about Castiel's family, and of course, there are always more feelings =)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I have a license, Dean. I've had one since last Christmas, in case you forgot," Sam said sullenly from the backseat of the Impala late Sunday afternoon. He’d been polite enough to give Castiel the passenger seat without any prodding from his brother.

Castiel and Dean had spent most of the day with Sam, running him to a doctor's appointment at the clinic by the H&R Block before making a trip to the HEB to restock Bobby's pantry. Now they were driving back to Singer Salvage and the time on Castiel's phone read 4:02pm.

It had been hot and humid out as the three of them ran their errands in town, and Castiel found himself almost missing the cool sting of the short, southern winter as he shifted uncomfortably against the sticky leather seat. He wiped the back of his neck before he could soak the collar of his shirt through with sweat. Apparently having seen, Dean reached a hand over Castiel and worked the hand crank to roll the passenger-side window down, letting some air circulate through the car’s cabin. Castiel murmured a word of thanks, closing his eyes as the cool draft hit his face and neck.

"Sammy, only Dad 'n' me are allowed to drive Baby," Dean said to Sam after both of his hands were on the wheel once more. He spared his brother a rueful smile before turning his attention back to the road ahead.

"You're ridiculous," Sam mumbled, crossing his arms and letting out a huff of a breath that lifted the long strands of his bangs from his forehead. Dean laughed softly beside Castiel. The sound was almost lost in the guitar chords of the song on the radio and the low hum of the engine.

After the car was parked in Bobby's drive a few minutes later, the three of them quickly got out and started to gather the sacks of groceries from the trunk to take inside. Bobby’s car was gone from its usual spot while he visited an old friend a town over, and the yard was usually closed on Sundays; the first weekend of Spring Break was no exception.

Castiel exhaled gratefully as they crossed the threshold into the entryway. He’d been more than ready to retreat back into the companionable silence of the Singer household since only an hour or so into their day. The sweat molding his shirt to his back wasn’t solely a result of the warm weather, and the inside of his mouth had been sour with the taste of bile for hours.

"One day you'll have a car of your own, and then you won't give a damn that I didn't let you drive this one," Dean was promising Sam as he held the front door open with the arm not laden with groceries.

"Whatever," Sam shot back as he entered the air-conditioned sanctuary of the living room.

Dean sighed audibly as he closed the door behind them.
"Such a drama queen," he said to Castiel with a smirk.

From the kitchen, Castiel heard Sam slam what sounded like the jar of pickles they’d purchased down onto the counter, clearly having heard.

"Proving my point!" Dean called as he walked ahead to join his brother.

Castiel didn’t realize he was laughing at their display until he heard himself doing so. He touched a hand to his mouth in surprise.

“Cas, you want a soda?” Dean asked from the other room.

“Yes, thank you,” Castiel responded as he lowered his hand and made to join his friends.

"He doesn't know it yet, but Bobby and I've been saving up to get him a used car since last September," Dean told Castiel an hour or so later as they sat together on the couch. Bobby’s TV was on in front of them, a re-run of Friends playing, and Sam was in his room down the hall.

"That's wonderful, Dean," Castiel said, imagining the look of surprise that would cross Sam’s face when Dean and Bobby presented him with whatever they chose.

"It's gonna be a graduation present, so don't say anything to him," Dean instructed conspiratorially, a small smile on his face. He was fiddling dreamily with the hem of his torn AC/DC t-shirt. "He’s been needin’ one for a few years, but we never had the money to get him anything good ‘til a while ago, when I sold a piece I finished to some office in Austin.”

“Did you really?” Castiel asked. “You’ve never mentioned it.”

Dean nodded, pink tinge ting his cheeks. “Wasn’t anything special, this lady just wanted some art to hang in her waiting room, bought it off me for a couple hundred sophomore year. It was enough to actually start saving. Would have had to use it to pay the hospital bills if Bobby wasn’t helpin’ me out, though.”

By the end, Dean’s full mouth was turned downward, his brow furrowed as he resumed picking at his shirt.

“I won’t say a word to him, I promise. I’m sure he’ll love it,” Castiel said quickly, something cold and heavy clenching in his chest at the look on Dean’s face.

Dean's shoulder was warm where it was pressed almost flat against Castiel’s own, the weight of him comforting the way no one else's was.

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean mumbled, clearing his throat as he scratched the back of his neck in a gesture all-too familiar to Castiel now. In front of them, the laugh track of the old sitcom suddenly erupted to an obnoxious pitch, and they both looked back at the TV again.

***

Monday, Meg decided that she wanted to see Castiel and invited herself over after texting him repeatedly until he sent her directions to Bobby's. Though he told Meg there wasn’t much to do at the house, she left no room for argument and texted that she was leaving immediately.

When Meg appeared as if by magic on the doorstep of Bobby’s house less than half an hour later, it
was almost two in the afternoon. It was another exceedingly hot day out. Almost as soon as he’d opened the door Castiel felt a blast of warm air buffet the exposed skin of his face and arms. She was wearing a pair of heavy black boots and bright pink lipstick, and smiled widely as she practically launched herself at Castiel. She wrapped her arms around him and crushed him to her chest, one of her hands splayed firmly over the tops of his shoulder blades. Her hair was heavy and sun-warmed where it fell over his shoulders as she held him, and Castiel closed his eyes and inhaled slowly through his nose, willing himself not to pull away. If Meg noticed his discomfort she said nothing of it, though she released him quickly enough. She adjusted her bag where it hung off of her shoulder as she took a step back.

“Heya, Clarence.”

"I, uh...I'm not sure there's much to do here," Castiel said doubtfully; he’d texted her as much and it hadn’t deterred her, so he wasn’t sure why he’d bothered saying so again as Meg swept past him into the house. As she hung her bag on one of the brass hooks screwed into the wall, Bobby emerged from the kitchen holding a sandwich. He paused for a second when he saw that Castiel had company. An amused smile played at the corners of his mouth as he approached the two of them.

"Hey, Cas. Who's this?" Bobby asked.

"This is Meg, she's—"

"I'm his best friend," Meg interrupted Castiel to announce. She self-assuredly held out a hand to greet Sam and Dean’s surrogate guardian.

Bobby nodded and shook Meg’s hand, the specter of a laugh on the edges of his voice. "Hey there, Meg. I’m Bobby and I run the Salvage yard out back. Always happy to meet any friends of Cas’s. You two feel free to eat whatever's in the fridge for lunch. Dean’s making dinner when he comes back in a few hours."

Meg thanked him, and Bobby bid them good day before finishing the walk back to his bedroom to eat his lunch. Once they’d heard the click of his door closing behind him, Meg turned to face Castiel.

"Don't worry, I won't be here that long. I doubt Dean'd want me eating his cooking, anyway," she said matter-of-factly.

Castiel wasn't sure she was wrong, and didn’t try to convince her otherwise.

When he showed her his room a few minutes later Castiel closed the door behind them, sitting somewhat nervously on the small, threadbare rug beside the bed. Beyond the window, the hottest part of the day made sunlight swell bright and heavy through the glass. Warm, dusty beams of gold rolled lazily through the spaces that separated Castiel from his friend.

"So, what's up, Clarence? Nice digs you got here. I bet Balthazar's missing you, though," Meg said as she sat cross-legged a few feet away from Castiel on the floor. She cast a curious look around the little space after she’d situated herself. Castiel followed her eyes as they took in the poems and quotes he’d transcribed from his favorite authors onto crinkled pieces of paper tacked to the walls, the sweater draped over the back of the chair in front of the desk, the pairs of worn shoes in a neat row beside the closet door.

"It's...I like it here," Castiel said as he folded his hands in his lap. "I haven't heard from Balthazar since I left, and I think we're both happier this way."

He didn’t know if he was correct in saying so, but found he didn't care. He made his monthly utility
payments online as he had the entirety of the academic year, and hadn't attempted to contact Balthazar since his departure. In fact, he'd spared only a thought or two for his roommate in the weeks he'd been living with Sam, Dean and Bobby. He figured the indifference was likely mutual.

"Where's your 'friend'?” Meg used air quotes to refer to Dean, a sly smile on her face.

"Dean's working right now," Castiel responded without bothering to comment on Meg’s obvious double entendre. "He offered to help one of Bobby's friends out with a truck on his property, and he won't be back until later tonight."

Meg nodded. "Cool. Who's the old guy, by the way?"

Castiel knew Dean would have been beside himself had he heard Meg refer to Bobby in such a way, but kept the observation to himself.

"His name’s Robert Singer. Sam’s lived with him for a few years, and Dean spends most of his nights here, now, though he still stays with his father one or two days a week. Bobby...I suppose he's like an uncle to them,” Castiel said, noticing as he spoke how little he actually knew of the man who’d agreed to let him live in his house.

"He's very kind," he said almost as an afterthought, more to himself than Meg.

"He seems nice," Meg assented. She shrugged out of the hoodie she was wearing and tossed it over her shoulder without bothering to see where it landed. "I've missed running into you on campus, though, I gotta be honest."

Castiel sighed with mock-exasperation. "As I remember, you were more likely to let yourself in unannounced than run into me when we walked to class."

Meg winked exaggeratedly. "That's why you like me so much."

"How's Andy?" Castiel asked, bringing his legs up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them.

Meg looked surprised by the inquiry, but answered promptly all the same. It was clear she’d recently spoken to their mutual friend. "He's fine. Why don't you ask him yourself? Last I checked you knew where he lived."

"I've been busy lately," Castiel said, looking down at a loose thread in the carpet. "I...I haven't had the time."

Meg's eyes narrowed at the words. “He asked about you, too, you know. Said he thought he’d pissed you off. Did he?"

Castiel shook his head without looking at her. “Of course not.”

“Then why’d he ask?”

Castiel huffed out an irritated breath. He regretted having asked about Andy at all. “I don’t know, Meg. Sometimes I just...I come off as cold or...or...distant, when the truth is I’m not good at talking to people.”

“You were talking to Andy just fine a month ago,” Meg needled.

Castiel began to pull at the thread on the rug.

Without warning, Meg shuffled forward a few inches on the floor toward Castiel.
"If something was wrong, you'd tell me, right?" she asked. The levity her voice had conveyed just seconds earlier was gone.

The change in atmosphere was almost palpable. Castiel looked anywhere but directly at the girl now only a few inches away from him on the worn rug.

Meg reached out toward Castiel when he didn't answer. Her small hand was hot on skin that turned clammy as she clasped his forearm. He forced himself not to pull back from the touch the same way he’d wanted to when she hugged him.

"Castiel?" she asked, jarring him the way she always did when she used his proper name.

Don’t move. Don’t talk. Don’t move. Don’t talk—

"Cas?"

Castiel closed his eyes, feeling her hand tighten on his arm.

“You sound like an old lady on oxygen. What’s wrong?” Meg demanded.

"Meg…I can't," Castiel said carefully.

"But something is?" Meg probed doggedly. Her hand constricted around Castiel's arm to such an extent that when he looked down he could see a thin ring of white around where her fingers dug into him. Castiel tried to figure out what color Meg’s nails were as he stared absently down at them. He was unsure if they were an iridescent green, a faded turquoise, perhaps an ugly purple. As if his thoughts had been broadcast, Meg’s glittering grip on him tightened still further.

"Talk to me, man."

It was then that Castiel at last wrenched his arm away, shuddering at the thought of telling her what had happened at the frat house, how Drew had felt on his skin. He had no idea if she would even believe him at all, and if she did he didn’t know who she would side with.

He’d taken the shots. He’d gone upstairs willingly. He’d asked for another drink.

At times Castiel wasn’t sure who he blamed more, Drew or himself.

"I can’t," Castiel repeated. His voice cracked.

"Well…I'm here, if you decide you can," Meg said slowly.

"I know," Castiel said tiredly. "I know. But I don’t want to. Please, just...just leave it alone."

Meg sat back on her haunches, still looking at him intently.

"Let's head to the back and smoke," Castiel suggested after they’d spent a few quiet minutes sitting together that way. "Bobby will be done eating soon."

As they passed her pipe back and forth in the side yard smoke crept in delicate tendrils up into the cornflower-blue of the sky from where they stood together. Castiel sensed that Meg wanted to barrage him with questions until he gave in and confided in her.

But she didn't, and less than an hour later she was gone.

***
Tuesday, Dean and Bobby had a laundry list of tasks that needed doing in the salvage yard. They worked a long, dragging shift that ate up almost the entirety of the fourth day of the break. Sam was in town with his friends and Jess, and Castiel had decided early-on that he’d spend the day catching up on his readings and completing his stalled assignments.

He’d picked a good time to do so. It was almost completely silent in the house around him as the hours crept by, with no oldies rock playing or the television blaring the way it would have been had either of the Winchesters been in. Castiel sat in his room with his textbooks and journals fanned out around him. He read, wrote, analyzed and contextualized until his eyes stung and his temples felt tender and bruised.

He left his room only a few times throughout the day, once to use the bathroom and again to eat a piece of bread smeared with peanut butter in the kitchen when he felt his already-tenuous concentration starting to wane.

Just outside the house, if Castiel took a cautious peek through the dirty window beside the back door, he caught glimpses of Bobby and Dean as they completed the tasks necessary to keep the salvage yard up and running. The cheerful spring sun was bright on their backs.

Though Castiel didn’t think much of it, he was aware that he left his room more often to catch sight of Dean than he did to grab a glass of water or relieve himself.

When Castiel felt himself being carefully shaken awake where he’d slumped onto his side, he sat up so quickly he almost collided with whoever was gently grasping his shoulders. For a moment Castiel didn’t know where he was. The room smelled unfamiliar and one of his arms was asleep where he’d apparently been lying on it. He tried to clumsily back away until he saw that it was Dean hovering over him, his hair wet as if he’d just showered.

"Hey, Cas," Dean murmured as he straightened back up, releasing Castiel’s arms. He looked tired, but not troubled. There was a lightness to his expression Castiel had only seen there a few times over the course of their friendship.

"Hello, Dean," he said. "What time is it?

"Just after six," Dean said. "I was actually gonna go on a walk, figured I’d ask if you wanted to come along. I know you’ve been in here all day."

He and Dean had taken two or three walks together since their self-defense session a week prior. They usually did so later in the evening to avoid the few, young families who lived in Bobby’s neighborhood and had a penchant for taking their toddlers out during the day. At that very moment Castiel didn’t want to leave the familiar safety of his room at Bobby’s. But he didn’t want Dean to worry, and knew he inevitably would if Castiel turned down the invitation. So, he nodded as he slowly stretched where he was still seated on the bed.

Castiel was sore from how long he’d been sleeping in the awkward position Dean found him in. As he stood and got up, he reached down to touch the small of his own back. He was so used to its perpetual stiffness and discomfort now that he barely noticed when a spark of pain raced up the length of his spine and he stumbled.

But, as Castiel was coming to learn from living with him, few things escaped Dean’s notice, and he covered Castiel’s hand with his own where it was still cupped over his back, steadying him. Castiel exhaled slowly, letting his head fall forward until it rested lightly on the solid anchor Dean's shoulder.
made. He smelled like soap and deodorant and sunlight.

"Is it bad today?" Dean asked quietly.

"Where did you want to walk?" Castiel ignored the question.

Dean didn’t ask again, and a few minutes later found the two of them making their way down the narrow street behind Bobby’s house. The setting sun cast long, slate-gray shadows onto the faded tar of the street that stretched out before them. Faintly, Castiel could hear the sound of cicadas chirping.

"Have any plans for the rest of the break?" Dean asked as they took a left down Homer street a few yards up.

Castiel shook his head, He felt an unwelcome pang of guilt at the thought of how his mother had sounded before he hung up on her. "I...I guess I thought I’d keep trying to catch up on my studies," he said. "I'm still behind."

Dean nodded. "As fun as that sounds, I was wondering if you’d want to hang out with Charlie and me tomorrow night. We're gonna go see whatever's playing at the dollar theater after we get some food in the forum. Did you, uh...want to come with?"

Castiel stopped and turned to look at the other boy. He felt something like dread as he pictured being surrounded by dozens of people in a pitch-black theater. As if he knew what Castiel was thinking, Dean said hurriedly, "It shouldn't be too busy. It's the little theater near the edge of town, and if we pick something random I doubt it'll even be close to a full house. It’s cool if you don’t want to, though, I just thought maybe—"

A loud and sudden noise to their left cut him off, and both Castiel and Dean quickly turned to look for the source of the sound. Neither of them were expecting it when they saw a small calico cat dash out from behind an overturned trashcan like it had been spooked. The feline eyed the two of them warily where they now stood in her path.

Castiel took a good look at the cat, slowing to a complete stop in front of her. She was handsome, with bright blue eyes and prettily-shaped spots of orange, black and white evenly distributed over her long-haired coat. She had a diamond-shaped blot of black covering half of her delicate, pink nose, and the very tip of her left ear was missing. She looked like she needed a good meal or three, but appeared well-groomed.

"She's pretty skittish," Dean said faintly to Castiel, clearly trying not to startle the calico. "I can never get her to give me the time of day when I see her."

The cat held Castiel's gaze confidently. Her posture was almost regal as she continued to sit there in front of them, her small head canted to one side as if waiting for them to answer a question she’d asked.

When Castiel slowly slid into a crouch before her and extended his hand, he did without the expectation that she would come to him and without consciously orchestrating the movement. However, when the cat began to do just that, Castiel found himself holding his breath as she leisurely crossed the few feet of distance between them. She took each small step lightly, flittingly, as if waiting for Castiel to lurch forward or attempt to scoop her up in his arms. But he did neither, and behind him, Dean didn't move.

Castiel couldn’t remember the last time he’d interacted with a cat or dog, and found himself trying to parse out the myriad shades of blue present in the calico’s large eyes, wondering how common it was
for cats to have eyes so bright and multifaceted.

She pushed her face into Castiel’s hand with a low mewl, and he heard Dean let out a quiet gasp.

Soon, Castiel was petting the cat steadily, marveling at how silky her fur felt between his fingers as she came still closer. Her captivating eyes closed as she rubbed her soft face over Castiel's knee, and he ran his hands down her thin sides, wondering why she was letting him pet her at all.

"She's never let me pet her," Dean said with a laugh. "Looks like you got yourself a friend, Cas."

Castiel felt an unexpected sense of contentment as she began to purr.

"I'll go with you tomorrow night, Dean," he said without looking back at his friend, carefully pulling the cat to his chest.

***

The following day, Castiel awoke next to Dean in the guest room from a dream in which he’d been chased through the darkness by an unseen predator. He’d felt hungry hands and teeth swiping at his legs, the vulnerable expanse of his Achilles’ tendons. Dean knew, somehow, and told Castiel to run himself a shower while he made them toast and coffee.

The shower didn’t wash away the remnants of the nightmare, however. Neither did milky coffee or Sam’s terrible puns or a few hours of mindless television.

Dean said nothing when Castiel excused himself periodically to the back yard with his pipe and stash in hand. He only reminded him once that they’d be meeting Charlie at around six that evening and asked if he had any preference to where they went out to eat.

It wouldn’t be all that different from their trips to the store, Castiel told himself as he smoked a bowl. It would simply be darker, filled with people he couldn’t see while he was expected to watch some movie and keep track of who was saying what on the screen—

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to, Cas,” Dean said after Castiel’s second trip out to the side-yard. “If you want, we can just order in and have Charlie come over instead.”

“Dean…” Castiel began, guilt bringing a flush to his cheeks. “Thank you for offering, but I can’t hide inside forever.”

“Maybe not forever, but you could today,” Dean said firmly. His green eyes were thoughtful.

While Castiel wanted nothing more than to stay at the house with his friends, he knew it wouldn’t be fair to ask it of them. He shook his head with as much finality as he could summon.

Dean didn’t suggest they stay inside a second time.

When he and Dean left Bobby’s to meet Charlie at the restaurant they’d chosen (an independently-owned Italian place) it was around five thirty, and by the time they arrived at the eatery it was only a quarter to six.

Castiel spotted Charlie sitting on one of the bench seats in the vestibule waiting for them as Dean parked the Impala. Her face broke into a wide grin when she caught sight of the two of them through the transparent double doors. She was wearing a Gears of War t-shirt and a bright red headband that clashed tackily with her hair, and somehow still managed to look elegant as she gave them both a quick hug.
“Happy Spring Break, bitches! You been enjoying yours?”

Dean answered for both of them as they walked over to the hostess’s podium.

Castiel’s day-long buzz was faded enough that he felt a surge of nausea at the sight of the sizable dinner rush. He tried to focus on Dean and Charlie or trivial details here and there in the restaurant as they made their way farther inside. Sixties big-band music was wafting from small speakers mounted in the corners of the ceiling, and Charlie had to practically shout at the hostess to ensure the woman took her name down correctly. It was a quaint little place, Castiel observed as they waited for a table to open. Walls that had undoubtedly once been plain were painted with red-brick patterning and curlicues of sunny green ivy coils. What would have been pointless art-marks were theatrically emphasized with bold lines and punchy colors. The tables were draped with green and white linens and accessorized with lit candles.

When they’d been seated a few minutes later at a table near the back, Charlie ordered them all glasses of the house white before they’d so much as looked at their menus. She insisted it was a wine they had to try.

“If I have to drive your ass home tonight, you owe me,” Dean was saying next to Castiel. His voice was a small, familiar foothold in the prattle of the dinner crowd.

Castiel heard Charlie laugh as he smoothed his hands over the table cloth before him, flattening any creases he felt beneath his palms and wishing he was somewhere quieter.

He gratefully accepted the glass of wine his friend had ordered when it was delivered. The alcohol made its sharp, white way down his throat as he took a large sip.

He breathed in slowly as he set the glass back down on the table with more care than necessary. From close behind him, someone laughed shrilly, and Castiel’s stomach flipped unpleasantly at the sound. He took another sip of wine, trying to focus on Charlie’s voice as she talked at length about the latest campaign she was heading in the fictional land of Moon Door. She insisted that she needed her handmaiden back, and Dean just as emphatically told her that he would never again be wearing a dress. As he continued to nurse his wine, Castiel gradually grew content to listen silently to Dean and Charlie’s practiced, easy banter.

When the waitress came to take their orders a few minutes later, he selected the first thing he saw on the menu. He doubted heartily he’d have an opinion of anything he tasted, anyway.

The food arrived twenty minutes and one wine refill later, and Castiel was feeling the effects of the chardonnay as he took a curious bite of the pasta he’d blindly chosen. He was surprised when he enjoyed the taste of the bright green pesto and sundried tomatoes. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d willingly eaten anything that wasn’t Dean’s cooking the past few weeks, and furthermore, the last time he’d liked it.

“That’s fine. Thank you, Dean,” Castiel said quietly. Though he knew the wine was helping dull his anxiety, so was being in close proximity to Charlie and Dean. The restaurant, while still filled with loud people and just this-side of overcrowded, had faded partially into the background for Castiel. His friends and their running narratives provided an excellent distraction.

By the time he’d finished his second glass of wine and half of his pasta it was almost seven thirty, and the server was bringing them the check to split.
"On to the movies!" Charlie exclaimed. They stood in unison and began the short walk to the parking lot so they could head to the nearby movie theater.

The place was mostly empty when they arrived less than fifteen minutes later, as Dean had assured him it would be. The undersized building was one Castiel had never been to in the few months he’d been living in the small town, and looked outdated and timeworn the way many other places in the area did. It was in need of renovation, repair, and a new coat of paint.

Once they’d taken a look at the list of movies showing that evening, they easily enough settled on watching a children's film called *Inside Out*. Castiel hadn't so much as heard of it, but Charlie had apparently seen more than once. Castiel slid his money under the ticket window to the clerk after Dean and Charlie went before him, hoping the movie wasn’t overly long.

"You'll love it, Cas. I promise," Charlie said assertively as she pulled him and Dean into the darkness of the theater after they gave their tickets to the usher in the lobby.

Once they were inside and their seats chosen, Castiel struggled to get comfortable in his red, overstuffed chair. He was sandwiched snugly between Dean and Charlie in a low center row, but when the movie began to play ten minutes later he still hadn't managed to settle in. If anything, the previews had only served to make him more uneasy. Castiel couldn’t remember the last time he’d gone to the movies, and if he’d felt as uncomfortable then as he did now.

He fidgeted unconsciously in his seat as the dim lights faded to black completely, trying to forget about the other people surrounding them in the theater without success. Castiel could hear their fellow movie-goers breathing, could hear the low, slinking sounds of them rubbing their hands together and the dull, watery crunch of the ice in their cups sloshing around as they took sips of their drinks. The residual dregs of his earlier high chased at the edges of the many noises, trying and failing to find a rhythm or pattern in the random scuffs and mumbles and scrapes. The sour aftertaste of the wine was heavy on his tongue, now. Castiel tried to focus on the soundtrack and dialogue of the movie itself, but felt almost stifled by the amount of minutiae he'd have to first filter out to do so. Why was it so loud in a mostly empty theater, anyway—

When Dean took Castiel’s hand where it lay flat on the armrest, his eyes flew open. He almost pulled away out of habit.

He turned to look at the other boy, seeing only the faint outline of Dean’s features in the white light of the tall screen. Dean wasn’t looking at the movie playing, he was staring back at Castiel as if he’d expected his reaction.

“Dean,” Castiel whispered. He looked down at where their hands were still intertwined and then back up at his friend.

“It’s just us here,” Dean said quietly. He wasn’t stroking the back of Castiel’s hand or moving his fingers, he’d simply laced their hands together and left them that way. He felt warm against Castiel, the skin of his palm and fingertips soft.

Breathing in little by little, Castiel turned to face the screen again.

There was a sandy-haired girl on the screen, and she was crying, Castiel saw now. Why? He’d been so distracted he hadn’t been following along. Shaking his head as if to reset an eight-ball, Castiel leaned forward slightly. He tried to listen only to the words the characters on the screen were saying, not to everyone around him and the noises they accidentally made when they so much as shifted in their seats.
Though he was only partially successful and felt he still missed more than one crucial aspect of the movie’s plot, Castiel managed to feel a sense of ambiguous catharsis when the movie ended and the protagonist came through the ordeal mostly unscathed.

Dean had held his hand for the remainder of their time in the theater, and they quietly let go of one another before standing up to leave.

Castiel tried not to think about the way he’d almost chased Dean’s hand with his own, had almost held on even though the lights were back on and most of the other people had filed out the door.

Charlie, clearly reluctant to part ways, asked them if they wanted to go to the nearby park and hang out for a while longer there.

“What do you say, Cas? Want to go?” she asked with an almost shy smile as they stood outside the theater.

"Whatever you wish, Lady Charlie," Castiel answered.

Charlie smiled excitedly and darted back to her car after gesturing for them to follow. “I’ll beat you there!”

Once he and Dean were seated in the Impala and the car was idling, Dean paused before putting it in drive.

“We don’t have to go to the park if you’re not feeling good, Cas,” Dean said. “It’s getting late.”

Castiel shook his head. “No, Dean. I want to go.”

And he did.

The park was a short drive away from the theater, and they arrived within a few minutes. Dean parked where they had the last time they’d visited when skipping class.

It was fully dark out, now, and the lone security light that illuminated the surrounding area gave everything a pale glow, as if the park was submerged underwater.

"I’m going down the slide!” Charlie called gleefully as she took off at a fast walk toward the playhouse near the old seesaw and swing set. Her hair was bright even in the washed-out glare of the street light.

Dean and Castiel followed her, watching as she climbed the steps to mount the slide. They cheered her on as she slid down the dented, plastic length of it, her hands up as if she was on a roller coaster at Six Flags.

Dean laughed at the sight. “You would make this place look like it’d be worth it to pay for entry.”

Charlie grinned and gave him a dorky, drawn-out thumbs-up.

It had cooled down some from the heat of the day, and Castiel wandered a few feet away from his friends. He distractedly trailed a hand over the chilled, metal links of the chains of a swing as he came to stand beside it. He could hear the sound of someone’s music playing in the distance, pop laced with static.

As he sat slowly down on the black rubber seat of the swing, Castiel tried to think back to the last time he could remember doing so. It had been with Gabriel, that much he was certain of.
Gabriel had delighted in dragging Castiel out of the house at odd hours to show him things, to drive them around town when no one else was awake, to make him play Mario Kart while he was half-asleep. Castiel had never actually minded despite the way he’d always pretended to. He didn’t think there had ever been a time he hadn’t told Gabriel how silly they were being, how obvious it was that they should get back home before one of their parents woke up and grounded the whole household for their folly.

But they’d never gotten caught, not that Castiel could recall. That was part of Gabriel’s charm, he supposed. For Gabriel, everything went smoothly. He was silly and handsome and charismatic and he was never caught red-handed. Not making pot brownies, not sneaking a half-naked girl out of the house in broad daylight, not lying to Naomi about the suspicious stain on the floor beneath the oven.

Castiel felt his eyes fall closed as he lifted his feet from the ground and pumped his legs, causing the swing to carry him forward. The thin, night air passed him by, cool on his skin, and he could hear Dean and Charlie laughing somewhere beyond him. He moved his legs with more force, sending himself higher with every back-and-forth.

When he opened his eyes and looked into the sky he saw dozens of cold, white stars and the silken wisps of silver clouds in the fathomless blue dark. He imagined the swing shooting him just a little further toward where the stars and planets hung with each pass forward, a chariot meant for the moon chained to the ground.

He didn't notice he was smiling until he chanced a glance down and saw Dean, standing beside the swing he occupied. He was looking up at Castiel as if he were something worth seeing, his freckled cheeks flushed from whatever he'd been doing before coming to check on him. Behind Dean, Castiel saw Charlie swinging idly from the set of rusted monkey bars. The tips of her toes just skimmed the ground.

"Isn't it great?" Dean asked Castiel softly.

He stopped pumping his legs so that his swing slowing gradually, the stars again higher than he could hope to reach.

Whether Dean was asking about the sky or the movie or all the times he thought he was alone and had been wrong, Castiel didn’t know.

“I’m glad you came out, Cas,” Dean said.

He reached out and wrapped his hand around the chain just above where Castiel’s rested, grounding him the way he always inevitably seemed to.

When Castiel felt his smile bloom again, he let it.

***

On Thursday, Dean got a call from Jo that John was at the Roadhouse, melting into the red pleather seating and insisting he hadn’t had enough when he clearly had.

The call came around seven-thirty in the evening. He and Castiel were sitting in the living room together debating what to do for dinner since Bobby was out visiting friends and Sam was at the Moore house again for the evening.

They hadn’t gotten any closer to a consensus when Dean's phone began to vibrate on the coffee table. When his face darkened as he saw who was calling Castiel had all but guessed who it was. By the time he'd ended the call, Dean was already pulling on his plaid overshirt and looking for his keys.
as a muscle clenched in his jaw.

"Looks like it's that time. I gotta get him," he said to Castiel said with a caustic grimace of a smile.

"Let me go with you, Dean," Castiel said. He expected his friend to tell him to stay home as he usually did. But to his surprise, Dean only nodded in response.

"Let's go," he said as he led them to the door, his hand light on the small of Castiel's back.

The drive back to John's after they’d retrieved him from the bar was tense, with Castiel in the back seat and John in the front passenger’s. He reeked of alcohol, and commented with irritation more than once that Dean and Castiel hadn't had a legitimate reason to come and get him.

"Jo's just bein' a judgy bitch," John grumbled as he moved to roll his window down.

"Don't call her that," Dean said sharply from beside his father. His hands were clenched tightly over the steering wheel, his posture rigid enough that even from behind him, Castiel could see it. Beyond the windshield the streetlamps were beginning to come on as the sun set, though the main road before them was still lit mostly by fading sunlight.

"I'll call her whatever I fuckin' want," John slurred at Dean. "You don't get to tell me what I can't say."

By the time they arrived at the Winchester house a few minutes later, Castiel was grateful that John appeared to be almost black-out drunk, and hoped that he wouldn't remember the petty squabble he was currently having with his son.

Dean parked the car in the drive and came around the passenger side to help his father out, though the look on his face made it clear he wanted to do nothing less.

"C'mon, Dad, let's go inside," Dean said wearily as he opened the door and held a hand out to John, who somewhat reluctantly took it and allowed his son to pull him to his feet.

Castiel watched closely from where he still sat in the Impala, one of his hands clenched in his lap and the other poised above the door handle as he waited for John to throw a punch or land a kick. But he never did, and soon he and Dean had disappeared into the darkness of the empty house together.

Less than five minutes later Dean reappeared and started the car without a word. Soon, they were on their way back to Bobby's.

Night had fully descended by then. Castiel couldn't see much beyond the porch lights of the houses they passed and the few neon signs placed here and there above liquor stores, gas stations and the local theater. Dean's face was partially obscured in the darkness, and more than once Castiel had to stop himself from asking his friend if he was alright.

"Of course he isn't," he thought as they exited the car where Dean had parked it in Bobby's driveway.

Dean was taciturn, his handsome face drawn as they let themselves in through the back entrance.

"I don't have any more homework today," Dean said once they were again in the living room.

"You wanna watch TV?" he asked Castiel, food apparently forgotten now.

Castiel nodded, and soon they were sitting pressed together on the sofa the way they’d fallen into the habit of sitting the past week or so. An episode of That 70's Show was playing, and Eric Foreman
and his friends were joking conspicuously about smoking pot in the basement. Castiel realized that he'd yet to smoke any that day, himself. He was planning on excusing himself to do so when from beside him, Dean spoke.

"Cas..." he began.

Yes?" Castiel said.

"I was wondering if you...are you gonna smoke soon?" he asked.

Castiel wasn't sure what to make of the question, or of the tentative way Dean was asking.

"I was going to," he admitted. "Why do you ask?"

"I, uh, wanted to know if you'd be cool with me smoking some, too?" Dean's cheeks were flushed, his eyes darting nervously here and there, flitting only briefly over Castiel's.

"Of course," Castiel said, surprised by the request. "I was actually about to go out back soon. Did you want to...?"

Dean nodded, letting out a long exhale that sounded suspiciously like a sigh.

Within a few minutes they were both out back of Bobby's, huddled around Castiel's piece. He briefly showed Dean how to use the contraption, handing it over to him after he'd loaded a small bowl in its foil belly.

"Okay," Dean said determinedly. He lifted the mouthpiece to his lips and brought the lighter up to singe the fuzzy green mound protruding from the rim of silver. He coughed hard as he took a drag undoubtedly deeper than he'd intended, and handed the little bong quickly back. Castiel reached out and touched Dean without thinking as they stood there. He gently wrapped his hand around Dean's upper arm as he continued to cough as if he’d just surfaced from a swimming pool.

He ignored the way his heart leapt in his chest when Dean reached up to lay his hand over Castiel's. He reminded himself that Dean had held his hand and comforted him in the movies and it hadn’t garnered the same reaction.

Castiel turned to look out into the darkness of the yard and the salvage shop just beyond it. He saw old, rusting parts and the half-hollowed car frames stacked on top of one another like strange, sleeping creatures of metal.

"Have you ever smoked?" Castiel asked as Dean cleared his throat and straightened up beside him.

Dean shook his head. "Once, when I was a freshman. 'S not usually my thing."

"Why now?" Castiel asked.

Dean licked his lips as he thought for a moment. His green eyes were distant, undoubtedly looking over the same things that Castiel had. He wondered if Dean was thinking of his father, passed out in the house a few blocks away.

"I don't know. I just wanted...wanted to float away with you for a little while, I guess. Thought things might be better up where you are," Dean said.

Castiel felt something sharp and sweet and unfamiliar warm him from the inside.

"You only have to ask," he said.
It was quiet out, only the sounds of their breathing and the distant call of a bird audible in the night.

***

Castiel awoke a few hours later than he usually did on Friday, slowly surfacing from what had been a mostly dreamless sleep around noon to the smell of bacon cooking and the low sound of Bobby singing to himself in the kitchen. The older man’s tuneless melody carried beneath the closed door to where Castiel lay in the guest bed, molded flush to Dean’s back. Dean had an arm flung out over the far edge of the bed, one of his legs bent back and pressed between Castiel’s. Castiel was sweating a little from their combined body heat and the old quilt still flung over both of them. He wondered idly when he’d migrated so close to his friend during the night at the same time he felt he had an erection and that the back of Dean’s thigh was pressed against it.

Castiel gasped soundlessly and immediately began to roll onto his back and away from Dean as the other boy stirred slightly at the movement, oblivious to his struggle.

Castiel felt his face reddening and jerkily threw his legs over his side of the bed. He straightened up to a seated position and tried not to jostle Dean too much. He rubbed his palms self-consciously over the front of his pajama pants, trying to decipher how long he’d been lying that way. Had it been right after they’d fallen asleep? Had it been a more recent development, spurred by a change of position sometime in the few hours previous?

Castiel jumped when Dean yawned beside him.

“Mornin’,” Dean said without turning to look at Castiel, the faint sound of a smile present in his voice. Outside, the sun was already out and shining. Its light coursed brightly through the parted curtains, warming the already tepid room still further.

“Good morning. Well, afternoon, really. It’s eleven fifty-one,” Castiel said fumblingly after a glance at his phone. He stood from the bed and crossed the room, pretending to busy himself getting something from one of his desk drawers to avoid looking at Dean.

“Did you, uh, sleep well?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Sure did. You?” Dean responded. Castiel heard the bed springs creak, and knew Dean was probably lying on his back now.

“Yes, thank you. I—I have to use the restroom,” Castiel grit out as he took a few, awkward side-steps toward the door and left the room as rapidly as he could. He exhaled through his teeth at the feeling of his underwear shifting over his erection.

Unwelcome and unasked, Castiel thought of how Dean had felt against him as they slept together, how solid and warm he’d been. He’d smelled familiar and clean and sweet, softened by slumber into something dark and rich. Dean was safe, he was safe and he always touched Castiel gently and lowered his head just slightly to speak to him and—
Castiel shook his head earnestly, tears welling in his sleep-swollen eyes. He roughly swiped at his face as he silently counted backward from ten, struggling to keep his breaths regular as his chest began to feel like someone was pressing a weight onto it.

He didn’t want this to happen. He wanted to be in control of himself, not resisting the urge to reach down and touch himself even as the thought alone made him want to throw up into the nearby toilet.

Castiel lowered his hands and pressed them flat against the door still supporting him. He couldn’t let it, let this, happen again. He needed to have control. He needed to.

He tilted his head back, thankful when his body at last began doing what he wanted it to. He was able to adjust his pants comfortably again.

He turned toward the sink and splashed cold water onto his fevered cheeks, holding his face in his hands for longer than he was able to keep track of. He waited until he no longer felt like he was breathing through a straw before straightening up and readying himself to go back to Dean.

When Castiel emerged from the bathroom and entered the guest room, Dean was sitting up in the bed looking at something on his phone.

“You okay, Cas?” Dean asked when their eyes met.

“I’m fine,” Castiel said, mortified. “Just hungry.”

“Me, too. Let’s head to the kitchen,” Dean said. He looked like he wanted to say more, but didn’t do so.

Brunch was cheerful and lively in the sunlit dining room a few minutes later, and Sam enthusiastically informed anyone who would listen that he’d be inviting Jessica over later in the day and working on a school project with her.

“She’s been working on the equations over a week now and says she’s almost got ‘em figured out. She’s so smart,” he said languorously, his chin in his hand.

Dean elbowed his brother playfully. “We know. You tell us every day.”

“Just make sure you shower before she comes,” Bobby grumbled as he passed a plate of biscuits Dean’s way. “Lord knows all you have to do is walk across the room ‘fore you need one.”

Sam scoffed and threw his used napkin at Bobby, and Dean hid a smile to avoid the same fate.

“Anyway, just make sure you offer her water or soda, girls like a man who’s always thinking of ‘em,” Bobby said sagely as he helped himself to another sausage link.

“Oh, and we should take that from you, Mister-I’ve-been-in-love-with-Ellen-for-a-million-years-and-haven’t-done-shit?” Sam quipped while from across the table Dean threw his head back and laughed.

“You hush up,” Bobby grumbled without venom before taking a swig of orange juice.

Castiel found himself pushing his eggs around on his plate when Dean looked pointedly over at it to ask if he wanted more of anything. His appetite felt smaller than it had in almost a week. He managed to eat half of what he’d been served and a glass of water, and even that made him feel overfull. He was relieved when at last most of the food had been eaten and the table cleared, and he and Dean retreated back down the hallway to ready themselves for the day.
It was almost one in the afternoon and neither of them had any concrete plans for the day. Meg had texted Castiel asking if he wanted to come to her apartment and try out a new strain, but he had no desire to leave Bobby’s. In only a few days classes would resume and Castiel would have no choice but to interact with people whether he wanted to or not; he’d rather spend the weekend soaking up the last moments of relative solitude.

“I can’t believe break’s almost over,” Dean said with a quiet sigh once the two of them were standing together in the guest room. “I had this whole list of stuff I was gonna do and did almost none of it.” He laughed sheepishly to himself.

“Just because it wasn’t productive doesn’t mean it wasn’t good,” Castiel pointed out as he walked over to the closet to grab a clean shirt.

“It’s…it’s been good to have you here for it,” Dean said while Castiel’s back was turned. He froze as he processed the words.

“Shit,” Castiel said quietly as he looked into the empty closet. His heart was pounding in his chest.

“Hm?” Dean asked.

“I need to do laundry,” Castiel said as he quickly turned around.

"Uh, don't worry about it today," Dean said. "You can just wear one of my shirts if you need to. I have a few in Sam’s room. Besides, we have stuff to fold before we can run the washer, anyway."

“Will he mind if I go and get one now?” Castiel asked.

Dean waved off his question. “He’s not in there right now, he’s in the bathroom, just go grab one. All the band tees are mine.”

“Thank you,” Castiel said before exiting the room to look through Sam’s closet.

True to Dean’s word, Sam was nowhere to be seen as Castiel entered his bedroom and opened his closet. He did a perfunctory search before tugging the faded Led Zeppelin t-shirt Dean had been wearing when they met from one of the hangers.

As he stripped himself of his sleep-shirt and pulled the clean one over his head, Castiel caught faintly the muted smell of Dean's skin and the clean, white scent of the laundry soap Bobby used. Once the shirt was on, he began to lift the hem of it to his nose, wanting to smell it again--

Shame seared him molten and red as the reality of what he was doing set in. Castiel swallowed around a rising lump in his throat as he smoothed the shirt down over his torso.

He didn’t linger in the room after that.

He trekked back to the guest room where Dean still stood in front of the dresser, now wearing jeans and the shirt he’d slept in.

“Want to help me fold?” Dean asked him. A smile crossed his face as he saw what shirt Castiel had chosen.

“Of course,” Castiel answered.

He followed Dean to the living room, where they sat down together on the familiar sofa in front of a plastic laundry basket overflowing with clean clothes and linens.
Dean turned the TV on and started sorting the laundry into piles, gesturing for Castiel to do the same. Soon, they were folding the many shirts and pairs of pants and socks and dish towels that needed putting away. A few loads of laundry for a household of four men was no small amount, and Castiel easily lost track of what was his or Dean’s or Sam’s or Bobby’s, all of it warm and freesia-scented as the piles grew on either side of them on the couch.

It was quiet in the parlor even with the TV on, and it was soothing after the strangeness of Castiel’s morning.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean said as he finished folding a large, bleach-stained towel.

“Yes?” Castiel didn’t look directly at Dean as he responded considering he was preoccupied with a sizable stain on one of Bobby’s work shirts, unable to tell if it needed to go through the cycle again or if it had been that way before.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” Dean began.

“What is it?” Castiel asked as he set Bobby’s shirt down on his lap.

“Cas, I—”

Before Dean could finish, he was interrupted by a loud and insistent knocking at Bobby’s front door.

“Let me get that,” Dean mumbled as he stood up and hastily strode toward the door. He opened it to whoever was standing outside without first checking to see who that might be, his irritation at being interrupted clear in the way he was standing.

Castiel finished folding Bobby’s shirt, deciding that another cycle wouldn’t do it much good.

“Hello? I’m sorry, but is my brother Castiel here?”

The sound of his sister’s voice was the last thing Castiel was expecting.

“Cas is your brother?” Dean asked.

Castiel froze where he was, at a loss to what the best course of action would be.

“Yes. I was told he’s been living here.”

“Uh, yeah. He is,” Dean said. “One second.” He turned around just as Castiel stood up from the sofa, upending a pile of folded dish towels in the process.

"Anna?” Castiel sputtered when he found his voice again.

The color drained from Dean’s handsome face as he looked at Castiel.

He came to stand beside Dean in front of the still-open door and his sister.

Anna had her arms crossed over her chest and looked as uncomfortable as Dean probably felt. Her hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail, and she was wearing a faded Mets t-shirt and jeans. Absurdly, Castiel wondered if their mother had seen her outfit before she left the house; there was little to no chance Naomi would have let Anna leave if she had.

"Castiel, what are you doing here? Your roommate told me you’ve been here for weeks. Are you still enrolled in your classes?” Anna asked as she took a step into Bobby’s living room. The toe of her shoe came to rest where the ‘welcome’ mat began. She looked better than she had the last time
Castiel saw her a few months prior during Christmas break, her usually-narrow face a bit fuller and her tired eyes livelier.

"I—I’ve been here, yes," Castiel admitted. "Of course I’m still in school. Anna, why didn’t you tell me you were going to—to come see me—I didn’t—"

"I’ve been trying, Castiel," Anna said sternly. She sounded very much like Naomi Novak in that moment. "You barely talk to me anymore, you told Mother you weren’t coming over on your break. Have you even called Gabriel back? What is wrong?"

The last question was unpleasantly reminiscent of the ones Meg had gauged him with, and Anna’s voice seemed to grow shrill as she continued to speak, high and wavering like a storm siren. She took another step into the house as she gestured emphatically toward Castiel.

“…you can’t do this, Castiel. I had to ask your roommate why you’d left and he said he didn’t know, and of course I got sort of scared since I couldn’t get you on the phone. You never pick up anymore. And I know you’re busy, you tell me all the time, but I just wish you would have told me…”

Castiel shook his head as if to negate her words, wanting to dislodge the sound of her voice like water from his ears. Behind him, he heard Sam and Bobby emerge from where they’d likely been gathered in the hallway. He wished he could sink into the dirty brown carpeting under his feet.

Dean was shifting uneasily from one foot the other next to Castiel. The sound of his socks slipping over the floor was almost earsplitting, louder even than Anna’s voice, somehow.

“Gabe says he’s called you more than once now,” Anna said, looking at him expectantly. “He wants to be back in our lives, Castiel.”

“Why do we have to talk about this right now?” Castiel said through a mouth he knew had become a thin line. The thought of talking to Gabriel again after all that had happened made a cold sweat form on his brow.

“Because I can’t get you to call or text when I try to talk to you about it any other time,” Anna said with exasperation, color rising in the apples of her fair cheeks.

Castiel held a hand out, his patience rapidly running thin. “Okay. If we have to do this now, can we at least go outside—”

“Just answer me,” Anna insisted, one of her hands coming to rest on her hip. It seemed being in contact with Gabriel again had made her more confident. Castiel couldn’t remember the last time his sister had insisted on anything where her own desires were concerned. He didn’t feel even close to being prepared to deal with this, had ignored Anna’s texts because he’d known he wasn’t able to deal with this.

She took another step forward, still waiting for an answer.

"Anna, I don't want to talk about Gabriel," Castiel grit out with effort as he took a proportionate step back, wanting nothing less than for the distance between them to be closed. He exhaled slowly, trying to find the right words and knowing he’d failed as he spoke. "I'm sorry, but a lot's been going on, and I—"

"He just wants to be your brother again, Castiel," Anna spoke over him plaintively as she stepped inward yet again. She smelled like flowers and summer air, the scent sweet enough to be sickening. She was speaking loudly, as if Castiel wasn’t hearing her. Her breath was hot on his face as she moved forward.
"Anna, I—"

"I wish you'd let go of what used to be."

"I understand what you want, but I don’t think—"

Anna reached out and wrapped her hand around Castiel’s wrist. She prevented him from backing away from her any farther at the same time that she interrupted him again. "We could have what we used to have with him. We don’t have to—"

"Shut the fuck up, Anna."

Dean exhaled audibly beside him, and Castiel realized that he’d spoken the words aloud in a torn gasp. His chest was rising and falling rapidly as he struggled not to wrench his hand from his sister’s grasp.

The change in Anna’s expression was almost instantaneous. She let go of Castiel’s wrist, backing away from him the way she had come, step by step.

"Castiel...?" her voice was small, then, the way he was accustomed to it being. Castiel felt relief and revulsion at the realization.

"I don't want to talk about Gabriel, and I don't want to listen to you guilt-trip me. All I want is to be left alone. That's all I want," Castiel snapped at his sister.

"What's wrong?" Anna whispered, the words slow to come. Somehow, Castiel had broken through whatever purpose she’d come with, and he could tell that now she was truly listening. But now, he wanted nothing less than to tell her anything.

Castiel knew Bobby and Sam and Dean were still watching silently behind him, and he shook his head.

"Why don’t you just go?" he asked flatly.

Anna didn't need telling a second time.

Soon, she was making her way back down Bobby’s driveway to her car where it was parked by the curb. Castiel watched her leave, watched the way her hands shook as she let herself into her car, the way her hair fell into her face as she leaned to the side to retrieve something from the passenger seat.

He didn’t know what to do or to say, so he watched the space where her car had been even after he heard Bobby and Sam quietly exit the living room. Their voices were low and indiscernible as they faded into the background.

"Cas..." Dean began a few minutes later, clearly unsure if he should say anything.

Deciding not to give him the chance to, Castiel turned and made his way back to the guest room, his feet and legs numb as they carried him there.

Castiel didn’t remember sitting on the edge of the bed, but there he was, his and Anna's words ringing in his ears.

He’d told his sister to fuck off.

He’d told her to go.
Castiel covered his face with his hands.

"Cas," Dean said from just outside.

Castiel slowly lifted his head.

"Can I come in? Please?" Dean asked through the closed door.

Wordlessly, Castiel got up and opened the door for Dean, backing away so that his friend could enter the room. The click of the door shutting behind him was loud in the silence.

Castiel sat back down on the bed without comment, wondering what Dean thought of him then as they sat there.

"She just wanted to see you, Cas," Dean said after almost a minute.

"I know," Castiel said. "I know she did."

"Cas…what's the deal with your brother? She's talking to him again, but you still don't think you can, too?" Dean asked carefully.

"I don't know," Castiel confessed. "There's so much that happened before he left, so much I still don't know."

"Like?" Dean prompted.

"The night before Gabriel left, we...my family had a fight," Castiel said quietly.

It had been a Thursday, a detail that for some reason had never left Castiel's mind.

Only a few months had passed since Andrew Novak's death, and relations between the rest of the family had been tense.

Naomi, Luke and Michael had been working seventy-hour weeks to pick up the slack Andrew’s death had caused, Anna had just started working in an official capacity for the lab, and Castiel had been attending community college while at the same time discreetly applying to universities with reputable art programs. Gabriel, for his part, had more or less continued on as he had been before Andrew's passing. He'd had a job at the cafe down the street since he was nineteen and seemed to have no ambitions of doing more, or at least Castiel knew it seemed that way to Naomi. Castiel and Anna alone were privy to the fact that Gabriel was in fact learning the business from the owner himself as he worked alongside him, and had more than a few notebooks filled with copious amounts of notes on the subject: inventory, banking, buying, loans, anecdotal advice the owner had given him. Gabriel might not have had a shred of interest in the sciences, but was as methodical as his brothers in many ways, not that any of them had taken it upon themselves to notice.

"I knew something was going to happen," Castiel said.

That night they’d eaten together as they always did, arranged around the same dining room table Castiel had seen again during his Christmas break.

It was still one of the few things their mother had never thrown out or replaced throughout her bouts of pointless renovation.

Gabriel had been obviously drunk when he first sat down, his hazel eyes somewhat bleary. Their mother hadn’t said a word against him when he’d requested more wine, always the diplomatic and decorous wife, maintaining appearances even when it made no difference. She’d simply poured
Gabriel a glass from the open bottle in the center of the table, the light glinting on its glossy curves.

Castiel remembered wanting to find a way to spill the cup in front of his brother. He'd felt a numinous premonition at the sight of it, had known somehow that the evening would end badly if Gabriel had another drink. But he'd watched mutely as his brother took a long pull of the wine, the fate of the night sealed by something as innocuous as fermented fruit.

Naomi had been tight-lipped at her spot at the head of the table, only nodding to Michael as he spoke at length of the toll the many hours he'd worked were taking on him. He'd been languishing and everyone had known it, but they’d kept their mouths shut to maintain the tenuous peace. Even Luke had stared silently down at his plate as Michael spoke of the faults he'd noticed in his lab assistants, the way the size of the building itself was a hindrance to his goals and ideals.

Across from him, Gabriel had asked for a refill and Naomi had poured him one. Castiel's hands had clenched in his lap, a buzzing in his ears coming to muffle Michael's words as his anxiety grew.

It had almost been a relief when Gabriel finally spoke to Michael, brandishing his mostly-empty wine glass for emphasis, "Fuck you."

Castiel remembered the look of horror Anna had shot him to his right, and knew it was mirrored on his own features.

"Excuse me?" Michael had shot back with genuine surprise, straightening in his chair.

"I don't feel sorry for you, and I don't give a shit how much you work," Gabriel replied with a slight slur.

Michael had blinked a few times before responding, "Well, tell me, Gabriel, what the hell are you doing for this family?"

Gabriel hadn't answered his question. "Oh, poor me, I'm so tired of staying late in my big office. Boohoo, my designer shoes hurt my feet. Dear god, this lab worker should be fired because they don't kiss my ass every second of every goddamn day!" by the end Gabriel was practically shouting, his eyes bright with anger.

Michael had stood, then, indignation growing on his fine features. "I fired Danielle because she—"

"Save that shit for your memos, Mikey. I think we all know why you fired Danni, and it sure as hell wasn't 'cause she sucked at her job. You've wanted to fire her since she got engaged, and Dad wouldn't let you. Well good for you, you must be so fuckin' happy now that you get to do whatever the hell you want, now. You've got it all," Gabriel spat the words with a venom Castiel had never heard from him before.

The silence in the room was palpable. Michael looked almost murderous at the mention of his former lab assistant, Danielle Gonzales. Though it had been fairly obvious to all involved that Gabriel's statement was the truth, no one had dared say it so explicitly. Even Naomi had looked shocked by the words, her wine glass still held in mid-air as she stared at her sons. Luke had laughed silently.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Michael had said.

Gabriel had smiled bitterly, "The hell I don't. What were you expecting her to do, Mike? You thought she'd leave her fiancé and work with you forever? Like Mom and dear old Dad? Doesn't work that way, bro. You have to be lovable to get the girl."

Naomi had gasped, knowing Gabriel crossed a line the same time everyone else did. Castiel had
blindly reached for Anna's hand under the table.

Michael's face had been tense and angry as he said, so quietly they almost hadn't heard him, "You should have died in that ditch instead."

Castiel paused in his story there, unable to say more.

Dean was gaping at him, and Castiel noticed for the first time that the other boy had taken his hand and was holding it loosely in his lap.

"My father and Anna were driving home from the lab the day he died. What Michael said...sometimes I think Gabriel wished it had been him in the car with Anna, too."

Dean's eyes were wide.

"Gabriel didn't really...fit in." Castiel said. "Didn't even pretend to, but I knew he felt it. I know he was affected by our father's death, but not for the reasons my other brothers were. He never said so, but I wondered after he left. He was gone the next day," Castiel finished. "I haven't...I've never told anyone else that."

Dean squeezed his hand, the touch a familiar one now.

"I don't know if Michael meant what he said. I don't know if my mother actually kept Gabriel from talking to us, either. I used to think that maybe he...maybe he thought I agreed with Michael, but he never asked me. I never got to tell him that I didn't, and now that I have the chance to tell him...I don't know if I want to. I'm still so angry at him for leaving at all."

"Shit. I'm sorry, Cas. I...I didn't know things had gotten that bad before he left," Dean said.

"I shouldn't have taken it out on Anna," Castiel whispered, his eyes heavy. "She didn't deserve it."

"It sounds like there are a lot of things you and her didn't deserve that you still had to deal with," Dean said quietly. "She'll listen when you apologize, as long as you mean it. Siblings always do."

"I'm not listening to Gabriel," Castiel responded as he watched Dean's thumb where it stroked a line down the back of his hand.

"Maybe not today," Dean said.

"I miss him," Castiel murmured into Dean's shoulder as the other boy slowly, carefully took him in his arms. "I hate that I miss him. Why can't I stop it?"

"You can't control everything," Dean said simply.

When Castiel tried to fall asleep later that night he repeated the words to himself again and again, wishing they comforted him.

***

The last day of Spring Break, at six in the morning, Castiel composed a simple message for his sister.

I was assaulted on February 1st. I'm so sorry that I said those things to you. Please don't text or call, I'll contact you when I'm able to talk. I love you.
From behind him, Castiel felt Dean's breath warm on the back of his neck. He drew strength from their proximity even as the knowledge of what he was about to say to Anna made him tremble.

When he pressed the send button he stared at the words on the screen before him, now real and existent in the void, now concrete and pixelated and irrefutable.

He stared at the message until it blurred and distorted.

"Dean," Castiel whispered, rolling onto his back to look at him.

Dean groaned softly as he slowly awoke, his cheeks flushed and his eyes heavy. "Yeah?" he asked, his voice husky with sleep.

"Dean, I..." Castiel swallowed with difficulty, tasting copper. He closed his mouth, then, shaking his head. "Nothing, I'm sorry."

Rather than pressing him for an answer, Dean wrapped Castiel in his arms the way he had so often the past few days and held him close.

Outside, the light of day slowly blossomed, gold and white and new, and Dean didn’t let go.

Chapter End Notes

So, I had someone ask me why Castiel's back is so messed up, and thought it might be a good idea to explain in case anyone else has this question. But, basically, sexual assault and the resulting trauma can lead to a host of bodily symptoms and sicknesses, and for some chronic pain is one of those symptoms.

Any thoughts/comments are so appreciated!
Monday was light blue and filled to the seams with humid warmth. As Castiel went about his day, the familiar classrooms and professors felt almost alien to him, temporary and strange and somehow worth exploring anew after the alternate universe his and Dean’s break had been. Though he didn’t savor being crammed back into lecture halls and breathing in the all-too recognizable smell of floor wax and dust, Castiel’s studies at least provided a measure of preoccupation from the fear that his siblings were going to try and contact him.

As it was, Castiel kept checking his phone when he had a few free moments (and even when he didn’t), half-expecting Anna to disregard what he’d requested and text him, to demand answers the way Dean never had. Castiel had no idea what he would say if she did, if he would spin a lie to pile on the others or finally tell her the truth. But she didn’t call or email, and neither did Gabriel, and Castiel found by the end of the day he’d become too tired to care.

“You want to go by that sandwich place for dinner? I got paid yesterday and I don’t wanna cook,” Dean said as he and Castiel climbed into the Impala where it was parked outside the Fine Arts Building. They’d just spent a few hours in the studio and both smelled like old mineral spirits and paint. Dean had completed the bulk of his second project just minutes before, and Castiel had done some of his course readings while his friend worked.

Castiel nodded distractedly as he set his bag down and fastened his seatbelt. “That would be fine. Thank you, Dean.”

“Subs it is,” Dean exclaimed with exuberance.

Soon, they were pulling into the local sandwich shop’s parking lot, and Dean locked the car before he and Castiel made their way inside.

Castiel wasn’t planning on seeing Arnold manning the counter of the place alone, wearing an ugly green polo shirt with a blob of mustard near the collar and an old canvas apron. Castiel stopped where he stood at the sight, remembering vividly the last time he and Arnold had seen one another. As if called to mind by the memory, cool beads of sweat began to break out on Castiel’s skin, and from behind him he heard Dean clear his throat.

But Arnold waved a plastic-gloved hand easily at Castiel, beckoning him and Dean over to where he was currently slicing a tomato on a large cutting board.

“There, guys!” he said, an easy grin splitting his handsome face as they drew near the long counter. Behind him was a mural of various sandwich fixings, the colors lively under the printed menu that hung a foot or so over it. Castiel couldn’t remember if he’d ever been to this place or not, but felt
he’d remember the mural if he had.

“Hey, Arn. I didn’t know you’d be working today. How you been, man?” Dean asked.

Arnold good-naturedly rolled his eyes. “They’ve got me working some weird hours lately. But I’m pretty freakin’ fabulous! How about you?”

Arnold leaned forward over the rows of meat and cheese and sliced vegetables stacked neatly in their shining metal rectangles. If he felt any hesitance where Castiel’s presence was concerned, it didn’t show.

“I’m…” Dean faltered as he pondered his answer. He had a streak of bright blue paint on one side of his freckled nose, Castiel noticed.

“I’m good,” Dean said, looking unexpectedly toward Castiel as he spoke, a faint smile on his face. Castiel diverted his eyes to the gleaming linoleum floor, feeling strangely buoyant.

“How about you, hon?” Arnold asked Castiel next, startling him into looking back up.

“I’m fine, thank you,” Castiel answered, the words as habitual as his response was automatic.

“Good,” Arnold said in response, though he didn’t look convinced. “Well, what can I get you two?” he asked as he trashed the pair of gloves he’d been wearing and moved to put a fresh set on.

Dean ordered quickly, though Castiel took longer as he had to study the menu for a few minutes before deciding. But Arnold prepared their food speedily once he’d picked his condiments of choice.

“You guys gonna eat here or take it to-go?” Arnold asked when Dean passed his old debit card forward. After swiping it through the reader and printing a receipt, Arnold handed them their sandwiches wrapped in wax paper.

“Cas?” Dean asked.

“Oh, I—I’d like to go home,” Castiel said apologetically. He felt his cheeks redden under Dean and Arnold’s twin gazes.

“No prob,” Arnold said as he procured a white paper bag.

“Enjoy,” he said with a wink.

Dean nodded and bid Arnold goodbye, turning and letting himself out of the shop with a tinkling chime of the bell rigged to the top of the door.

Before Castiel could do the same, Arnold called to him.

“Cas, wait.”

Castiel tried to keep one eye on Arnold and one on Dean as the other boy unlocked the car and slid into the driver’s seat of the Impala out front. He ventured nothing as he stood there, suspended between the door and the counter as he waited for Arnold to speak.

“You’re looking better,” Arnold said.

“Uh, thank you, Arnold,” Castiel said slowly.

“Are you doing okay?” Arnold asked in a low voice. “It’s been a while since you came to the house,
man.”

“I’m fine, yes, and I’ve been very busy with homework.” Castiel paused. “When you saw me a few weeks ago, I was experiencing some…anxiety about my car, but nothing is wrong.” He hoped he sounded sincere. “Thank you for your concern. Have a good night.”

Castiel didn’t wait for Arnold to answer before following Dean out the door and into the car.

Later that night, as he and Dean sat eating their sandwiches together in front of the TV, Castiel wondered when Bobby’s house had become ‘home’.

***

The next few days passed unremarkably, with noontime hours spent in the studio so Dean could put the finishing details on his piece, and quiet evenings studying or reading in Bobby’s living room. Charlie came over more than once, and Sam had Jess and his friend Brady over at least twice, so the house was rarely empty or quiet, but Dean wasn’t home Wednesday or Thursday night. John Winchester, it seemed, had one problem after another spring up throughout the week, and according to him each of them required Dean’s attention and clearly irritated Bobby (who acted uncharacteristically foul-tempered when Castiel informed him where Dean was spending the night).

Though Castiel felt a listless sort of unease without Dean next to him on the couch those evenings, his friend never complained when John asked him for help with something, so neither did Castiel.

He spent most of Thursday night staring at the ceiling above his bed, wondering when Dean would come back to the safety of Bobby’s house as he tried and failed to sleep.

***

It was just after ten in the morning on Friday when Dean returned to Singer Salvage from his father’s. His face was stark and colorless, and he was tight-lipped as he stumbled in through the front door with a loud creak of its hinges. Dean kicked his shoes off with unexpected nonchalance once through the entryway, bits of dirt falling from their heavy soles as they landed haphazardly beside the wall.

“Dean?” Castiel asked from where he was sitting in the living room on one end of the sofa. He had a reading for his print-making class in one hand and his second cup of coffee in the other. The surge of elation he’d felt upon seeing Dean again quickly soured as he noticed the other boy’s demeanor.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean murmured without looking at him. His eyes were distant.

“How was your time with your father?”

Castiel set his things down on the coffee table and stood up from the couch, taking a step toward Dean. He found himself looking for the sickly violet of a new bruise on Dean’s skin, the brown-red maw of a fresh abrasion on his knuckles. There were none that he could see, but Dean flinched when the floor groaned beneath Castiel’s feet.

“What’d you say?” he asked.

Castiel repeated himself, still searching for a wound, a visible reason for Dean’s reaction.

“It—it was fine.” Dean shook his head as if dislodging water from his ears. “I need a fuckin’ beer.
You want one?"

Castiel nodded even though he didn’t actually want one, following Dean as he trekked to the kitchen.

A few minutes later they were both sipping on sweating brown bottles of Coors, and it was quiet in the kitchen. Outside, the day began to lose its pale shroud of fog, and the sun started to shine with enthusiasm. The light flowered its happy way through the window, and the glass in their hands was slowly warmed by it as they stood motionlessly together by the counter.

Castiel set his bottle down after he’d finished a little over half of it, tracing with his eyes the edges of a shadow that had fallen beneath the sharp line of Dean’s jaw.

“Did something happen, Dean?”

“You want to learn how to throw a punch tomorrow?” Dean asked instead of answering the question.

***

The detached garage looked different on Saturday, somehow.

Castiel and Dean had had a subsequent session in getting out of various sorts of holds near the end of the break, and it seemed Dean had decided it was time to move on to offensive maneuvers. Before they did anything, though, he first showed Castiel how to safely throw a punch in theory, helping him with the positioning of his hands and feet and demonstrating how best to move for maximum effect. After that, Dean crossed the room and began to move an old punching bag from the back corner of the space, a loud scraping sound accompanying the motion as the heavy thing was dragged across the floor.

“It’s covered in dust,” Castiel said once Dean had finished.

Dean nodded dutifully. “Yeah. Bobby’s had that thing since, like, 2009. But it’ll get the job done for what we want today, okay?”

Castiel nodded, stepping wordlessly in front of the bag and getting in the position Dean had shown him.

“Okay, so you’re gonna do what we did before, but now you’re gonna do it with the bag,” Dean said as he watched Castiel align himself. Castiel knew he wouldn’t get the luxury of distributing his weight just so were he to get into a random altercation, but Dean had stressed it important to know just the same.

When Castiel landed the first hit to the bag, he wasn’t expecting how solid it was beneath his knuckles and how much the impact of it jarred him to the socket of his shoulder. The second was a little easier, though, and the third easier still.

Dean wordlessly guided and corrected Castiel through each of his attempts, standing close beside him. More than once, he stepped in to realign Castiel’s stance or move the bag to its proper place from where it had been pushed back after five or six swings. Castiel knew he wasn’t succeeding wildly where control was concerned, but felt he was at least starting to get the hang of how to throw a relatively forceful punch. He was sweating profusely and the lower part of his back was throbbing dully, but he was slowly beginning to see results; each hit sent the bag swinging farther back, now, and Castiel could make out the faint imprints of where his fists had been on its surface.
Dean had again proven himself an effective instructor, and Castiel wiped a swathe through the dampness on his forehead, turning to thank his friend. He wasn’t prepared for the look he saw on Dean’s face when he did; those familiar eyes were again far-away and glazed as they’d been the day after his return, his lips parted absently.

“Dean?” Castiel said, slightly out of breath.

Dean blinked a few times and closed his mouth. “Sorry, Cas,” he said. He seemed tense and skittish, and his hands were in fists by his sides, his shoulders high.

“Do you…want to show me how to do it again? I don’t know if I’m getting it,” Castiel said as he backed away from the bag, unsure if he was making the right decision.

Dean nodded without looking at Castiel, waiting until he was a few feet away taking his place in front of the still-swinging bag. He didn’t begin immediately, even when the bag had stilled and the dust around them settled. He stared at the faded red and blue stripes on the bag’s surface for a long, long time.

When Dean finally extended a fist to strike the bag, the motion was so sudden Castiel took a startled step back. He winced as his back sang. But Dean didn’t notice, his eyes fixed on some point beyond. His expression grew gradually more unfocused as he began to move forward with more force. He was soon hitting the bag in short, concentrated bursts of movement. His thick arms flexed as sweat began to gather on his skin, the undulation of his hands almost ceaseless.

Castiel couldn’t look away.

Dean was a sight to behold, fluid and accurate with seeming effortlessness. The bag exhaustedly puffed out little clouds of dust each time Dean’s fists made contact with it, the snap of the old, fraying material loud in the room. When he struck with his right hand he subtly gentled his movements for the collarbone that had only recently healed, though the work-around was only noticeable if one was looking for it, so smoothly did Dean move.

Castiel wanted to put his arms around Dean and his far-away gaze. He wanted say that whatever John Winchester had said or done, Dean was better than the abuse he’d endured at his hands. He wanted to hold Dean and tell him—

I love you.

The thought was one Castiel had as he followed the curve of Dean’s back, the furls of his fists, the bend of his tensed legs where they were a foot or so apart on the dirty floor. He could almost feel the words forming on his lips, the air filling his lungs with which he could make them real.

Castiel slid down to sit on his haunches, feeling lightheaded. He turned away as his breath came in a sharp gasp and his back gave a creak of protest. He pressed his face into his hands.

"Cas?" Dean's voice was rough from where he stood above Castiel.

Castiel looked up from where he was still crouched, realizing that the rhythmic sound of Dean hitting the bag had stopped. He looked up.

"I…I guess I got a little carried away," Dean said as he flexed his hands.

"I don’t feel good," Castiel said truthfully.

Dean nodded and moved the punching bag back to the corner from whence it had come.
reached a hand out to help Castiel up from the ground, he hesitated before taking it.

The pull back up to his feet was slow and stiff as the muscles in Castiel’s back tensed inconveniently.

Dean turned the lights off before closing and locking the door, and they made the trip to the house in a few short steps. Once they were back inside Bobby’s, Dean went ahead of Castiel to the kitchen to get them some water.

As Castiel turned to close the front door behind them, he extended his dominant arm to clasp the old brass knob, the upper half of his torso twisting to the side with the gesture. He almost immediately realized he must have moved too quickly, however, and let out a brief, pained yelp as his muscles tightened and locked. He held his breath to keep from crying out again as he felt something pull tight in the center of his lower back before hearing a muffled snap.

Castiel didn’t notice that he’d stopped moving until Dean came back with a water bottle in each hand. His eyes widened as he caught sight of Castiel where he was still standing in front of the door, and set the bottles down on the coffee table.

“What’s wrong?” Dean asked.

“My back,” Castiel said through clenched teeth as Dean came close, shutting the door for him.

“Shit,” Dean exclaimed as he lightly put a hand over Castiel’s back. “We probably went a little too hard today. This is on me.” He sighed quietly. “We need to take you to the doctor, Cas?”

Castiel exhaled sharply as he tried to move and felt a hot, bright red burn lance its way from the base of his spine to the tops of his shoulder blades. He carefully shook his head.

“No, Dean,” he said. “I just need to…to lie down. My back always hurts.”

“Not like this it doesn’t,” Dean pointed out.

“It’s fine. It’s been hurting since it—for a few months, now. I just moved the wrong way.”

Dean slowly shook his head. “I don’t know, Cas.”

Castiel exhaled slowly, closing his eyes for a moment.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you for a couple weeks, and, uh, I’m not an expert, but dad’s knee got fucked up a few years back and the doc showed me how to rub it down when it’d give him trouble. Want me to try that on your back and see if it helps at all?” Dean asked.

At the thought of Dean touching him in such a way Castiel felt simultaneously nauseous, apprehensive, and some other emotion he couldn’t define.

“No,” he stuttered before he took an ill-advised step forward. The movement hurt his back enough to make his stomach lurch. Dean stepped forward and clasped Castiel’s shoulder as he swayed in place.

“Can you help me to my bed, please?”

Dean nodded silently and wrapped an arm around Castiel’s middle, supporting him as they shuffled toward the guest room. Once they reached it and stepped inside, Castiel lay down carefully on his stomach. Dean helped him do so without jostling his back more than necessary, bracing Castiel’s shoulders as he lowered himself.

Castiel buried his face in the cool swell of the pillow as he felt Dean sit beside him on the bed. His
back hurt more than it had in recent memory, even the shallow movements of his breaths sending twinges of discomfort pulsing through him.

“You sure you don’t want to go to the clinic, Cas?” Dean asked.

“You can try and help me,” Castiel managed to mumble audibly enough for his friend to hear. The last thing he wanted to do was let someone he didn’t know touch him and dig their fingertips into the cramps under his skin and ask if—

“Okay,” Dean said, startling Castiel from his train of thought. “I’ll start easy, slow. If it hurts or you want me to stop, you tell me and I will. Alright?” Dean asked.

“I understand,” Castiel said into the bed. He shifted restlessly as the mattress dipped and Dean repositioned himself on his knees by Castiel’s side.

Castiel had awoken at a reasonable hour that morning. He’d made coffee and cereal for himself and Dean. He’d done the dishes piled in the sink and completed a course reading for his printing class. He’d dressed in a clean shirt and drank a healthy amount of water and thrown more than one successful punch in the garage, only to attempt to close a door and manage to fuck his back up even more than it already was before. Castiel pressed his face further down into the soft folds of his pillow.

Dean’s breath was warm on Castiel’s ear as he spoke. “I’m gonna start now, okay?”

Castiel nodded.

A few seconds later Dean slowly and mindfully began to run his hands over Castiel’s back, his touch light over the sweat-dampened cotton shirt Castiel was wearing. To start, Dean was exceedingly tentative, the movements of his fingers barely noticeable. Dean was attentive to Castiel’s low exhales of pain, modulating the amount of pressure he applied as he began to press down with more force on the painful knots Castiel’s back was twisted into.

It hurt at first.

Every touch, even the gentlest ones, initially made Castiel’s teeth chatter and his hands clench themselves into fists where they were splayed out by his sides. His back was cramped and tender, his muscles swollen and hypersensitive. But Dean soothed Castiel when he shifted in discomfort or opened his mouth to say stop, which was fairly often during the first ten minutes.

Not long after he’d started Dean managed to locate the specific area of Castiel’s back that was causing him the most pain (which was on his lower right side) and began to concentrate more of his exertions there. Castiel hissed the first time Dean pressed his fingertips to the spot in a circular motion, but within a few minutes of it the tension there began to lessen, and his muscles to lose some of their unnatural tightness.

Dean continued to work with a quiet dedication even after that, however, getting as much of Castiel’s back under his hands as he was able.

As time wore on and Dean persisted, Castiel gradually stopped fearing that the next touch would hurt, or that Dean would encounter some part of his back that he simply couldn’t loosen and would have to take him to the doctor’s after all. Dean was consistent and firm, but careful enough that it rarely felt like he was applying too much pressure, and Castiel slowly began to relax.

Castiel’s eyes slid closed at some point, his hands loosening from where they’d been tightly curled into fists before as his legs fell open. It surprised him to realize he’d been holding his thighs firmly
together, and wondered why he’d bothered to do so. The smell of Dean’s skin and sweat was heavy in the room, and Castiel could hear the soft, even draws of his breaths. He could picture Dean in his mind’s eye, what he must look like as he dragged his hands over Castiel’s back, the full pink swell of his lower lip just visible where it was likely pulled between his teeth as he concentrated on the task before him.

When Dean bent low over him to get at a particularly stubborn knot in his shoulder, the heat of his body seeping over Castiel’s skin through the layers of fabric separating them, Castiel felt himself begin to harden in his athletic shorts. Moisture pooled at the tip of him where he filled and caught on the slight curve of his belly, the elastic of his shorts pressed uncomfortably near the same spot. Castiel shifted to alleviate some of the pressure as Dean moved to brace himself on the jut of Castiel’s hip.

He gasped into the pillow as Dean continued to work at him, none the wiser to how Castiel had been affected. Castiel could feel the fullness of one of Dean’s thighs where it was flush against the hip his hand was molded to. Dean’s breath was again on Castiel’s ear, and he was perfect and familiar and good.

“Dean, stop. Please, stop,” Castiel whispered.

“Shit. Did I hurt you?” Dean asked earnestly.

“No, you didn’t. I just…I need a shower. I’m—I’m dirty,” Castiel said hoarsely as he shoved Dean’s hand away.

He almost fell out of the bed in his hurry to get to his feet before exiting the room without looking back at his friend. He practically slammed the door shut.

As soon as he’d made it to the bathroom across the hall and locked himself in, Castiel stripped himself and turned the shower on, leaving the water ice-cold and quickly stepping beneath it.

He stood in the freezing spray for over fifteen minutes as he waited for his erection to go down and stay that way.

Castiel’s hands shook as he dried himself off, and he chose not to look at himself in the mirror.***

The following morning Castiel awoke to Dean’s head pillowed on his chest, a soft smile on his face as he slept. Castiel’s arms and legs were wrapped around Dean’s body in turn, and they were slotted almost perfectly together beneath the pale dawn light.

They must have found one another during the night despite Castiel’s attempts to keep that very thing from happening.

Instead of feeling comforted and joyful, Castiel fought the surge of nausea that hit him and slid out of the bed as quietly as he was able, managing to leave the room without waking Dean.

He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly once he was again in the locked bathroom.

White.

Castiel covered his mouth as he dry-heaved over the sink, reactionary tears gathering in his eyes as his stomach tried to empty itself.
When he returned to the guestroom ten minutes later, Dean was awake. He smiled guilelessly at Castiel.

“Mornin’, sunshine,” he said.

Castiel turned away without responding as he opened the closet door, busying himself with choosing a shirt for the day.

It was almost five o’clock in the evening when Castiel made the short drive over to Andy and Anselm’s.

He didn’t text, call, or in any other way warn Andy of his visit. He simply told Dean he had a friend to see, climbed into his side-swiped car, and hoped Andy wasn’t working a shift at the Wag-a-Bag that day.

But he needn’t have worried; when Castiel arrived at the familiar house and parked in the drive he saw through the window that Andy was sitting in his usual spot on the sofa, illuminated by the light of the television.

When Castiel got out of his car and knocked at the peeling front door, Andy let him in without question. The surprise he felt at Castiel’s arrival was clear on his face, but all he said in way of a greeting was, “Hey, man.”

Once they were both inside and situated on the couch, Andy loaded them a generous bowl in the belly of a heavy blue and green glass pipe. He piled it high with fragrant mounds of herb, not looking at Castiel as he did so. From the nearby kitchen, Castiel could hear Anselm as he poured himself a glass of water.

“Want greens?” Andy asked Castiel after Anselm had returned to his room.

“Thank you,” Castiel said as the other boy handed him the piece and a Bic.

For the next few minutes they passed the pipe back and forth, each taking a hit in turn until the room was slightly smoky. The anime playing on the TV was entirely in Japanese, and without looking at the subtitles Castiel had no idea what the characters were saying. As he felt the weed begin to affect him, he didn’t much care.

“What’s up?” Andy asked after the bowl had been cashed. He shook out the gray dust from the bowl piece as he waited for Castiel to respond, dumping the contents into an ashtray on the table nearby.

Castiel hesitated, watching Andy’s hands as they moved through the simple motions.

“I came to apologize.”

Andy stopped what he was doing, looking up at Castiel for the first time since they’d sat down.

“I’m sorry for how I acted when I saw you a few weeks ago, and for how things have been since then. I was…upset. It wasn’t fair to you.”

The way Andy’s face practically lit up at the words filled Castiel with guilt.

“It’s okay, man,” Andy said hurriedly. “I was just worried. I’ve never…seen you like that before. Are you feeling better? Meg, uh, told me she saw you the other day, said you’ve been living with
that guy you had a crush on.”

Castiel shook his head quickly. “It isn’t like that with Dean. We’re just friends.”

He picked at a hangnail on his left hand, thinking of the way Dean had smiled into his chest that morning.

Andy looked confused at his statement, but nodded anyway. “Okay. My bad. Well, uh, how’s that been? You missing campus life any?”

“Not at all,” Castiel answered, not surprised to find it was the truth.

He and Andy smoked and caught up with one another for almost an hour before Castiel decided it was time to take his leave. Before Castiel let himself out, Andy reached out and touched his hand lightly to his shoulder.

“I’m glad you came over, Cas, I really am. Why don’t you do it again sometime soon?”

Andy smiled, and Castiel nodded.

“I will.”

When he returned to Singer Salvage, it was just past seven-thirty.

Dean looked like he’d recently finished doing some work for Bobby by the time Castiel got back, and he made a familiar sight as he sat in his usual spot on the sofa in front of the old TV.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean said with a half-smile as he heard him come in. He was smudged with grease and oil, and rubbed a hand over his face self-consciously as Castiel looked at him. He only succeeded in smearing the streak of black in a broader stripe over the skin of his cheek.

But Castiel sat down beside his friend without comment, reaching out and gently wiping part of the stain away with his forefinger. Dean’s eyes fell closed, and he leaned into the touch with what sounded like a sigh.

When Dean lay his head on Castiel’s shoulder a minute or so later, Castiel took the remote to choose something new to watch, knowing both that Dean was already half-asleep and that he’d probably end up with grease on his shirt from his friend’s face. He didn’t mind either one, however.

At least Dean’s dirt could be cleansed with water.

***

Before his and Dean’s critique on Monday, Castiel ran into Gilda as he made his way to the painting studio.

“Castiel?”

Her voice was small and quiet, but it snapped Castiel from the thoughts he’d been buried in all the same. He’d been making a mental list of what all he needed to do before the critique began in his seminar class in less than twenty minutes, and was taken completely by surprise when he saw Charlie’s ex-girlfriend walking toward him on the wide concrete path.

It was another bright day out, and Gilda’s willowy silhouette was framed with midday sunlight as she made her way over. Not knowing what the best course of action was, Castiel stopped where he stood when he heard Gilda say his name, waiting there uncertainly as she approached him.
“Hey,” Gilda said once she was standing directly in front of him.

"Hello," Castiel said. His hand was tightening almost painfully around the strap of his bookbag, and he felt unable to stop it.

Gilda’s usually-thin cheeks were fuller than they’d been the last time Castiel saw her, some of their characteristic gauntness gone, and her eyes were clear. Her hair looked neatly washed and combed today, and she was wearing a shirt that covered the entirety of her midriff.

“I just, uh, came from Charlie’s,” Gilda said in explanation as she caught Castiel’s questioning gaze. A smile crossed her face, and her cheeks flushed a light pink. “It’s—we’ve been hanging out more lately."

It appeared time with Charlie had done her well.

“That’s wonderful,” Castiel said. His hand ached, the nylon of the strap digging into his palm as he stood there.

"How…are you?” she asked somewhat reluctantly.

Castiel hesitated.

He didn’t know what to say to Gilda and thought of the last time he’d seen her on campus. He’d been certain then that she knew what had happened to him. He closed his mouth and opened it again, his skin heating beneath the collar of his shirt.

“Cas, I’ve actually been wanting to talk to you since we…since I ran into you a few weeks ago. Walk with me?” Gilda said, taking the pressure off of Castiel to respond.

He nodded as they began to stroll down the walkway.

They walked together in silence for a few minutes before they came to sit together on a nearby bench beneath a picturesque oak tree. The wooden slats of the bench were old and gray under the cheerful sunlight. A small group of prospective students milled slowly along the sidewalk in front of them, their guide an overly enthusiastic senior student with a bright yellow t-shirt on.

"When I saw you, you looked kinda sick," Gilda said once the crowd had passed. “Are you? Sick, I mean."

“I’m tired,” Castiel said, nudging a fallen leaf with the toe of his shoe.

“Cas, you’ve known me for a few months now. You…you know the way I used to be,” Gilda said after a minute or so had passed in silence. This time she flushed with embarrassment rather than happiness, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’ve gotten fucked up a lot, more than I should’ve. I’ve hurt people. I’ve messed up and gotten myself into situations that could’ve been bad. I’ve also had things happen to me that weren’t my fault.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Castiel said, still looking at the leaf as he thought of what Charlie had confided in him a few months prior.

“What I’m trying to say is that if something happened that’s eating at you, you’re not alone. There’s a group that meets in the café down the street once a week. It’s a bunch of nice people. Some go to school with us and some just live in the area, but you can trust me when I say you’ll feel safe there. If you want to come with me, the next meeting is in a few days.”
“What sort of group?” Castiel asked.

“Uh, well…” Gilda paused for a moment, pointlessly adjusting her bag before continuing. “It’s kind of a mix, but it’s mostly for sexual assault or abuse survivors.”

In the distance, Castiel heard someone’s music playing.

“How did you know?” he asked without looking at her.

“I don’t know. I just saw you and the way you looked at me…it reminded me of myself, kind of. I just…I felt it, I guess.”

She was quiet for a long time after that, waiting for Castiel to speak again.

“He fucked me. People do it all the time.”

“Did you want him to?” Gilda asked.

Castiel shook his head. “He…he gave me something in a drink. I couldn’t move.”

“Not being able to stop someone doesn’t mean you wanted it,” Gilda said.

“It was just sex. I don’t know why I can’t—why I can’t seem to understand it,” Castiel said.

“Rape isn’t sex, Cas,” Gilda said.

The word made him flinch, and Castiel sighed in exasperation. “I wouldn’t know, Gilda. I’ve never —”

He stopped himself, lifting a finger to his mouth so he could gnaw at the skin around his nail. He knew Gilda’s mouth had fallen open and her eyes had widened, he could see it in his peripheral vision, and he couldn’t make himself look directly at her.

“Fuck. I’m so sorry, Cas.”

“Does Charlie know?” Castiel asked then.

"No. She knows something’s wrong, but I’m not going to tell her. That’s for you to do, if you ever want to," Gilda said.

“Does anyone else know? Did you report the guy?” Gilda asked after it became clear Castiel wasn’t going to volunteer anything else.

“No…Dean knows it happened,” Castiel said. “But I haven’t told him who.”

“I can understand that,” Gilda said. “He’d probably feel better knowing, though. Aren’t you guys…?” she let the question hang.

“He’s my friend,” Castiel said sharply. “Dean’s a good person and we are not—we aren’t anything more than that.”

“Charlie loves him, thinks the sun shines out of his ass. Is he helping you right now, then?” Gilda asked.

Castiel nodded, something constricting in his chest.
I don’t deserve him. I don’t deserve anything he’s done for me.

“He wouldn’t help you if he didn’t want to,” Gilda said as she put a hand on his forearm. He wondered if he’d said what he was thinking aloud, but Gilda gave no sign that he had.

"I keep thinking…maybe I’m getting better, but then something happens and I feel like I'm drowning."

Gilda nodded at Castiel’s words. "It hurts. It hurts so much. It almost killed me, and a few times I tried to finish the job myself. But, you know, I didn’t, and now…now I’m finally getting better. I know it might not feel like it now, but I promise, one day you won’t feel like you’re underwater.”

When Castiel looked down, he saw that he and Gilda’s hands were clasped together between them on the bench, her fingers small beside his.

Professor Harvelle seemed pleased with the array of works this past assignment had produced. She slowly made her way around the room with her small leather journal in hand as she jotted down a few notes to herself, a faint smile on her usually stern-face. Once everyone had arrived and settled themselves in their seats, Harvelle placed the little book on a nearby table and addressed the class.

“Alright, everyone. I trust you had a good break. I know I certainly did. I look forward to hearing about all of your works today. Does someone want to volunteer, or should I choose a victim?” she joked.

Lisa stood up somewhat abruptly from her chair, a forced-looking smile on her face. “I’ll go, professor.”

“Thank you, Lisa,” Harvelle said approvingly as she took a step back while Lisa moved her painting on its easel to the center of the studio, which had again been cleared out to create a make-shift viewing area.

Dean’s ex-girlfriend’s piece was a compact abstract work, resembling something Helen Frakenthaler might have liked but with brighter colors. Beside him, Castiel both saw and heard Dean shift uncomfortably in his chair as Lisa gave a brief explanation of her piece before stepping back for questions.

Harvelle smoothly put the class through their paces, and when it was Castiel’s turn to go an hour or so later, he hesitated a few seconds too long before stepping forward. His feet felt clumsy beneath him as he began to pull the easel his piece rested on toward the center of the room like the others had. Though he tried not to focus on the other students watching him do so, he couldn’t help but catch more than a few unreadable looks cast toward his distorted self-portrait.

He turned slowly to face the group of painters once his piece was properly centered and viewable beside him, clasping his hands tightly behind his back and trying to swallow around a dry throat.

“Okay, Castiel. What would you like to tell us about your painting before we ask our questions?” Harvelle inquired with interest.

Castiel wished he’d given in to his earlier urges and smoked a bowl before setting off toward campus. He wanted to turn and leave, to tell Harvelle that he was sick and needed to go to the health center on campus or that a relative had died, anything feasible to get him out of the studio. He was sweating again, he could feel it gathering on his skin. He thought of the things Gilda had said to him only minutes before, how sure she’d seemed that he would one day get better.
But would he? And how long could Dean be expected to carry Castiel’s dead weight before he finally did?

Castiel cleared his throat as if he had something to say, but didn’t know if he could actually bring himself to speak.

“Cas.”

Dean’s voice was like a balm, and in that moment Castiel didn’t have the strength to question the relief he felt at hearing his friend say his name. He made himself focus on Dean where he sat a few yards ahead in his low wooden chair. A few of the students had turned to look at Dean when he spoke, waiting for him to say something else. But he didn’t, and Castiel knew that he wouldn’t.

Dean smiled at him, and Castiel made him the center of his line of sight, taking a breath.

“This work is representative of trauma enacted on a known face, of the familiar becoming monstrous. The face used was mine, and I experimented with new techniques to see how I could convey the ideas of fracturing and psychological dissociation,” Castiel recited.

His knuckles were sore where his hands were still clenched behind his back, but he’d said the bare minimum needed for an artist’s statement, and Harvelle was nodding and writing something down.

“Is the…trauma you were attempting to represent based on something you’ve personally experienced?” The blue-haired girl Charlie was friends with asked when it was time for questions.

Castiel hesitated, but Dean met his gaze and held it. His green eyes grounded Castiel where he stood.

“No, it’s not,” Castiel lied.

That night Castiel took it upon himself to make boxed macaroni and cheese and packet lemonade for dinner. There wasn’t a chance it would be nearly as good as the meals Dean made considering there hadn’t been much in the pantry to work with, but neither Sam, Dean, nor Bobby complained as Castiel doled out their servings before sitting at the table himself.

After, Bobby left to drive Sam to a friend’s birthday party in town, and Dean and Castiel settled into their usual evening routine. That day it consisted mostly of studying in silence together as the sun began to set.

When Bobby returned from town, he immediately went to the kitchen for his customary whiskey, informing them Jessica’s parents would be driving Sam back later when Dean gave him a meaningful glance.

“Geeze, why don’t they just move in together already, save her parents the trouble,” Dean joked as he took a sip of the lemonade still in his glass.

It was then Bobby’s turn to give his surrogate son a pointed look, and Dean set his glass down on the table, clearing his throat awkwardly as he picked up his book again.

“That’s what I thought. I’ll be in the garage if you need me,” Bobby said with a snort before he disappeared through the back door with his tumbler in hand.

After Bobby had been gone long enough that he was sure he wouldn’t be coming back for something he’d forgotten, Castiel turned to look at Dean.
“You tired already? I am,” Dean said breezily as he stood up from where he’d been sitting near the coffee table.

“Dean, wait,” Castiel said as he reached out and grabbed Dean’s wrist, stopping him from leaving. Dean looked down at him expectantly, and Castiel realized he had nothing to say.

When Dean gently pulled Castiel to his feet, he went willingly, still grasping the other boy’s wrist. Dean’s eyes were soft in the fading light, and Castiel caught the way they fell to his mouth as he bit his lower lip.

Castiel let go of Dean’s arm then. He felt confused and warm and sick and elated all at once as he watched Dean touch his own lips with fingers slow and absent, as if he wished they were someone else’s.

***

On Wednesday morning Castiel had just finished his usual morning routine in the hall bathroom when he took what was meant to be a brief look at himself in the mirror.

“Cas?”

Castiel turned toward the sound of Dean’s voice, blinking his dry eyes slowly. He felt almost hyper-aware of the way his overlong hair lifted off the back of his neck as he moved. He didn’t know how long he’d been standing there, looking at his reflection.

“I don’t like the way I look,” Castiel said. The realization wasn’t one he’d been expecting.

Dean took the last few steps that separated them.

“You look fine to me, Cas.”

“I spent hours looking in the mirror for the painting, but today I—I don’t see myself,” Castiel said as he lifted a hand to his mouth. He tore a strip of skin from his left pointer finger with his teeth, but the copper of his blood didn’t anchor him as it had in the past. Dean reached out warily, pulling Castiel’s hand down and wrapping it in both of his to stop him from widening the small cut.

“Y’know, Cas,” he began. “Your hair being this long might be throwin’ you. I used to cut Sammy’s all the time growing up. I can give yours a trim today if you want.”

“You would do that for me?”

Dean nodded and released his hand. “’Course I would.”

“Yes, please,” Castiel thought he must have said, though he couldn’t remember actually doing so as Dean told him he was going to go grab the scissors and instructed that he stay put.

That was how Castiel came to be sitting on the edge of the toilet seat in the bathroom with a towel draped over his shoulders at five past nine in the morning. The curtains were pulled back from the lone window just above the tub, and the little room was sun-brightened and warm.

“Anything special you want me to do?” Dean asked, a pair of polished silver scissors in one hand and a wooden ruler in the other.

Castiel shook his head as he lifted his still-bleeding finger back to his mouth. “I just want it short
again. That’s all. Please.”

Dean was methodical in his process when he actually began to cut Castiel’s hair a few minutes later. He gently turned Castiel’s head this way and that as he went from side to side, shifting lightly on the balls of his feet.

He set the ruler down on the edge of the sink a few cuts in, and didn’t use it again after. Dean didn’t appear nervous or hesitant in his actions, and Castiel could tell he’d been telling the truth about cutting Sam’s hair.

As Dean worked, pieces of mahogany-colored hair began to fall to the floor in downy piles around Castiel’s bare feet. The strips of hair were three and four inches long, some of them, almost as long as Gabriel had worn his the last time Castiel saw him.

Dean’s full lips were pursed in concentration, his eyes slightly narrowed. At times, he came close enough that Castiel could feel the warmth of Dean’s breath on his cheeks or his forehead. The light touch of his hands was familiar and comforting, now, after how used to it Castiel had become over the past few weeks.

Fifteen minutes in, Castiel’s hand slipped from his mouth to fall loosely into his lap. His skin was itchy and warm as pieces of hair the size of his eyelashes dusted the crests of his cheekbones and the bridge of his nose.

Soon, he was moving only when Dean needed him to, becoming almost drowsy as the poor sleep he’d gotten the night before began to catch up with him.

“Y’know, it’ll be good to see your hair short again. When I first met you, I thought you were sorta preppy, actually. You just had it so neat and shit. I remember thinking…”

Dean was quiet for an almost uncomfortable few seconds, and when he started again he sounded somehow different.

“I just remember thinking you were so cool, collected and calm. Now, I know you were shy, but you seemed so intimidating.”

“You’ve always thought too much of me,” Castiel said.

Whether Dean heard him and chose not to answer or was none the wiser to his comment, Castiel didn’t know.

When Dean had finished less than twenty minutes later, he put the scissors down on the rim of the sink. The sound they made startled Castiel from what had almost become a nap.

“Allright, you’re done,” Dean said before he turned and rummaged in the small cabinet behind them. He grabbed a washcloth and held it under the water for a few seconds. Once he’d wet it all the way through, Dean held the rag out to Castiel so he could use it to wipe the stray bits of hair from his face. After he had, Dean took a step back, making room for Castiel to stand up.

As he looked down and saw the sheer amount of hair that had accumulated on the floor around his feet, Castiel felt a stab of apprehension. Dean was looking at him anxiously, though, and Castiel stood quickly, positioning himself in front of the mirror.

Castiel felt something beyond surreality as he took in what he saw before him.

His hair was no longer ugly and well-past his chin in lank, unkempt waves. Now, he looked almost
the way he had months ago, his hair trimmed into the shape it had been when he’d first come to campus and met his classmates. He was surprised Dean had been able to so successfully replicate its shape, even down to the slight downward slope of his bangs and the gradual taper of the sides. The thinness of Castiel’s face was less prominent this way, the sharp cut of his jaw and cheeks softened.

If he was a few pounds heavier, he might even have passed for his old self, the one who’d been clean and stupid and had never taken a shot or smoked a cigarette.

Castiel did his best to shove the thought aside as he gingerly ran his fingers through his newly-cut hair. The short, almost bristly feeling of it was unfamiliar again after so many weeks of letting it grow.

“I look like…me again,” Castiel said faintly.

Dean shuffled over to stand beside Castiel in front of the sink, soon reflected next to him in the toothpaste-speckled glass. Sunlight poured in through the dirty window to bathe them both in gold as Dean smiled. He reached out to sweep the longest part of Castiel’s fringe back from of his forehead, his touch so light it could barely be felt.

“Just comb it back the next time it’s wet, and it’ll dry like this,” Dean said.

Castiel wasn’t looking at his hair in the mirror as he spoke, but at the way Dean’s fingers were tangled in its dark strands.

Dean was mere inches away again as he inspected his work in the mirror, giving Castiel a final appraisal.

Castiel turned to face his friend, feeling his shoulder drag across Dean’s chest as he moved in the cramped bathroom. The gesture felt somehow new in the strangeness of that silent, sun-soaked moment, as if they’d never before been so close even though they now regularly slept pressed against one another in the guest bedroom. It was as if the light painted everything shining and unfamiliar.

As they stood there, Castiel tried and failed to think of a combination of words that would adequately express his thanks. He opened his mouth before closing it again, his throat dry. He could hear the quiet rustle of the wind just outside the window, and Dean was so close he could feel the warmth rolling off of his skin, could see the tiniest of the freckles that dotted his skin.

“Dean…” he began, but the perfect phrase didn’t come to his rescue.

As if he understood, Dean smiled at Castiel, the corners of his eyes crinkling the way they did when he laughed.

Castiel found himself helpless to do anything but smile back, wider and fuller than he’d smiled in days, or perhaps even weeks. He laughed softly, almost giddily, light-headed as he reached up to touch his own hair again.

Had someone told him yesterday that something as deceptively simple as a haircut could make him feel this way, he would have thought them naïve and said so.

He closed his eyes as he felt Dean’s hands come up to cup the sides of his face. Both of them were laughing, now.

“There you are,” Dean whispered. “Been lookin’ for you all year.”

When Castiel opened his eyes Dean was still smiling, and he found that he wanted to take the final
step and press his mouth to the slope of Dean’s cheek, the speckled tip of his nose. Dean smelled like soap and oil and cologne even when he was fresh out of the shower, and he felt like home and Castiel had never stopped loving him even though he’d been trying since the night he moved into Bobby’s.

Feeling the pit of his stomach churn, Castiel filled his lungs with sunlight and leaned forward.

When his mouth landed on the flat plane of Dean’s cheek, he felt stubble on his lips and Dean’s sharp exhale in his ear. The other boy wrapped his arms around Castiel as if by reflex, pulling him in.

“Cas,” Dean murmured.

His hands were warm where they grasped at Castiel’s sides, and he was trembling, Castiel could feel it as Dean moved closer. He bowed his head as if in prayer.

“Cas,” Dean said again. “You—”

Before he could finish, Castiel leaned forward again.

This time, what Castiel gently pressed his mouth to was Dean’s, still open as he made to speak.

Feeling like his ribs were splintering inside him, Castiel cupped Dean’s chin and held him there for a few, precious seconds, tasting toothpaste and coffee and the sweetness of Dean’s skin just the way it had tasted on Christmas eve before he pulled himself away.

Castiel left the bathroom without a word, ignoring the siren call of his own name and Dean behind him.

Guilt surged through his veins as he opened the guest room door and let himself inside.

He closed and locked the door behind him.

Castiel grabbed his weed and opened the window above his desk, torching what was left of the bowl he’d loaded the night before and watching as the smoke he gradually exhaled drifted out into the early morning sky.

Once the bowl was a pile of ash Castiel lay his head down on the desk.

He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly as the high from the weed began to crest, light blue and carrying him away like a tide from what he’d just done, and from the memory of Dean kissing him back.

***

The following day began strangely and ended the same way.

Castiel was awoken by a dream of his mother after a night spent alone in the guest room.

In his dream Naomi Novak had been dead and buried and he’d stood before the headstone, the marble of her final resting place cold under his hand as he reached out to touch it. He’d stared at her name on the grave marker, the letters elegant and simple. He’d tried to cry as he stood there in front of the second parent he’d put in the ground in five years. But all he’d felt was relief that he’d never have to lie to Naomi and tell her he was fine again.

He was disturbed when he woke up, the sky outside his window light enough that he dragged himself out of bed and into clothing comfortable enough to walk in even though he knew he likely
wouldn’t be leaving his room that day.

*What’s wrong with me?*

The question lingered long after the dream.

It haunted Castiel as he gathered his few belongings once again, as he straightened the mirror and cleaned the closet and closed and latched the window.

He’d decided he was going to leave Bobby’s within the next few days and return to his campus apartment as he struggled to fall asleep the night before. But though the decision had been made, Castiel felt dread at the thought of telling Dean. He stayed in the guest room for the duration of the day, even though he missed a class to do so.

That evening Castiel shivered as he lay in bed alone, hating how difficult it still was to sleep without Dean beside him.

He heard a soft rap on his door around midnight, but didn’t get up to answer it. He knew too well who it was.

Castiel thought of snow and closed his eyes tightly.

***

On Friday Castiel was awake at five in the morning, restless and plagued with the difficult decision of choosing a gesture with which to convey to Bobby, Dean, and Sam how grateful he was for the kindness they’d shown him.

He crept quietly to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee as he pondered what might be an appropriate gesture, staring idly out at the moon where it hung pale and heavy in the slowly lightening sky. His hands shook as he measured out the dark grounds and poured water into the maker’s white plastic top, listening to it percolate as the familiar smell filled the room.

Around him, the kitchen looked smaller than it had even the day before, drained of color and almost claustrophobic. The checkered dishcloths and patchwork rug were drab, the linoleum of the counter and the wood beneath Castiel’s feet dull and filmy.

He paused as he held his coffee cup in both hands, noticing a layer of dust on the old shelves and the cookbooks stacked upon them, the clumped dirt tracked into the entry way, the faint smell of rotting food wafting toward him from the sink. As Castiel set his mug down, he knew he’d decided what to do for his friends.

His mind made up, Castiel found Bobby’s cleaning supplies easily enough with a cursory search through the cluttered cabinets beneath the sink. Soon, armed with a clean dishrag and enough counter spray to scour the entirety of the house, Castiel began to thoroughly clean the kitchen and dining room.

He swept, scoured and rearranged. He reorganized the contents of the pantry. He cleaned out the refrigerator and arranged the products within it by color, size, and impending expiration date. He scrubbed the lime-filmed, dusty window panes above the sink until they gleamed like they were fresh off the assembly line.

Bobby and Sam woke around seven, and seemed surprised when entered the kitchen only to see
Castiel on his hands and knees scrubbing the floor around the oven. But he waved them off when they asked if he needed help, and they left easily enough.

After they’d left the house a half hour later, however, Castiel felt a pang of regret. He wondered if he should have told them goodbye rather than ignoring the situation in favor of attempting to remove every bit of dust and grime from beneath the twenty-year old stove.

Castiel’s back was throbbing by the time he’d crossed into the living room just past nine and started on that space as well. He was sweating profusely, and could feel bile in the back of his throat as he took a wad of damp paper towels to one of the front windows, working at a speck of dirt that seemed, for all intents and purposes, permanently inscribed onto the pane.

Why wouldn’t it come off?

Why couldn’t he get it off?

Castiel worked at the speck with his nail, unable to loosen it.

Why was it not budging?

It was the one thing keeping that part of the window from being spotless, an ugly flaw on an otherwise smooth surface, and Castiel was half-convinced he would need to take a knife to it when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

He startled violently, whipping around only to come face-to-face with Dean, who was still in his pajamas and looked like he’d accidentally slept for too long.

Castiel was holding a dirty rag in one hand and a bottle of Clorox multi-surface household cleaner in the other, and he almost dropped both at the sight.

"Sorry, sorry," Dean apologized quickly. "It, uh, it looks good in here." His voice was strained, his posture formal and awkward.

Castiel nodded mutely, his mouth too dry to speak.

"Why don't you give it a rest for today, huh? I think you've done enough," Dean said. His hand was still on Castiel's shoulder, the weight of it heavy.

Castiel shook his head and took a few steps back. His t-shirt was sticking to the skin of his sweat-dampened back, and the thought of Dean seeing it repulsed him.

"I'm almost done, I can't just stop now," he explained.

Dean looked at him for a long time. Behind him was the now-spotless kitchen and dining nook, and Castiel focused on a point above Dean’s shoulder where a row of gleaming pots were arranged on a drying rack. The oven clock read 9:41am.

"You've done more than any of us ever do. I can see my face in the floor." Dean gestured to the now-shining hardwood beneath his feet. "Trust me, it's perfect. I can't even remember the last time this room looked this good. You look like you’ve been at it for a while this morning. Aren't you tired?"

Castiel was exhausted. He was shaking and on his fourth cup of coffee and had gotten so little sleep the night before that he felt a few wrong moves from dropping where he stood. But he shook his head.
"There's still dust all over the shelves and the—the window there. I need to finish, Dean."

Castiel pointed to the front windows a yard or so to his left, which were still smudged with fingerprints and a fine layer of dirt.

"What’s wrong?" Dean asked as he took a step toward him.

"I'm fine." Castiel swallowed with difficulty as he looked down at his own feet. "There's just so much dirt."

Dean opened his mouth to respond, and Castiel pushed past him to go back into the kitchen. His knees felt fluid and precarious as he moved, and the rag in his hand dripped cold liquid onto his bare feet. He would stop cleaning and sit in silence in the guest room all day if it would make Dean let this go. Castiel had gone over in his mind what he would say to Dean all that morning and the perfectly reasonable explanation he would give him, but now that the opportunity had presented itself he wanted nothing less than to take it.

"Is this…is this about the other day?" Dean asked from behind him.

Castiel froze where he stood, focused on staying completely still with an intensity that made the base of his skull begin to throb in protest.

“I don’t want to talk about that,” he said.

He shook out the rag and folded it into a neat square even though it was still covered in cleaning product. He could hear Dean a few feet behind him, the drag of his pant legs on the linoleum, the sound of his lips parting as he inhaled and prepared to speak.

“Look, I…” Dean hesitated. “I’m sorry if I messed up. I know I might’ve—”

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

Castiel turned to face his friend again in time to see Dean’s eyes widen and his features grow slack with disbelief.

“What? Fuck, Cas, why?” Dean asked.

“I think I would be better off back at my apartment. Thank you for all that you’ve done, but I’ve made up my mind,” Castiel said, trying not to meet Dean’s crestfallen gaze.

“Did I scare you yesterday? Did I—did I freak you out?” Dean asked, his hands extended toward him.

Casted shook his head. “No, Dean. You never have. What happened yesterday was my fault, and I’m aware of that. I—I was selfish.” His voice caught in his throat, and he looked down at the rag he was still holding.

“You wanted to kiss me, then? You didn’t do it just ‘cause you thought I wanted to?” Dean asked.

Castiel felt heavy and sick, weighed down with the thing that had been like a stone in the center of his chest for weeks.

“Did you?” Dean asked again.

“Cas, did you want to?”
“I was wrong to do what I did, Dean,” he said at last. “I didn’t think of the consequences of my actions.”

Castiel was lying. He’d known very well what the consequences of the kiss would be, but had wanted like he hadn’t in months, and had been greedy in a way he rarely allowed himself to be.

“I wanted you to kiss me, and I thought—” Dean paused, licking his lips. “I thought I imagined it, the look in your eyes. Did I?”

“This isn’t fair,” Castiel said abruptly.

Dean’s face fell.

“This isn’t fair to you, Dean. None of this is. I can’t keep letting you do this for me.” Castiel stopped there, balanced precariously on the sharp, bitter edge.

“What are you talking about?” Dean asked.

When had he taken another step forward? Castiel didn’t know.

Castiel raised his hands to clutch at the sides of his head, his shorn hair slipping through his fingers. He closed his eyes and inhaled thickly, wanting to cry and forcing himself not to.

“Every time it comes up, you tell me it wasn’t my fault. But Dean, it was, and you don’t believe me.”

“I—” Dean tried to interject, but Castiel held a hand up, silencing him. He opened his eyes and made himself face the other boy again.

“You don’t understand,” Castiel repeated. “When he…when it was happening, I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t make him stop, and I…I thought of you.” Castiel’s voice broke on the last word, and he slid to the floor the way he’d wanted to all morning, sitting cross-legged on the hardwood he’d just cleaned.

“While he was on top of me, I pretended I was somewhere with you. I imagined we were talking in my room and that I’d never gone to the frat house. But it didn’t change anything. I went to that party alone. I went upstairs, into his room. I took the drinks and he fucked me.” Castiel’s face was becoming numb and cold.

"I can’t take back any of this.

He was shuddering, now, his shoulders shaking and the sore muscles of his back tensing painfully as he was again dragged back to that night at the frat house, to Drew’s body heavy on his, to the red ache and the nauseous slick and the bile sharp and sour in his stomach as he was consumed, subsumed, and ruined while outside no one had been any the wiser.

Dean crouched down beside Castiel as he spoke.

“Why can’t you fucking believe me when I say it’s my fault?” Castiel reached out and grabbed a fistful of Dean’s shirt and pulled him inward, as if touching him would make him understand.

“I don’t deserve your help. I don’t deserve any of this, the food you make or the time you spend or the fact that you act like I’m not a colossal fuck-up. I can’t keep doing this to you, I can’t keep… taking from you and wanting you, not when I can never be good enough to have you, not now. A haircut doesn’t change anything. You don’t know what it was like, how many shots I took and how easy I made it for him to hurt me. You don’t know and I don’t want you to, not when knowing
would make you see me for what I am. But you need to.”

Castiel forced himself to search Dean’s face in the silence that followed, certain he’d said the one thing that would make Dean realize just the kind of person he’d been falling asleep with almost every night, the person whom he’d kissed back.

But Dean didn’t look disgusted or angry, he looked heartbroken.

He put his hand gently over Castiel’s where it was still fisted in the front of his t-shirt.

“I could never see you as anything but who you are,” Dean said.

Castiel pulled away.

Dean followed him when Castiel stood on trembling legs and backed into the kitchen. Outside the pristine windows, the world was beginning to truly wake up, and Castiel made himself watch a cardinal as it came to perch on the sill just beyond, afraid of what would be said next.

“It was not your fault, I promise you. You can’t keep telling yourself that,” Dean said.

The bright red of the cardinal blurred before Castiel’s eyes, he was staring at it so intently.

“Cas,” Dean continued. “why do you think I asked you to come live with me?”

“You felt obligated. You didn’t think I would be fine on my own, and you were right,” Castiel said woodenly.

“No,” Dean said firmly. “I asked because I wanted you with me.”

“Dean, I can’t be another drain on you, I can’t be just like your father and let you take care of me because you’re good at it and you always will be. You can’t let me do that to you,” Castiel mumbled.

Dean shook his head almost frantically, coming to stand between Castiel and the window and intercepting his view.

“You don’t get it.”

“Then explain it to me,” Castiel retorted.

“Talking to you, helping you, being with you, Cas, those are the good things in my life. That’s the stuff I think about when I’m pissed off or I’m tired or I feel like shit. Yeah, I got Sam and Bobby and Charlie, and I like being with them, but they aren’t you.”

Castiel opened his mouth to object, but Dean kept talking.

“I know the last few weeks have been hell, and I can’t even imagine how you feel most the time. But I also know you’re strong, and that you’ve been gettin’ better. I see it every day,” Dean said. He was framed with sunlight, now, partially silouetted by the dawn.

“I don’t do anything for you, Dean. I can’t give you all that you’ve given me, I can’t repay you.” Castiel didn’t understand.

“I don’t want anything from you. Shit, I don’t need anything from anybody. Anything I want I can get if I put my mind to it. I just need you,” Dean said.

“How can you possibly think you need someone like me when I—”
“Because I love you,” Dean interrupted softly.

His eyes were fearful, his full lips growing red and swollen as he bit self-consciously at them. As soon as Dean had finished speaking he turned away, lifting a hand to his mouth as if to cover it before thinking better of it.

The absolute silence that followed was deafening.

Castiel’s hands fell to his sides, the rag landing on the floor beside his feet. He couldn’t look away from Dean’s eyes when he turned to face him again a few seconds later.

“You love me?” he asked quietly.

Dean nodded, looking down at his feet

“Even after everything that’s happened?”

Dean sighed shakily, and a few long minutes passed before he spoke again.

“Always, Cas.”

“Dean, I—I’m not…good.” Castiel’s throat filled, and he wrapped his arms around himself.

“I’m on academic probation with an alcoholic for a father and less than two hundred bucks in my bank account and I just got paid. I’ve broken most of my bones and didn’t know what home felt like ’til Bobby and I’m not that smart,” Dean said, his cheeks flushing a deep red but his voice determined.

“That’s not true,” Castiel insisted reflexively.

“Most of the time I feel like I’m holding you back,” Dean said. The words were spoken haltingly, a start-stop. “I know you could find someone better to hang out with.”

“There’s no one better than you,” Castiel said, the words coming as easily and naturally as breathing.

He looked down after he’d spoken, feeling as if he’d bared his soul with the words. He heard Dean take another step forward as he saw his bare feet enter his line of sight.

“I don’t…I don’t think I’m worth all this,” Castiel said, focusing on the gray, torn hem of Dean’s sweatpants.

“You’re one of the best people I’ve ever met. What’s happened to you doesn’t change that. You’re...you’re special. It fucking kills me that you believe you’re some lost cause,” Dean said. “I’ve never met anyone else like you.”

“I could say the same of you,” Castiel said.

“Don’t we make a pair?” Dean asked with a huff of empty laughter.

Castiel looked back up, then, at the messiness of Dean’s hair, the way the early-morning light fell through its strands and made him beautiful the way he only was when they were alone together in the quiet.

“I want to be with you, Cas. Whatever it is we’re doing now, that’s what I want. Not you like you think you need to be, or you like you think I want. Just you. Whatever happens, whatever comes,” Dean said as he came closer, still.
“Why do you love me?” Castiel breathed.

When Dean reached out to take his hand, Castiel let him, interlacing their fingers snugly together.

Castiel didn’t know what he’d predicted Dean would say, if he was actually expecting an answer at all, but it wasn’t what Dean ended up saying a few minutes later.

“I don’t know how not to.”

Outside, the cardinal spread its wings and took flight, and Castiel’s heart went with him.

Chapter End Notes

Are you crying and screaming?
(I only ask because I definitely was!)
Comments? Thoughts? Suggestions? Feel free to post here or inbox me on Tumblr!
Thank you so much for reading!
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

If you haven’t read this, I would highly recommend doing so before embarking on this chapter reading. It’s a short time-stamp from Dean’s perspective that sheds some light on a few events that occur.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

On Saturday, Castiel awoke at half-past seven. The room was warm and the air dense even though beyond the window, the sun was still creeping its way up the distant horizon.

Next to Castiel, pressed to his hip with one hand tangled beneath their shared pillow, Dean yawned and turned drowsily onto his side, roused from sleep as well.

“Hey,” he said, his green eyes clear for so early an hour.

“Good morning,” Castiel responded.

“I had this…weird dream,” Dean murmured, his toes peeking out from under the edge of the sheet covering them. His voice was contemplative.

“What was it?” Castiel asked as he smoothed the threadbare sheets beneath his palms, waiting for Dean to answer.

“I was back at the park, but this time I was alone and there was this huge mountain behind the swings, so I started climbing it.” Dean’s brow furrowed.

“Did you reach the top?”

Dean shook his head. “Not even close. I feel like maybe I’ve dreamed it before and I didn’t get to the top then, either.”

“The day you reach the top is likely the day the dream ceases to have meaning,” Castiel said.

“Isn’t that how it always works?” Dean remarked. A sliver of light fell onto the slant of his cheekbone.

“Always,” Castiel said.

“Want to sleep a little longer?” Dean asked him. His arm was flush to Castiel’s and their fingers overlapped at the ends, they lay so close together in the bed.

“I don’t think I can,” Castiel said.

He was thankful when Dean moved forward and enfolded Castiel in his arms, pulling him into the firm anchor of his chest.

Even as he began to sweat from the heat of the room and that of Dean’s body, Castiel pressed his face into Dean’s neck and breathed in, hoping the day would pass quickly.
The clinic where they’d dropped Sam off was empty when Dean drove them less than an hour later.

They arrived as it was opening for the day, and were the first people to sign in that morning. It smelled like Windex and burnt coffee in the gray waiting room, and Castiel filled out a stack of forms pinned to a battered clipboard as Dean stood next to him with his hands jammed into his pockets.

When Castiel had finished and handed the papers back to the blonde receptionist at the desk, Castiel saw her look overlong at the things he’d checked off under the ‘reasons for visit’ section (sexual health, STD prevention). After she looked back up, her eyes flickered from Castiel over to Dean and back before she pulled her lower lip between her teeth in what resembled distaste. Then she let out a brief, uncomfortable laugh and set his paperwork to the side, briskly waving them to one of the many empty chairs.

“A clinician will be with you in a few minutes. Your friend has to stay out here when you go.”

Unsure how to respond to her reaction, Castiel simply nodded and turned, choosing a chair and taking it. Dean sat down next to him.

Castiel stared blindly ahead at a spot in the dull, off-white of the far wall. His hands were clenched into fists in his lap.

_They’re only tests_, he reminded himself.

When Dean began to try and take his hand over the armrests of their plastic chairs, Castiel pulled away jerkily and then instantly regretted it.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Dean didn’t say anything, he only reached for Castiel’s hand again. This time he found no resistance when he laced their fingers together.

Ten minutes later, Castiel was called to the back by a tired-looking brunette.

“I’ll be right out here,” Dean reminded him as Castiel followed the nurse to one of the examination rooms.

After she’d closed the door behind them, she instructed Castiel to sit on the edge of the paper-covered examination table and wiped the inside of his elbow with alcohol. She drew three small vials’ worth of his blood, and after that swabbed the inside of his mouth a q-tip and put it in a plastic tube.

“Okay. For the last few tests I’m going to need you to fill this cup to the black line, and I’m also going to have to swab your urethra before that happens.” The nurse gestured to a clear plastic cup on the table next to her, a clean q-tip already in her hand.

“Will—will that hurt?” he asked.

The nurse gave Castiel a strange look, as if she wasn’t sure whether or not he was serious.

“…I mean, you’ll probably experience a little discomfort. But if you want to get all the panels run, you need to do it. Do you still want to or not?” She sounded almost bored, her eyes diverted as she looked at something on the exam room floor.
“Uh, yes. Yes, I do,” Castiel said.

“Step out of your pants, please.”

The drive back was silent. Castiel didn’t know what he would say if he were to open his mouth, and instead of trying to figure it out, he looked outward as they passed the Wag-a-Bag and HEB and Jimmy’s Diner.

When they pulled into the driveway of Singer Salvage they let themselves in through the unlocked back door. Castiel could hear Sam on the phone in his room, and Bobby was likely in the back office doing paperwork.

Dean reached out to put a hand on Castiel’s shoulder.

“Look, Cas, about what happened—”

Castiel tugged his arm out from under him and shook his head. “I need to use the restroom.”

He turned and made his way over to the hall bathroom, leaving Dean where he still stood in the back entryway.

Castiel closed the bathroom door behind himself, wondering for a second if he should lock it. He decided not to in a second more and slipped out of his tennis shoes in front of the old, claw-foot bathtub. He was shaking as he reached out his hand to twist the lime-encrusted knob that turned on the water.

As the shower began to run, Castiel closed his eyes and listened to the patter of it on the cool, white enamel.

He stepped under the spray with his clothes still on before the water was warm. He could hear knocking coming from outside and the sound of Dean’s voice repeating his name. When Castiel turned his head to the side he saw the shadows of Dean’s restless feet underneath the door. Rather than responding or moving to open it, Castiel sat down beneath the lukewarm water. He wished he was high.

“Cas? Can you answer me?” Dean asked.

Castiel rested his chin on the tops of his knees after drawing them to his chest, inhaling slowly.

“I’m comin’ in if you don’t say anything, Cas.”

Castiel didn’t.

Dean apologized and opened the bathroom door just as the water began to warm, and Castiel said nothing. He felt only a cool numbness seeping through his bundled limbs. He couldn’t feel his fingers where they were wrapped around his knees, nor could he feel the ubiquitous sting in his back. He had a bandaid stretched over the inside of his elbow, and somehow he could still smell the antiseptic and pale, waxy paper he’d lain on.

“Hey.” Dean was kneeling next to the tub.

Castiel looked over at him, then back at the emptiness of the tub as dirt ran from the hems of his jeans down the drain.
Dean touched Castiel’s arm so lightly he could barely feel it. "Is it okay if I get in?"

Castiel nodded, and Dean stood up to shrug out of his plaid overshirt before bending and unlacing his workboots. He moved gracefully as he undressed, even with his shoulders covered in scars and his knuckles torn and healed over.

When Dean began to climb into the tub wearing only his worn jeans and a wife-beater, he did so timidly. He braced both hands on the sides of the tub and, little by little, positioned himself in front of Castiel, facing him.

For over ten minutes, they sat in the tub together beneath the spray. Weak sunlight filtered in through the window above, coloring the room a sickly rose-yellow. Castiel’s teeth began to chatter as the water cooled by slow degrees, and Dean slid forward, closing up the few inches of space still between them.

“I know what she thought, that woman,” Castiel said into the space over Dean’s shoulder.

“People like that don’t understand shit. They don’t know you or me,” Dean responded. “Try not to think about her.”

“What should I think about?” Castiel asked.

“This,” Dean said as he rubbed small circles over Castiel’s back.

“Just this.”

***

When Castiel drove to Andy and Anselm’s on Sunday both to buy weed and visit his friend, he was surprised to see Meg through the living room window. Both she and Andy were laughing and pressed close to one another on the old sofa.

Andy must have heard him pull up, and opened the door to greet Castiel before he had the chance to knock.

“Hey, man!” he said with enthusiasm as Castiel stepped inside.

“Hello, Andy,” Castiel greeted.

“Hey, Clarence. You’re looking…extremely neat today, actually,” Meg said from behind their dealer, a wide grin quickly breaking across her face. “Y’know, I actually kinda missed you lookin’ all clean-cut.”

She stood from the couch and threw her arms around him. After a few seconds, she let go of Castiel’s shoulders and stepped back to begin running her fingers through his hair.

“Thank you, Meg,” Castiel said as he lightly took her wrists and moved them back down to her sides.

“I know, I know. Personal space. Anyway, who did your hair?” Meg asked good-naturedly as she sat back down on the couch. She began loading them a fresh bowl in Andy’s green and yellow bong.

“Dean,” Castiel said. “He offered.”

“Is there anything Winchester can’t do?” Meg asked rhetorically as she lay her head on Andy’s
“Probably,” Castiel answered.

“You look good, man. I missed the short hair,” Andy said with a laugh as Meg blew a plume of smoke into their faces.

“I did, too,” Castiel said as he took the pipe Meg handed to him.

That night Dean went out to pick Sam up from Jess’s and make a run to the store, and Castiel had the room to himself for a short while.

He busied himself with cleaning for a few precious minutes: organizing the open textbooks and pencils on his small desk; pushing his shoes under the bed so they couldn’t be seen; wiping the mirror on the wall down with one of his dirty shirts.

It was nine twenty-two when he made himself stop stalling and dialed his sister’s cellphone.

“Castiel?” Anna answered before the first ring had finished.

“Hello, Anna.”

“Oh, god, are you okay?” she asked in a rush. She sounded uncharacteristically flustered.

“No,” Castiel said simply. “I’m sorry for what I said to you. It was unfair. Do you want to come over this weekend so we can… talk?”

“Yes,” Anna said without hesitation.

“Good,” Castiel said. “I’ll speak to you then.”

“Wait, Castiel,” Anna said before he could end the call. “I told Gabriel to give you some space after you texted me. Has he?”

“Yes. Thank you. I’m going to call him soon,” Castiel said.

“Are you going to tell him what you told me?” Anna asked.

“I don’t know,” Castiel told her honestly.

“I love you,” Anna said seriously.

“I love you, too, Anna.”

Castiel lay down on the bed with the phone still in his hand, looking over at the poem pinned to his wall and catching the last of its words.

‘and we sleep together like
that
with our
secret pact
and it’s nice enough to
make a man
weep, but I don’t
weep, do
you?’

Castiel thought of Dean, and spread his arm over the space he’d occupy again soon.

***

When Castiel prepared himself and Dean a stovetop meal and a fresh pot of coffee Tuesday after they’d driven back from campus, he realized he’d been waiting for Dean to take back what he’d said on Friday.

But he hadn’t, and Castiel began to wonder if he wasn’t going to.

***

Dean and Castiel spent most of Wednesday together in the partially-empty fine arts building after their classes ended. It rained on and off outside as the afternoon and top of the evening passed, and periodically Castiel made sure to take a break from his brainstorming session to sit beside the tall windows at the end of the studio. The rain made the glass foggy and cool, and the sky beyond was pale silver and white.

“Apparently Bobby’s making pot roast tonight,” Dean said unexpectedly from Castiel’s right.

Castiel looked toward him. “What time is it?”

Charlie was sitting a few yards away in her own space, and beyond the three of them there was only one artist in the studio. It was mostly quiet in the room; both their fellow painters had apparently decided to use headphones rather than speakers that day to listen to their music. But the rain fell in splats and drips and patters onto the concrete and metal and the soft green of grass outside, and the sound seeped its way in.

“Kinda late. We should probably go soon,” Dean said.

He and Castiel had been parsing through potential ideas for their last projects of the seminar most of their time in the studio. During their class session on Monday Harvelle had informed her students their final works would be due the day before finals began on April 29th. Altogether, the class had a little over a month to finish their final assignments, and Castiel knew he needed to generate and commit to an artistic concept as quickly as possible; the main obstacle was that it was easier said than done.

Castiel was doubtful he’d be able to create something cohesive enough to tie his previous two pieces together, but knew at least that he didn’t want to put himself through another twenty-plus hours of staring at his own face in a mirror. Beyond that, however, he had no direction in which he felt moved.

“Yes, let’s go,” he tiredly agreed as he stood up and took a step toward Dean.

On their way out they bid Charlie a quick goodbye before heading down the stairs to the parking lot. It was still raining as they sprinted toward the Impala, and by the time they slid into its seats Castiel’s hair and shirt were damp and heavy.

On the drive home, Castiel turned to Dean and said, “I have to call Gabriel tonight. Will you…be with me when I do?”

“Yeah,” Dean said as he reached over and took Castiel’s hand.
He didn’t let go until they reached the house, and Castiel didn’t ask him to.

Two hours, two plates of pot roast, and two pipe-bowls later found Castiel and Dean sitting together on the guest room bed. It smelled faintly of weed around them, and Dean’s eyes were already red-rimmed and heavy. Bobby’s radio (pilfered from the kitchen) was sitting on Castiel’s desk, and a classic rock station was playing Stairway to Heaven; Castiel recognized the lyrics easily now after so many hours spent with the band playing in the background.

Dean tried and failed to stifle a yawn behind his hand as the song ended.

“Are you tired?” Castiel asked him.

“No,” Dean said as he began to stretch out slowly onto his back. Soon, he was lying long-ways on the bed, his head only a few inches away from being in Castiel’s lap. “I’m good. You might want to call soon, though.”

When Castiel dialed Gabriel’s cell, he did so with deliberate slowness, watching the numbers pop up onto the screen one by one. After he pressed ‘call’ he closed his eyes and put the phone to his ear.

It was almost ten at night in both Texas and Chicago; perhaps Gabriel had already gone to bed.

It was when Gabriel answered that Castiel admitted to himself he’d been hoping that would be the case.

“Cassie? Is that you?”

“Hello, Gabriel,” Castiel said. He felt Dean’s hand smooth itself palm-down over the small of his back, and tried to relax into the touch. “I’m…returning your call.”

“Yeah?”

“Well…yes,” Castiel said.

Gabriel huffed a dry laugh on the other end of the line before exhaling a long, slow breath.

"Okay. First, I gotta ask: do you even want to talk to me?” he asked.

The question took Castiel completely by surprise. He had expected Gabriel to take the first available opportunity to unload everything he wanted to say as quickly as he was able to say it, not for him to ask for Castiel’s consent to converse with him.

“I do want to talk to you,” he said. “Thank you for asking. I—thank you.”

“Well, yeah. Well…fuck, bro. I don’t even know where to start. I miss the hell out of you and want to catch up, Cassie. See what’s hangin’. You think we could do that?”

The question was an innocent one, but it made something twist in Castiel’s belly all the same.

The faltering hopefulness he’d felt only seconds before began to evaporate.

How much could he tell Gabriel? How much would his brother believe or even want to know? Was it best to simply be cordial toward him and selective about what he revealed? Could he one day trust Gabriel enough to tell him the truth about his time in college and how tense things had become at home in his absence? Castiel wasn’t sure. When he spoke, he said the only thing he felt he could.
“I’m painting and hoping it isn’t terrible. There’s not much to catch you up on.”

Gabriel laughed, and the second time his voice was less strained. “I know that, dude. I mean, what else is new? Any girlfriends? Boyfriends? New habits? As long as you haven’t picked up heroin I think anything new you tried probably woulda been good for you. You got any tats you haven’t shown anyone yet?”

“I smoke pot now. I thought of you the first time,” Castiel said. From below him, Dean began to laugh softly.

Gabriel whooped loudly. “Man, I did not see that comin’, you square! Does Mom know? Tell me she knows and did her whole ‘I’m-so-disappointed-in-you-son-I-don’t-even-think-I-have-to-punish-you’ bullshit!”

Castiel felt a small smile curl the corners of his lips. He knew just what Gabriel was referring to.

“She has no idea, Gabriel, and I plan to keep it that way. I imagine she has reason enough to disown me if she finds out I don’t like women.”

“I feel like we all kinda knew that already,” Gabriel quipped. “I did, at least. How could I not, though? No one likes the statue of David that much, Cassie. You spent hours sketching it and I remember that one time you decided you decided you were going to pay it an homage and…”

And so the conversation went. Castiel and Gabriel fell into the familiar rhythm they’d kept all their lives together, with Gabriel doing most of the talking as Castiel listened and offered a comment once every few minutes.

Gabriel made him laugh. He referenced things Castiel hadn’t heard of and had to have explained to him. He mentioned that Anna was still seeing the woman she’d met at the grocery store and they seemed happy. He told an anecdote about his experience with flambéing and the singed eyebrow-chic look he wore for weeks until they grew back.

But it was what Gabriel didn’t say that Castiel found himself listening for; he didn’t mention that he’d considered what his youngest siblings would do if he suddenly disappeared; he didn’t ask if Naomi had looked for him after he left; he didn’t say if he had missed his family the first few weeks he lived alone in the city. In fact, amidst the talk of Chicago and Kali and pain au chocolat, Gabriel seemed to carefully skirt the subject of his departure from home.

Castiel knew why Gabriel had left home. He knew where he had gone and what he had done since. But he didn’t know why Gabriel had left the way he did.

“…been thinking about Tessa lately, actually. She was always a godsend when she was around. She still working for Mom, by the way?” Gabriel was asking.

“Gabriel, I…” Castiel’s throat was dry.

“What’s up?”

Castiel knew that he should end the call on a light note. It had been a good conversation.

He was quiet for too long, and Gabriel said his name. “You okay?”

“I understand why you left, Gabriel. I do,” Castiel began. “But why didn’t you at least…tell us where you were going? You always said—”
One day, we’ll get out of here, Cas, I promise.

Castiel couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence, and began again.

“I know you needed to protect yourself. You’ve always been good at that. But we…we were never as good,” Castiel said. “If we could have at least known where you were, or how long you’d be there —”

“I fucked you both over, Cas.” Gabriel gently cut him off. The words came readily, as if he’d been waiting for his cue.

Castiel didn’t speak for a long time.

“I didn’t know you realized that,” he said at last.

“I do,” Gabriel said plaintively. “I just…ignored it. I just wanted to leave after I fought with Michael…I thought I was gonna do something stupid if I stayed, so I bought a bus ticket. I knew it was shitty and that it would hurt.”

Something swooped in Castiel’s stomach at the words.

“I have to go now, Gabriel,” he said. “I’ll call you soon.”

He ended the call before his brother could respond, looking down at Dean as the other boy gazed up at him sleepily.

“Are you okay?” he asked Castiel.

“I hung up on my brother after he told me he knew he was wrong to leave the way he did,” Castiel said. “I’ve wanted to hear him say that since the day I realized he was gone, and when he did I hung up.”

“Sometimes the things you think you want to hear don’t actually make you feel better,” Dean said. His hand had stilled on Castiel’s back.

“What have you heard that didn’t make you feel better?” Castiel asked.

Dean was quiet for so long Castiel was about to tell him he didn’t have to answer, but as he opened his mouth to do so, Dean responded.

“That Dad hates himself, not me.”

Castiel slipped his hand down to cup the side of Dean’s face, watching his eyes as they fluttered closed. His warm skin was dusted lightly with dark blonde stubble, and Castiel brushed his palm against it.

“He said that to you?”

Dean didn’t open his eyes to answer. “When I was still in high school. Pretty sure he doesn’t remember.”

Castiel slid down and to the unoccupied side on the bed so that he and Dean were lying side-by-side together, feeling something painful and tight bloom between his lungs as he reached for Dean.

The room around them had grown steadily darker as they talked, the stars and moon outside brighter.
Castiel tucked himself into Dean’s side, pressed tight together everywhere that he could reach, hands and feet and chests and hips. He curled himself in toward the other boy so tightly he could feel the rocking motion of Dean breathing against his chest and stomach, could feel the warm breaths he exhaled on his nose and cheeks.

Castiel wished he could give Dean a life free of the pain it had been riddled with.

But as long as John Winchester was a part of theirs, Castiel didn’t know if he could.

***

The following day, Charlie insisted on taking Castiel out for lunch.

“Tell Dean you’re just spending some time with me, ‘kay?” she said as she ushered him over to where she’d parked by the fine arts building. It was half-past noon, and as Castiel buckled his seatbelt he wondered how obvious it must be that he and Dean were spending most of their time together for her to be so straightforward.

She drove them to the same sandwich shop Castiel now knew Arnold worked at, though when they went inside, he saw he wasn’t manning the counter that day. There was a bit of a lunch rush, and it gave them a chance to catch up as Charlie talked at length about her cat, her mother, and an issue she was having with an acquaintance on campus.

When they reached the register and ordered, it only took a few minutes before they were handed their sandwiches and moving to select a table in the dining room. After they got their drinks and sat down, there was silence between them for a few minutes as they both took a large first bite of their food.

Lately, Castiel had been starting to appreciate the tastes of his favorite foods again, and he was also a little stoned from the bowl he’d smoked that morning. He savored the sandwich as he ate, the feeling of doing so still unfamiliar.

Their conversation resumed soon after they’d each had something to eat.

“So, lay it on me. How’re things?” Charlie asked before she threw a potato chip into her mouth.

“Things are, of course, fine,” Castiel said, shoving a bite of sandwich into his face.

“You know what you’re thinkin’ of doing for your last project?” Charlie asked without missing a beat.

“Not at all,” Castiel said through the subsequent mouthful of food.

“Not even a little?” Charlie prodded.

Castiel shook his head, wincing. He hadn’t thought of any new ideas since the last time he’d tried to conjure inspiration in the studio. He was trying not to panic, but to say it wasn’t a small problem was an accurate assessment. If Castiel failed to create a piece that tied his first together, and Harvelle decided he hadn’t been cohesive and timely enough this semester to pass the seminar, he wasn’t sure how he’d get his degree on-schedule.

Castiel noticed he was digging his nails into his palms and unclenched his hand.

“I think an idea will come to me soon,” he said, hoping both that it’d be enough to satisfy her and that it was true. “What about you?”
“I’m thinkin’ Grande Odalisque done in ‘mixed media’, so to speak. Like, all the makeups and shit, all of it together to go into a three-fourths-scale version,” Charlie said with a broad smile.

“That sounds impressive,” Castiel said, smiling back at her. “I can’t wait to see how it turns out.”

“I’m serious, though. How are…other things with you?” Charlie asked after they’d eaten some more.

Castiel knew very well what she was asking about, and shook his head wordlessly as he looked down at his half-eaten sandwich. He could feel a blush building in his cheeks, and tried to change the subject.

“You’ve been seeing Gilda again,” he said as he looked up.

Charlie paused, though she didn’t ask Castiel to repeat himself. She swirled her straw in her Styrofoam cup, thinking silently until she responded.

“Yeah. We’re kinda dating. Again.” Charlie’s tone was defensive, and Castiel shook his head.

“I think it’s a good thing. She looked good the last time I saw her. She seemed…better,” he said.

“She’s getting there, I think,” Charlie said. “She’s not drinking anymore. It’s been…weirdly normal. I go over, she gets me a soda, and we watch sci-fi shows and cuddle. Like normal couples do.”

Castiel felt a small spark of joy as he thought of how often he and Dean did those exact things together.

“Like normal couples do,” he repeated.

***

Castiel called Gabriel back while Dean was in the backyard on Friday.

Considering he now only had his print-making class on Thursdays, Castiel had been back at the house for a few hours before dinner time rolled around. It was the first time he’d been home before nightfall in a few days. He had classwork to do, but knew he needed to talk to Gabriel before he could begin it.

Castiel looked out the window as the phone rang, cataloguing the bright green of the grass, the cornflower blue of the sky. He paused as he caught a glimpse of Bobby and Dean laughing together. Dean was holding a car part Castiel wouldn’t have been able to identify if he tried, and Bobby’s baseball cap was on backwards. Their faces and the knees of their jeans were streaked with dirt.

Castiel’s gaze was dragged from the broad outline of Dean’s shoulders and the creases of Bobby’s work shirt when Gabriel answered.

“I called to tell you that I understand,” he said before Gabriel could get out more than a hello. “You needed to do what was best for you. You were hurt.”

“Do you forgive me?” Gabriel asked. Uncertainty was clear in his voice.

“I will,” Castiel said.

“I…I guess I’ll take it,” Gabriel said. “Look, Cas…you know I care about you, right?”

“Of course I do, Gabriel.”
“I know I fucked up a couple times, and I know I need to be better. But I will. You can bet on it. I don’t have shit if I don’t have you and Anna.”

Castiel looked out the window at Dean again and caught the other boy staring back at him from his place in the yard. Castiel lifted a hand and waved, warmth like a long-held breath seeping through his chest.

He pressed his hand to the glass, and Dean waved back.

“You had us all along, Gabriel.”

***

As he and Anna had planned, Castiel’s sister made the drive from the Novak house to Singer Salvage that Friday.

She arrived around four and parked in the same place near the far sidewalk that she had the first time she’d visited. Castiel stood expectantly in the living room as she pulled in, watching the familiar car through a small space between the curtains. It was warmer than usual out that day, and Castiel saw Anna swipe a hand across her forehead as she got out of the car.

Bobby was in the kitchen mixing a marinade for the chicken they were preparing, and Dean was standing not far from Castiel in the living room.

“It’ll be fine, Cas,” Dean said as Anna began to approach the house. He was wearing a dressier-than-usual green plaid shirt, and it brought out his eyes more than anything else Castiel had ever seen him wear.

“Thank you, Dean,” Castiel said quietly.

At a light rapping on the door a few moments later, Castiel stepped forward to let his sister in and Dean left the room to tell Bobby she’d arrived.

Anna greeted him without taking a step forward when Castiel opened the door, her hands clasped strangely in front of her as she extended a bottle of wine toward him.

“I’m glad you came, Anna,” Castiel said as he took it from her, moving back to clear her way.

Anna’s sneakered feet made a soft tap-tap-tap on the metal doorjamb as she crossed it, and she kept her eyes on Castiel’s as she entered the house. Her regard was keen, the questions she had for him more than obvious.

“Mother thinks I’m finally taking some vacation time to have a girl’s weekend in Austin,” Anna said with a tense laugh as Castiel closed the door behind her.

It was apparent she felt doubtful, but Anna greeted Dean as if they’d never encountered one another before when he returned, shaking his hand and politely introducing herself after doing the same with Bobby. She remained composed and implacable throughout the greetings, and Castiel was reminded of their mother as she took a step back to address them both.

“Thank you for inviting me into your home. I apologize for the way I entered it last time,” she said politely.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dean told her sincerely. “Thank you for the wine, I’ll put that in the fridge. Dinner’ll be on around six. We’ll see you guys then.” Dean carefully took the pinot grigio from
Castiel before he disappeared into the kitchen again, shooting Castiel a small nod.

Bobby stepped forward for his turn. “Cas can show you around, feel free to do whatever ‘til dinner. I’ll be in the back office if y’ need me.” He smiled and quickly retreated as well, leaving Anna and Castiel alone in the living room.

“Let’s go to my room.” Castiel gestured toward the hallway.

He could hear whatever Dean was doing in the kitchen even as they walked in the opposite direction, the sound seemingly amplified as Dean stirred something in a metal bowl.

When they reached the guestroom, Anna set her bag on the desk. She didn’t move as Castiel folded the sweater hanging from the back of his chair and pointlessly swept a few pencil shavings into the trash. His hands were sweating. When he finally sat down on the edge of the bed, he slid his palms beneath his thighs in the hopes that Anna wouldn’t notice.

He knew she was waiting for him to speak.

“What do you want to know?” he asked after he’d taken an apprehensive breath.

“Did…it happen on campus?” Anna asked. She was having difficulty meeting his eyes.

Castiel swallowed with effort and nodded. He saw tears gather in Anna’s eyes, her mouth working uselessly before she spoke again.

“Was it someone you knew?”

Castiel nodded again, watching with dismay as a tear fell down his sister’s face. He reached out to take her hand and was relieved when she let him.

“Were you…are you hurt?” she asked next.

Castiel thought of blood on the insides of his thighs, flaking and red-brown under the water.

“I’ve healed, Anna.”

“How did it happen? Did they…was it a man or a woman?” she asked, more tears now steadily dripping down her narrow cheeks.

“He was in one of my classes,” Castiel said. “I trusted him, and…I shouldn’t have. He gave me something in a drink, and…” Castiel paused, unsure how to phrase himself without upsetting Anna more than he already had.

“I couldn’t leave,” was what he settled on. “I waited until he was done, then he took me downstairs and I went home. That was all, Anna.”

It simultaneously devastated and calmed him to minimize the violence of what had happened, and he dragged his hands out from under his legs, exhaling slowly as an unpleasant dart of heat shot through his chest.

“Cas? Are you having an anxiety attack?” Anna asked, grasping his arms. “You didn’t tell me you were having them again.”

Castiel closed his eyes and nodded. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

Anna smoothed his hair back from his forehead, her hands cool on Castiel’s face.
“Sorry,” he told his sister.

“Don’t be,” Anna said.

“It’s…I don’t like talking about it.” Castiel said.

“I wouldn’t, either. I just…can I ask one last thing?” Anna inquired.

Castiel nodded without looking at her. “You can.”

“I just want to know…I want to know why it happened,” Anna said hesitantly. “I…I don’t understand, Castiel.”

She sounded like a teenager again, the way she had when their father died and Castiel had told her over and over again that the accident wasn’t her fault. Anna’s words immobilized Castiel as they sank in, though, and he opened his eyes.

“Why?” he repeated numbly.

Anna nodded, leaning forward.

The question wasn’t a foreign one to Castiel. He’d asked himself why many, many times, had looked at himself in the mirror until his eyes burned and he couldn’t move, locked into the seemingly endless internal litany of reasons why Drew might have chosen him that night at Heaven and Hell.

I gave you a good time.

“I don’t know why, Anna,” he said quietly. “He never said.”

“Does your roommate know what happened? Are you happier here? Happier than you think you’d be on campus or…if you came back home?” Anna asked as she squeezed Castiel’s hand.

“Dean knows. He’s…he’s been there for me. I owe him more than I can ever repay him. I’m happy here,” Castiel said.

Understanding seemed to dawn on Anna’s face, then. Castiel was beginning to grow accustomed to that from those around him.

“Do you love him?” she asked.

Castiel nodded, and when Anna scooted with open arms toward him, he went into them without hesitation. He breathed in the familiar smell of his sister’s perfume and of the laundry detergent Tessa had been using to wash their things since they were children. He could hear the distant sound of Bobby saying something to Dean and the whisper of Anna’s breaths.

“I’m sorry,” Anna spoke into Castiel’s shoulder. “I’ve been thinking about it, and now I know I shouldn’t have pushed you the way I did. I just wanted us to be a family again, and I wanted you to talk to Gabriel and tell me everything was fine. But it isn’t, and I knew that.”

“Don’t apologize,” Castiel answered. “I shouldn’t have been awful to you. And we’ll always be family, Anna. I just need a little more time if Gabriel’s going to be part of my life again.”

When they parted, Anna was nodding in agreement. “That’s fair. I didn’t…I’m just so sorry, Castiel. I’m so sorry.” She began to cry again.

“I’m okay,” Castiel said as he wiped Anna’s tears.
It wasn’t true, but if Gilda was to be believed, perhaps in time it would be.

“We’re okay, I promise.”

“Okay,” Anna said through a watery smile. “Okay.”

Before Anna left when dinner had ended, she leaned in and said discreetly to Castiel, “I’ll email you when Gabriel and I have talked more about how we want to handle this. I’ll keep you in the loop. I love you.”

After they’d seen her off, Dean and Castiel cleaned the kitchen and then went to lie in bed together. The sheets and rumpled quilt were pulled up to their hips, and Castiel was falling asleep with his head resting on Dean’s shoulder even though he’d insisted not five minutes earlier that he’d stay up and listen to an episode of Welcome to Night Vale. He could faintly hear the quiet singing of the cicadas outside, the sound bright and shrill in the night, and the warm breath of the wind as it blew through the trees.

As he drifted gradually to sleep, one of the last things Castiel was aware of was the soft press of Dean’s hand on his where it was splayed over Dean’s heart. He felt awash in what was becoming an almost familiar feeling.

Safe.

***

Early the next morning, Castiel answered an incoming call from an unfamiliar number.

"Is this Castiel Novak?" a woman’s nasal voice inquired. Castiel could hear what sounded like the low murmuring of someone else talking on the other end of the line.

“Yes. May I ask who’s calling?”

“I’m from the WilCo Wellness Center on Main. I have some lab results for you.”

“Alright,” Castiel said as he reached up to hold the phone to his ear with both hands. He should have sat down earlier, he thought to himself; now he didn’t know if he’d be able to stand if—

Castiel cut the thought short, making himself focus on what the woman on the phone was telling him.

“…all the tests came back negative or normal. Now, if—”

“What?” Castiel said.

“You didn’t test positive for any STI’s. Do y’ need me to read the list of tests?”

“I don’t.”

“Alright. Well, you’ll probably want to come back in within three to six months and get re-tested for HIV antibodies, but other than that, are there any other questions I can answer for you?”

“No.”

“Okay. Goodbye, Mr. Novak.”
Castiel set his phone on the dresser, staring out the window at the familiar view of the yard. Without looking away, he sat on a corner of the bed to wait for Dean to finish showering.

There had been something Castiel had been planning on doing right as he’d gotten the call, some chore or task he’d been on his way to begin, but he couldn’t remember now what it had been. His heart felt bizarrely light in his chest, and when he lifted his hand, it wasn’t shaking.

Dean emerged from the hall bathroom a few minutes later with a faint cloud of steam following him into the bedroom. Castiel watched the other boy as he pulled on a t-shirt, his light hair still dripping wet. The shirt Dean had donned stuck to his front and sides. He had a smile on his face as he turned to look at Castiel. However, when their eyes met Dean paused, his hand still on the doorknob.

“You okay?” he asked.

Castiel pushed himself up from the edge of the bed without feeling his legs as they bent or the muscles of his back as they tensed and released. It was luminous outside though it wasn’t even a quarter past nine, and the birds perched on the low-hanging branches beyond the window were chirping blithely. The morning suddenly seemed like something out of a movie, a flawless backdrop for whatever might come next.

“I—I got a call from the clinic,” Castiel said when he remembered Dean had asked him something. He reached for Dean as if by compulsion and was obliged; Dean clasped both of Castiel’s hands in his own, holding them firmly.

“I didn’t contract anything,” Castiel said.

“What do you—you mean the tests were negative?” Dean asked. When Castiel nodded, a smile graced Dean’s face as he gave Castiel's hands a squeeze.

“That’s great!”

“It feels too good to be true,” Castiel said with a weak laugh. He felt almost lightheaded with relief as the weight of the situation at last began to feel real.

The day before, he’d put his fingers between his legs and scrubbed himself raw as he showered, holding back tears at the sting of the soap. The week before last, he’d dreamt he cut himself with the razor he used to scrape his painting table, and instead of blood filling his veins there had been rich, black wet dirt. Earlier that very morning, Castiel had been unable to look at his face in the cracked mirror above the sink as he washed his hands for the second time in as many minutes.

But apparently, Drew hadn’t left Castiel anything more than the remembrance of pain.

He didn’t know if the knowledge changed everything or nothing at all.

“I’m not sick,” Castiel said, both to himself and Dean.

“You never were,” Dean said.

“I should go start the coffee, I think I hear Bobby in the back,” Castiel said as he gently pulled away and turned to leave the room. But before he could, Dean grabbed his hand, temporarily keeping him in place.

“Can I show you something today?” he asked Castiel. “If you don’t want to go out, I get it. But if you’re up for a drive…” Dean let the statement hang.
“Of course. If you want to show me something, I want to see it,” Castiel said.

An hour later the two of them clambered into the Impala and waved goodbye to Sam and Bobby, who were out together in the front yard doing some maintenance on a tall oak. Both full of buttered toast and black coffee, Dean and Castiel were in good spirits as Dean started the car and backed out of the drive.

The little college town was just waking up around them as they drove down Main Street, and Castiel watched as shop-owners swept their walkways clean and flipped neon ‘open’ signs on. As per Dean’s request, he’d brought the borrowed pipe from Meg and what was left of his weed in his pockets, and could feel the weight of them where they sat in his lap.

“Do you go wherever you’re taking me very often?” Castiel asked as he turned away from the window.

“Now? No. But I used to,” Dean said before he turned the music up.

Soon, they reached the nearby wood at the edge of town.

Castiel hadn’t ever ventured near the thick swathe of trees that spread itself over a few acres just beyond the abandoned gas station by the intersection at 1-35 and Tennison, but he’d driven past it a few times. From a few, short yards away it looked different than he would have expected; while from the road it appeared dark and ill-grown, up close it was clear it wasn’t. Its trees were tall and thick, with leaves that sprouted like strands of tufted hair from the long branches. The ample shade they provided also looked like it would be a welcome respite from the still-rising temperature of the day.

When Dean parked the Impala a few feet from where the treeline began, Castiel loaded a small bowl for them in the pipe.

“You want greens?” Castiel asked.

Dean declined while rolling down all the windows, and Castiel took the first hit, passing the piece to his friend after.

Dean still smoked slowly, uncertainly, his movements precise and almost delicate as he brought the smooth glass piece to his lips and held the lighter beside its bowl. He usually took short, small hits, while Castiel inhaled deeply for as long as he could. They’d smoked together a few times since Dean’s last blowout with John, and being high usually seemed to calm him.

“Dad says he wants to stop drinking,” Dean said abruptly through a mouthful of smoke a few minutes later. He began to cough after he got the words out, and Castiel took the pipe from him, reaching over to rub Dean’s heaving back.

“Do you think he means it?” Castiel asked once he’d stopped coughing.

Dean cleared his throat. “I don’t know. Sometimes he says he does, but the day he actually does it, I’ll probably be too sick of him to give a shit.”

“Maybe he’s serious this time,” Castiel said, even though he doubted John Winchester was capable of being serious about much more than liquor.

Dean shook his head, but said nothing more.
They got out of the car together once they'd cashed the bowl and Castiel put his pipe and baggy back into his pocket. After Dean ensured the Impala was locked and that he had her keys, they set off toward their destination, wherever or whatever it might be. Their movements were almost perfectly synced in the hush of the morning.

When they reached where the trees began, Dean held out his hand. Castiel took it, watching Dean as he turned to lead them into the gloom of the woods.

It felt almost as if a different universe lay just within the copse of trees. The air was thick and warm around them, the ground beneath their feet porous and black with dirt. Castiel closed his eyes and let Dean pull him forward for a while, feeling the tips of his toes press against protruding tree roots growing up from the ground and tall, jagged rocks half-buried in the dirt like seedlings.

It was quieter within the wood than it had been outside, and they walked together through the greenery and the silence, their breaths and the *slish* of their feet on the ground the only sounds that could be heard.

Following Dean came naturally to Castiel; he led with more confidence than he smoked, and they moved inexorably deeper into the dark green and brown of the trees. Their hands pressed firmly together were smooth and dry, and the irresistible symmetry of the steps they took together became a lull.

Dean stopped suddenly when they reached an old, rotting tree strung with colorful, parasitic ivy and the plump, icy blooms of lichen and moss. They’d been walking for almost half an hour, and Dean had given no warning that they were close.

“Dean?” Castiel came to stand beside Dean rather than behind him.

“This is where we used to go,” Dean said without looking at him.

“Who?” Castiel asked.

“When Dad’d had too much, and we didn’t know if he was gonna start swingin’ at me, Sam ‘n’ me used to hide in the hollow.” Dean pointed at a large, curved opening near the massive base of the tree, its graying maw large enough to fit a small child or two.

“Was this when you lived here the first time?”

Dean nodded. “We lived in a dinky blue matchbox in the neighborhood a couple minutes away. After Mom died, we stayed there ‘til I was eight, then we didn’t come back until my sixteenth birthday.”

“How often did you have to come here?” Castiel asked.

“For a while it was almost every week,” Dean said.

“Where would you go when you moved?” Castiel pictured nine year old Dean shielding a toddler-aged Sam as he looked desperately for a place to hide in a motel room, and wished immediately that he hadn’t.

“We’d find a 24-hour fast food joint and drink the water ‘til they made us leave,” Dean said with a grating laugh.

“Why this tree?” Castiel asked.
“We’d been walking a while, I guess this was where we got tired.”

Dean reached out and touched the rough bark of it with his fingertips. Castiel followed the line his arm made, gasping quietly when he saw a jerky, sprawling carving near the distension of the hollow.

‘Dean Winchester was hear

and baby Sammy 2’

“You did this,” Castiel breathed as he moved to touch it himself. He traced the grooves the letters made, wondering what Dean had used to carve them.

“It was safe here,” Dean said. He was motionless, his hand still extended.

Somewhere beyond them, water dripped and a bird whistled sadly, its call drawn-out and high. Castiel could far too easily imagine the Winchester brothers huddled out here as children, shivering and small and frightened as they sat pressed together in the aperture of the enormous tree.

“Dean,” Castiel said when he didn’t think he could stand the silence any longer.

“When I was a kid, everything…hurt. So, I made sure I wasn’t really there, I guess.” Dean touched a finger to his temple.

“I mean, I was. I took care of Sammy, made food and worked jobs, but I didn’t feel a lot of it. Didn’t let myself. I did that for a long time. But then I’d come here and it was like…there I was. When we left, somethin’ changed. It was like…that awake part of me stayed here. It still feels safer than anywhere else I’ve been,” Dean said. His hands, Castiel noticed, were not shoved into his pockets, his expression one of trepidation.

“Even Bobby’s?” Castiel asked, his voice thick.

“I know it’s dumb,” Dean said quickly.

“It’s not dumb, Dean,” Castiel said softly.

“Sometimes, I come back here alone, and it’s like I never left, like I’ve just been dreaming of school and Sam and you.” Dean’s last word was barely a murmur.

Castiel reached out to take Dean’s hand as he’d done for him more than once. He leaned to the side to lay his head on Dean’s shoulder, both of them regarding the tree, now.

“We’re safe here, yes, but it’s also safe at Bobby’s, and in the Impala, and when we’re in the painting studio,” he said gently into Dean’s ear. “Safe doesn’t have to be this tree anymore.”

Dean turned inward toward Castiel, wrapping his free arm around him and drawing him close.

“I feel safe wherever you are,” Castiel whispered.

“You do?” Dean asked.

Castiel nodded. “I love you, too, Dean.”

Dean dragged himself back to free his hands, framing Castiel’s face with them. Now, his eyes were somehow sunlit even in the murkiness of the woods, his full lips parted.

Again, softer this time, “You do?”
In response, Castiel closed his eyes and pressed his lips to Dean’s.

***

Late Sunday evening, Castiel dialed Gilda’s number and made himself a cup of coffee while he waited for her to pick up.

“Castiel?” She sounded surprised.

“Gilda, I was…well, I was wondering when those meetings you told me about were.”

Chapter End Notes

Apparently Bluebird by Bukowski somehow gets included in all my fics in some way. Who knew?
Additionally, how are you feeling about the story? Please let me know if you have the time. Comments make me SO incredibly happy, you really have no idea! =)
Hey, guys. This chapter…wow. It tore me a new one, and I don’t think I’ve ever edited anything so much in my life. One of my betas described it as ‘a bit of a wild ride’, and I think he’s right. I hope y’all like this update as much as I’ve grown to in the few weeks it's been my focus.

In other news, there is now officially a chapter count for this story :D I honestly can’t believe it! The sheer excitement I feel is indescribable. It may go up to 36 at the most, but 35 is looking like it’ll work as of right this second. Additionally, if you are interested in the side-characters or seeing things from Dean’s perspective, I have a link to a companion series of time-stamps that I’ve been writing here. If you read that between my main story updates, the wait may seem a bit shorter. I hope you enjoy it if you choose to give it a read <3

On Monday, Dean drove himself and Castiel to campus and back twice: once for their classes, and again for a mandatory meeting in the painting studio around six in the evening. Professors Harvelle and the head of the sculpture department, Pamela Barnes, had provided an impressive spread of pizza and soda for when everyone began to arrive, and the studio smelled delicious as they made their way inside.

Charlie and Dean sat on either side of Castiel on the paint-stained floor, each of them holding a plate of greasy pizza slices in their laps. Elsewhere in the large room, the other junior and senior painting majors were seated in chairs or also on the floor, and the faint buzz of small-talk filled the room as they got themselves situated.

The teachers allowed everyone a few minutes to serve themselves and find a place to sit, and it was around six-fifteen that they actually got down to business and began the meeting.

An upcoming gallery exhibit for the art department was scheduled to open in less than a week, and there were numerous details still to sort out, including the final decisions on what would be featured in the show and from whom. The exhibit was specifically to showcase the work of the junior and senior art majors of the university, which explained the limited attendance in the studio.

“Dean? We’d like to show your most recent two works as well as Scar Tissue. Do we have your permission?” Harvelle asked.

Beside Castiel Dean nodded, his mouth too full of pepperoni and cheese to verbally answer.

“He says sure,” Charlie informed their professor with a snort.

Harvelle nodded and wrote something down on the plastic clipboard she was holding, adjusting her gold-rimmed glasses on the bridge of her nose as she looked for the next name on the list.

“And let’s see…Castiel, we think you should show your self-portrait. Do you want to?”

Castiel felt his mouth fall open at her question and was glad he hadn’t been eating anything;
otherwise, he wasn’t sure he would have been able to resist spitting it out.

“Why?” he blurted.

From somewhere behind him Castiel heard someone scoff scathingly, and he bent his head.

“It’s just…I don’t feel it represents me or my work,” he tried to clarify.

“I think it’s extremely impressive, and was a huge artistic gamble that paid off very well,” Harvelle said without looking up from her clipboard.

Dean lightly nudged Castiel in the side with his elbow, and Castiel exhaled. On the opposite side of him, Charlie touched the back of his hand with her forefinger. “It’s so good, Cas,” she whispered. “Really.”

“Uh, if you think so, Professor,” Castiel said slowly as he looked from Dean and back to Charlie. They both nodded enthusiastically at his answer.

“Alright.” Harvelle looked up with a smile, then. “Pamela will now speak with all of you about volunteering.”

She took a step back as Professor Barnes took a step forward with a list and clipboard of her own. Castiel hadn’t ever directly interacted with her, but had seen her often enough to know that the midriff-exposing black tank top and skin-tight blue jeans she was wearing were common attire for the sculptor.

“Hello, everyone,” she said with a wide smile. “So, those who volunteered to help out last semester will need to attend every meeting leading up to the gallery show, I think it goes without saying. If you don’t think you can do this, we understand, but you won’t be able to help organize if you can’t. ‘Kay? Alright, the list of volunteers is as follows: Bethany Franklin…Juanita Lambert…Jake Talley…Castiel Novak…”

Castiel looked up from his pizza in surprise a second time, having completely forgotten that he’d put his name on the sign-up sheet sometime in early September the semester before. At the time it had sounded like a wonderful idea, and he’d been eager to help the art department out.

Now, though, he wasn’t sure if he’d even be able to do it.

The familiar chill of self-doubt bled through him as he shrank where he sat. Professor Barnes wasn’t looking at him, she’d already moved on to the other people on the list, but he still felt as if someone’s eyes were on him.

“If you do it, I’ll volunteer with you,” Dean said into Castiel’s ear, as if he’d somehow known what he was thinking.

“Are you sure?” Castiel asked as he turned his head to face Dean.

He nodded easily. “Course. Bobby can cut some of my hours this week, it’s not a big deal.”

“If you do it with me,” Castiel said, calming by slow, slipping degrees at the thought of Dean by his side, helping him set up the gallery with their classmates.

Nowadays, Dean was almost always beside him, offering strength with his presence alone.
That night, after Dean bent his head and gave Castiel a chaste peck on the lips before he went across the hall to shower, Castiel waited until he heard the door close behind him. Then, he crossed the room to the desk.

Castiel’s copy of Bukowski’s ‘Bluebird’ still hung above his mirror, and he pulled out the lime-green thumbtack that adhered the poem to the wall and took it down, sitting in the desk chair and setting it before him on a piece of naked space next to his textbooks.

Carefully, he drew a small blue line beside a few tick-marks of the same size that were already clustered in the upper right-hand corner of the piece of paper.

Now, there were three.

Castiel smiled to himself, dragging his finger over the delicate lines before he put the poem back on the wall.

***

The following day Castiel picked Gilda up from her and Meg’s apartment on campus, driving them both to a small café he was fairly certain he’d been to once before. Within a few minutes, he already knew where they were going and told Gilda he wouldn’t need further directions.

The drive was quiet, so Castiel turned the radio on, hoping it would ease the tension that had lodged itself between them the second Gilda got into the car. They’d spoken on the phone earlier that very morning and calmly discussed the practical details, and Castiel had hung up feeling like he’d made a good decision.

But that had been hours ago, and all he felt now was apprehensive and unconvinced and Gilda couldn’t seem to stop fidgeting.

Castiel turned the radio up.

“—helter skelter, helter skelter—”

She crossed and uncrossed her legs while her fingers traced indiscriminate patterns over and over the bare skin of her arms.

“—I get to the bottom and I see you again—”

She tapped her feet and rubbed her hands together.

“—I’m comin’ down fast but don’t let me break you—”

She tugged at the edges of her shirt until she tore threads loose.

“Gilda, please,” Castiel said tightly as he turned the radio off. “We’re almost there.”

“I know, I know. Sorry,” Gilda said. “I just…I want it to be a good meeting for you.”

Unexpectedly touched by her words and still on-edge, Castiel couldn’t think of an apt response, so he just nodded awkwardly. He was grateful when they made it to the café a few minutes later and he was able to park in a patch of shade and turn the car off.

Within a minute more, he and Gilda were walking together to the front entrance of the café.

The aroma of coffee grounds and flavored syrups instantly filled his nostrils when Castiel opened the
door, and he ushered Gilda inside before following her. Castiel didn’t see any sizable groups of people sitting together in the vestibule when he looked around, and he wondered where the meeting was being facilitated. He admitted to himself that a not-so-small part of him hoped it had somehow been cancelled.

Not long after the thought crossed his mind, however, Gilda made a sharp left near the tall marbled counter and opened a door Castiel hadn’t seen into a little conference room. It contained a long, rectangular table and a few stacks of folding chairs.

There were six women seated around the table, and Castiel recognized three of them from around campus almost immediately. The one he noticed first, a senior architecture major named Madison, he’d seen no sooner than a few hours earlier as they helped Garth sketch a diagram of what would go where in the downstairs gallery. He was going to be volunteering with her over the next few days. That very morning Madison had smiled at Castiel and asked how his day was going, he even remembered her exact wording. Now, she was looking silently up at him, surprise obvious in her coffee-brown eyes the way he knew it must also be in his own.

Not only did Castiel know half of these women, the set-up reminded him unpleasantly of the first day of his fall semester a few months back; he was again the only male in the room.

Castiel felt his throat work as Gilda grabbed his hand, anchoring him there. It must have been obvious how close he was to turning and leaving the room.

“Cas, it’s safe here, we’ve all been through it and we aren’t going to judge you, it’s fine,” Gilda said into his ear. “Okay?”

But Castiel didn’t think it was fine, not at all.

Earlier, it hadn’t sunk in that he would be attempting to talk to a group of women he didn’t know about the most intimate and disturbing thing that had ever happened to him. He’d known intellectually that he would be attempting to process his emotions through discussing them with others, but now, he realized he hadn’t understood it as anything other than a theoretical concept, and it hadn’t occurred to him that there would be no other men in the group.

And it made sense, didn’t it? Most men were probably strong enough to fend off sexual predators.

While he stood there, a knee-jerk wash of shame and guilt couldn’t be stopped as it coursed over him.

Weak.

Dirty.

Pathetic.

“I—I don’t think I should’ve come. I’m sorry,” Castiel said clumsily as he tried to turn and leave the room.

“Please don’t leave, Castiel,” Madison said as she stood from where she’d been sitting at the head of the table. “We’ve all experienced abuse and pain here. You can say whatever you want or need to, we’re here to listen. That’s what we do for each other.”

So, Castiel knew now that Madison was kind, she liked to volunteer her time, and she’d been sexually assaulted, herself.
We already have more in common than I do with most of my friends and family.

He felt the irrational urge to laugh.

Instead, Castiel cleared his throat. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought I could do this.”

Madison nodded like she understood, though Castiel wasn’t sure she did.

“Okay. Well, why don’t you just sit down for a few minutes and catch your breath with us? We don’t have to talk about you at all today, you don’t even have to tell us a little about yourself or anything. You can just listen right now and see what it’s like. If you feel like it, you can join in on the conversation.”

Castiel nodded stiffly, though he had no desire to stay for the duration of the meeting. However, he wasn’t sure how he could turn the request down gracefully since he’d made a commitment to attend at least one meeting with Gilda and he’d be seeing Madison regularly for the rest of the week.

After he chose a spot near the opposite end of the table, Gilda made a point to sit close beside Castiel. He could tell that she wanted to touch him, and was thankful when she chose not to.

When it began, the meeting seemed to have a very loose structure, if one could even call it that. Since Castiel was new to the group, the girls went around the table introducing themselves and sharing a little about their likes and dislikes. Their names were Gabrielle, Jennie, Emma, Jamie, and Tara. Castiel knew Tara and Jennie from various general education classes they’d shared the past two semesters, and they were biochemistry and French majors, respectively. But besides Madison, Castiel hadn’t ever met or interacted with the other three women.

True to Madison’s word, luckily, they didn’t ask Castiel to speak or introduce himself.

Castiel wasn’t sure what he was expecting after the introductions were completed, but it wasn’t for Madison to stand and address the group as a whole. Was she the one in charge of the sessions?

“We’re a group of trauma survivors, but that isn’t all our meetings are about. We talk about our triumphs and our failings, we plan birthday parties for each other, we’re friends and some of us have known each other for a while, now. But even though any topic is up for discussion, we can and will also talk a lot about sexual assault and the pain left behind. You’ll probably encounter things that trigger you or upset you in our talks. That’s normal. If this happens we have a rule: don’t suffer in silence, tell us you’ve been triggered if it happens so we can talk about it and help you feel safe in this room.”

The girls were nodding enthusiastically where they sat around the table, and Castiel wondered what they had all weathered together in this café, and if they were indeed somehow stronger for their solidarity.

“Anyway, that’s our formal bit for today. If no one has any emergency topics that need discussing, should we talk about weekly events?” Madison asked the group with a smile on her face. Castiel got the distinct impression that she was deliberately steering his first meeting away from particularly heavy subject-matter, and felt a pang of guilt at the thought that he might be depriving one of the women of a much-needed venting session. He clasped his hands tightly in his lap, focusing on a speck on the table.

But nonetheless, everyone nodded or confirmed verbally in response to Madison’s question, and soon Emma was talking excitedly to all of them about an event that was happening at the university the following week involving crowdfunding and barbecue, and handed out a few flyers to each
person. After that, the girls discussed job-hunting and who was hiring around town, and one of them mentioned she was thinking about getting a dog since her roommate had moved back home and she didn’t like being alone in her apartment.

Before Castiel knew it, the meeting had wrapped and it was 5 o’clock.

Gabrielle and Jennie began packing up the few snacks that had been brought while Emma and Jamie bid the others farewell and left together. Madison had her phone out and appeared to be taking something down on it as she spoke to Tara, and Gilda and Castiel stood to make their way to the door.

“Let me say goodbye to Maddie?” Gilda asked Castiel.

“Of course,” Castiel said even though he wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

He wasn’t expecting it when Madison addressed him a few seconds later.

“Will I see you next week, Castiel?”

“I…I don’t know,” Castiel said. “It’s…I don’t think I belong here.”

“Because you’re not a woman?” Madison asked bluntly.

Feeling his face flush, Castiel looked away from her as he nodded.

“We used to have another guy who attended with us, but he transferred to a school in North Carolina last semester to be with family,” Madison said with a sad look on her face. “He was awesome. I wish he could have been here today, he was really funny and…Anyway, uh, what I’m trying to say is anyone can be hurt by someone else, not just girls. Please don’t feel like this makes things awkward or weird, because for us, it doesn’t.”

Not wanting to talk about the issue anymore, Castiel nodded his head jerkily. “Alright, then. Well, uh, goodbye.”

“I’ll see you soon in the gallery?” Madison said with a small, uncertain smile.

“Goodbye, Madison,” Castiel repeated.

When Castiel made it back to Bobby’s an hour later after dropping Gilda off and briefly saying hello to Meg, Dean was sitting on the guest bed reading something in one of his art history textbooks. He had a test the following week, Castiel knew, and he’d been studying regularly over the past few days in preparation.

“Hey, you,” Dean said as Castiel took a seat beside him on the bed. “How’d it go?”

Castiel had told him a day or two before that he’d be going to the meeting with Gilda. Although he hadn’t said so, Castiel had been able to tell easily that Dean wasn’t sure how he felt about the idea. But he’d encouraged Castiel to do what he thought was best, nevertheless.

“I almost left,” Castiel muttered as he shrugged his arms out of his sweater, folding it neatly in his lap and pressing the creases down.

“Why?” Dean didn’t sound surprised.
“There were people I knew there.”

“You know Gilda,” Dean said with what sounded like genuine curiosity.

“I was the only guy there,” Castiel admitted as he busied himself with draping his sweater over the back of the nearby desk chair, not sure if he could bear to look Dean in the face in that moment.

Dean’s hand on the inside of Castiel’s elbow brought him face-to-face with him again soon after, though. His expression had softened.

“Do you think it was a bad idea to go?” Dean asked.

Castiel thought for a few minutes.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly.

“Are you gonna go again?”

“I—I’m not sure,” Castiel said.

Outside, it had begun to rain rather suddenly, and the sound of the water drops pattering merrily on the window was pacifying.

Dean slid an arm around Castiel’s shoulders as they looked out into the cloudy day together, and he almost sagged into the touch, wanting nothing more than to close his eyes and listen to the rain while he and Dean held one another.

“I’m proud of you for going,” Dean said. “It means something that you did, even if you don’t think you can go back.”

Safe.

When it came seconds later, the kiss was one so soft Castiel could only just feel the pressure of Dean’s mouth on his; he held his breath, so reluctant was he to disturb the easy way they always seemed to fit together.

Dean didn’t open Castiel’s mouth to taste him, nor did he move his hands under Castiel’s clothes to touch his skin. All Dean did was kiss him once, twice, three times, before he withdrew and pressed his lips to Castiel’s forehead.

A few minutes later Castiel nestled his head in the crook of Dean’s neck once more and breathed deeply.

“I missed you,” Dean said.

Somewhere in the distance, a crack of thunder sounded through the milky rainclouds.

Safe.

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The next time that Castiel decided it would be appropriate to call his brother again, it was almost eight in the morning that Wednesday. Dean was out dropping Sam off at the high school when Castiel dialed Gabriel’s number, and he knew the other boy likely wouldn’t be back for another ten to twenty minutes, especially if he did as Bobby had jokingly requested and stopped at the Jack in the Box on the way back to get breakfast.
Castiel had opened the bedroom window a half-hour or so before as he and Dean dressed, and a cool morning breeze drifted into the room, lifting the linen curtains from the walls so that they fluttered prettily in the new morning light. There was a hush over the surrounding houses outside, and Castiel lay back on the bed with the phone against his ear to bask in it while it lasted. It being a school day, he knew within a few short hours the neighborhood would wake up around him in its usual boisterous glory.

“Cassie?”

Castiel had forgotten he was calling his brother, and sat up in the bed before he could fall back asleep. Its frame creaked loudly underneath him.

“Are you busy, Gabriel?” he asked.

“You still get up way too fuckin’ early, bro. I’m busy sleeping.”

“This is still later than I used to try and wake you up,” Castiel reminded him.

“Whatever. I can get up, you win.” Gabriel capitulated easily. “Got any special plans today?”

“My art history class has actually been canceled, so, besides spending a few hours at the gallery later today, nothing much,” Castiel told him.

“You have an actual gallery at that school? That’s nifty. What are you doing in there?”

“One of the annual art showcases is coming up in a few days, and Dean and I are helping the department set everything up,” Castiel explained. “Mostly making sure the mounts are assembled correctly and the placement of the works is the way it’s supposed to be, things like that.”

“Sounds cool, kinda technical. Dean’s your roommate, right?” Gabriel asked.

Castiel blinked. He hadn’t even noticed mentioning Dean. “Yes, he is.”

“Cool. You, uh, sound happy today. Better than the other times we’ve talked.”

Castiel could tell that his brother was aiming for a neutral delivery of the words, but the tension in them was obvious even without the benefit of seeing Gabriel’s face.

“The first time you called…” Castiel paused, swallowing before he began again. “The first time you called, I was angry, Gabriel. I wouldn’t have talked to anyone, let alone someone I hadn’t heard from in years.”

“Angry?” Gabriel sounded startled. “It’s not like you to be angry, Cassie. You’re like, the calmest person I know. Did something happen? Anna said you were liking school, but I know it can be stressful. Culinary school sure as fuck is.”

Castiel recognized the opportunity to tell his brother about Drew for what it was, and didn’t take it.

“I’d had a falling out with one of my classmates,” Castiel lied as he picked at a thread on the quilt. “But we worked it out, and things are much better now.”

“Sounds cool… I guess. I’m glad you made up with whoever it was,” Gabriel said. Then, “…sure, babe. I’ll get you one when I get off the phone… yeah… Oh, sorry, Cassie. I woke Kali up by accident and she demands a blood sacrifice. Or coffee. Either one will do, apparently.”

Castiel laughed, more to himself than for his brother to hear. “I’ll let you go, then. I just… wanted to
say hello.”

“Hey, you’re okay, right? For real, if you want to talk more right now, coffee-run can wait a few minutes. We just started doing our ‘brotherly bonding’ thing.”

“Get coffee and appease your goddess, you can call me later,” Castiel assured his brother, feeling as if he should have said more as Gabriel ended the call.

He set his phone down on the bed and looked back out the open window, mulling over the course their conversation had taken.

He was shaken from his thoughts by the sudden drawn-out meow of a cat a few minutes later.

Getting out of his bed to approach the window, Castiel wasn’t anticipating it when he saw the calico he’d met a few weeks before while on his walk with Dean. She was slinking across Bobby’s recently-trimmed backyard, her fluffy tail high in the air.

“How do you know where I live?” Castiel asked as he watched the calico crouch before leaping up onto the window sill. She meowed at him again in response, the little sounds she made ladylike and almost dainty.

She was silky when Castiel cautiously reached out to pet her, as she had been the last time. As he stroked her head and the sides of her small chin, she sat calmly on her hind legs and began to groom one of her paws. Within a few minutes she was purring loudly into Castiel’s hand, and he sat on the sill beside her, pulling her a little closer so he could hug her.

Castiel had never considered himself much of a cat person, but something about this particular feline felt familiar, almost comfortable.

“I wonder what your name is,” Castiel ruminated, speaking more to himself than the cat. “You must have an owner…but I don’t know who they are, and neither does Dean…If I was going to choose a name you, though, I’d pick something classic, like…Charlotte, or maybe Olivia.”

The cat looked up at him for a few seconds at the second name, and then began to purr again when Castiel slid a hand over the downy curve of her back.

“Olivia it is,” Castiel said as he sat as well as he could on the sill with the cat and continued to pet her.

“She seems like she freakin’ loves you, dude.”
Castiel jumped at the sound of Dean’s voice, not having heard him enter the room. The other boy had a faint smile on his face as he watched Castiel hold Olivia in his lap.

“She probably wants food,” Castiel said.

“Well, we should head to the studio soon if we’re gonna get any time in before they start calling us down to the gallery,” Dean said after a glance down at his phone.

Castiel nodded as he carefully set Olivia down, standing up so he could get dressed.

He still hadn’t figured out what he wanted to do for his final project, and knew the time he and Dean spent in the studio would likely be as fruitless as that before it had been.

The gallery smelled like sawdust and glue, and there were boxes of tools, discarded water bottles, and pieces of brightly-colored poster board scattered here and there throughout the well-illuminated space to mark what would go where.

“Castiel! Have you patched it?” Garth called as he took a few steps over from where he’d just been speaking to Professor Barnes.

Castiel nodded, pointing to the recently-repaired expanse of wall Garth was referring to. “Yes. I’m about to do the other spot right now.” He motioned toward another noticeable hole in the wall where a large nail had been, his fingertips still white and dry with filler.

“Good, good,” Garth said with a distracted smile. “Now, Dean—”

“Yeah, I already got all the adhesive off the wall. I’m installing the mount now,” Dean succinctly informed their assistant teacher.

“Thank you,” Garth practically sighed with relief, clapping Dean on the shoulder. “Keep up the good work, guys. We’re almost done for today.”

True to Garth’s word, the volunteers had soon finished the list of tasks they’d had on their list for the day, and Dean and Castiel took the Impala back to Bobby’s around seven in the evening. Castiel was tired, and almost nodded off in the car. He and Dean had spent almost the entire day in the gallery, and Madison had worked alongside them for most of it, smiling at Castiel when their eyes met and waving cheerfully at him before she left to run something upstairs to Harvelle. He knew she was only trying to be his friend, but Castiel had been more than ready to return to the familiar sanctuary of the Singer house when Garth released them.

“I think your painting’s gonna look killer mounted in the gallery, man. I can’t wait to see that,” Dean was saying to Castiel as they let themselves in to the sounds of a sitcom blaring through the living room.

“Hello, Sam, Bobby,” Castiel loudly greeted Dean’s family over a spray of canned laughter before setting his bookbag down on the kitchen counter.

He looked back at his friend. “I think your pieces will be more impressive than mine, Dean. Their sizes alone are...daunting.”

“You don’t see the way everyone keeps looking at yours, though,” Dean insisted. “It’s like...Schiele on steroids.”
Castiel felt almost unfairly flattered by the compliment, and looked down at his feet to hide the prideful flush stealing across his cheeks. “He’s one of my favorite artists.”

“It’s true,” Dean said as he took a step and turned toward the tall door of the pantry, opening it and rummaging within its innards for a few seconds. Realizing Dean was likely intent on making them something to eat, Castiel put a hand on Dean’s shoulder.

“You don’t have to make anything. It’s getting late. We can heat something up.”

Dean shook his head.

“I want tomato-rice soup, and we got everything to whip some up here. You don’t have to eat any, but I’m pretty sure you’re gonna want to.”

From the living room, Sam let out a loud whoop and called to his brother, “I want some! Yours is the best!”

Dean grinned almost impishly at Castiel as he turned around, his arms full of seasoning and vegetables.

“See?”

By ten past eight the little kitchen was warm and smelled of basil and the bright acidity of fresh tomatoes. Dean was humming to himself as he moved efficiently around the few feet of space between the stove, the sink, and the counter that housed a cutting board and a few piles of sliced vegetables he’d apparently be using as garnishes.

Somehow, Dean was able to keep one eye on the rice and the other on the rich red soup he’d made as he shredded parsley and thyme and ground fresh pepper from the wooden grinder with a few loud clicks.

Throughout the process, Castiel had offered his assistance whenever it was needed, and together they’d made the soup base from scratch not twenty minutes before. The rice was almost done in its separate pot on the stove, its small white grains swirling happily in their hot water bath.

“Even Tessa used a rice cooker,” Castiel contemplated as he looked down into the contents of the pot.

“Tessa?” Dean asked.

Castiel nodded. “Our housekeeper. She still works for my family.”

“I’ve heard they make some real fancy ones nowadays,” Dean commented as he poked at the rice with a spoon. “Rice cookers, I mean. Ones that can steam and sauté shit and stuff like that. But Bobby doesn’t want to shell out the cash, so he just makes me cook it.” He laughed to himself.

“I wish I knew how to make things the way you do,” Castiel said as he sucked on a still-smarting burn on his finger from an earlier run-in with the soup pot.

“I’ll just show you a recipe every week for the rest of our lives. You’ll be a pro by the time you’re, like, twenty-six,” Dean said as he threw handfuls of fresh herbs into the bubbling red.

Castiel looked up at Dean in surprise, his sore finger forgotten as he let his hand fall back to his side.

Warmth that had nothing to do with the clouds of steam wafting up from the rice coursed through
As if Dean had only just understood the implications of what he’d said, he quickly exclaimed, “Only if you wanted to, I mean. Obviously, we don’t have to. We probably wouldn’t have time, anyway, and, uh, I—”

“I’d like that,” Castiel said, cutting the other boy off as gently as he could.

“Oh. Uh, yeah?” Dean asked bashfully. The smooth skin of his face was damp from the droplets of steam that had collected in a thin sheen on it.

Castiel leaned forward and wrapped one of his arms around Dean’s middle.

“Yes.”

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Castiel sat in the studio, staring at the still-lives stacked in his space and the faded shadows that fell over them from the dim light coming from the buttery ambient bulbs above him.

He was the only one there at the moment, and hadn’t wanted to turn all the lights on. He just wanted to sit in the silence and think.

Dean was in his philosophy of consciousness class, leaving Castiel with an hour or so before his printing course began.

When his phone began to ring, Castiel took it out of his pocket to see who was calling, assuming it to be either Dean or Meg. But the caller was neither.

_Incoming call from: Mother._

Castiel set the phone in Dean’s empty chair, listening to its vibrations as the plastic rattled against the worn wood beneath.

He knew that if he continued to ignore Naomi, she would eventually do something. What that something would be, Castiel wasn’t sure, but the certainty of it sat like a peach pit in the center of his stomach until the call went to voicemail.

By the time he left the studio a half-hour later, Castiel still hadn’t figured out what to do about his final work, and he had two more missed calls from his mother.

“No, sorry. I can’t, Dad…No. Just not tonight. Okay?”

Dean was balancing his cellphone between his chin and one shoulder as he dried the scrubbed dishes Castiel continued to hand him from the right.

Though he didn’t say so, Castiel was extremely surprised to hear his friend turn John Winchester down. He had no memory of Dean ever having done so in the past, not when his father had requested something from him directly. Whenever John told his son to jump, Dean rarely failed to ask how high, regardless of what he might have had planned before his father’s phone call.

Castiel could hear John responding to Dean, but not exactly what he was saying. Though his voice came through loud and clear over the sound of the running water, it was so garbled Castiel wondered if Dean’s father had been drinking already.
“I have homework to do, actually…No, Sam’s not out. But anyway, can I—? Hello? Shit, seriously? Dad?”

Dean moved to dry his hands on the dishtowel he’d thrown on the kitchen counter a few seconds earlier. Then, he grabbed his phone from the crook of his neck to look at its screen.

“Did he hang up on you?” Castiel asked.

Dean nodded, his mouth tight and flat.

It was almost eight at night, and Bobby was having his customary whiskey out on the front porch while Sam did homework back in his room. Though it wasn’t that late, everything seemed to be winding down already in the Singer-Winchester household, and it was quiet now that the faucet had been turned off and the dishes finished.

Dean sighed. “Guess it wouldn’t be a Thursday without him asking if I can fix the AC while he watches Three’s Company and hides a rum bottle.”

“Does he know you’re aware?” Castiel asked.

Dean shook his head, his lower lip now caught between his teeth. “I’m not even sure sometimes.”

“You…told him no,” Castiel said when what felt like too much time had passed between them in silence.

“I just don’t think I want to see him,” Dean said heavily; something in his face made Castiel pause where he’d been about to put the last plate away in the nearby cupboard.

“Do you want to sit in bed and smoke?” he asked.

When Dean nodded, Castiel wasn’t surprised.

After the kitchen was close to spotless and the lights had been turned off a few minutes later, the two of them made their way back to the guestroom.

Once there and with the door closed and locked behind them, Castiel began to load a bowl in his borrowed pipe while Dean opened the window and fiddled with the knob on the radio until he found a song he wanted to listen to. Castiel could see tension in the movements of Dean’s hands and the rigidity of his posture, and he knew exactly who’d put it there.

“Why don’t you come sit down?” Castiel said.

He gestured with the pipe to get Dean’s attention, relieved when his friend did as he’d suggested and sat, cross-legged, next to him on the bed.

They shared greens together as a familiar Metallica song began to play, masking the sounds of their coughs and exhales. The smoke spiraled slowly out the open window, and Castiel wondered where Olivia the calico was, and if she’d return to the house if he left something on the sill for her.

Dean took Castiel’s hand as they continued to smoke, and Castiel lightly squeezed his fingers.

When they’d smoked the entirety of the first bowl, they both agreed on loading another.

Castiel kept an eye on Dean as they passed the piece back and forth, watching the other boy as he gradually began to unwind. By the time they’d finished the second bowl Dean’s face had lost some of the uncharacteristic dullness that had masked it since John’s phone call.
It sometimes astounded Castiel, how distinctly different Dean acted when he was well and truly high; the change seemed almost like that of night and day sometimes.

The Dean that Castiel saw most of the time was tall and broad and silent, his shoulders thrust back and his chin high, his striking face almost blank as he made his way from place to place or spoke to his and Castiel’s friends. Sober and surrounded by other students, Dean kept his thoughts to himself and his feelings even further suppressed than that. Dean was strong and capable and unobtrusive as he and Castiel went to and from their classes or stood in line at the store; he got things done quickly and competently and when he moved, it was always with purpose.

Stoned, however, Dean became candid and trusting, unguarded and innocent in a way Castiel had only seen him once or twice before. Stoned, Dean threw his head back and laughed until he couldn’t breathe; he had such a sweet laugh when he couldn’t stop it from bubbling up from his lips, his eyes screwed shut and his shoulders heaving. Stoned, Dean let Castiel hold him and stroke his hair as he buried his face in Castiel’s chest and closed his eyes.

Stoned, Dean also spoke about his father more often, and after Castiel’s pipe had been retired for the night and the ashtray emptied into the trash, Dean leaned back against the wall with a faraway look in his eyes.

“Y’know, before the drinking got outta hand, Dad used to work wood. He’d sit at the kitchen table and make us magic wands and these, like, tiny cars with numbers on ‘em. He’d do that for hours, and we’d just watch him.”

He and Castiel were sitting the way they’d been when they started smoking the last bowl, side-by-side on the bed and with their fingers still looped together.

“Do you miss that?” Castiel asked.

“I used to…but I guess I don’t anymore,” Dean answered. “I don’t know. I miss the way he used to be, not the wands and stuff.”

“My father used to build ships in bottles,” Castiel said. “Anna and I used to get so excited when he started a new one. Each one took him a few days to make, and we used to have a special shelf for his favorites in the living room. We’d watch him paint the tiny hulls and rig the masts with dental floss. They were so colorful and…fine.”

He could still see them in his mind when he closed his eyes, the little coffee-tinted masts and gleaming coats of acrylic paint trapped in their shiny glass houses. His father had let Anna pick the colors while Castiel got to choose the type of ship.

“Do you have any of ‘em?” Dean asked with interest.

Castiel shook his head, the smile he hadn’t even felt wilting on his lips. “No. One day…well, first, he stopped. When I asked him why, he—” Castiel hesitated. “He told me that it was stupid. That things like miniature ships were useless. Pointless ornamentation, he said. He sold them and never made another. I think something must have happened at the lab to upset him that much, but he didn’t tell me what, and neither did my mother.”

“It sounds like your dad and mine would’ve gotten along,” Dean said dolefully.

“I wonder how I’d feel if I could’ve met your father when he still made you racecars,” Castiel said.

Dean shook his head, letting go of Castiel’s hand to press the heels of his palms into his eyes. “You’d probably still feel the same way you do about him now. Trust me,” he sighed. “I don’t think
my Dad’s been himself since the fire. Not even right after.”

“I still wonder,” Castiel said.

“I’m glad I stayed here tonight,” Dean said as he opened his eyes.

“I feel better when you’re with me,” Castiel said sleepily, too high to think through the statement much more than the bare mechanics of it. “I don’t have to worry about you getting hurt.”

Dean leaned inward to press his forehead to Castiel’s, the gesture thoughtful and measured. Castiel felt a profound tenderness well up inside him, and wished he knew how to show Dean how much he adored him, how much he never wanted him to go anywhere but exactly where he was, where they breathed one another in while the world beyond left them alone.

“Can you kiss me?” Castiel asked, feeling his face heat with embarrassment at his own straightforwardness.

But Dean only gave him a soft, drowsy smile. “C’mer.”

Castiel shifted onto his left hip, breathing out bit by bit as he felt Dean’s hands come up to cup the sides of his face.

Dean’s movements were gradual and restrained when he drew Castiel still closer, giving him time to pull away. The light hairs on Dean’s arms were soft beneath Castiel’s hands as he stroked them over the insides of his scarred elbows.

Their lips met a few seconds later, and it was gentle and easy. Castiel pressed his face a little further into the callused palms of Dean’s hands, letting the touch moor him as he loosely encircled his own fingers around Dean’s wrists, clinging to his forearms.

Dean tasted like smoke and the sugar of the soda he’d brought back to the room with them, and Castiel couldn’t even hear the radio anymore, so absorbed had he become in the moment spanning out between them.

Safe.

Castiel was too high to keep track of the minutes as they passed, and found that, for once, he didn’t mind not knowing the exact time as the seconds ticked past them on the nearby clock. When he and Dean moved together to lie down next to one another on the narrow bed, Castiel stretched himself out almost languorously as he smoothed his hands over Dean’s shoulders and the muscles that moved and twitched beneath the skin. He kept his eyes closed as he focused on the way Dean’s touches felt against his clothed sides and the softness of his mouth.

He didn’t realize he was falling asleep until Dean ended the kiss and held Castiel to his chest, his hands splayed over Castiel’s back as they breathed together again.

Safe.

They fell asleep together not long after, curled around one another in the smoky dark.

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The following day was Friday, April 4th, and the gallery was scheduled to open its doors at three in the afternoon while the formal reception would begin at four. That morning, Dean and Castiel awoke together around seven to the sound of Bobby rapping stridently on the guestroom door.
Though the Winchester brothers’ surrogate father had been listening to Dean and Castiel downplay the significance of being featured in the show for most of the week, he’d nonetheless clearly cottoned on to the importance of this particular Friday.

Next to Castiel, Dean groaned at the sudden noise, pulling the sheet over his face.

“I made eggs and toast, so get on out here! Both of you,” Bobby called.

The change in the room’s energy was almost instantaneous. One moment, all was calm, quiet, and slow, the next, it became frantic and uneasy; Castiel let out a disconcertingly high-pitched noise of shock as beside him, Dean choked on what sounded like his own saliva. They both practically leapt out of the bed.

“Bobby,” Castiel gasped as he began searching for his over shirt. “We’re not—it’s just me in here, Dean is—”

“No in Sam’s room, I checked,” Bobby finished for him. “And no, he ain’t at John’s, either. I know he didn’t go over last night ’cause I woke up to a half-dozen calls from him.”

Dean’s sleep-swollen eyes snapped all the way open at that, but before he could react any further Bobby continued.

“Before you ask, no, I don’t give two shits and no, I’m not tellin’ your daddy, Dean…Uh, Sam knows, too, by the way. Um, anyway…y’know. Hurry.”

Castiel thought he might have heard Bobby mutter what sounded like something about ‘idjits’ and feelings, but didn’t dwell on it for long. Once he was sure Bobby had gone back down the hallway, he fell back onto the bed with a long, slow exhale of the breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

Through the paper-thin walls, he could hear Sam’s clock radio going off in the room next to them, the sounds of early 90’s rock filtering beneath their door, and he could smell the coffee Bobby was brewing even though they were yards away from the kitchen.

“Uh…well then,” Dean said as he dazedly rubbed his eyes.

“Mnhmm,” Castiel agreed.

Outside, it looked like it was going to be another calm, temperate day; a clear, yellow sunrise was shining its lukewarm way into the room. Neither he nor Dean moved for a few minutes, both of them watching as the light progressively grew brighter, drifting over the slats of the floor like honey.

“It’s gonna be a long day, we should probably go eat breakfast,” Dean said at last, lightly knocking their shoulders together.

Castiel turned to look at him.

“Aren’t you upset that your brother and uncle know that we…that you and I are…” he wasn’t sure what combination of words to use, and the sentence hung inelegantly in the air between them until Dean salvaged it.

“That we’re together?” he supplied.

Castiel’s stomach fluttered with unexpected butterflies at the simple phrase.

“Yes.”
Dean gave a one-armed shrug. “Well, I guess I would have liked to be the one to tell Bobby and Sam, but they were gonna find out anyway.”

“What if…your father finds out?” Castiel asked, feeling it was something he needed to say.

Dean turned away for a moment, resting his chin in his palm as he looked out the window.

“I don’t know,” was what he said when he spoke a little while later.

After that, they silently got dressed together.

In preparation for the show, Dean, Castiel, Madison, and the rest of the volunteers arrived at the FAB around nine that morning, most of the art students guzzling the coffee Harvelle and Garth had provided as they simultaneously hastened to place the finishing touches on the various groups of paintings and sculpture mounts around the room.

Someone had indie rock playing on a purple stereo in one corner of the gallery, and everyone seemed to be attempting to speak over one another as they milled about doing this or that. During the time Castiel and Dean had already spent in the closed gallery that week it had been much less crowded than it was today, and though that detail wasn’t surprising, Castiel was on-edge and slightly claustrophobic once situated within the bubble of noise that enveloped the FAB; he had to take the elevator upstairs to grab a pair of earplugs from the woodshop at only two minutes past ten, and twice he took a few minutes to borrow Dean’s keys and sit out in the Impala, breathing in the faded scent of him until he felt he’d regained his composure.

Around mid-afternoon, while Castiel helped Jake Talley secure a particularly large mount for a sculpture that had been too delicate to move any sooner than the day of the opening, Castiel happened to see Madison and Professor Harvelle as they went down a checklist of things that needed to be completed by two. Today, he noticed that Madison had her hair up and was wearing a paint-stained Nirvana t-shirt. When she caught Castiel’s eye she smiled at him and gave him a little wave the way she had on Wednesday before looking back at Harvelle. This time, Castiel wished fleetingly that he’d been quick enough to respond in kind.

Professor Harvelle, for the most part, appeared to be spending most of her day running around like a chicken with her head cut off, relying heavily on her volunteers and Professor Barnes to help her as she gradually lost the tight edge of control she usually expertly retained. By noon she’d already lost her glasses (twice), her checklist (once), and her diet Coke (three times). But she and her students were capable, and everything was running as smoothly as could be hoped for as the hours wore on.

While Castiel, Madison, Jake and a few others continued to work inside the gallery, outside of it, the tables which would house the catered food and drinks were being unfolded and set up. Dean had been recruited to lend a hand in the foyer along with one or two other volunteers. Garth was, for the most part, in charge of ensuring that those arrangements were placed properly, and when Castiel periodically looked up from his tasks, he saw Harvelle’s assistant talking to Dean and the others through the polished glass wall that separated them.

Despite how long the day felt as he lived it, before Castiel could make a third trip to the Impala, 2:30 pm had rolled around and there was barely enough time for he and Dean to run back to Bobby’s and change.

Dean’s hands shook where they clamped the steering wheel as he drove them home, and more than once he jumped when Castiel said something to him, his thoughts obviously elsewhere. By the time
they made it back to Bobby’s, Castiel was worried, though he didn’t say so.

They had a little over forty-five minutes to grab a quick bite and put their dress clothes on, and Dean only seemed to grow more anxious as the time passed.

“You look wonderful,” Castiel told Dean as he pulled on his black dress shirt in front of the guestroom mirror a little while later. They were due to return back to campus shortly, and Dean’s skin was damp with nervous sweat.

“Do you want water?” Castiel asked.

“What?” Dean turned to look at him, his hands pausing where they’d been fastening the small, tortoiseshell buttons of his shirt.

Castiel frowned, inordinately grateful that he hadn’t been chosen to present his work at the reception. Dean hadn’t been so lucky; his work was so well-received by the art department heads that he’d been volunteered. Castiel knew that was likely part of his obvious anxiety.

“Water?” Castiel repeated.

“Oh. No. Thanks, though,” Dean muttered distractedly as he returned to his task. He then proceeded to button his shirt incorrectly. Castiel wordlessly moved to stand before him, unbuttoning and then refastening Dean’s shirt while ignoring the growing flush on the other boy’s face.

“You’re going to do well,” he said to Dean after he’d finished. “You’ve memorized your artist’s statement, and your work is beautiful.”

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean mumbled, too preoccupied fiddling with his buttons again to look at Castiel.

Castiel thought he could guess the deeper reason for Dean’s fretfulness, but wasn’t sure if discussing it would make him feel any more secure. However, what he knew was beginning to weigh more and more heavily on his mind as Dean almost forgot his wallet and then tripped over the front step on their way out.

Sam had informed Castiel the previous day that he, Bobby, Jessica, and John Winchester were all slotted to attend the reception, and while Castiel had heard the first three freely compliment Dean’s work when they saw it, he was more than aware that John thought Dean’s art was glorified chicken-scratch and had no issues saying so to his son’s face.

As Dean started the Impala so they could head back to campus a few minutes later, Castiel prayed to a god he didn’t think existed that the reception would go smoothly.

By the time they re-entered the FAB at three-thirty, two dozen or so people were already mingling both on the inside the gallery and around the foyer, talking loudly amongst themselves and sipping sparkling water from thick plastic cups that had likely cost more than Castiel’s entire coffee mug collection.

As soon as he and Dean set foot in the foyer itself, Castiel saw Dean’s family as well as Jessica standing amidst the growing group of people in the gallery beyond. He knew Dean had seen them too when he waved at Bobby and gently took Castiel’s arm at the elbow, guiding them both toward the small group.

As they made their way across the now-familiar room, Castiel took a moment to survey how well the art displays themselves had turned out, how well-chosen the pieces and tastefully-arranged everything was. He felt a modest and unaccustomed blush of self-satisfaction, the flame of it new and
rare in his chest as he thought of what he and Dean had contributed to the event.

“Everything looks great, boys,” Bobby said with a smile as Castiel and Dean reached them.

“Some of this stuff is so cool,” Sam gushed as he grinned widely at Dean. “Man, I can’t believe y’all made all this.” He waved broadly at the gallery and artists clustered around them. “You have some talented classmates, dude. And don’t even get me started on your pieces, Dean. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s even better than some of the stuff you made last year, and believe me when—”

Sam was interrupted by John Winchester as he chuckled with quiet amusement and spoke over his son. “C’mon, Sam, they all look the same. Bunch ‘a colors slapped on a canvas. Again.”

Just as it had at Sam’s dinner and Christmas day, the casual rudeness of the comment almost immediately caused a strained silence to fall over the little group. Jessica diverted her eyes uncomfortably, the hopeful expression Dean had been wearing died on his face, Bobby gawkily shuffled his feet, and Sam clamped his jaw shut. John, however, seemed oblivious to these tells, and brandished a cup of lemon-lime water at Sam with a half-smile on his face as he waited for someone to respond.

If ever he was asked, Castiel would likely say he didn’t consider himself someone particularly quick to anger or outbursts of temper. When he’d been younger, his father had been severe enough for everyone as far as Castiel was concerned. A bitter and rebellious Gabriel hadn’t agreed, however, and some of Castiel’s most prominent adolescent memories were of Andrew and Gabriel yelling at each other in the living room while Naomi poured herself a glass of rosé in the kitchen. Castiel had always been naturally shy and introverted, but his fear of angering his father the way Gabriel regularly did had also played a significant part in the way he conducted himself and spoke to people.

Most of the time, Andrew Novak had been the epitome of calm, cool, and collected, but during the few times he lost his self-possession, it was as if he became a different person. At a young age Castiel had learned that having an unruffled surface by no means meant the depths were as smooth and undisturbed. His father had never raised a hand to his family, nor had Castiel feared he would, but the dread of his father’s sometimes capricious irritability had kept him small, silent, and polite even after Andrew’s death.

Even now, after what Drew had done to him and the small flares of temper Castiel was more prone to, he didn’t often feel truly angry. For the most part, he found that the worst of the problems he’d experienced with expressing his anger had receded.

But right now, that familiar red line was not far below the cool waters of Castiel’s hard-won calm, nor was it quiet.

Dean deserved better.

He turned to speak directly to Sam and Dean’s father.

“Dean’s work is remarkable. His conceptual piece was easily one of the best in our class, and the head of the painting department personally asked Dean to present on his work. He’s extremely talented, unique, and modern, and so are his paintings.”

Castiel had straightened his posture enough that he knew it would hurt later, and the hairs on the back of his neck felt as if they were literally bristling with the intensity of his words.

John didn’t respond immediately. He took a slow sip of his water first, looking from Dean to Castiel and then back again, his eyes narrowing as he swirled the contents of his cup. There was something
calculating in his gaze, something... knowing.

Castiel felt something coil in his stomach as the wheels visibly turned in John’s head and he turned to smile at his son.

The color drained from Dean’s face as John locked eyes with him, the smile still unmoving on his face. It looked almost as if something in both Winchesters’ body language was changing right before Castiel’s eyes; as John seemed to draw himself up and his shoulders to broaden, Dean practically shrank before him. His green eyes grew wide as he looked up at his father, making his face look almost childlike, as if he was no longer twenty-one and inches taller than Castiel.

He felt like throwing up as he realized what he’d done.

Fuck.

He’d gone and made a reality the one thing Dean was afraid of happening, and the person who would be punished for Castiel’s words would of course not be Castiel himself. It would be Dean.

Fuck.

Castiel’s feet felt rooted to the gleaming floor as he watched John watching Dean.

“That so, Dean?” John asked, his voice almost dangerously quiet.

“Uh, yes, sir. Well, we actually have to run and talk to Professor Barnes about something, and, ah, we’ll be back. Sorry guys,” Dean said with a smile as fake as his father’s as he took Castiel’s arm a second time and moved them toward the other end of the gallery. Dean’s hand was tight on the inside of Castiel’s elbow, and he could feel sweat gathering under it.

“Dean, I’m so sorry,” Castiel stuttered once he felt they were out of earshot. His anger and self-righteousness had been replaced with panic and dread. “Please, I’ll do anything you ask to make it better, I didn’t mean to—”

“Please be quiet,” Dean said tightly, looking anywhere but at Castiel as he released his arm. “Please, just—fuck. Fuck.”

Before he could say anything else, Castiel heard both of their names called.

“Cas! Dean!”

Castiel turned just in time to see Charlie practically sprinting toward them with a wide grin on her face. Professor Harvelle eyed her warily as she galloped past, as if she was surveying a particularly enthusiastic bull in a china shop.

When she reached him, Charlie threw her arms around Castiel’s shoulders like she hadn’t seen him only a few hours earlier, and Castiel noticed that Gilda was following closely behind her girlfriend. She gave him a small wave as she reached out a hand to lightly clasp his shoulder.

“I missed you!” Charlie said exuberantly into Castiel’s ear before she let him go and set her sights on Dean, pulling him in as well. She was wearing a light green dress that complemented her hair for the occasion, and she looked happy.

“Your fidelity obviously proves it,” Castiel said with a forced laugh before he turned toward Charlie’s companion. “Hello, Gilda.”
“Hey, Cas,” Gilda said quietly. “Your painting is…well, it’s amazing. It scares me, but it’s so good. It’s…it’s kinda beautiful.”

Castiel found he didn’t know how to process the compliment alongside the terror and self-hatred he felt for outing himself and Dean to John.

“Uh, thank you,” he said shortly, nodding and hoping his smile looked sincere enough to pass muster. He wished he was able to fully mean it.

The gallery filled even more rapidly with people as the clock struck four, and Professor Harvelle stepped into the center of the gallery as somewhere outside of the room Garth dimmed the lights a few times to get everyone’s attention for her. She was wearing a long white linen robe with silver sandals and a jeweled lotus in her hair, and while the get-up likely would have looked ridiculous on most other people, she looked almost regal.

Both the artists present and the attendees began to gather accordingly around her after the lights flashed for the last time, and Dean began to walk toward the small group of students standing directly behind Professor Harvelle.

“Dean, wait,” Castiel said as he grasped the other boy’s wrist. Dean turned to look at him, his face impassive.

There was something that Castiel had thought up for this very moment before they left the house, something to reassure and comfort Dean, but the words failed him utterly.

“I’m so sorry,” was all he was able to say before Dean walked away.

Castiel watched him take his place near Harvelle, fighting back tears.

Professor Harvelle waited for everyone in the gallery to quiet down, which took a few additional minutes, and then she beamed brightly at the sizable crowd before her and began to speak.

“Hello, and welcome to the Sarofine Gallery of Fine Arts. We’re so glad you were able to attend our reception tonight and see some of the work of our students. We are so proud of them and all that they’ve accomplished the past few semesters, and are happy to share that with you, their friends and family. A few of them have been elected by their classmates to talk a little about the works of theirs featured in this show, and Miss Ruby Cortese will be going first.”

Harvelle backed gracefully away then, ushering forward the dark-haired student she’d just named to take her place. Ruby waved and gestured toward her pieces before she began to give her speech.

A few people behind Ruby, Castiel could see a fresh sheen of sweat gleaming on Dean’s forehead under the warm yellow lights as the two majors before him came and went. Dean didn’t spare a glance for the crowd, and Castiel wondered if he was avoiding his eyes or John’s.

When it was Dean’s turn, Castiel silently moved forward through the few people blocking his way, trying to get a better view.

Dean’s shoulders were still slightly hunched, his eyes downcast as he addressed his peers.

“H—hi, everybody. I’m Dean Winchester, and I have three pieces in this show, all of ‘em over there,” he pointed to the west end of the gallery before continuing. “They, uh—well, my works are usually focused on movement and color interactions. I—”

The sound of the gallery door opening and closing was almost ear-piercing in the respectful silence
that surrounded Dean’s words.

The tumbler catching echoed audibly in the low-ceilinged space, and Castiel turned just in time to catch John Winchester’s back as it receded into the foyer beyond. Castiel saw him grab a handful of cheese and crackers through the glass.

When he turned back around, Castiel’s breath caught in his chest a second time as he saw the crushed look in Dean’s eyes.

Dean’s mouth worked silently for a few seconds, his arms swinging idly by his sides. He looked down at his feet and then back up, something like resignation settling onto his face.

When Dean resumed his statement, his eyes were focused on some point above the crowd, his voice leaden.

By the time Dean had finished, the gallery was practically vibrating with tension; whispers abounded from the attendees who’d pieced together what had likely happened, and Castiel heard a few people exit the gallery behind him.

Dean looked as if he couldn’t care less as he stood there. Professor Harvelle, however, appeared uncertain as she walked back to the front of the room wearing a stiff smile.

“Thank you, Dean. Ah, next up is Arlene White,” Harvelle announced before she draped her arm over Dean’s shoulders in a way she hadn’t with Ruby or Bethany before him, guiding him a few yards away. Castiel was thankful when Arlene began to talk and the gallery to quiet again, but the feeling was short-lived as he saw Dean shrug Harvelle’s arm off of himself to push past her toward the gallery exit and follow John. He didn’t have to expend much effort to do so considering most people stepped out of Dean’s way when they saw him approaching the door. In a few seconds, he was gone.

Next to Castiel, Charlie and Gilda looked dismayed, and they began to walk toward the door as well. Before they could get very far, however, Castiel shook his head and gestured for them to hold back. Once they’d done as he asked, Castiel parted his own way through the throng of gallery attendees as politely as he could, reaching the door not long after it closed behind Dean.

His heart dashed itself against his ribs at the thought of what might happen if Dean and his father were left alone, of what Castiel had unwittingly started. It was true that they were in a public place and there were no visible signs John was intoxicated, but Castiel still had no idea what he might say or do to his son if he felt provoked.

By the time Castiel made it past the foyer and into the far entry hall, he could see Dean and John already standing outside in the parking lot together. He pushed the glass double doors open and walked hurriedly toward them, not noticing that Sam and Bobby were close at his heels until he heard them come up beside him in unison.

The three of them made it to where Dean and John were still wordlessly facing one another at the same time, forming a loose half-circle around them. Dean turned to look at them as they arrived, his expression unreadable. John didn’t bother to do the same, his eyes still fixed on Dean.

“You wanted to say somethin’ to me?” John asked his oldest son with an unnerving calm.

Dean was facing his father again in less than a second, the movement evidently involuntary.

“I…” he began before quickly faltering. “Yeah, I did.”
The capable, confident person Castiel had seen fix cars and prepare three dishes simultaneously and comfort those around him was nowhere to be found.

The person Castiel was looking at now was obviously wound tight enough to hurt, with his hands hanging uncomfortably by his sides and sweat seeping through his black dress shirt and dripping from his hair. Dean and his father were standing less than two yards apart from one another, and Castiel could tell that Dean wished it was further.

“You followed me out here, so you can say what you need to like a man,” John said. “C’mon, now.”

Dean flushed at the words as if they were ones he’d heard many times before, and his hands began to clench and unclench, his jaw set as he looked down at his feet.

“I…I worked hard on that stuff in there, and you just—”

Despite John’s insistence Dean speak his mind, he interrupted him before he could even finish a full sentence. “You don’t want to help your old man when he needs you, but me not liking your doodles is the problem here? Alright, sure,” John drawled as he hooked his thumbs in his belt-loops and took a step toward his son. He had a long-suffering expression on his face, as if Dean’s palpable pain was a familiar nuisance.

“I help you any time I can,” Dean said as he took an equal step away, his eyes darting uneasily from his father’s face to their immediate surroundings and back again. “I was busy this week, I told you that.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I believe that,” John retorted. “If you’re gonna lie, the least you can do is look like you mean it.”

It was the accusation Dean was lying that seemed to finally goad him, and he looked his father fully in the face again, then, a crease of frustration appearing between his brows. “I can’t come over every time you call, Dad. It’s not always gonna work that way because of my schedule. It…it can’t.”

“Before that kid moved in with you, you always had time for me,” John countered as he glanced pointedly at Castiel. He felt even the brief weight of John’s eyes like lead on his shoulders.

Dean threw an arm out as if to shield Castiel from his father’s gaze. “C’mon, don’t bring Cas into this, he’s—”

“Obviously more than a friend,” John finished.

Dean hesitated too long to respond, turning to look at Castiel for the few precious seconds he could have spent answering his father. However, when John opened his mouth to speak, he was cut off as Sam abruptly took a step forward and talked over him.

“What does that have to do with anything? Who cares if they’re together? That’s none of your business.”

The youngest Winchester’s hazel eyes were bright with anger, and Castiel saw Bobby reach out to clasp one of his shoulders in a silent warning, the older man’s face tense.

“Sammy, stay outta this,” Dean said quietly to his brother.

“This is between your brother and me, Samuel,” John said warningly, not even looking over at Sam.

But Sam wasn’t willing to back down, and he shook Bobby’s hand off. “He’s my big brother, it’s
between all of us when you hurt him.”

The last phrase seemed to spur Dean to action, and he threw himself between his father and brother, his hands out in supplication.

“Sam,” he barked. “Leave it.”

“How about, no?” Sam exclaimed with exasperation as he tried to push Dean out of the way to stand directly before John, his angular face mottled an ugly red and white with the intensity of his feelings. “What the hell, Dean? How is this okay?”

Castiel felt immobilized, horror crashing like waves inside him at the look on Dean’s face and the out of character mask of fury on Sam’s.

“Dean can speak for himself,” John said to Sam over Dean’s shoulder. “If he wants to say something, he’s more than capable of doin’ so himself.”

“Obviously,” Sam said with an exaggerated snort. “Cause, y’know, you’ve clearly let him in the past.”

“What’s he talking about?” John snapped at Dean, who was practically pressed flush to his chest.

Dean flinched at the words and reached an arm back to shove Sam a few inches away so he could get some distance from his father.

“He—”

“What? I didn’t raise you right and you’re boo-hooing behind my back to Dick, Jane, and Mary about how I messed you up? Is that why your friend thinks he has to talk you up to me?” John actually pointed at Castiel, then.

Castiel backed away a few inches as he was again reminded of his unwitting part in this confrontation.

“Leave Cas out of this,” Dean repeated firmly. “It’s got nothin’ to do with him.”

“Why should I? I don’t know him from Adam, and it’s pretty clear he’s been a bad influence on you,” John bit back. “Now, you’d rather screw around than help me.”

Sam rolled his eyes with enough emphasis that the gesture would have been noticeable from yards away, and beside Castiel, Bobby shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

“Stop,” Dean said, though the word had little authority. “This isn’t about him or Sam. It’s…let’s just drop it.”

“Typical,” John said, the word partially uttered under his breath. Castiel saw a muscle tick in Dean’s jaw. “You don’t even know what you’re mad about.”

When Dean spoke again Castiel wasn’t expecting it, and judging by the looks on Sam and Bobby’s faces, they hadn’t been, either.

“You couldn’t listen to my artist statement.”

Castiel doubted he did so consciously, but Dean took few steps back from his father after he’d spoken. His arms were partially raised by his sides, and his eyes were trained on John.
“What’d you say?” John asked, seemingly genuinely taken aback by his answer.

“I just…you…you couldn’t listen to my artist statement. It was less than three minutes, and you walked out,” Dean said slowly. “It took hours to write that.”

Beside him, Sam was nodding.

“You’re serious?” John asked, stepping toward Dean as if his son hadn’t just moved away.

Castiel didn’t realize he’d taken a step forward as well until he felt Sam’s hand on his forearm, stopping him where he was.

Dean nodded.

“You’re throwin’ a fit because I’m telling you like it is? I’m preparing you for the real world, Dean, where this free-spirit bullshit doesn’t matter,” John’s voice was little more than a hiss, now, and his face was only inches away from Dean’s.

“John,” Bobby blessedly intervened, his voice gruff as he moved to clasp one of Dean’s arms.

John rounded on Bobby quickly, side-stepping Dean to do so. “He ain’t your boy, Bobby. Back off. You lettin’ him do whatever the hell he wants while he’s under your roof fed into this mess.”

“And you hitting him when you get drunk keeps him in line?” Sam’s voice dripped with acid, and before John could respond to his youngest, Bobby spoke again.

“I have a say in this since the boy works for me, and Cas needed a place to stay, so we gave him one,” Bobby said matter-of-factly. “This needs to stop right here, before it gets any uglier.”

“Bobby, it’s fine,” Dean said. “Don’t worry about—”

“What is this? I’m tryin’ to talk to my son, if everyone else could kindly stay out of it,” John protested.

“Well, then why don’t you actually let him talk instead of treating him like shit?” Sam snapped at his father, his interjection clearly expected by Mr. Winchester.

“That’s rich, Sam. You don’t get it right now, but one day—”

“Oh, give me a friggin’ break. You’re so full of shit you don’t even see—”

“Stay out of this like I told you, Sam,” Dean ordered, talking over both his father and brother. “You always do this, you always try and help me out, and all you fuckin’ do is make it worse! Don’t you get it?”

By the look on Sam’s face, Castiel could tell they’d had this argument before.

“If I don’t say it, I don’t think anyone will!” Sam said heatedly. “You never do!”

“Because there’s nothin’ to say, Sam,” John said with frustration. “What do you want him to do? Lie and tell everyone what an asshole I am? Act like it’s that simple so you can feel like you saved someone today?”

“You broke his collarbone!” Sam practically yelled, his face turning a dark red. “How the hell is that a lie?”
“Dean knows exactly what he did and why that happened, and you don’t know enough about the situation to—”

“Why can’t you just be nice to me?”

Bobby, Sam and John fell silent, clearly not expecting the ferocity with which Dean had spoken. His shoulders and chest were heaving, and there was stone in his eyes as he looked up from where he’d been staring at the asphalt beneath his feet again. When he continued, his voice was measured and slow, the words ringing in Castiel’s ears.

“And not when you’re drunk, or when I fix something for you. Not after you get wasted and hit me ‘cause you’d rather be pissed than sad. Just ‘cause. When have you ever told me something good about me or all the shit I do for you instead of taking and taking and taking until it’s not enough and you fall off the wagon for the millionth time?”

Sam’s mouth had fallen open in silent shock, and both he, Bobby, and Castiel watched John, waiting to see what he would say to his son.

John shook his head. “I know things’ve been rough since your Mom passed, but if you think that justifies your attitude—”

When Dean interrupted his father for the first time in Castiel’s memory, he felt his heart leap.

“I’ve been hoping for years that if I was there for you enough, you’d get your shit together.”

Castiel had never seen Dean look so angry before.

“I did my best with you boys,” John said defensively, looking thrown off-balance by the statement.

“No. You didn’t,” Dean said. “You burned through everything we had and blamed it on the fire. I gave up so much to make sure nothing bad happened to you or to Sam. I almost didn’t make it to college ‘cause I had to support your dead weight. I almost ruined everything to make you happy.” Dean’s voice was brutal, his words heavy with years of things left unspoken.

“I fucking raised you,” John snarled as he lost his cool for the first time that day, grabbing a fistful of Dean’s shirt and jerking him forward roughly.

“I raised me,” Dean spat, though he didn’t move to raise a hand against his father.

“Least I didn’t raise a queer, then,” John said, so quietly Castiel knew Bobby likely hadn’t even caught it.

“Fuck you,” Dean said.

When John pulled his arm back and made to strike Dean, Bobby managed to block the movement, grunting with effort as he pushed his friend away from Dean and shoved him a yard or so away.

“So help me god, John, if you lay a hand on him I’ll call the police,” Bobby grit out.

Dean backed slowly away from his father, Bobby, and Sam, his face empty and smooth.

“Dean, don’t go!” Sam’s voice was broken, and one of his hands was clamped onto the forearm of John’s that Bobby wasn’t holding. Castiel stared numbly as Dean raised his hands.

“I’m getting the fuck out of here,” Dean said tonelessly. “C’mon, Cas.”
Castiel didn’t need telling twice, and hastily followed Dean as he turned and strode across the parking lot to the Impala where it had been parked on the other side. Dean’s steps were solid and absolute on the tar, and the harsh heat of the day made the air wave and distort around him as he moved.

From behind them, Castiel could just make out the sounds of John and Bobby continuing to argue amongst themselves and the low murmur of the gallery attendees who had come outside to watch the uncomfortable encounter.

When they reached the car Dean unlocked it and got inside without comment, and Castiel clambered into the passenger side next to him, feeling how much his legs were shaking only once he’d gotten off his feet.

Dean backed out of the parking lot and began the short drive back to Bobby’s. They didn’t speak to one another as they drove, and Castiel looked out the window, his head light and hollow as the things John and Dean had said to one another ran endlessly through it.

When they were halfway to the house Castiel felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, and he pulled it out to see who’d texted him, grateful for any excuse to pretend he wasn’t having a panic attack.

Sam W: ‘We have my dad handled. Bobby’s gonna take him home and we’ll give yall some space at the house for a little while.’

A few minutes later Dean had parked the Impala in the front driveway, and they were making their silent way into the old house together.

It should have felt similar to the many times they’d done so in the weeks Castiel had been living at Bobby’s, but what made it different was the vast and aching quiet. Any other night, Dean would have been making some joke at Sam’s expense or recounting something from his day, but tonight Dean walked inside without so much as a look back at Castiel, his back rigid.

After weeks of being closer to one another than Castiel had ever been to anyone in his life, the wall Dean had thrown between them felt almost like a physical blow.

Castiel wondered if there was anything he could say to mend things, or if he should even say anything to Dean at all right now. This was his fault, and Dean had taken the brunt of the consequences. How could he begin to amply express the regret he felt for having accidentally caused Dean additional pain?

After Castiel shut and locked the front door behind them, he turned nervously around, expecting to see Dean. When he only found an empty entryway and living room before him, he paused. He’d apparently been so absorbed in his thoughts that he hadn’t heard even Dean leave the room.

Should he follow Dean or leave him alone? Should he call his name or look for him silently? Castiel closed his eyes, almost wishing he had the keys so he could sit outside in the car for a few minutes to sort through his scattered feelings.

Is he going to ask me to leave?

The thought stung so much that Castiel bent over with a breath that felt ripped from his lungs, pressing one hand to his knee while the other came up to cover his mouth.

When he began to walk further into the house a few minutes later, Castiel couldn’t bring himself to walk quickly through the familiar spaces he’d come to know, and his footsteps were so quiet he could barely hear them himself. He made his way through the kitchen, dining room, and living room
before he paused for a long time at the start of the hallway that housed the bedrooms and Bobby’s office.

Castiel shoved his shaking palms under the hem of his shirt as he took the first step into the hall.

“Dean?” he called.

He heard the sound of a soft exhalation coming from the guestroom, and quietly let himself in after he found the door unlocked, unsurprised at where Dean had ended up.

Dean was sitting on the unmade bed, his hands in his lap as he stared down at them. He made a peculiarly striking image there, his back curved and his head bowed over his empty palms.

“Dean?”

Dean didn’t move or acknowledge that he’d heard his name.

“I…I’m sorry.”

When Castiel gingerly reached out to touch one of Dean’s hands, the other boy didn’t pull away or squeeze Castiel’s fingers in turn.

“I was just so angry at him.” Castiel’s voice broke on the last word.

Only then did Dean look up and meet Castiel’s eyes, his own full of pain and a bitter resentment Castiel had never seen before.

“I didn’t want this to happen. I wasn’t thinking,” Castiel said as Dean shook his hand off and stood up in a single motion. “I wanted him to know how wonderful you are and I made a mistake. Please.”

Dean didn’t respond, and Castiel watched mutely as he turned to face the mirror above the desk a few feet away, motionless as he stood in front of it for seconds that turned into minutes.

“What are those?” Dean asked, pointing to Castiel’s copy of ‘Bluebird’.

Castiel’s heart sank as he realized Dean was referring to the tickmarks that had grown in number over the past few days, all still in blue ink and printed neatly beside one another.

“They’re our…when you kiss me, I…they make me feel…safe when I look at them…” Castiel trailed off. He felt unutterably stupid.

“I’m so sorry, Dean,” he repeated, his voice a whisper as he looked down at the carpet.

When Dean turned away from the mirror and stood beside the bed again, Castiel moved quickly to grab the poem, tugging it down from the wall and crumpling it into the nearby trash as he wiped unshed tears from the corners of his eyes.

“Fuck,” Dean said faintly, as if in disbelief.

Castiel faced him again, unsure what to do or say in response.

“Fuck!” Dean’s voice was louder, then, and he was reaching up to grab at his head, tugging his short hair between his fingers. His eyes were wild, his mouth slack. A few seconds later, he grabbed the pillow from the bed and threw it across the room. It hit the far wall with a loud whump, and then Dean was ripping the rumpled quilt off of the mattress and throwing that, too. It didn’t go far because it was so heavy, and it landed only a few feet in front of them on the floor. Dean kicked at it, only
succeeding in producing a few new folds in its surface.

“Fuck!”

He slid to his knees on the floor, grabbing two handfuls of blanket and drawing them up to his chest. When Dean began to cry, Castiel cast aside his uncertainty and knelt down beside him, gathering him in his arms. He pressed his cheek to the side of Dean’s head, listening to the sound of his small, watery breaths.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, Dean. I never want you to hurt, ever.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” Dean gulped between wet, ragged inhales. “This isn’t on you.”

Dean shuddered against Castiel’s chest, reaching down for his hand and holding it tightly.

“I spoke out of turn,” Castiel said.

Dean shook his head, his voice thick. “He would’ve found a way to ruin it. I…shouldn’t’ve ignored him. I made him mad.”

Castiel used his free hand to cup the side of Dean’s face, feeling tears on his fingertips as he slowly turned Dean’s head so that they were looking at one another. Dean’s eyes were wet and bloodshot, his nose running and his lower lip so worried it had started to bleed. Castiel carefully wiped the water from Dean’s face with the sleeve of his button-down, not caring that he got more than tears on the fabric.

“You deserve a parent who tries to make things better for you,” Castiel said.

Dean’s eyes flickered to the floor. “Sometimes I…I think if I were a good person, he woulda gotten better, that Ma would’ve made it and...and we’d’ve been happy.”

“You’re so much more than just a good person, Dean. You…you don’t know just how much. You deserve good things, and people who treat you well, and everything you’ve done because you wanted to. You deserve a father who loves you,” Castiel said, one of his hands still cupping Dean’s face.

Fresh tears fell down Dean’s face.

“All my life I’ve been wonderin’, ‘when’s it gonna happen?’ ‘when’s he gonna stop hurting me?’ I thought he’d be happy for me today...but now I—now I know.”

Dean had always been careful with the things he let slip, and there was so much he kept to himself where John was concerned that Castiel had never been sure just how his friend felt.

But now, as Dean wept quietly in Castiel’s arms, still dressed in his black button-down and slacks and holding a handful of Bobby’s old quilt, it was clear he’d never stopped loving his father despite the abuse.

Castiel sat on the floor there with Dean until his legs cramped and he could no longer feel his feet. He carded his fingers through Dean’s hair and stroked the back of his neck until he stopped shaking. He recited the few poems he’d memorized for Naomi’s rigid homeschooling, speaking them softly into Dean’s ear. They exchanged gentle kisses, tasting of blood and salt as Dean’s tears slowly dried.
“I’m not answering the next time he calls,” Dean said before they got up together.

Castiel took his hand. “Thank you.”

They climbed into bed with their tear-stained dress clothes still on, then, soon falling asleep wrapped close around one another.

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The following morning Castiel awoke to an empty bed, the smell of eggs and bacon wafting beneath the door, and the copy of ‘Bluebird’ that he’d thrown in the trash on the dresser next to the bed. It had been retrieved and carefully smoothed back out.

Castiel reached a hand out for it, noticing that Dean had taken it upon himself to add three new tick-marks, one for each of the kisses they’d shared after the opening the night before.

There was also a small note in the left-hand margin, now.

‘You deserve good things too.’

Chapter End Notes

No joke, as I was writing the confrontation between Dean and John, I listened to this song and cried a little because I'm secretly a large child. It just fits so well. Thoughts? Please, please leave me comments expressing yourself! It makes me so happy when I get to hear from you guys, and is such a great motivator to update more quickly! :)
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Wow. My sincere apologies for the delay. A few things came up in my personal life and I haven't had much time to write lately. But this chapter is over 16k words and packed with feels, so I hope you enjoy it :) it's a mixed bag, and PLEASE be aware that there are multiple semi-graphic flashbacks to Castiel's assault that you might find triggering or upsetting. If you are unsure you can read this chapter, feel free to message me on Tumblr and I will give you a detailed summary that leaves out the possible triggers. Please leave me a comment if you feel so moved. I love to hear what you guys think of how the story is moving forward.
Thank you for waiting <3

It had been exactly one week since Dean and his father parted ways at the gallery opening, and things hadn’t reverted to the way they’d been before; John (and the things that needed fixing at his house) were not mentioned, nor did he make an appearance at Bobby’s to see his friend or Sam. The only sign Dean gave that anything had changed at all was that he was quieter than usual, and Bobby and Sam had been careful to tread lightly around him for the first few days after the confrontation, both of them clearly expecting there to be more fallout. But Dean didn’t mention his father, nor did he seem to want to devote much time thinking of him.

Even when he and Castiel were alone, the most emotion Dean displayed where John was concerned had been as he’d cried against Castiel’s chest immediately after the clash. Since then, Dean had moved through the motions of life alongside Castiel as he had before, eating and driving and sitting before the massive canvas he’d built on Tuesday as he created the first planes of color on its surface.

Dean was sad about the way things had gone and was frustrated with the apology he hadn’t gotten, Castiel could tell. But Dean also seemed to understand that things were better this way, and he let Castiel comfort him throughout the days after; he held Castiel’s hand when he couldn’t sleep, and let him press soft kisses to his cheeks when they were alone.

But despite knowing Dean must be in pain over the altercation with his father, the week without John had been both exceedingly quiet and restful. Castiel and Dean spent every day on campus going to class and ducking into the painting studio so Castiel could fruitlessly look for source material or Dean could work on his painting, returning each evening tired and ready to fall asleep wrapped around each other in their shared bed. Sam and Jessica alternated nights at one another’s houses and thought it was a secret that they were already saying ‘I love you’ to each other. Bobby drank his whiskey in the thick glass tumbler he used every sunset. Castiel continued to avoid speaking to his mother even though Naomi was now calling him daily. One night Charlie came over and spent a few hours with them and another Castiel spent the evening with Meg and Andy and bought himself and Dean more weed to smoke before bed. Bobby picked up burgers for dinner once, and one eventful morning Dean had realized the remaining eggs were a day away from expiration and made a large omelet for himself and Castiel to split.

More than once throughout the week Dean and Castiel had sat next to one another on the couch as
Dean’s cellphone rattled loudly on the coffee table, John’s name blinking on its screen as he called his son over and over again. By the third night Dean had begun leaving his phone in the guestroom when he wasn’t using it to call someone, and he had not gone to his father’s and returned with bruises and scrapes. Castiel clung to that, to the sight of Dean sleeping next to him safe and unharmed and the knowledge that John couldn’t hurt him physically anymore.

Everything felt strangely simple without John, as if even the specter of his presence had cast a shadow over Bobby’s home before.

As they had before, Dean and Castiel spent most of their time together and not much changed between the two of them the way not much had anywhere else. Things weren’t perfect, nor were they free of pain, but they were quiet, calm, and secure. Castiel had Dean, and Dean would not return to him with a bloody nose and torn knuckles again.

***

The 11th of April fell on a Friday, and the same day that marked seven past John Winchester’s exit from their lives was also the next time Castiel saw Olivia the calico again.

He awoke around seven that morning bleary and slightly disoriented. As he blinked grit out of his eyes and smoothed his hands over his oily face, Castiel could feel something nagging at the back of his mind but couldn’t parse out what it might be or why it mattered. Had he been dreaming? Had he not? He didn’t know, but felt perhaps he should.

Castiel yawned so widely his jaw popped and then crossed his arms beneath his head, staring up at the ceiling. He listened to the slow, even sounds of Dean’s breaths coming from beside him, letting the rhythm lull him into back down somewhere between sleep and consciousness as a few minutes passed. Their alarm wasn’t to go off for another half-hour and Castiel was comfortable, nestled into Dean’s warm side as a faded green sun rose sluggishly beyond the window.

When something little and warm stirred unexpectedly next to his foot, Castiel looked down with a noiseless gasp as he reflexively sat up in the bed, surprised and relieved when he saw it was only a familiar furry body that had startled him. Olivia was burrowed in the small space between his and Dean’s legs and purring so loudly Castiel wondered how he hadn’t heard her as soon as he’d woken up.

Behind her, he noticed that the window had been opened just enough that she would have been able to crawl in through the small gap, and Castiel could only guess Dean must have unfastened it at some point during the night as he hadn’t himself.

“How long have you been in here?” Castiel asked Olivia as he carefully reached a hand down to pet the top of her soft ginger and black-spotted head.

She provided him no answer, she only purred more loudly before rising to crawl into Castiel’s lap.

“You let the stray in while I was sleeping?” Dean asked with an indignant snuffle as he shifted and slowly lifted himself onto his elbows next to Castiel.

“You mean you’re not the one who opened the window?” Castiel asked.

Dean shook his head. “I don’t like leaving the window open,” he reminded Castiel before leaning into him with a soft huff, his breath warm on Castiel’s skin.

“I guess I may have, then,” Castiel said with a shrug even though he wasn’t convinced. “Well, pet
her, Dean. She’s sweet and wants more pets.”

Dean grumbled but dutifully reached out to pet Olivia, who eagerly nuzzled into the touch.

“You want to go back to bed?” Dean asked as they pet the cat in easy tandem strokes.

Castiel nodded. “I could go back to sleep for a while.”

When they awoke a few hours later just after nine-thirty, they found that Olivia had left them, a slight indent on the bed where she’d been the only sign she’d visited at all.

***

On Saturday afternoon Castiel got an unexpected phone call that he didn’t hesitate to answer.

“Gilda?” Castiel said.

Something heavy settled in his stomach at the sound of her greeting.

“Oh, hey, Cas. Madison asked after you last week. Do you think you’re gonna come to the next meeting?”

Castiel hesitated. “I…I don’t know. I don’t think I belong there.”

“Well…you know the door’s always open with us, right? If you want to come back again?” Gilda’s voice had become sad.

“Thank you. I’ll talk to you soon,” Castiel said before he hung up.

Dean was looking at him curiously as he set his phone down. They were sitting on the couch together in the living room and the five o’clock news was on.

“Madison wants me to go back,” Castiel said.

Dean nodded, dropping his eyes to his lap and studying his hands where they were clasped there.

“You think I should,” Castiel said.

Dean separated his hands before looking back up at him. “I want you to have someone to talk to who understands better than I can. I don’t…want you to feel alone.”

“It scares me,” Castiel said.

Dean reached for his hand, and Castiel let him take it. He looked down at their hands where they came together neatly, looking for all the world as if they’d been made that way. Dean’s skin was thick and sunbrowned against the tender, pale olive of Castiel’s, their laced fingers making stripes of alternating color bathed in the pale blue light of the television.

“Not talking didn’t do anything for me,” Dean said after a few more minutes had passed in silence.

Castiel didn’t answer, knowing that Dean was right but feeling no less afraid.

***

Naomi called three times the next day, each call spaced a few hours apart. Castiel imagined his
mother sitting on her expensive sofa at home checking the time before each attempt, trying not to appear overeager. The thought made him inexplicably regretful.

“You with me, Cas?”

Dean was calling his name from across the little kitchen, and Castiel wondered how long he’d been too absorbed in his thoughts to hear. He shook his head and pushed himself away from the counter ledge he’d been leaning on. “Yes, I am. I’m sorry.”

They’d gotten home only a few minutes earlier from a run to the grocery store for that week’s food, and Dean had a loaf of bread in one hand and a package of frozen stir-fry mix in the other. His eyes were soft and watchful on Castiel’s.

“What’re you thinking about?” Dean asked before he turned to open the pantry door.

“Everything,” Castiel said with a long sigh.

“Know what you mean there,” Dean said as he reached above his head to wedge a box of cereal onto the top of the fridge.

“Do you want to smoke before we study?” Castiel asked.

Sam was spending the evening at Jessica’s and Bobby had gone out to dinner with a friend and told them in no uncertain terms he’d be out until much later that night, so they had the house to themselves and didn’t need to concern themselves with secrecy.

“Sure,” Dean said. “Let me put the rest of this away.”

After Dean finished they made their way back to the guestroom so Castiel could load them a bowl to split.

“You want greens?” Castiel asked once the pipe had been packed.

Dean nodded, and soon the room was filling with thin furls of smoke they didn’t bother attempting to fan toward the open window. After only a few hits they set the piece down on the dresser and sat side-by-side on the bed as they had so often before, the night like a dozen of those that had preceded it.

“I think I like this strain,” Dean said tiredly. His eyes were already growing heavy-lidded, and the tension Castiel had seen in his posture that day appeared to be ebbing away with each hit. His face was creaseless and relaxed soon, his back no longer the arrow it was when they were around family and friends. Castiel moved his knee so that it touched Dean’s, gently jostling him.

“Andy says it’s one of his favorites. I see why,” he responded.

“It makes me feel sorta like everything’s gonna be alright,” Dean said as he toed his shoes off.

“It makes me…quiet on the inside,” Castiel said as he tilted his head back. The pervasive ache in his back began to recede, and its absence was a welcome relief after the hours he’d spent on his feet that day. Castiel breathed in slowly, grateful when the gradual swell of air didn’t make his lower back twinge.

“Alright. Well, I’m gonna go change before I can’t get up,” Dean said with a distracted laugh as he took a last, quick hit and set the pipe on the desk to stand up. He grabbed a clean shirt and pair of basketball shorts from the bureau, then made to leave the room and go into the hall bath.
As he watched Dean, Castiel felt an unexpected flare of irritation in spite of his high. The emotion wasn’t directed at Dean, it was at himself.

He and Dean had kissed more times than Castiel could count, now; he’d reached for Dean’s hand almost daily since they’d said they loved one another, and Dean had wrapped his arms around Castiel’s shoulders nightly as they watched TV on the couch; they’d been literally sleeping together for most of the time Castiel had lived at Bobby’s, and Dean still displayed so much caution around Castiel that the gestures sometimes stuck out like sore thumbs from the easy comfort the rest of their relationship had. Even after the time they’d spent being a couple Dean asked regularly if Castiel wanted the bed to himself for the night, left the room when either of them began to change, and waited for Castiel to initiate the majority of their caresses and touches.

But Dean was Castiel’s boyfriend, he’d said as much more than once and had made no effort to hide the fact now that his family knew. Dean shouldn’t feel like he had to change in the hall bathroom when Castiel simply needed to start acting like the adult in a relationship that he was.

He wanted to be normal for a night.

“You can change in here,” Castiel said, lurching forward and grabbing Dean’s wrist before he could leave.

Obviously not expecting the request, Dean turned to look at Castiel.

“You, uh, you sure?” he asked, the shirt and shorts now twisted in nervous fingers.

Castiel nodded and released Dean’s arm, hoping it wasn’t obvious that his heart had begun to pound.

“This was your room before I moved in, you don’t need to change somewhere else.”

He quickly busied himself grabbing the pipe and a tarnished needle from the top drawer of the bedside table, hearing Dean quietly inhale and forcing himself not to look over. Castiel knew he hadn’t answered the unspoken question hidden beneath the obvious but didn’t want to address it.

“Okay,” Dean said softly.

Castiel meant to keep his eyes on the task at hand but felt his gaze drawn back to Dean when he heard the familiar rustle of fabric chafing skin. The room had become so quiet the sound was more than audible.

Dean was turned a little away from Castiel, rolling his neck until it popped before he shook his arms out and began to pull his Black Sabbath t-shirt over his head. His freckled cheeks were flushing a soft pink, and Castiel wondered if it was because he was being watched.

Should he stop? Was Castiel ruining whatever was happening by studying Dean’s arms and the bones beneath his skin as they moved him?

Castiel had seen Dean shirtless before and more than once; he’d seen it when he and Charlie found Dean with a broken collarbone and a ruptured spleen, when Dean breezed in fresh from the shower to pull a shirt from his closet while Castiel read a book in bed, when Dean unconsciously grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it up to dry sweat from his face with.

This didn’t feel like the few times before.

As he watched, Dean tugged the fabric of his shirt completely up and off, and Castiel saw just how beautiful the person standing before him was. He drank in Dean’s hands, the subtle musculature of his chest and abdomen, the gentle swell of his ribcage as he inhaled, even the soft, dark hairs that
trailed from his belly button down into the waistband of his low-slung jeans. Castiel let the pipe slip from his hand and down into his lap as he forgot what he’d been doing in favor of staring at Dean.

There were dozens of small scars spiderwebbed across Dean’s skin, so faded they could have almost been tricks of the light. But they were thin and fine like silk strings, striking and somehow deliberate looking through the faint patina of smoke still swirling between them. Though Dean’s collarbone was mostly healed, the fracture still made a small bump on one side of Dean’s upper sternum, the bone jutting just slightly outwards. Castiel also recognized the small, red line on the lower right-hand side of his torso as the surgery site from which Dean’s ruptured spleen had been extracted.

Dean let the shirt he’d removed fall to the floor next to his shoes and swallowed. Castiel followed the movements of his throat, the gradual loosening of his hands, the way goosebumps formed on Dean’s bare skin under the cheap yellow light.

When Dean drew the clean shirt up toward his chest to put it on, Castiel half-stood.

“Wait,” he breathed.

He felt his face heat and wondered if he should look away. The moment had become charged so quickly it felt almost unreal.

“Cas?” Dean’s eyes were green oceans.

The sound of his voice broke the sugar-spun silence that had settled around them, and Castiel stepped forward. The pipe fell to the floor alongside Dean’s Black Sabbath shirt. Soon, they were standing less than a foot away from one another.

“You’re perfect,” Castiel said, knowing Dean wouldn’t believe him.

When Dean dropped the shirt on the bed again and wrapped Castiel in his arms a few seconds later, Castiel dragged his hands down Dean’s bare back, sighing softly into his shoulder as he mapped the ridges of his spine and the barest raised lines of scar tissue.

***

Monday seemed to drag itself out almost torturously as the academic week began, and the heavy, damp heat of the sky beyond the campus buildings was stifling, adding to the illusion. Each solitary hour felt as long as a day to Castiel, and by the time he and Dean were walking into the painting studio for their weekly session with Harvelle he was ready to fall asleep.

Charlie greeted them from across the room with a playful whistle, and Castiel waved hurriedly at her before turning just in time to catch their painting professor as Harvelle made her way over to their cubby.

“Hey, Prof,” Dean said as she leaned forward briefly to look at Dean’s tall canvas and the progress he’d made.

“Hello, Dean,” Harvelle said, leaning back again and briefly squeezing his shoulder. “I’ll need to speak to you later this week. But this is shaping up. Keep up the effort.”

She then looked pointedly at Castiel.

“You do realize you should have started by now?” Harvelle asked without prelude.

Her question hit like a set of knuckles to the gut, and Castiel swallowed dryly, feeling Dean’s eyes
on him.

“I know,” he said as he straightened uncomfortably. “I…I’ve been thinking, but it hasn’t come to me yet.”

For a second or two Harvelle looked unconvinced, but then seemed to change her mind. Her eyes softened, and she dropped one hand to her hip as she looked thoughtfully at Castiel.

“Come with me. Let’s walk,” she said. Beckoning Castiel with one hand, she turned and walked toward the door. From behind her Dean shrugged at Castiel, but he wasn’t able to acknowledge the gesture before he had to move and follow Harvelle out into the hall.

Outside the painting studio it was surprisingly quiet, and Castiel heard the low flutter of the drawings hanging on the walls as the movement of the doors disturbed them. The architecture class had ended a half hour or so earlier, and he and Professor Harvelle were the only people present in the wide hallway.

Harvelle didn’t say anything as she opened the door to the studio, holding it for Castiel as she gestured for him to go inside ahead of her. Once he had she walked them slowly through the considerably smaller studio. It was crammed with paper, cardboard structures, boxes of toothpicks, and plastic jars of grey and brown pebbles.

Harvelle led Castiel past a constellation of small-scale models and a house made of posterboard covered in a thin sheen of dust that apparently never left Professor Colter’s desk. Castiel soon stopped waiting for Harvelle to speak when it became clear it might not be immediately, and let himself look at each of the little buildings the architecture students had made. Pale sunlight filtered in through the sunroof above, illuminating the little houses and office buildings and garages. He saw blonde wooden edifices with saran wrap windows, construction paper yards with blue glue streams running through them and little stained glass windows painted with marker.

Castiel wondered if this room was so quiet when students occupied it, building and thinking in miniature.

When Harvelle stopped in front of a model hospital a few minutes later Castiel stopped beside her, both of them looking mutely at the small squares and triangles that it was comprised of.

“You haven’t been yourself,” Harvelle said without looking at Castiel.

“I’ll get my project completed in time,” he said as he brought one of his fingers to his mouth, biting absently at the cuticle.

“Will you?” Harvelle turned toward him.

Castiel dropped his eyes to the floor.

“I’ve told you before that if you or your classmates are struggling you need to seek me out. You haven’t.”

“I’m not struggling,” Castiel said stiffly. He tasted blood and pulled his hand from his face.

“You’re not?” Harvelle sounded incredulous, but not unkind.

“I’m sorry.” Castiel crossed his arms and then uncrossed them as he took a step back from the hospital, feeling he’d said the wrong thing.
“I don’t want an apology,” Harvelle said curtly. “I want to know if there’s a way I can help you as your teacher. You had a clear vision last semester when we discussed your artistic goals. You knew exactly what you wanted to achieve. What’s changed since then?”

Castiel stared at a trivial feature over the double-doors of the little building. The answer to her question pressed hard against the inside of his ribs, a heavy, tangible thing that felt difficult to contain.

“Everything,” was what he said at last, crossing his arms and leaving them that way.

His and Professor Harvelle’s conversation played through loop after loop in Castiel’s head as the day waned and he and Dean drove back to Bobby’s for the evening.

He knew she was right; he was running out of time to complete his project if he wanted it to look like anything other than an extremely rushed afterthought. But he felt empty and lost when he forced himself into more unsuccessful brainstorming sessions in the studio or library, and the realization that he might not pass the class didn’t make it easier to concentrate. But instead of filling him with dread the thought only made Castiel feel listless; he hadn’t sketched so much as a curved line in weeks and hadn’t wanted to. What did it matter if he got an art degree he no longer knew he could even use?

As far back as he could remember, Castiel had gone through life wanting to put things he saw throughout his day down on paper or canvas. He was used to being unable to sleep or settle until he got out his sketchpad and drew what he remembered of a tree or building or interesting item, and had always taken pride in his creations and the effort he put into them. However, lately he hadn’t cared at all about his art, and hadn’t even been able to find it in himself to feel sorrow for the drawings he hadn’t made, the painting he hadn’t yet started. The past few weeks had been spent simply surviving from one day to the next.

But the empty space in his chest where inspiration used to be nagged at Castiel as he and Dean ate dinner and then spent the evening studying beside Sam at the dining room table.

“Time for bed?” Dean asked when Sam let out a loud yawn across from Castiel at half-past nine. He clicked his pen closed and pushed away the composition journal he’d been writing in.

“I could sleep,” Castiel lied as he closed the book currently open in front of him. He stood up slowly, wondering if he’d be even be able to doze off that night.

“Night, guys,” Sam called to them with a wave before he went to his room.

“Night, Sammy,” Dean answered before he cupped a light hand over the small of Castiel’s back and began leading them both down the hall after.

“I feel like I need to crash for a week,” Dean mumbled into Castiel’s ear as he placed an absent kiss to the hinge of his jaw and opened the door to the guestroom. Castiel tried to turn his face into the gesture, wanting to kiss Dean if he could. He ached for affection and simultaneously felt unsure he deserved to ask for it. But he wasn’t quick enough, and Dean had already withdrawn and turned to close the door by the time Castiel tried.

When they’d slipped out of their shoes, socks and jeans, Castiel felt able to relax at long last as he and Dean were finally alone and climbing in beside one another. The wrinkled sheets were cool over their legs as Castiel reached for them and tugged them up.

“God,” he murmured after as he lay back and covered his face with his hands. It felt good to be in
bed after the day he’d had, where he at least now he had an excuse to try and forget his encroaching responsibilities.

“Long day?” Dean asked sympathetically from next to him.

“The longest in a while,” Castiel answered.

“Yeah? Uh, I meant to ask…how’d your talk with Harvelle go?” Dean asked cautiously.

Castiel uncovered his face.

“She told me she would help me if I needed her to,” he said.

“That’s good, Cas. I thought she might,” Dean said, his tone hopeful.

“It’s not her responsibility to help me, Dean,” Castiel muttered as he shifted uncomfortably on the mattress. “It’s mine to help myself.”

He felt Dean stiffen beside him. “She’s our teacher. If she can help you without doing shit for you, she will, trust me. And I—” Dean paused.

“What?” Castiel asked, afraid to look over at him.

“I think you should let her,” Dean said. “You got a lot on your plate right now, and—”

“You mean I’m not functioning,” Castiel said without inflection.

Dean was silent for a long time before he responded.

“I love you,” he said quietly when he spoke at last. “I see you hurting, and I can’t… I can’t not see how hard things are for you. You don’t like help, I know. But…”

Castiel rolled onto his side so that he was facing the wall and away from Dean, shame filling him.

“I know,” he said to the old wallpaper.

“Baby,” Dean murmured as he wrapped his arms gently around Castiel’s waist from behind him, pressing in close.

Castiel buried his face in the pillow as he clutched at Dean’s hands where they were clasped over his t-shirt. Dean breathed against the shell of his ear, warm and steady.

“I want to be who I was before,” Castiel said into the worn cotton of the pillowcase, unsure which of them he was speaking to.

“You’re still you, the same person I met at the beginning of the year,” Dean said. “You’re hurting… bad right now. Doesn’t mean you’re different.”

Castiel exhaled shakily.

“I don’t know if that’s true,” he whispered.

Dean moved one of his hands to lightly clasped Castiel’s shoulder, holding him a little closer. “True or not, whatever happens we’re gonna deal with it together. Okay?” he said.

Castiel turned carefully onto his back and then his other side, facing Dean again in the bed. He let
his eyes fall closed as Dean moved forward and pressed his mouth to his forehead, feeling something shift and loosen inside him at the contact.

“Okay,” he breathed.

***

Tuesday proved to be a less eventful day than its precedent, and that evening Castiel stayed on campus to spend a few hours with Meg. They’d met up with the promise that they would study together, however, so far they’d only succeeded in getting impressively stoned and sitting around watching Netflix on Meg’s new tablet.

Across town somewhere, Dean was helping Charlie and Gilda with a DIY project the latter’s mother had undertaken, and while it felt strange to be away from Dean when they spent so much time together, it had also been pleasant to have an evening with Meg. Castiel had gotten most of his readings done earlier that day, and besides the ever-looming prospect of the painting he still needed to start on, it had been a good night.

It was just after six when Meg excused herself to the restroom and was gone for the better part of ten minutes. Castiel used the opportunity to check his phone for texts from Dean even though he hadn’t received any since before Dean said he’d reached Gilda’s mother’s.

Meg exited the bathroom just as Castiel was in the middle of putting his phone back in his jeans pocket, and he looked up at her expectantly. He planned to ask if they could watch another episode of House of Cards, but stopped when he saw the expression on his friend’s face. Meg was wearing a strange, thoughtful smile as she sat next to him on the bed. Her movements were slow and absent, her weight barely shifting the mattress as she crossed her legs.

“Are you alright?” Castiel asked her.

“I’m great. I got my period,” she responded tonelessly.

Castiel canted his head to the side.

“Don’t you usually get that…?” he asked, feeling as if he was missing something.

“I was a week late, so I’m happy about it,” Meg said as she pulled her knees up to her chest and set her chin on the shelf they made.

“You don’t sound that happy,” Castiel pointed out.

Meg didn’t answer, and Castiel wondered what the best course of action was.

“Um…Andy?” he asked mostly rhetorically as Meg handed him the pipe after she took a hit herself. He took a deep drag, letting his chest and belly expand to make room for the smoke.

“You two fit together,” Castiel said, the smoke leaving his lungs alongside the observation. Meg lay back and looked up at the ceiling.

“I know,” she said. “I guess…I think I was kind of excited. I’ve never really had a family before.”

“You’re still in school,” Castiel reminded her. “What would you have done?”

“I know that,” Meg said irritably. “It was just a pipe dream, okay?”
“It’s normal to want a family,” Castiel said. “And…you could do worse than Andy. He’s a good person.”

Meg laughed softly to herself. “Yeah, he is. I know I tease you and shit, but Winchester is too. Good, I mean.”

Castiel felt his guts clench as he nodded. “He’s better than I deserve.”

Meg shrugged without sitting up. “Whatever, dude. People like me and Dean…we’re lucky to find people like you. Like Andy. People who don’t mind a little baggage, I guess,” she said, her eyes still fixed on some point up in the ceiling.

“I have infinitely more baggage than Dean does,” Castiel said softly, thinking of the warmth of Dean’s lips on his forehead.

“As long as your baggage matches,” Meg said as she pushed a piece of hair out of her eyes.

Castiel began to pick at one of his fingertips.

Meg slapped his hand away from his mouth as had become her custom, taking it between both of hers so he couldn’t abuse it further.

“C’mon, Clarence. Don’t try and tell me he wouldn’t do anything for you,” she chided.

Castiel felt suddenly and unutterably alone.

“It’s…it’s complicated,” he said as he took the pipe from her again, lighting the bowl to avoid looking at Meg.

***

“When’s your birthday, Cas?” Dean asked as he drove them home from campus the following evening. They’d spent an hour or two at Charlie’s after Dean’s last class ended, and it was now almost five o’clock and the light was beginning to wane outside.

“Why?” Castiel countered. He hadn’t been expecting the question.

“’Cause I don’t know it,” Dean said as if it explained everything. He had a half-smile on his face as he watched the road.

“It’s…well, it’s this Sunday, actually,” Castiel said, averting his eyes toward the window to avoid Dean’s as he turned to gape at him.

“What?” Dean exclaimed, tapping Castiel on the shoulder until he reluctantly looked back over. “Are you freakin’ serious? You and everyone’s mother went out of their way to give me a surprise party for mine, and you were gonna let yours pass without saying anything?”

“I’m sorry,” Castiel said with a self-conscious breath. “It just…it seemed unimportant given what all we have to do for school right now, and I don’t think—”

“We should celebrate,” Dean said as he looked back at the road.

They drove in silence down the road to Bobby’s until Dean freed one of his hands from the wheel and reached for Castiel’s, clasping it loosely when he found it.

“Who do you mean by ‘we’?” Castiel asked.

“What would we do?”

“That’s for me to know, and you to find out,” Dean said opaquely as he turned the radio up.

***

Two young men were tangled together on orange sheets.

They held one another close, their hands wandering, their mouths warm and open as they touched one another. They moved in tandem with each other as soft, drowsy sunlight fell onto their smooth skin, painting them bronze and exquisite.

Castiel was watching them from some vantage point near the ceiling as he had the first time he saw them months ago, now. His hands were distractedly outstretched as he imagined what it would feel like to move closer to them, to swim through air honey-sweet and thick with yearning.

As it was, he inched downward slowly, each movement somehow a monumental effort. His fingers and toes tingled as he stretched and breathed, feeling his body grow warm with his labor.

When Castiel was near enough to see the faces of the people on the bed he realized he was staring not at two strangers, but himself and Dean.

Both of them were completely naked, their skin damp and hot. Dean’s arms were wrapped around Castiel’s waist, and he hefted him close so that they were pressed tightly together from their chests down to their feet.

When Dean began to move his hips in a slow circle Castiel gasped softly. Something intoxicating started to pool low in his belly at the sight, something that made it hard to breathe or think. All Castiel could do was watch as Dean moved their bodies together on the bed, the motions both obscene and achingly innocent looking. Castiel could hear both of them breathing loudly, could hear the slick sounds of their thighs and bellies and sexes coming together in the silence of the room. Castiel’s own breaths came in languorous pants that clouded the air around him like steam on a mirror.

Dean’s strong, capable back flexed and moved, his careful fingers slid downward to grasp Castiel’s hips. The touch looked gentle but firm, and Castiel moved his hands to his own hipbones to try and mirror it, his lips parting at the thought of Dean touching him in such a way.

“Dean—” he began, but wasn’t able to say anything more before Dean’s grip tightened noticeably and he pulled at Castiel’s hips so that he could—

—hurt him—

Castiel shook his head, eyes he hadn’t realized were closed flying open as he tried to forbid the thought from returning.

He focused his attention again on Dean’s beautiful body, looking this time at the muscles that stirred beneath his skin. Now, he knew the freckles that dotted Dean’s shoulders and the slant of the left divot of his back, and it was on display for him again. Dean’s spine looked almost like a work of art as droplets of sweat coursed down its knobs.

Castiel wanted to touch Dean the way his doppelganger was doing now, to lave his tongue over the curve of Dean’s neck, to take Dean’s hands in his and press them to his own body. The thought
made him tremble.

When Dean parted Castiel’s legs and moved slowly to settle between them, above Castiel shuddered and palmed the bare expanses of his own thighs as he stared in apprehension and awe. He was growing hard, now, and could feel the undeniably erotic weight of himself as he filled between his legs.

The movements of Dean’s hands were long and sweeping, and he reached down carefully between his and Castiel’s bodies, bending forward to kiss his open, panting mouth as he did.

Castiel couldn’t quite see what was happening after that, as Dean’s body was now partially blocking his view, but he knew what Dean was going to do and where his fingertips would next trail. He craned his neck to try and catch sight of Dean’s wandering hand where it was—

—damp with sweat and smooth-palmed, Drew’s free hand came down to pull one of Castiel’s legs to the side and get a better angle as he forced himself in. Castiel held his breath as his vision blurred with tears, his body stretched far too wide around the thing inside him.

Where before he’d been watching from above, now he was pulled violently back into the role he’d played that night at the frat house, his body again trapped beneath Drew’s. His thighs were trembling almost spastically, his lower belly cramping painfully with every thrust of Drew’s hips.

Castiel could taste blood in his mouth and guessed he must have bitten the insides of his closed lips. When he managed to extricate one of the wrists clasped above his head, Drew pulled his arms down by his sides and pressed his weight onto the insides of Castiel’s elbows with his palms instead, pinning him that way.

“You like it,” Drew was saying. “Look.”

Castiel flinched at the sound of his voice and began to try and shake his head before he felt with a pulse of nausea that he was hard.

Drew was hurting him and he was drenched in his own sweat, but Castiel was still hard the way he’d been for Dean less than a minute before. It escaped him where Dean had gone, and he tried to say Dean’s name but found that he couldn’t speak, he could only think.

—Dean, please. Oh, fuck. Please don’t be angry with me, please don’t hate me. I don’t know why I’m like this. I don’t know why I can’t wake up—

Was it all the same? Was it all the same in the end, whether or not the fucking was in the light or the dark, whether it hurt or it felt good? Was it? Was—

Castiel sat up with so much force that he made the shared pillow fall to the floor beside the bed. He was breathing heavily, his head spinning, and he froze when he felt that it hadn’t just been the dream in which he was hard; the length of his erection was pressed against his own heaving stomach, and he could feel wetness from the tip soaking through his boxers and into the hem of his sleeping t-shirt.

His vision blurred as he cried out softly, cupping a hand over his mouth and pitching himself from the bed. He made it to the trash can in the corner of the room just in time as he began to throw up.

He was grateful when he began to soften at the sour smell of his own vomit.

“Cas?” Dean mumbled sleepily from the bed. “’re you throwin’ up?”

“I’m f-fine,” Castiel said after he spat the taste from his mouth. “Fine.”
When Dean came to sit next to him on the floor and rub a slow hand up and down his shaking back a few minutes later, Castiel willed himself not to cry.

***

On Thursday Castiel received a three-way call from Gabriel and Anna around five in the evening, and they ended up being on the phone together for almost two hours. Even though Castiel didn’t contribute much to the conversation, it felt good to be included in it nonetheless.

He lay in the guestroom bed listening to his siblings crack jokes and throw playful jabs at one another while in the kitchen he faintly could hear the sounds of Sam and Jessica preparing fondue for everyone. Dean was chaperoning them to ensure they didn’t set fire to any dairy products. Bobby, Castiel knew, was completing some paperwork back in his office, and once in a while Castiel would hear a snatch of laughter or note of music waft its way down the hallway to him.

He was a little buzzed, but the high he’d reached upon his and Dean’s return from campus gradually faded as the minutes and then hours passed.

If Castiel closed his eyes, he could almost pretend that he and his siblings were in the same room together conversing; Gabriel would likely commandeer the couch for himself, stretching out languorously as Castiel and Anna made themselves comfortable on the floor after shooting him murderous glares. Castiel could see it clearly in his mind, the scene still a familiar one to him even though it had been years since he’d been with Gabriel in person. But now, when Castiel pictured them together, the living room they sat in was Bobby’s rather than Naomi’s, and Castiel imagined Dean and Kali present alongside them as well, all of them laughing and talking.

“Are you really getting Kali a sapphire ring? That seems a little…extravagant,” Anna was saying pointedly to their brother after a comfortable silence came and went, pulling Castiel from his contemplation.

"Um, duh. My lady’s a classy lady, and if I want her to say yes the ring’s gotta be perfect. I’ve been saving since December,” Gabriel shot back with what sounded like a mixture of pride and well-covered apprehension.

As Gabriel had explained earlier during the call, he and Kali were celebrating their two-year anniversary in a few days and he was about to close the deal on a rather expensive ring purchased from a local jeweler to propose with. He was obviously excited about the prospect of asking Kali to spend the rest of their lives together, and had talked at length about the evening he had planned (complete with far too much information and sexual innuendoes Castiel had no interest in hearing ever again).

Castiel had listened with a mixture of incredulity and a feeling he couldn’t place, having a difficult time wrapping his head around the idea of Gabriel wanting to settle down with anyone. When he and Castiel were younger and both still living at home, Gabriel’d had a veritable string of casual girlfriends and women that he obviously wasn’t dating, and had never shown any inclination toward commitment or taking his relationships seriously.

Gabriel had somehow managed to remain friends with most of his exes, but it had always been clear he wouldn’t be asking them out again and that he was more interested in meeting new people than getting to know the ones already in his life. But Gabriel was obviously completely smitten with Kali, and from the things he’d said Castiel was fairly sure the feeling was mutual.

He hoped she would tell Gabriel yes and pointedly didn't ask Anna why Naomi had been calling him for days.
When the call ended a few minutes after the two-hour and fifteen-minute mark, Castiel made his and Dean’s bed and left the room to make his way to the kitchen. Once there, he was immediately greeted by the savory smell of cheese and herbs coming from the bubbling double-boiler on the front stove burner.

Everyone was now congregated in the kitchen, even Bobby, and Castiel made his entrance just as Jessica pressed a fingerful of melted cheese to Sam’s nose, an impish smile on her face. The radio was playing from its perch on the window sill and the room was warm with heat from the cheese.

“Hey, you shut-in,” Sam said good-naturedly to Castiel as he wiped the orange blob from his face. “Come to dip stuff in cheese with us?”

From behind his little brother, Dean took a few steps forward to lay a light hand on Castiel’s arm.

“Good talk?” he asked hopefully.

To both inquiries, Castiel nodded. “Yes.”

Dean smiled at him.

“Who wants to try the apple pieces first?” Jess asked excitedly as she skipped toward the fridge and opened it, pulling out a plastic-wrapped plate of sliced pink apple chunks.

“You remember that time your Daddy ate a whole bag of those fancy organic ones when you got ‘em for Sam? Oh, you were fit to be tied,” Bobby said with a laugh where he stood beside the sink.

Both Sam and Dean laughed, and then seemed to give the memory more than simply reflexive thought; Dean’s face fell by slow degrees at the mention of John, and Castiel could tell that Bobby realized his folly only seconds after he’d spoken.

The mood in the kitchen was suddenly the farthest thing from lighthearted, and Castiel saw Jess gently take Sam’s hand in the corner of his eye.

“Yeah, I do,” Dean said at last a few seconds later, his voice flat.

Later that night as they lay together in the darkness, Castiel pressed his palm to Dean’s chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart underneath his skin.

“Do you think about him often?” he asked.

He couldn’t see Dean move, but felt it as he turned his head to face Castiel.

“All the time,” he said simply.

“I wish I could heal your heart,” Castiel said into the scant space between them.

“I wish that too,” Dean said as he cupped the back of Castiel’s head, bringing him close again.

***

The following morning, Dean and Castiel were eating toast and drinking coffee together at the little dining room table when Dean set his mug down and said without preamble: “I’m taking you out to dinner tonight.”
“What?” was Castiel’s immediate response.

“Your birthday’s this weekend,” Dean said before taking a bite of his toast.

Castiel nodded. “It is,” he said stupidly.

When a smile began to bloom unexpectedly on his lips at the thought of himself and Dean going out on an actual date, he took a sip of his coffee in an attempt to hide it.

“I mean, if you want to,” Castiel mumbled into the contents of his cup.

“I do,” Dean said with a grin.

Castiel snorted into his coffee, and Dean laughed.

Neither of them had class as it was Friday, and Castiel spent most of his day in a state of anxious excitement he couldn’t seem to tamp down. Though he hadn’t said so to Dean, Castiel had never been on a date. He’d been asked out by one of his neighbors when he was a few months into seventeen, but Naomi had been adamant he not accept; ever the dutiful son, Castiel did as she asked.

But now, he reminded himself as he locked the bathroom door so he could shower, there was no one besides himself to dictate his actions or control his decisions. If Dean wanted to take him out to dinner, Castiel was going to let him.

Castiel closed his eyes and basked in the thought as well as the warm water falling over his skin, thinking of Dean’s sweet smile and feeling his stomach flip-flop at the thought of sitting in a restaurant across from him the way they did at Bobby’s beat-up dining room table.

Castiel spent the next few hours simultaneously grinning to himself and suffering moderate nausea, and it took him almost fifteen minutes to decide what to wear before Dean beckoned him to the Impala around seven that evening.

“You like Chinese, right?” Dean asked Castiel as he closed the passenger side door behind him and put his seatbelt on. When Castiel nodded, Dean slumped a little in his seat with obvious relief as he started the car.

“Awesome, ’cause one of my favorite places is right down the road, and it’s a Chinese joint.”

True to Dean’s word, the restaurant was less than ten minutes away, and the drive seemed even shorter than it might have otherwise; Castiel felt almost hyper-aware of every detail of the passing surroundings, from the brown patches of grass on the sides of the road to the flecks of paint missing from the traffic signs they drove by. Everything somehow seemed bright and solid, more palpable than it had in days.

When they arrived at the restaurant Dean got out of the car quickly enough that he was able to come around to Castiel’s side and open his door for him. After, he held a hand out to Castiel somewhat shyly, if the way he looked interestedly at his feet was any indication.

Castiel gently took his proffered hand as he stepped out of the car, letting out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding as his and Dean’s palms slid together comfortably.

Dean didn’t let go of Castiel’s hand after the door had been closed and the car itself locked, and he clung to the now-familiar feeling of their interwoven fingers as they walked toward the set of double
doors.

“You look good,” Dean commented as they entered the restaurant together and waited for a hostess to come to the podium wedged between them and the tables beyond.

“I think I might be wearing one of your shirts,” Castiel said with a smile.

Around them the eatery was decorated traditionally, the walls strewn with bright red and gold banners while the backs of the booths were festooned with small maneki-nekos, and decorative paper lamps were strung from the low ceiling. It was a step away from overdone, but Castiel liked the bold colors and the overabundance of gold trim and frayed satin; he looked around interestingly as the hostess led them to a booth near the back, trying to take in every detail of the place Dean had taken them for their date.

It didn’t seem like a particularly busy restaurant, unlike the Italian place Charlie had dragged them to a few weeks earlier. Besides himself and Dean, Castiel counted only a few other people in the place with them. Soon they were seated and the hostess had gone to get them a couple of waters and a menu.

“I’ve never been here,” Castiel said as he smoothed a hand over the white cloth draped over their table. “It’s nice.”

“It’s…it’s not that nice,” Dean said quickly, a nervous smile tugging at his mouth. “You don’t have to say that.”

“It seems perfectly nice to me,” Castiel said as the waitress chose that moment to return with their drinks. Once she’d set the glasses down and left them once more, Dean took a sip of his water before speaking.

“I’ve been comin’ here since I was a kid, and I wanted to come here with you,” he said as he swiped a hand across his face, his cheeks flushing. “It’s not perfect, but it’s…well, it’s something good.”

Castiel reached out and squeezed Dean’s arm where it rested on the table across from him. “I like it here.”

Dean seemed to recognize Castiel’s understanding for what it was, and nodded once before he gestured toward the menus still stacked next to their empty appetizer plates. Within the next ten minutes they ordered a noodle dish and plate of fried rice to share as well as some saké, which Dean told Castiel he might like or he might absolutely hate, but they’d find out together soon enough. When their server brought them a set of two small white cups and a little green-glassed bottle of alcohol, Dean poured them both a shot’s worth and pushed one toward Castiel.

“You can take it like a shot if you want, I like to taste mine,” Dean said as he lifted the small glass to his lips and took a large sip with something that looked like a cross between a smile and a grimace. “It’s kinda bitter, kinda sweet, kinda actually does taste like rice.”

Castiel brought the cup to his nose and took a tentative sniff of its contents, flinching a little at the smell of the rice wine. Across from him, Dean smiled at whatever expression his face bore in that moment.

“Smelling it might not have been the best course of action,” Castiel admitted as he set the cup down on the table, staring at it.

“I don’t think so,” Dean said with a laugh. “It’s better to drink it than smell it.”
Nodding, Castiel gingerly picked the glass up again, taking an experimental sip and having to immediately chase it with water to wash the taste out of his mouth.

“You like this?” he asked Dean in disbelief. When Dean nodded, still laughing, Castiel braved another swallow, finding that this time it wasn’t as surprisingly bitter on his tongue.

By the time their food arrived, both of them had finished two little cups of saké each and Dean had split the dregs of the bottle between them.

“It’s not as bad once you know what to expect,” Castiel said before finishing his quarter-shot.

“Like most things involving alcohol,” Dean said ruefully as he did the same.

As they sat at the booth together over the course of the next hour, eating noodles and rice with worn pairs of metal chopsticks, Castiel found himself smiling and laughing more than he had in days. The corrosive thoughts that wore holes in the pit of his stomach were momentarily forgotten as he relished simply being with Dean for no other reason than to enjoy his company. Their secure and well-worn lines of conversation seemed somehow glossy and new when spoken aloud at the red-draped booth, the novelty of simply being together impressed upon them again for the first time since Castiel had moved in.

The food was better than Castiel had known to expect, and the owner sent them home with teabags and red-wrapped mints and handfuls of fortune cookies when they’d finished, smiling at them as they made their way toward the door.

Castiel thought their first date had gone well, though he admitted to himself he had no prior experience to which he could compare it. But as Dean drove them back to Bobby’s, Castiel smiled absently out the window as he held their Styrofoam-boxed food on his lap.

“We’re home,” Dean said as he shook Castiel’s shoulder a few minutes later.

Castiel shook his head. “Sorry, I was…I was just happy.”

Dean smiled at him. “Yeah?” he asked.

Yes. Thank you for dinner,” Castiel said as he reached for Dean’s hand from across the bench seat. “I…I had a wonderful time.”

Dean squeezed his hand and leaned forward to give Castiel a quick kiss on the cheek. “’Course, Cas.”

As they let themselves into the house a few minutes later Castiel reached for Dean’s hand again, feeling a little flush of pride at how easy it felt to touch him first in that moment, to show physical affection without second-guessing himself.

A cool wave of air conditioning and the sounds of a sitcom met them as they passed through the entryway and into the kitchen to stow their leftovers; when they made it to the living room Bobby was watching TV on the couch, a half-full beer in one hand. He greeted them with a little wave.

“You already done for the night?” Dean asked him.

Bobby nodded. “It’s why I told ya yesterday you could have off tonight. I didn’t have much goin’ on here.”

Dean nodded. “Well, cool. I—I mean we, uh—”
“Yeah, I know where you’ll be if I need ya. I wasn’t born yesterday,” Bobby interrupted before taking a dainty sip of beer.

Castiel felt his face heat as he comprehended Bobby’s meaning and looked at his own ankles, and Dean mumbled something he couldn’t catch before tugging on Castiel’s hand to lead them both back to the guestroom.

Dean sighed once they were in their room and the door had been closed behind them, rolling his eyes good-naturedly as Castiel leaned inward to press his face to the hollow of Dean’s neck.

“I don’t know if I like this or when he pretended not to know better,” Dean groaned as he wrapped his arms around Castiel and pulled him closer.

“It’s nice to know he doesn’t mind,” Castiel said as he drew back a little to rest his head on Dean’s shoulder, wrapping his arms around his waist. He wasn’t usually so free with his affections and was wondering why that was the case when it felt so good to hold Dean in his arms, to feel the easy way their bodies fit together. He could dimly hear the sound of Bobby’s show playing, the even hum of Dean’s breaths, the distant sound of the washing machine running in the back of the house.

Dean was warm and solid and smelled like home, and when he moved to kiss Castiel a few seconds later, Castiel readily tilted his head back to allow him.

He closed his eyes at the soft press of Dean’s mouth to his, breathing in slowly.

“Thank you,” he whispered into the kiss, feeling it needed saying a second time as he blindly grasped at the front of Dean’s overshirt. “Thank you.”

Something light and effervescent suffused him as Dean carefully cupped the side of Castiel’s face, stroking his thumb over the jut of his cheekbone.

“Thank you, baby,” Dean murmured into Castiel’s open mouth as he continued to kiss him, gently alternating between the swell of his lower lip and the bow of his upper.

Castiel inhaled deeply as Dean slid an arm around the back of his shoulders, bringing their chests together.

“Can we sit down?” he asked.

“We can do that,” Dean said as he began to carefully move them toward the unmade bed a few feet away at Castiel’s request.

As Castiel listened to the sound of the old house existing around them, creaking and groaning in the warm spring air, he helped propel them to the familiar bed, reaching a hand out to brace himself on its edge.

Though he knew they’d meant to simply sit, he and Dean slowly lay down together on the narrow mattress instead.

Castiel heard a sigh without being able to tell who it had come from, wrapping his arms snugly around Dean’s middle. Dean cupped the back of his head as Castiel tugged him down, still kissing him.

Soon, Dean’s weight was partially settled on Castiel’s body, partially on the elbow propped next to Castiel’s shoulder. It was both comforting and claustrophobic to feel him close and hot and familiar, to understand in reality what it meant to feel Dean at all.
Castiel exhaled softly as Dean slipped his tongue along the seam of his lips a few minutes later, feeling warmth gathering beneath his navel at the way Dean was kissing him, at the heaviness of his chest against Castiel’s. Dean tasted like the mints they’d taken home and the saké they’d shared in the booth, and they were practically enmeshed from knees to chest.

A furl of heat grew incrementally between them as Dean continued to hold Castiel close and kiss him slow and wet and deep.

Castiel found it hard to breathe; he’d never felt this way before in his life. Even in the few dreams he’d had of this very thing his feelings hadn’t been half as intense or vivid. He ran his hands over Dean’s clothed back, feeling as if he couldn’t get enough of the way he felt just underneath the cotton; he combed his fingers through the short hairs at the nape of Dean’s neck, breathing in slowly. He moved one of his legs so that it framed Dean’s outer thigh, his skin starting to tingle at the way Dean’s leg felt pressed between his.

When Castiel began to grow hard in his jeans, he went still where he lay underneath Dean. He’d never been in a situation where he was unable to hide his body’s reaction to Dean and his proximity. He ineptly tried to shift his hips away from Dean’s where they were still pressed almost completely flush, but Dean reached a hand down and carefully held Castiel still.

“You don’t have to move if you don’t want to,” he said. “It’s okay.”

When Castiel noticed Dean was hard as well, his breath hitched in his chest and his heart began to pound. He wasn’t sure if he felt more aroused or afraid.

“Okay,” he breathed. He clung to Dean even more tightly without consciously meaning to, only realizing his hands were clenched a little too tightly on his back when he felt Dean start to gently stroke the side of his arm, the touch calming him slowly as he continued.

He’d never truly kissed anyone besides Dean, Castiel thought with a thrum of what might have been pleasure. In fact, he didn’t think he would mind kissing only Dean for the rest of his life.

As soon as Castiel had the thought, however, he remembered suddenly that it wasn’t true.

Drew had kissed him the night of the party, and he’d done far more than simply give Castiel a chaste peck.

When Dean moved the leg still pressed between Castiel’s to reposition himself, the movement caused his erection to slip and catch against Castiel’s through their jeans. It made him remember, quite suddenly, what exactly they were doing.

Castiel gasped brokenly against Dean’s mouth, feeling both pleasure and panic.

Into his ear Dean asked, “Can I kiss your neck? Just there.”

“Yes,” Castiel said, almost dizzy now as he closed his eyes and gripped at Dean.

He held his breath when Dean gently moved his mouth from the corner of Castiel’s mouth and down the line of his jaw, pressing a kiss over every other inch of skin or so as he went.

When Dean began to do as he’d asked, his mouth was lighter than a breath.

His hands were moving over Castiel’s sides, his mouth warm on Castiel’s throat as he pressed his lips lightly to the hollow, then the line of his collarbone before returning to the hinge of his jaw. The kisses were slow and rhythmic, predictable enough that Castiel found them almost soothing. But they
were more than simply comforting; they felt good.

Castiel’s hands loosened from the fists they’d been clenched into as he turned his head to give Dean better access. He was harder than he could remember being in recent memory and felt himself throb as Dean slid his tongue over a tendon on his neck.

“Dean,” he said nonsensically into the warm air around them.

He felt Dean exhale against his throat at the noise, felt the other boy’s hips shift between Castiel’s parted thighs, which he noticed only then had splayed themselves wide around Dean’s body. A flash of fear registered through the haze of pleasure, and Castiel tried to close his legs without success.

When Dean came to a spot on his throat he hadn’t yet mapped with kisses, Castiel was almost immediately assailed by the blurred memory of a mouth on his neck in the same place, of a stinging bruise being carelessly sucked into the skin there as Drew fucked him.

*He didn’t fuck me, rape isn’t sex,* Castiel habitually tried to correct himself, but the thought was like a slap in the face.

Castiel tried to chase the thought of Drew away as he had a few minutes before, but found that this time he was unable to.

He’d woken up hard and leaking onto his stomach from a dream of Drew fucking (*raping*) the way he was right this *second* as Dean touched and kissed and loved him. What did that imply about him?

Castiel suddenly hated himself so much he could barely breathe, and fear filled him in a crashing surge.

He dimly felt his body start to go cold and turned his head away. The movement dislodged Dean’s lips from the hollow of his throat.

Immediately, Dean’s hands lifted from his body, his mouth disappeared.

“Please,” Castiel stuttered. “I can’t, I c—can’t. Fuck. Fuck, I’m sorry.”

He wanted to throw up like he had earlier that week as he felt again the pain of Drew’s body on top of his, the memory of heaviness at the insides of his elbows and of a pulsing ache in the muscles of his thighs from having his legs spread and held apart.

He was practically hyperventilating and moving up and away from Dean even as the other boy moved back himself. Castiel accidentally hit his head against the wall in his hurry and hissed quietly in pain.

“Did I hurt you?” Dean asked with obvious worry. His hands were up and he was a few feet away on the bed, now.

“Can you tell me what’s wrong?” Dean asked when Castiel fought for breath for a few more tense, silent minutes, turning over onto his stomach and gasping into the comforter crumpled beneath his cheek.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel panted.

He let Dean hold him as his vision began to swim from the oxygen he wasn’t getting. He seized Dean’s arms and held on tightly, closing his eyes and trying to fight the rigid tension making his muscles tremble and his chest collapse.
“I went too fast. Shit, I’m so sorry,” Dean said as he hugged Castiel firmly to his chest. “I’m so fucking sorry, I messed up. I just wanted to—”

“You’re not the problem,” Castiel interrupted hoarsely.

“You’re not a problem to me,” Dean said as he continued to hold Castiel close, his hands soft and safe over the fabric of Castiel’s borrowed shirt.

“You’re everything.”

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“You sure you still want to go? We can do somethin’ else today,” Dean was saying seriously as Castiel pushed past him to exit the bedroom and make his way to the hall bath.

“I can just tell Charlie you wanna stay in for your birthday, too, I don’t think she’s gonna be heartbroken if we don’t end up seeing the play—”

“Dean, I’m fine,” Castiel said as he turned to look at Dean and reached out to briefly touch his arm. “I appreciate your concern, but I feel okay enough to leave the house. Alright?” It wasn’t exactly the truth, but Castiel hoped Dean would drop the matter all the same.

Dean nodded slowly, his green eyes searching Castiel’s face for a few seconds before he took a step back. “Sorry, okay. I’ll, uh, tell her we’re on, then. She’s planning on sneaking her flask in tonight in honor of your 22nd, y’know.”

“That does sound like it would make the play much funnier,” Castiel said, relieved when Dean began to laugh where he still stood next to him in the hallway.

Dean and Charlie had apparently decided they were taking Castiel to see a play called Urinetown that evening. It was being performed at the university, and they’d all be able to get in for free. Dean hadn’t let slip any additional details of the night he and Charlie’d planned for Castiel’s birthday, but a few hours earlier he’d woken up to a chocolate chip muffin, Dean’s lips on his cheek, and a murmured ‘happy birthday, Cas’ in his ear.

So far, the day itself had been far more pleasant than Castiel was anticipating after his panic attack the previous night. He and Dean had eaten together in bed before taking a walk together in the early morning stillness, and Dean hadn’t given any indication he was irritated or upset with Castiel, he’d only acted the kind and easy way he always did. Castiel was indescribably grateful for the small mercy of his good company.

Before they left the house around six o’clock that evening, they smoked a bowl together in the side yard. As they stood just beyond the laundry room window Castiel felt the last of his tension begin to ebb away at last, and he sighed as he moved forward into Dean’s arms. They stayed that way for a few minutes, hugging as the high set in before they had to make their way over to the Impala.

“I don’t feel any different,” Castiel said as Dean drove them to campus. It was a pleasant day out, with none of the humidity in the air that had been clinging to the growing heat for weeks.

“What do you mean?” Dean asked with a brief glance toward him.

“Being twenty-two. It doesn’t feel like much,” Castiel answered.

“I don’t know if anything feels as good as your sixteenth,” Dean mused as he held a flattened hand
out the car window, making waves in the warm air with his fingers.

“What’s that one supposed to feel like?”

Dean looked over at him for another second, then back toward the road. “Y’know, your sweet sixteen. It’s special. Hell, for my sixteenth Dad gave me a set of keys to Baby and said I was almost a man.”

“I remember going to driver’s ed that year,” Castiel supplied when Dean looked at him expectantly.

“You family sounds like a real barrel ‘a laughs,” Dean said as he took a right at the intersection just before the university.

“You’ve met Anna. She’s probably the most well-adjusted out of us all,” Castiel said as he lifted a hand to his neck to flatten his collar before remembering he was wearing a t-shirt and didn’t need to.

“I’m glad you came to school instead of staying there, then,” Dean said as he dragged the back of his hand over Castiel’s shoulder.

They arrived on campus soon after, and Castiel helped Dean find a parking spot in the lot behind the fitness center. They were twenty minutes or so early in order to meet Charlie and pick up their tickets, and Dean checked his phone as they got out of the car, chuckling to himself at whatever he read on its cracked screen.

“She wants us to meet her at the mall so she can show us something she found,” he explained to Castiel as they began walking across the parking lot to the sidewalk that would eventually lead them to the center of campus.

“I bet it’s another beetle that looks like Snape,” Castiel said as they stepped onto the white squares of concrete.

“I owe you five if it is,” Dean responded with a grin still a little bit dopey from the pot.

As they made the trek down the sidewalk, passing other students and the familiar trees on the edges of the path, Castiel turned to look at Dean. For a moment, he couldn’t begin to imagine how someone like Dean loved him.

Not for long.

The thought was intrusive and unpleasant, and Castiel felt his smile turn tight and strained as he turned his attention back to the familiar path that led to the mall. The conversation he’d had with Meg days before echoed through his skull.

“Hey, bitches!”

Charlie’s voice broke his reverie, and Castiel lifted his head to greet her alongside Dean, dutifully holding his arms out as she began to bound toward them.

“Someone told me it’s your birthday tomorrow!” Charlie said with a smile as she hugged Castiel tightly for a few seconds before shoving a small gift bag toward him. It was bright teal, filled with neon orange tissue paper, and looked like it had been showered with paper confetti.

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” Castiel insisted as Charlie ignored him and poked impatiently at the insides of the bag.
“Open it, now!” she said without acknowledging his protests.

“Alright, give me one second,” Castiel soothed her absently as he removed the wad of paper and turned it over in his hands so he could part the folds of tissue and retrieve what they contained. When he found the appropriate crease and tore through a piece of clear tape, a few stray dots of confetti fell to the grass as he uncovered a small collection of tiny detail brushes, each neatly wrapped in a piece of shiny blue ribbon. Their bristles were delicate and waxed neatly into points, and Castiel recognized them as the very same ones he’d been looking at a few months earlier at the art store in town. They hadn’t been cheap, nor had Castiel ever told her that he used to want them. Since February he’d devoted so little thought to his art at all that the intrusion of it into his birthday outing was the last thing he’d been expecting.

“Thank you, Charlie,” Castiel said on the edge of a surprised gasp. “You—how did you—”

“C’mon, with your gift for realism, don’t tell me you can’t use them!” Charlie said she reached out to clasp Castiel’s free hand for a moment, smiling.

“Of course I can use them, Charlie,” Castiel sputtered. “I just don’t think you should have spent—”

“I think it’s time we start heading toward the theater,” Charlie spoke over Castiel with another grin as she gave him a push forward. Jokingly rolling his eyes, Castiel allowed himself to be led by the redhead, walking obediently in the direction of the Fine Arts Building as Charlie continued to shoo him forward.

“So, if you haven’t seen this play before, there’s a couple things you should know about it,” Charlie said once they’d set off toward the theater at a brisk pace.

“Alright, educate me,” Castiel said with a soft laugh.

Charlie looped an arm through his, while on his other side Dean quietly took Castiel’s hand, both of them bracketing him in as they strolled across the grass of the mall. Their feet left soft indents on the clusters of green blades as they went, and Castiel squeezed Dean’s hand in his, wishing the touch conveyed all that he felt as they walked together.

It was a bright, clear day out, and he was pleased to be with Charlie and Dean celebrating. While before Castiel had been fairly uncertain, now he was thankful he’d swallowed his misgivings and gone forward with Dean’s plan (even if it had partially been the pot that gave him the confidence to leave Bobby’s). As he listened to Charlie tell him a few facts about the original idea the play had been based on, Castiel turned to look ahead again, surveying the broad expanse of the mall and the small groups of students gathered here and there. He saw people laughing, cuddling, and jogging around him, all of them apparently content and satisfied beside one another where they sat or stood on the field of faded green and brown.

Castiel was wondering if any would be attending the play when he spotted a familiar figure walking toward them.

Recognition didn’t come immediately, but when it did it almost crushed him. Castiel reflexively clamped a hand to his mouth as he felt bile rise in his throat, ripping it from Dean’s hold to do so without noticing.

Drew looked almost exactly the same as he had the last time Castiel had seen him, the only difference was the shirt he wore and the daylight that painted his boyish features. His hair was the same pale shade of dirty blonde, the same too-perfect-to-be-accidental almost-chin length. His arms were still toned, his face still good-natured looking. As it had been before, he appeared as if he was
always only a few seconds away from an endearing smile or easy laugh.

Castiel’s fears of running into Drew on campus had finally come true after months of stupid, hapless luck.

Beside Drew, a friend Castiel didn’t know walked almost shoulder-to-shoulder next to him, laughing loudly at something Drew must have said. Castiel felt something broken that might have been a name die in his throat as Drew turned his head toward him and their eyes met.

Drew looked kind, the same way he had when they spoke to one another in class or upstairs in his dark room. For a bizarre moment Castiel found himself questioning his own memories, combing over the things he remembered and the jumbled impressions he could only peripherally recall.

*He looks like someone Gabriel would be friends with.*

On either side of him Charlie and Dean were talking to one another about something Castiel was unable to focus on, and he couldn’t seem to make himself grab one of them and tell them who was coming toward them, couldn’t tell them that the person who’d destroyed something in him was less than six yards away and coming closer with every light-footed step. Drew’s shoulders seemed to cut a swathe through the sunny day as he walked toward them.

Castiel felt horror open like a pit inside him.

*He doesn’t look like he could have broken me.*

Castiel’s feet relentlessly moved him forward alongside his friends, his paces measured and even as if his feet moved independently of the thoughts that clawed at the inside of his head. His body felt out of his control again.

Drew’s teeth were perfectly straight and white as his lips parted around a small, almost hopeful smile, something offered to Castiel as if in the hopes that it would mend a small misunderstanding or a careless word stuck between them.

The pit inside Castiel yawned wider.

He exhaled sharply as the front of his toe dipped into a small hole in the grassy ground and he stumbled over his own feet. But even as he struggled not to fall he found that he couldn’t keep his eyes off of Drew.

*Do you know what god’s favorite color is?*

*I gave you a good time. We both know that.*

*No. No. No no no nonon—*

Castiel didn’t know he’d spoken the word aloud until he heard Dean say his name. Breathing in slowly, he turned to look at him. Confusion and concern were heavy on Dean’s face.

“You okay?” Dean asked lowly.

*Wish I was dead. Can’t think. I can’t think. Can’t—*

“I…” Castiel tried to speak and found that no words came to him, not those he was thinking nor those he wished to say. He looked back at Drew, whose tall frame was buoyant with casual confidence as he approached.
Castiel covered his mouth again as the brunch he and Dean had shared earlier threatened to come back up a second time. He could feel himself starting to sweat, could feel it beginning to soak through his shirt underneath his arms.

“Dean,” Castiel whispered. He felt powerless to say anything more, wishing with every cell in his body that Dean would turn them around and walk them away from Drew’s white teeth. Anything but this, he thought disorientedly.

He clutched at Dean’s hand again, knowing he was holding on much too tightly.

The moment Dean broke eye contact with Castiel and followed his gaze to look at Drew, it was obvious that he almost immediately connected the dots. The anger that darkened his face made Castiel flinch.

Dean quickly turned his body so that he was facing Drew, partially shielding Castiel with the movement.

“You.”

The word was low, barely audible amongst the sounds of people talking and music playing on cell phone speakers. Dean’s usually calm voice was filled with a quiet and dangerous wrath, his eyes narrowed and his full lips pursed tightly.

“Cas? What’s wrong? Dean, what’re you looking at?” Charlie’s sounded alarmed, her grip tightening uncomfortably on Castiel’s arm as she grabbed the gift bag he was about to drop.

“Charlie, I’m gonna need the two of you to stay right here,” Dean murmured before he gave Castiel’s hand a final squeeze and released it.

Drew paused mid-step as Dean began to walk toward him. The friend he’d been walking with practically collided with his back after Drew’s abrupt stop, but he didn’t acknowledge the other student. Instead, he stared wordlessly at Dean as he advanced. Now, Drew’s expression was inscrutable.

Dean said nothing. He offered no explanation nor introduction as he placed himself firmly in Drew’s path, his hands in loose fists by his sides.

Castiel thoughtlessly took a step back at the sight, unintentionally pulling Charlie with him.

“You.”

The word was both a threat and a promise, and all that Dean uttered.

Drew’s hands came up in an almost parodic gesture of good-will and openness, and he looked confused and apprehensive of Dean’s obvious anger.

“What’s up, man? Everything cool?” Drew asked. He sounded genuinely concerned, and Castiel was reminded of the times they’d spoken to one another in class and of the way Drew had appeared truly interested in what he had to say.

“Is everything alright, Cas?” Drew asked over Dean’s shoulder when he didn’t respond verbally.

Dean and Charlie’s nickname for him on Drew’s tongue made Castiel flinch, and he shuddered as details he’d previously forgotten from the night of the assault came rushing at him from all sides: the
color Drew’s boxers had been, the way he’d tangled his fingers in Castiel’s hair to keep his head back and down, the way the room had smelled around them, the sour scent of sex and sweat and an ugly copper undertone that might have been blood or come or both.

*You’ve really never done this before, have you? Shit, you feel good.*

“I—I—” Castiel tried and failed to speak again.

He felt weak and stupid and heavy and was thinking too quickly and too sluggishly at the same time. Everything landed on and stuck to the outside of his skull without making it past.

When Dean hit Drew in the face, it was with no warning. The other boy’s head snapped to the side with the force of impact.

Castiel heard Charlie gasp beside him and dimly felt her arms wrap themselves around his waist, her skin damp with sweat that might have been his.

Drew’s nose began to bleed almost instantly, and it was clear he’d realized a minute or so too late that he should have taken Dean seriously as he tried to take a clumsy step back.

Dean hit Drew a second time and then a third, the muscles of his arms bunched tight as he pulled his fist back and aimed to strike again. His momentum was pitiless and unremitting after he began, the air itself vibrating around him as he shifted and swayed. Dean’s carriage echoed almost exactly what Castiel had in the detached garage with the punching bag, his forward thrusts simple and effective, his stance compressed and flexible as he moved smoothly on the balls of his feet.

Soon, however, Drew gathered himself and his composure enough to start fighting back, and managed to duck one of Dean’s thrusts and catch the side of his jaw with a closed fist. The friend Drew had been walking with stepped forward with his fists out as well then, landing a blow on Dean’s nose.

“What’s your fucking problem?” Drew asked Dean pointlessly through the blood pouring from his nose as he bent backwards to avoid coming into contact with his fist again.

Dean didn’t answer, and he didn’t back down from the brawl the altercation was rapidly becoming. He seemed to learn from Drew and his partner’s movements, parrying their blows well enough as they continued.

People were beginning to gather around the clash, blocking both Drew and Dean’s exit routes with how densely they were now packed in a circle around the patch of grass the boys occupied. The words they said were indiscernible, their voices only a loud hum that tried and failed to fill Castiel’s already-waterlogged ears.

Dean’s face was tense with fury and mottled red and white when he turned far enough to the side that Castiel could see him clearly, and his nose was bleeding steadily as well.

Drew may have been stronger than Castiel, but he was not stronger than Dean, nor was he a better fighter. He got another blow in amongst Dean’s three and then four and then—

“What!”

Castiel hadn’t even noticed Charlie releasing him and setting his gift down on the mall as she took a step toward Dean and Drew.

“Dean, stop!” Charlie said again.
Dean turned to look at them briefly after the second call, his chest heaving and his hands still clenched into fists.

Behind him, Drew was slightly hunched over now, one hand covering his bruised and swollen face. Blood dripped down the front of his dark green v-neck, and beside him a brunette girl had her cellphone out and was rapidly dialing something out on its keypad. Drew’s teeth were stained red now, his lips inflamed and discolored. He spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground and took a few shuffling steps back as the girl pushed people out of his way, clearly having seen the opportunity to run for what it was.

“What the fuck, Dean?”

Charlie’s voice was somehow louder than it had been before, and Castiel looked up to see her launching herself bodily at Dean to keep him from following Drew’s unsteady jog away from the scene.

Charlie’s eyes were as big as dinner-plates on her face, her hands splayed over Dean’s chest as she struggled to hold him in place.

“Charlie, move!” Dean commanded gruffly as he tried to shove her out of his way.

“Dean, please.”

Castiel meant to yell, but barely got the words out instead.

Dean hesitated where he and Charlie still stood a few yards away, his lips parting as he turned to look at Castiel. Charlie had both hands fisted in the front of Dean’s t-shirt, her face pinched as she tried to keep her grip on him.

“Please, Dean,” Castiel said again, not sure he could say it a third time.

When Dean stopped struggling against Charlie and instead began to walk back toward Castiel, he dragged her with him. There was blood still seeping steadily from both of Dean’s nostrils, and his right cheek was swollen and his lower lip cut and bleeding. The sight made Castiel’s guts clench painfully.

*He isn’t supposed to get hurt anymore.*

He reached a hand out toward Dean without conscious thought, and the tension seemed to drain from Dean’s body as Castiel watched; his shoulders sagged, his hands unfurled from the fists they’d been compressed into.

“You’re bleeding,” Castiel said when Dean was close enough to touch.

“I’m fine,” Dean said as he wiped the blood from his nose. He was breathing heavily, his chest heaving and his limbs trembling. “Nothin’ I haven’t gotten before.”

His knuckles were torn and bloodied, and Castiel’s eyes followed them as Dean moved his hand back down from his face.

“C’mon, let’s get the fuck out of here,” Dean said quietly to Castiel. Then, he turned to look at their friend. “Charlie…I’ll call you later. Please, just…we need to leave. Go back to your apartment and call me when you get there, okay?”

Charlie slowly let go of Dean’s shirt, the marks that her fingertips had stretched into it still visible.
“What’s going on?”

The hollow confusion in her voice made Castiel want to weep, and he turned and blindly began to lead the way back to the Impala, having no idea if it was what he should be doing or not but needing urgently to move. When he came face-to-face with a phone-wielding student who’d been ogling the fight Castiel flinched, pushing impolitely past them a second later.

He knew Dean was following when he heard the soft crumple of grass under a pair of feet beside him. Castiel could still hear people murmuring their names, could hear the quiet beeps of phone calls going out and texts being sent.

*It was going to be a good day.*

Soon they were both sitting in the Impala and Dean was shifting gears and backing out of the parking lot they’d been in only twenty minutes earlier.

*My birthday is tomorrow.*

Castiel wasn’t able to keep track of where Dean drove them, he only knew that the wheels rolled beneath the car and the bumps on the road made the seats shake. His ears rang, his thoughts muddy and dense. He felt frozen in time, caught in the endless loop of Drew raping him over and over, the experience again a fresh-bleeding wound in his mind.

He didn’t know how to stop it, didn’t know anything except the pit still swallowing him ceaselessly only to begin again when he thought he could sink no deeper.

*Everything alright, Cas?*

Castiel bit his lip so hard he tasted blood, wanting both to hold Dean’s hand and to dig his nails into the skin of his own palms.

When Dean turned the music down and the car off in Bobby’s driveway a few minutes later, Castiel rubbed his hands roughly over his face and forced himself to breathe in.

When he turned to face Dean for the first time since they’d gotten in the car and left campus, what he saw weighed as heavily on him as the thick, white silence filling the empty spaces of the car’s cabin; Dean’s nose was badly swollen now, his lower lip bleeding freely the way only his nose had been earlier, and his right cheekbone looked severely bruised, red and purple flowering in a blotchy pattern over the sharp planes of his face.

The sight cut Castiel to his center.

“You’re hurt,” he whispered. “Fuck, Dean.”

He didn’t realize he was shaking hard enough to make his teeth chatter until Dean pulled him into his arms, one of his hands rubbing down the length of his back. But Castiel struggled fitfully in the embrace, unworthy of the so freely given comfort.

“Let’s go inside so I can help you,” he said through lips that felt numb and heavy on his face. “I can clean it up. I can—” His voice caught, and he quieted.

Castiel pushed himself away even though it felt like tearing his own heart out, feeling his skin itch and his throat begin to close as he clambered awkwardly out of the Impala, circling around to open Dean’s door and grasp clumsily at his hands, pulling him out of the car as well. Dean said nothing, simply allowing Castiel to tug him to the front door and into the house.
Castiel didn’t notice that Bobby had company until his painting instructor’s voice startled him as she asked with unease, “What happened?”

Professor Harvelle and Bobby were sitting in the dining room together with a deck of playing cards spread out on the table, both of them also nursing full tumblers in preparation for a quiet evening in.

Harvelle’s eyes were wide with shock and Bobby was already standing from his chair, his eyes narrowed with alarm.

“What the hell? I thought y’all were gonna see a play!” he said as he began to walk toward Dean.

“Can we please talk about it later?” Dean sounded exhausted as he tried to flap Bobby’s concern away with one hand. “Cas’s gonna get me patched up, ‘kay? I’ll…I’ll tell you later. Please.”

“Did someone call the fuckin’ cops on you or…whoever?” Bobby growled as he respected Dean’s wishes and took a few steps back.

At the question Castiel felt the bottom fall out of his stomach. What if Dean was put on academic suspension or expelled because of his problem? What if he had to start working full-time and was unable to complete his degree at the university because Castiel had been foolish enough to befriend a —

As if sensing his thoughts, Dean squeezed Castiel’s hand with a faint wince and said to Bobby, “If they did, we’ll deal with it when I get called in. For now, we’ll be in my room.”

Unable to look at Bobby directly, Castiel focused on the way Dean’s hand felt around his, on the specks of dirt and grass clinging to his shoes.

“Cas?” Dean was saying.

Castiel nodded habitually, pretending he’d heard whatever else Bobby and Dean had said to one another.

“C’mon,” Dean said, now the one to lead the way as they exited the dining room and made the short trek down the hall.

Castiel could hear Bobby and Ellen murmuring amongst themselves as he opened the door to the bathroom and Dean waited just beyond the threshold. He grabbed the plastic case of first-aid supplies from under the sink with hands that didn’t shake now; he felt a dazed sort of surprise at the sight.

Dean followed him into the guest room without comment, sitting on the edge of the bed as he waited for Castiel to take out what he needed from the little storage tub. It was filled with gauze, a bottle of rubbing alcohol, stacks of bandaids and a roll of white tape, and Castiel soon realized he would likely need all of it, upending the case onto the bed with a noise he wasn’t sure came from him or not.

Dean didn’t flinch or show any signs of pain as Castiel soaked a cotton ball in rubbing alcohol and pressed it to his bruised cheek, the side of his nose, a scrape on the underside of his chin. Dean just sat still, obediently turning his head when Castiel needed him to and holding out his hands when he was asked.

The silence in the room was even heavier than it had been in the car, and Castiel felt as if he was suffocating. Every motion of his body seemed artificial and unreal, worthless and futile as he chased Dean’s blood with hands that were still so steady, his nails clean and his knuckles perfect and smooth.
Castiel didn’t notice that he’d stopped and was staring motionlessly at the split on Dean’s lower lip until the other boy spoke.

“This isn’t on you.”

“This wouldn’t have happened if not for me,” Castiel responded. The red of Dean’s still-bleeding nose was too bright, a few brown flakes decorating his freckled cheeks and chin.

“I wanted to kill him,” Dean said calmly. He grabbed Castiel’s frozen fingertips, holding his hand to his chest. “I woulda kept goin’ if Charlie hadn’t stopped me. You didn’t make me do anything. I wanted to hurt that piece of shit and I’d do it all again if I had to.”

Castiel shuddered, feeling anger bruise him where before there had been only empty dark. He pulled back, freeing his hand from Dean’s.

Now he was shaking, he could feel it in his joints and the unsteadiness of his legs.

“I should’ve done something. I wanted to tell him to go to hell. I wanted to…to fucking ask him why.” Castiel’s words were slurred and heavy, strange and unwieldy in his mouth. “Instead, I let you get hurt. You’re—you’re supposed to be safe now.”

“I’m as safe as I wanna be, Cas. And could that fucker have said anything that would make it better?” Dean asked with what might have been anger, though whether it was directed at himself or Drew, Castiel wasn’t sure. “Could he actually give you an answer that would take any of the pain away? Pain he caused?”

When Castiel felt tears rolling down his cheeks he turned away, facing the opposite wall. He heard Dean get up behind him, the muted creak of the bedsprings reminding him of the previous night and his failings as a partner.

The solid reality of what had just happened settled onto Castiel’s shoulders then, and he hung his head.

The floor groaned beneath Dean’s feet as he closed the short distance between them, gently taking Castiel’s shoulders and turning him around. Dean clasped his chin when he continued to look at the floor, carefully lifting his face.

Castiel looked up into Dean’s eyes; they were tired and filled with tenderness Castiel didn’t think he deserved.

“Please don’t leave me,” Castiel said, his voice broken. “I know I’m fucked up, but—please.”

Dean shook his head, his eyes still so gentle they hurt Castiel to look at.

“I love you,” Castiel said. “I want to get better, I—I want to be what you deserve.”

“You already are,” Dean said into Castiel’s ear as he moved his arms and held him close. This time, Castiel let him. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The words were a balm Castiel hadn’t known he needed.

Dean combed his fingers through Castiel’s hair.

“I promise.”

***
The following morning Castiel drove to the university campus and parked in front of the Fine Arts Building. His demented self-portrait still hung in the gallery when he stepped inside, imposing and ominous as it had been the day he completed it.

Castiel silently took it down, hauling it to the elevator across the lobby and riding beside it. It took him a few tries to get it through the doors of the painting studio by himself, but he managed, dragging it to his and Dean’s cubby.

Castiel took a pair of scissors left out on Dean’s side of their cubby and began to cut the painting into pieces, working quickly.

He knew what he wanted to do, now.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Retraumatization- 'retraumatization is a conscious or unconscious reminder of past trauma that results in a re-experiencing of the initial trauma event. It can be triggered by a situation, an attitude or expression, or by certain environments that replicate the dynamics (loss of power/control/safety) of the original trauma.'

In this chapter Castiel's loved ones worry, he goes through the emotional wringer, and finally has some realizations about the necessary journey forward into true healing and progress. This transitional chapter begins as a step backward and ends as a step forward.

Please be aware that this chapter contains some fairly graphic descriptions of traumatic sense-memories.

Chapter Notes

Wow. It's been over a year, and I'm finally feeling well enough to work on this story again and to give it the love and attention I feel it deserves. I'm beyond excited to be back and so in love with these sweet characters and ready to tell their stories again.

It's been a long, difficult year, full of both victories and defeats, but I can finally say that I'm doing better. In fact, I'm feeling better than I have in years, and I'm ready to return. Thank you to everyone who still reads this story, you mean the world to me <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sunday was not a good day for Castiel before or after his trip to the studio. In fact, it was one of the worst he’d had in recent memory. As the hours crawled slowly by it felt as if the air had become thin and sour, like the foundation of Bobby’s house had been pushed off-kilter just far enough to the side to make Castiel stumble but not far enough to be noticeable.

Nothing felt right.

Castiel spent the majority of the day steeped in anxiety so extreme it repeatedly pushed him to the brink of tears as he waited for a call that didn’t come, either from the campus police or the president’s office informing Dean that he needed to come to the university for questioning. Castiel hoped harder than he’d ever hoped for anything before that nothing came of the altercation, but had no faith his hopes would be realized. Even so, though, he prayed silently to whoever might be listening when Dean left to use the restroom or to speak to Bobby out back where he’d retreated to the shop, and the same words circled obsessively through his scattered mind like a tape recording (please let this pass please let nothing bad happen I’m sorry I shouldn’t have made a scene it was my fault please let this pass please—).

His thoughts were persistently negative enough that smoking made little to no difference, and only halfway through the day Castiel began to feel afraid. Just as he couldn’t stop inwardly pleading with God to prevent his mistakes from ruining Dean’s life, Castiel also couldn’t seem to stop reliving the
night he’d spent in Drew’s room; he could smell Drew’s cologne as if it’d been sprayed onto Dean’s bedding, and he could feel the fresh impressions of Drew’s hands digging into his skin. The intensity of the phantom sensations made him nauseous, and more than once he excused himself to the bathroom only to fail to throw anything up.

Most alarmingly of all, however, Castiel found he could actually feel Drew inside him again if he stood or sat too still, his thighs aching as if they’d been stretched to the side a second time and his belly cramping so badly he couldn’t make himself eat more than a few pieces of white sandwich bread that day. The feeling was so disturbing that Castiel felt himself beginning to dissociate whenever Dean left the room and he found himself alone with the sense memory.

“’s wrong with me?” he muttered disorientedly as he trembled over the toilet in the hall bath, his throat stinging and his eyes burning.

By the time the sun had set and it was time to settle down for the evening, Castiel was drained both physically and emotionally. He wanted to crawl into his and Dean’s shared bed and scream into the mattress, but instead he made himself change into his pajamas as if nothing was wrong and calmly ask Dean if he or Bobby was driving Sam to school in the morning.

When Dean left the room to take a shower after dropping a kiss to Castiel’s forehead, Castiel allowed himself to curl into a ball on their bed and cover his face with a pillow the way he’d wanted to do all day. His body shook everywhere even as he tried to take comfort in Dean’s familiar smell on the sheets and pillowcase. Castiel dug his fingertips into the pillow until he stretched the fabric and grit his teeth until his jaw ached, and nothing that he felt abated or lessened.

When he heard the sound of the shower being turned on across the hall, Castiel noticed that he was crying.

He hadn’t realized he’d been waiting for Dean to leave to do so until that moment, but as the tears came faster and it became harder to keep himself contained, he understood that he’d been afraid of Dean seeing him like this again so quickly after the previous day, unhinged and pathetic and somehow even worse-off than he’d been when he first moved in. Castiel didn’t understand what was happening to him, which made it incalculably worse.

He was unable to get the vivid sight of Drew’s golden, smiling face out of his head, was unable to stop thinking of how it had felt as Drew pushed into his body and breathed acrid air into his lungs. He felt empty and scared and angry and wanted to sleep forever and everything he’d held in that day was rapidly becoming too much, spilling out at Castiel’s seams and down his hot, aching cheeks. He wrapped his arms around himself and dug his nails into his arms until he felt the skin begin to break, still shaking.

“Cas?” Dean’s voice came from the doorway.

Castiel wondered how things could possibly get any worse. He couldn’t bring himself to look up from the bed even as he knew Dean was now standing just a few feet away.

“Hey, hey, sweetheart, what’s wrong?” Dean asked, the sound of his socked footsteps drawing close in the relative quiet.

“W-what are you doing b-back in here already?” Castiel stuttered.

“I forgot a clean shirt,” Dean said as he sat carefully down on the edge of the bed.

“You wanna tell me what’s wrong?” Dean asked when Castiel didn’t answer.
“Sorry,” Castiel whispered at the inquiry, not sure if Dean could even hear him through the now-damp pillow he still had partially pulled over his face.

“It’s about yesterday, isn’t it?” Dean asked as he cautiously moved the pillow down.

“I—” Castiel tried to explain himself but found that he couldn’t form the words, his breath coming shallow and fast as more tears fell down his cheeks.

Dean leaned toward the wall. “I’m gonna open the window, okay? I think some air might help.”

Castiel heard the window being slid open and quickly felt the cool tendrils of a breeze on the skin of his bare arms and wet cheeks.

After that, Dean sat mutely next to him for a few minutes, not moving forward or retreating, his eyes soft and concerned where they rested on Castiel’s tear-stained face.

When Castiel timidly held out his arms, Dean at last closed the distance between them and lay down beside him, pulling him close. His skin was bare and soft and familiar, the circle of his arms as comforting as it had ever been. The release that Castiel felt was palpable. He pressed his face to the warmth of Dean’s chest, hoping to hide that he hadn’t stopped crying.

Dean moved his hands up and down Castiel’s back, his fingers absently tracing the knobs of his spine. “I know yesterday was harder for you than for me.”

The audacity of Dean saying that he’d had it easier than Castiel after he’d literally gotten punched in the face made Castiel shake his head where it was still flush against Dean.

“Please don’t say that,” he said, still consumed with guilt over the fight.

“It’s how I feel,” Dean said simply. “I’d fuck him up again if I had the chance. But I know that seeing him made you…made you upset.”

Again, Castiel didn’t answer, anxiety thrumming through his racing heart again at the mention of Drew.

“Do you wanna try and tell me what you’re feeling right now?” Dean asked against the top of Castiel’s head.

The thought of trying to describe the many, many things he was feeling in that moment felt impossible and terrifying. What would Dean say if he knew that Castiel was feeling Drew rape him even as he lay wrapped in the shelter of Dean’s arms? Would he understand that Castiel didn’t want to feel that way, or would he be angry and repulsed? At the thought of Dean being angry at him Castiel began to shake again.

“Can’t,” Castiel said hoarsely. “I can’t.”

Dean drew him still closer and said, “Okay, you don’t have to tell me if you think that’ll make you feel shittier. I just…want you to know you can if you want. Okay?”

Castiel wanted to stop crying and to explain to Dean what was going on in his head, to stop being pitiful and childish and to articulate his words like the adult he knew he was capable of being, but all he could feel was the pressure of Drew’s hands on his arms and his body being crushed by someone else’s weight.

Castiel was numb and on fire at the same time, feeling himself regressing as the seconds ticked by.
He could practically taste the tenuous progress he’d made during his time at Bobby’s evaporating like dew in sunlight.

He held on tightly to Dean even as he began to doubt that he deserved to, afraid and tired and so, so lost.

“Love you,” Dean said quietly. His voice was heavy with concern Castiel knew he’d put there.

Castiel had no memory of the tears stopping, he only knew that eventually, he fell asleep.

***

On Monday, Charlie texted Dean that she’d be absent from their seminar as one of her works was being featured at a gallery downtown and Harvelle had given her permission to go to the opening. Dean read the message aloud to Castiel as they walked to the Fine Arts Building together that afternoon, their free hands looped together.

Though neither Castiel nor Dean said so, it was obvious they were both relieved they still had time before they inevitably had to tell their friend why Dean had apparently assaulted a total stranger on the way to a play.

Inside the studio a few minutes later, Castiel set straight to work on the sizable undertaking he’d begun the morning before in the gallery, gathering every work he’d completed that academic year and stacking them neatly. Then, he began to dismantle the paintings one by one—pulling the canvas or linen from their wooden frames and discarding the latter before cutting the detached pieces of painted fabric into long strips and then small squares. He used a ruler to ensure his edges were straight and worked with an attention to detail he couldn’t remember possessing in months; Castiel felt a pronounced sense of relief at finally having a clear aim for what he wanted to do. If he was also grateful to have a tangible distraction from the way he was feeling, he felt it was all the better.

As he worked, Castiel kept at the forefront of his mind the image of the finished product he’d envisioned the day after his failed birthday outing, an idea that didn’t change as the hours passed or his moods shifted or he felt the ghost of Drew’s body inside him. Though he wasn’t sure how Harvelle or anyone else in the class would feel about his work or judge it once it was done, he did his best to keep moving forward all the same, and he almost succeeded in losing himself in the artistic process for the first time in weeks. The few times the obtrusive sense-memories began to reassert themselves, Castiel redoubled his efforts and worked even more attentively on the task at hand, and that way he found he was mostly able to ignore what he was feeling. It wasn’t easy, however, and by the time class had ended Castiel was sweating profusely and felt extraordinarily tired.

“Cas? You good?” Dean asked from beside him as they straightened their respective cubbies and prepared for the next stretches of effort.

“There’s something I need to get from my apartment,” Castiel said as he wiped his brow.

“What is it?”


Dean drove Castiel to his campus apartment as requested a few minutes later. Even though Castiel had moved almost everything of immediate import from his apartment to Bobby’s over the couple of months he’d spent living with the Winchesters, there still remained a few items of clothing and the book that Anna had given him for Christmas. Why he’d left it there, Castiel couldn’t say, nor could
he explain the urgency he felt now to retrieve it and finish it after months of being too preoccupied with the difficulties of his everyday life to so much as think of it. But he wanted it near him, and he wanted to lose himself in the world he and his sister had created as children.

When he and Dean arrived and let themselves in with Castiel’s key they initially assumed Balthazar was out running errands, as he was nowhere to be seen in either the kitchen or the common area and the place was wholly quiet. For his part, Castiel had mixed feelings about not getting the chance to see his former roommate; though he wasn’t exactly eager to face Balthazar and he never relished the thought of any kind of confrontation, Castiel also felt unhappy over what had become of their once-amicable relationship, and more than once since living with Dean he’d wanted to apologize to Balthazar for all that transpired before he moved out. In hindsight, he understood that it had likely seemed like he had some sort of substance abuse problem or other serious mental health issue, and he wanted to clear the air if he could (though he still wasn’t sure what he’d be moved to say were he to get the opportunity).

But since Balthazar didn’t appear to be home Dean and Castiel wasted no time going to what used to be his room and grabbing both the last few items of clothing left in the dresser drawers and the book where it still lay on Castiel’s desk. A thin layer of dust now masked its embossed cover. Castiel gathered the book in his arms feeling almost as if he was dreaming, brushing the dust from its surface and taking solace in the heft of it in his hands, real and so-long neglected now after the months he’d spent away. He handled it gingerly as he put it in his bag, wrapping it in his sweater to ensure it came to no harm.

“You’ll have to tell Anna when you finish it,” Dean said from behind Castiel, dropping a kiss on the top of his head before he grabbed the two remaining shirts and single pair of socks Castiel had also mentioned wanting to get and stowing them in his own bag before they made to head back to the front door. However, as they entered the living room they both stopped where they stood as Balthazar emerged from his bedroom, his hair disheveled and eyes swollen as if he’d just been sleeping.

“Castiel, wait. I need to talk to you,” he said as he rubbed sleep out of his eyes and swayed slightly on his feet. The statement had an unexpected bluntness to it despite the soft, sleepy edges of Balthazar’s voice and appearance.

Dean looked to Castiel for guidance, the expression on his face one that clearly indicated he would either stay or leave if it was what Castiel wanted. Though it had nothing to do with the situation at hand, Castiel felt a surge of affection for Dean and reached out to take his hand, squeezing it briefly to his chest before he turned toward Balthazar again.

“Yes, Balthazar. Let’s talk,” he said.

Balthazar gestured toward the couch. “Let’s sit?” he said. It was more of a request than a confident suggestion, and Castiel found himself wondering if something had happened since the last time he’d seen Balthazar. He was used to his roommate being boisterous and confident, not timid.

Castiel nodded and asked Dean, “Can you wait for me outside?”

Dean nodded. “I’ll be out by the car.”

After Dean had made good on his word and Balthazar and Castiel were alone in the apartment, both of them sat down on the tacky blue sofa, each taking a seat as close to their respective ends as possible.

“’m sorry I didn’t warn we’d be coming,” Castiel said politely once Balthazar seemed to fully situate
himself on the couch (which took a few minutes and several elaborate rearrangements of both the sofa cushions and pillows). Balthazar was fidgeting and seemed anxious, which in turn began to put Castiel on-edge even as he actively tried not to swerve into the feeling.

Castiel cleared his throat, but Balthazar didn’t seem to notice. His ice-blue eyes moved restlessly around the room as he absently picked at the pillow he was holding in his lap like a shield. Castiel had no idea what to say now that he was actually in front of his roommate and in the perfect position to deliver his apology, but he pressed on despite his uncertainty and growing discomfort.

“I’m glad you wanted to speak to me,” he began again, speaking a little more loudly now. “I—I want to apologize for my behavior. I was…irresponsible and rude, and I don’t blame you for your irritation with me. I wasn’t a good roommate, and I’m very sorry for that. I also—”

“Don’t,” Balthazar said, cutting Castiel’s act of contrition short.

Feeling his stomach flip with nerves at the interruption, Castiel didn’t try to continue speaking, instead looking expectantly at Balthazar, who had at last made eye-contact with him.

“I mean, thank you for apologizing. Really, thanks. But I…” As quickly as he’d managed to look Castiel in the face, Balthazar shook his head a little spastically and looked down at the pillow in his lap again, beginning to pick at its edges with renewed vigor. “At the time I didn’t know what to think. You were just so different, I guess. I was pissed, yeah. But now, I think I get it.”

Castiel forced himself to hold steady and still on the couch, clasping his hands in his lap to keep his fingertips from wandering to the hem of his shirt where he knew they’d begin to tear at its stitches.

“What do you mean?”

Again, Balthazar shifted uncomfortably where he sat, a few moments of silence passing before he answered.

“I know something happened, mate,” he said.

Castiel felt the blood drain from his face.

“And I heard what Dean did to Miller yesterday,” Balthazar continued. “I…I know it was ‘cause he did something to you. I don’t know exactly what, but it’s not rocket science and it never has been, and I’m sorry I wasn’t…I’m sorry I just wrote you off when you came home and you were—”

“Stop,” Castiel said tightly as he crossed both arms over his chest. “Please, stop. I—” He struggled to finish his sentence and at last simply said, “Thank you, but I don’t want to talk about this.”

Balthazar frowned, the movements of his hands slowing and then almost stopping as he thought to himself before speaking again. “He’s no angel, Drew Miller. I know you’re new to this campus, but he’s never been a reputable sort. You’re probably in the right, whatever happened, and you’re not the first.”

“What are you saying?” Castiel asked before he could stop himself.

Balthazar shook his head. “I don’t think it’s really my place to go into, but Drew…he’s not innocent, not the way his daddy wants everyone to think every time he dumps money into the football fund.”

Castiel felt his mouth fall open as he tried to process the implications of what Balthazar had just told him.
“I have to go now,” he said at last. “I’ll see you around.”

He had no idea if he would or not, but he wasn’t really listening to himself as he heard Balthazar’s words echoed in the dark, swirling mess of his own head.

“You want to know more, ask the other frats,” Balthazar called as Castiel opened the door and practically launched himself outside toward the Impala.

Dean leaned over and opened the passenger door as Castiel came close. He took his seat beside Dean without comment.

Castiel felt mixed up and sick and as if the ground had tilted even farther to the side. He stared blankly at the dashboard in front of him, not having any idea what to do with the information Balthazar had given him.

“You ready to go home?” Dean asked him after it become clear Castiel wasn’t going to say what had transpired in the apartment.

Castiel nodded without looking over at him, crossing his arms over his chest again and wishing he could curl so far into himself that he stopped existing.

Hours later, Castiel lay awake in his and Dean’s bed, shivering under the quilt that covered them even though he didn’t feel cold.

The clock beside the bed read 3:16am and Castiel hadn’t gotten any sleep since Dean had drifted off around eleven. The room they shared was almost completely silent save for the even draws of Dean’s breaths and the faint noise of the television Bobby had accidentally left on in his own room.

Beside Castiel, Dean’s face was faintly visible in the moonlight streaming in from the nearby window, his black eye and split lip only marginally more healed now than they had been the night before. Castiel wished he wasn’t the only one awake for a few, selfish seconds, but made no move to act on the impulse.

He carefully turned in the bed so that he was facing the wall instead of Dean’s sleeping form, exhaling slowly at the familiar twinge that had returned to his back and the awful, alien feeling that never truly went away of someone else’s body being pressed into his own. Castiel pushed his hands to his face as he forced himself not to move, to kick or yell or get up and run outside into the warm night air where perhaps things would be easier to bear.

Most intrusive of all, however, was that now a new question dug itself into the back of Castiel’s aching head, numinous and dark.

*Had Drew done what he did to Castiel to other people?*

Behind him, Dean shifted in his sleep with a muffled groan, his arm clumsily coming to wrap itself around Castiel’s middle as he pulled him closer.

Castiel closed his eyes and clasped his hands over Dean’s forearm, wishing he had never run into Drew in the first place as he’d stumbled around looking for Gilda, high on painkillers and half-lost.

Maybe he wasn’t the only one with those same regrets.
When Dean hadn’t been called into the dean’s office or the police station by Tuesday evening, Castiel gradually began to realize that somehow, Dean and Drew must have evaded academic or other punishments for the confrontation. While he found it hard to believe, he was so relieved than he found himself silently giving thanks to whoever had answered his desperate prayers as he changed into his pajamas next to Dean.

They had less than two weeks until their classes ended and finals began, now, and in that brief, precious, and grateful moment Castiel found himself thinking that perhaps he should be looking forward to his and Dean’s inevitable summer and the many peaceful days that he hoped would come once school let out and they were safely tucked away from campus for a few months.

The moment was dulled by the fact that Castiel could still feel the rough, heavy touch of Drew’s hands on his skin as he slipped his cotton sleeping t-shirt over his head.

—*Stop please—*

—*I need to go home—*

—*I think you’re just a lightweight—*

—*I gave you a good time—*

“Cas?”

Castiel turned to look at Dean.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Your hands,” Dean said quietly.

“What?” Castiel asked.

Dean pulled his lower lip between his teeth, sighing before he reached for Castiel’s wrists.

His hands were curled into fists so tight he’d broken the skin of his palms with his nails.

Castiel shook his head. “No, I didn’t—I didn’t mean to,” he said to Dean. “I didn’t mean to, I promise, I just—”

He’d just what? Lost minutes of time slipping into a flashback while the kindest person he’d ever known was right beside him in their bedroom? Just thought he was back in Drew’s bed having his virginity forcibly taken even though it had happened months ago?

What was happening to him?

Castiel shook his head, smelling his own blood now as the crescent-shaped cuts continued to bleed sluggishly.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last.

“Can I hug you?” Dean asked him.

That he had to ask at all was alarming to Castiel; Dean hadn’t doubted whether or not Castiel wanted to be touched or embraced in weeks, and the fact that he was asking now meant it must be obvious that something was wrong with Castiel.
“Of course you can,” Castiel said quickly, perhaps a little desperately. “You always can. You know that, don’t you?”

Dean didn’t answer, he only took Castiel in his arms and held him close.

“You know that, don’t you, Dean?” Castiel asked again as Dean held him.

“I do, hon,” Dean said at last.

***

Castiel spent almost two hours on Wednesday constructing a large frame in the woodshop that rivaled the size of his (now-deconstructed) self-portrait. It took him longer than he would have liked to make it, but he felt something that might have been pride as he stood back after and gazed appraisingly at the straight, blonde rectangle leaning against the far wall of the woodshop. No nails or bits of glue were visible after the careful way he’d joined and sanded and nailed the thing into being.

Though Castiel hadn’t realized it at the time, not making his own canvas for his self-portrait had taken a toll on him, making him feel even less accomplished than he already had. Even though he still wasn’t entirely sure he was working as quickly as he could be, it satisfied him to see the progress he’d made in a few hours.

Back in the studio, the squares of Castiel’s disassembled works were heaped in a pile beside his chair, and he had yet more to do while he waited on the frame to settle.

Sitting down with a stolen pillow shoved between his back and the chair, Castiel doggedly continued the task he’d begun on Sunday, cutting his previous works into neat squares to set on top of the growing mound.

—I gave you a good time—

“Stop,” Castiel mumbled between gritted teeth, feeling sweat began to gather at his temples as he roughly pulled his hands through his hair and grabbed the scissors again with more force than necessary.

“Please stop.”

***

On Thursday, Charlie sent a group text to Castiel and Dean asking if she could come to Bobby’s after her classes ended. When both boys’ phones pinged at the same time they read her request quietly.

For a few, tense minutes there was silence before Castiel exhaled and reluctantly broke it.

“Let’s have her over,” he said to Dean, hearing the exhaustion in his own voice but unable to do anything about it.

“Cas, we don’t have to tell her anything,” Dean said. “I can think of something else to say. She doesn’t have to know if you don’t want her to. This is only if you want to.”

Castiel shook his head. “She’ll figure it out, Dean. She always does.”

“I don’t want to tell her if you don’t want to,” Dean insisted.
“You don’t understand,” Castiel said tiredly, thinking of what Balthazar had told him and unable to articulate any of it to Dean. “It…it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Are you sure?” Dean asked, his green eyes dark with worry.

Castiel nodded, and Dean lifted his phone to his ear to call Charlie.

Castiel wasn’t sure if Charlie had already been nearby or had literally sped to Bobby’s from campus to make the drive in the few minutes that passed between Dean’s phone call and her tentative knock on the front door, but all too soon she’d arrived.

“Where’s Sam?” she asked stridently as Dean let her in. The question was clearly asked to try and dispel the tangible strain that had filled the room as soon as she passed through the doorway.

“He’s at Jessica’s. They’re basically attached at the hip now,” Dean said as he took Charlie’s bag and hung it on the hook near the door.

Charlie smiled, but the expression was an uneasy one. She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again, looking from Dean to Castiel with unsure eyes.

When she opened her arms to them, Castiel was taken by surprise.

“Come here, please?” Charlie implored.

As Dean and Castiel moved forward from their respective places and into Charlie’s arms, Castiel felt acid churning in his stomach. He closed his eyes and pressed his face into her shoulder, breathing in the clean, sweet smell of her clothes and skin. Charlie cared about him, he reminded himself, she always had.

Castiel wished he could stay like that forever, wrapped tight and silent and empty and perpetually suspended in the last moment he would ever experience when Charlie didn’t know what had happened at the frat house.

“We need to talk,” she said as she let them go a few seconds later.

Castiel only nodded.

“Let’s go to our room,” Dean said, taking Castiel’s hand as they led Charlie down the hall.

They all sat together in the small bed, making a semi-circle with their bodies facing away from the window and door. Dean and Castiel sat beside one another, with Dean’s arm draped over Castiel’s shoulders as he held him securely to his side. The door of the bedroom had been closed and locked on the off-chance that Sam came home early or Bobby emerged from the back office, but the house was as quiet as a mausoleum.

Castiel felt sick to his stomach, and as much as he tried to shake the feeling and focus on the conversation they were about to have he had difficulty doing so, finding himself pulling at the hem of his shirt and looking at the wall beyond instead of at his friend.

When Charlie spoke, her words were mostly directed toward Dean.

“There’s some stuff I think you need to see.”

She dug her phone out of her pocket and unlocked its screen, the small click click click of her scrolling through various apps beginning to put Castiel on edge before she found what she was
looking for and held her phone out for Dean and Castiel to look at.

What they saw as they looked down together appeared to be a screenshot of a cellphone app, with bright yellow and blue borders framing blocky, purple text that stood out starkly against a white backdrop. In the upper-right corner of the screen was a small logo that read ‘ChitChat’.

There were three images that Charlie scrolled through after a few seconds had been spent on each, and all of them seemed to be anonymously submitted statements, each marked as coming from their small, college town.

Castiel wanted to stop reading after the first screencap, but he didn’t.

_Drew Millers a rapist
Our school doesn’t care
Drew Miller hurts ppl
Drew M gave me drugs and had sex with me
I told my RA and he said I shouldn’t report it bc ‘Drews a nice guy’
DM’s parents give money to the uni & nothing ever happens when his frat rapes someone

It settled into the center of Castiel’s chest with an awful, awful clarity that Balthazar had been correct; Drew had a history of doing this to others.

Castiel felt himself start to shake against Dean’s side. The bitter, scared feeling in his guts that he thought he’d cried out days ago was back. He felt powerless and small, a pawn in a game he hadn’t even known he was playing. Knowing without question or doubt that someone else had gone through exactly what he had—and there it was _again_, the vivid physical memory he’d been trying to ignore since Saturday, playing in his mind and over his skin like a heavy, tangible thing—made him want to crawl under a blanket and sleep until the semester ended.

“So, I didn’t know anything about this Drew Miller dude before a few days ago, but I got curious when I started seeing those messages on the app. They started showing up the day of the fight,” Charlie said as she withdrew her phone and put it back in her pocket. “I follow it for campus gossip, sue me. Anyway, usually there’s nothing that serious on it, ever. But these all started popping up, and when I did a little digging, what did I find? That this asshole’s the same random guy you beat the crap out of. And let me just tell you, it’s not hard to find shit on this guy. He’s got a record and a reputation on this campus and so does his frat house. They call KA ‘the rape house’ for fuck’s sake. People have been drugged and assaulted at that house a few times before and each time nothing happened when they reported it to the campus cops. Did you know that?”

Castiel looked up at her, then. “People knew that happened there?” he asked.

Charlie nodded unhappily. “Each time the campus police has gotten a report they’ve sent out an email telling us to ‘be safe’, not to take drinks from people you don’t know, the usual stuff you get at orientation and crap, but they’ve never said which frat to avoid and nothing’s ever fucking come of the allegations. I remember those emails, too, is the shitty thing. They were so vague I had no idea what the cops were even talking about, and today I found out it’s been about this fucking house all along.”

Castiel felt numb, and Charlie continued undaunted when neither boy responded to her, clearly gathering steam as she went.
“This guy, though, Drew, he’s had more than one person accuse him of assault. His parents are donors for this school and he’s only ever gotten a week off lacross practice for the shit it looks like he’s pulled.”

“How do you know all this, Charlie?” Dean asked sharply.

“I hacked the disciplinary records,” Charlie said with a shrug as if it were an obvious answer. “But this guy’s bad news, and I had no idea he even existed until…until last weekend.” She paused, then, looking from Dean to Cas as she waited for an answer.

When again none came, she said, “Look…did something happen I don’t know about? You don’t go around punching people in the face for fun, Dean, even if they’re shitheads.”

After a minute or so of more uneasy silence, Dean slowly turned his head toward Castiel where he was still wedged into Dean’s side. His chin brushed the top of Castiel’s head as he rubbed his hand down Castiel’s arm in what was supposed to be a comforting gesture.

“Cas?” Dean asked.

Feeling his heart begin to pound in his chest, Castiel nodded once and looked back down at his crossed legs, leaning his head against the solid shape of Dean’s shoulder.

“What?” Charlie demanded.

Dean held his hand up before he spoke, silencing her. Whether he was struggling to say what he knew he needed to or simply thinking of the best way to explain it, Castiel wasn’t sure, but Dean only spoke after he was apparently good and ready to.

“Charlie…I hurt that guy ‘cause he…assaulted Cas,” Dean said with what sounded like a great deal of effort. “Like, uh, those messages said. It was a few months ago. I—” here, Dean stopped and swallowed, breathing in before continuing. “I found Cas, right after. He needed help back to his apartment, could barely talk, and he was…scared. Really scared.”

There was silence, uncomfortable and heavy, before Charlie shook her head in disbelief, her eyes bright with resentment and confusion.

“What the hell, Dean? Why didn’t you tell me? Our friend was drugged and assaulted and you thought I didn’t need to know that? I could’ve been saying all the wrong shit and hurting him and I never would have even—”

“I didn’t want you to know, Charlie,” Castiel interrupted before she could continue. “This wasn’t because of Dean. I…didn’t want anyone knowing I was stupid enough to think Drew was my friend.”

“You weren’t stupid for thinking that,” Charlie said forcefully. “He’s done this to more than one person and that is no one’s fault but his and this university’s. The messages speak for themselves.” She looked furious, her usually pale skin almost white with the intensity of her anger.

As Castiel struggled to find an answer to her assertion, Charlie reached out and seized Castiel’s hand, taking it tightly in both of hers as if she were trying to rub warmth into frostbitten limbs.

“I love you,” she said. “You did nothing wrong.”

“I love you too, thank you,” Castiel said as he winced at the stiffness of her grip.
“You don’t believe me,” Charlie said sadly.

Castiel closed his eyes and shook his head, feeling the beginnings of headache. “I—I don’t know. Can you please let go of my hand?”

“I’m sorry if I said or did anything that hurt you. I didn’t know,” Charlie said seriously as she obliged Castiel and let him go. “I should have known something was wrong. I mean, I think I fucking did, but I didn’t know exactly what, I didn’t know that—”

“I didn’t want you to know,” Castiel repeated as he opened his eyes. “I didn’t want anyone to know.”

Charlie’s expression was grim as she slowly, regretfully shook her head. “Cas…I think it might too late for that, honey. This school’s tiny and…people already knew about the fight, and with his past… I think they’re starting to connect the dots.”

“How do you know?” Castiel asked. And then, “No, don’t. I don’t want—” Castiel swallowed around a lump growing in his throat. “I can’t know.”

He clumsily hobbled off of the bed, almost tripping on his way out of the room as his legs partially crumpled underneath him.

“Cas—” Dean began somewhere behind him.

“I need a glass of water,” Castiel mumbled as he opened the door and let himself out. “That’s all.”

He was having an anxiety attack, now, he could feel it rapidly growing worse as he tried to process the thought of people he’d never even met knowing what had happened to him and concurrently the thought of other people (perhaps just like him) having gone through the same pain, the same helplessness and the same fear as Drew held them down while they could barely move or talk or think and feeling that same awful nakedness—

Castiel was in the kitchen and then walking out the back door. He could barely breathe and he was leaning against the side of the house and then folding down onto the ground with his knees drawn up to his chest. He framed his face with his arms and pressed his nose and mouth into the blue hills of his knees, his chest tight and his head pounding.

“Fuck, Cas. Cas,” Castiel dimly heard Dean say as the loud creak of the back door came and went. “Come here.”

When Dean knelt beside him and wrapped his arms around Castiel’s shoulders, Castiel clung to him the way he had a few nights earlier, his fingers soon stiff and painful with how tightly he had his fists tangled in Dean’s overshirt. He wanted to breathe Dean in and couldn’t.

“I can’t do this,” Castiel said. “I—I can’t do this, Dean.”

He couldn’t continue feeling this way and survive it. He couldn’t wake up in the middle of the night thinking Drew was still inside him and his hand was still over his mouth and survive it. He couldn’t think of other people going through the same thing and carrying the same memories tangled inside them and survive it.

“I’m here with you,” Dean said. “I’m always here. Please don’t give up on me. C’mon, please don’t give up now. I’m here with you…”

Castiel didn’t say anything else, and Dean murmured the same things over and over into Castiel’s
hair until his lungs eventually began to work the way they were supposed to and the worst of his panic had passed.

Castiel didn’t feel relieved, though. He only felt empty.

“Let’s go inside,” he said to Dean after he took his hand and pressed his lips to the back of the familiar, scarred knuckles.

“I wish none of this was happening,” Dean said as he cupped Castiel’s cheek. “I wish it would stop so we could rest.”

Castiel didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing. When Dean kissed him a few seconds later, dry and soft and warm, he wanted to cry but knew that crying would make absolutely no difference.

They soon helped one another up and went back inside the house and down the hall to the guest room. Charlie was waiting for them where she’d been sitting earlier.

“I’m sorry I told you all that,” she whispered. “I didn’t know this would happen.”

Castiel shook his head, too weary to feel anything but resignation. “I was going to find out anyway.”

“Do you want me to go?” she asked them, clearly expecting the answer to be yes.

“Don’t,” Castiel said blearily. “Let’s just…sit in the living room and wait up for Sam.”

A few minutes later the three of them were settled on the couch with the TV on in front of them, bathing them in blue light and canned laughter as they watched a Charmed rerun.

Castiel sat in-between Charlie and Dean, and though none of them moved consciously to do so and the gesture wasn’t planned, they all held hands with one another.

“Thank you for being honest,” Castiel said to the redhead during one of the commercial breaks. She squeezed his hand again (this time much more gently).

Castiel didn’t realize that they’d fallen asleep until he woke up hours later to Charlie gone, Sam and Bobby both home, and the smell of food and the sound of music wafting from the kitchen as next to him Dean slept on his shoulder, their hands still woven together.

***

On Friday, Meg was waiting for Castiel outside of the Fine Arts building when he made his way there around two in the afternoon. Dean was currently in a meeting with his literature professor and would be for the next half-hour or so, and Castiel had decided to try and fit some work in on his project before they made their way back home for the evening.

Meg was wearing an eyesore of a neon yellow t-shirt and holding two cups of coffee, and when Castiel had come near enough to catch the familiar scent she thrust one at him unceremoniously.

“Afternoon, Clarence,” she said. There was something in her tone that Castiel wasn’t able to identify, but he didn’t dwell on the observation for long.

“I assume you’re here to see me?” Castiel asked as he took the paper cup from her.

Meg snorted as she followed him inside. “Don’t be self-centered, I’m obviously here for my other
two-dozen art major friends.”

Castiel didn’t laugh at the joke, already distractedly taking in the sight of the familiar foyer as they stepped inside. The doors to the theater were open as they passed them, the sounds of set construction and the hum of idle chatter and power tools filling the otherwise quiet first floor.

“Steady, watch it,” Castiel heard someone say from what sounded like the rafters. For a second, he wondered if the play he, Charlie, and Dean had missed the weekend before had been as good as its reviews promised.

*Is everything alright, Cas?*

“I didn’t even put sugar in it, y’know, I know how you are about sweets. You gonna say thank you?” Meg was asking him.

“Of course. Thank you, Meg,” Castiel murmured as he shook his head and brought the coffee to his nose, breathing in the bright, nutty smell. He was as thankful for the coffee as he was uneasy that Meg had decided to send herself alongside it. As a friend Meg was talkative and demanding, and the few times she’d accompanied him to the studio in the past had been long and tiresome sittings. To say Castiel was running low on both sleep and energy from the previous evening was an understatement of impressive proportions. He worried his lower lip between his teeth as Meg launched into a story about Andy and Anselm from the previous week while they walked together.

“…was so random. I don’t know what he was thinking but the whole time I was like, *why is this dude looking at me like*—”

“How did you know I’d be here today?” Castiel asked Meg as they stepped into the elevator, cutting her off.

“You’re way more predictable than you think you are,” she answered.

Castiel frowned but didn’t respond, and soon they’d reached the third floor and Meg had finished relaying her anecdote.

As they approached the painting studio its doors opened and Lisa stepped out, her long hair in a messy bun on the top of her head and her cellphone pressed to her ear. She was walking so briskly she almost collided with Castiel and only barely stopped herself from doing so, her phone slipping from her hand and clattering to the floor.

“S-sorry, Lisa,” Castiel stuttered as he bent to retrieve her phone, his hands shaking so badly he almost dropped it again as he picked it up. He hadn’t spoken to or interacted with Lisa since she and Dean had dated what now seemed like a lifetime ago. Warmth flooded his cheeks as he straightened up and held the phone out to her, meeting her dark eyes.

For a moment, Lisa said nothing, her lips parted slightly as they looked at one another. Then, all at once she gave Castiel a strained smile and nodded hastily, taking her phone from his outstretched hand.

“Don’t worry about it, honey,” she said softly before she murmured a quick hello to Meg and took her leave.

“Since when are you ‘honey’ to Winchester’s ex?” Meg asked Castiel once they were alone inside the studio.

Castiel didn’t answer, but he thought he knew exactly why.
His cubby looked just as it had when he’d last left it a few days ago, and Castiel found that today the sight of it filled him with dread rather than the almost victorious feeling he’d had when he was last beside it. He didn’t feel up to working on much of anything, but sat down in front of his easel all the same, hoping that even with Meg around he’d be able to make some sort of headway.

Meg commandeered the chair that Dean usually sat in and positioned it beside Castiel’s stool, taking an almost indecently loud sip of her coffee after she’d made herself comfortable.

“Go on, be artsy,” she said with a wave of her hand. “You have my permission.”

Despite her instruction, Castiel sat motionless for a long time as he looked down at the many pieces of his own paintings in a pile next to him. Every single work he’d created in the studio had now been cut into squares, and each one of them would soon be fastened to the sheet of linen he was about to stretch over the frame he’d made earlier.

But he couldn’t seem to take his eyes off of the pile and make himself actually get to work. There was a dull buzzing in his ears.

Drew Miller hurts ppl

Castiel’s skin was crawling, the ghost of Drew’s hands still seemingly trapped beneath it.

Drew Miller gave me drugs and had sex with me

“You gonna tell me why you cut up all your stuff?” Meg gestured to the pile with her cup, pulling Castiel from his thoughts. A few drops of milky brown coffee spilled from the rim of her cup and onto the floor with her careless motion, and though none of it came near his project Castiel leapt up from his chair in startled surprise, abortively throwing his hands out as if to contain the nonexistent problem. He angrily pushed Meg away when she reached out to grasp his shoulder.

“You can’t stay in here if you’re not going to take this seriously,” he reprimanded her through a mostly-closed jaw. “Be careful.”

“Answer my question and I might,” Meg said playfully, a smile audible in her voice.

When Castiel didn’t answer and instead turned back to the pile of canvas squares, Meg sighed in exasperation. “C’mon, Clarence, I’m kidding…you know that, right?”

She sounded genuinely taken aback, and Castiel began to feel guilt and shame for the way he’d snapped at her for something so inconsequential. He sighed and shook his head, reaching his hands up to rub them over eyes that still ached.

“I know, and I’m sorry. I’m just—” he paused when he realized he didn’t know what he’d been about to say.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel said again when he lowered his hands. “I shouldn’t have said that to you. You brought me coffee and you’re a good friend.”

“It’s fine. You’re usually too uptight to be honest with me, anyway,” Meg said with a single-shouldered shrug when he looked back over at her. “Least when you’re pissed I know it’s real.”

“What?” Castiel asked with honest surprise.

Meg scoffed. “You don’t tell me anything, like, ever, unless you’re mad.” She thought for a moment, then amended her statement by adding, “Or really high.”
Castiel was disturbed by how similar Meg’s words were to something Dean had said to him weeks earlier.

“I don’t try to keep things from you,” he said.

“I know your type,” Meg said with another shrug. “Families with money are all the same. It’s not about how you feel, it’s about how much you can make.”

Castiel opened his mouth to argue, feeling his hackles rise at the generality, but closed it again when he realized that she was right. His parents had always cared more about research and numbers and the running of the laboratories than they ever had about how their children felt or what impact the business might have had on their lives. Castiel knew he was far from forthcoming when it came to how he felt, he never had been and had never had any incentive to be. His father and mother had seen to that.

For a long time Castiel said nothing to his friend, looking at Meg’s brown eyes and her curls and the dimple on her right cheek that never seemed to fade.

“I don’t know how to start this,” he said finally.

“Just tell me what’s wrong,” Meg said simply. “Because I know something is.”

“Everyone else knows, I guess you might as well find out, too,” Castiel said with a harsh, uncomfortable laugh as he sat heavily back down in his chair, the metallic thunk of him doing so lurid in the studio.

Meg said nothing, she simply waited.

“The night you heard I got drunk at the frat house, I was with Drew,” Castiel began. His voice shook noticeably. He wished Dean was with him to relay the story the way he’d been the night before, and the fact that he wanted such a thing made him feel smaller than the pieces of canvas scattered at his feet. This thing had happened to him, not Dean.

“He gave me something in my drink. I couldn’t get up. And he—he had sex with me.”

Meg’s eyes narrowed. “Did you want to have sex with him?”

Castiel shook his head, looking down at his knees.

“That’s not sex, Cas, that’s—”

“Don’t say it,” Castiel said sharply. “Don’t—don’t say it. I can’t, not today.”

“But you know?” Meg asked. “You know what that is?”

Castiel nodded.

Now it was Meg’s turn to be quiet as she processed what he had said.

Then, “I was stupid to tell you to talk to him. I didn’t know.”

“I don’t blame you,” Castiel told her honestly. “I didn’t know, either.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Meg asked as she moved her chair closer to his.

“I thought you’d just say I shouldn’t have gotten so drunk,” Castiel said, feeling more guilt churn
through him as Meg’s face visibly fell.

“My neighbors still think my dad never beat me even though I left the house covered in bruises ‘cause he told ‘em I got hurt playing soccer. I know what it feels like to have someone doubt you, and I’d never do that to you,” Meg said as she reached out and lay her hand on Castiel’s shoulder.

“People don’t give a shit about someone getting hurt ‘til it’s them. Before that it’s ‘they probably asked for it’, ‘why didn’t they tell anyone?’ But we know. I don’t care what happened, it wasn’t your fault.”

Castiel had heard the same phrase from more than one person, now, and in that moment he wanted so badly for it to mean something to him. As he looked back up at Meg he wanted so much to accept her words as truth that it felt like a gnawing in his guts. Like the skeptic who feels God beside him for the first time after months of silent, hollow prayer, Castiel wanted to believe.

But he didn’t.

“I don’t think that’s true,” he said as he shook his head.

“You need to talk to someone about it, then,” Meg said frankly. “I did when I got here ‘cause counselling’s free in the student life center. It helped me a lot. Obviously, I still got some work to do, but I’m way better now than I was, if you can believe that.”

“I tried talking once, in a group. I…I just felt stupid,” Castiel said.

“Then maybe group’s not for you, but you still need to talk. You can’t let that piece of shit have this much control over your life.” Meg’s eyes locked onto Castiel’s as she continued. “I’m glad you have Dean and Charlie and whoever, but they’re not enough to get you through this. Take it from someone who knows.”

“Does it even matter?” Castiel asked, exhaling and leaning his forehead against one of the cool, metal rungs of his easel. The week he’d just survived had thoroughly drained him of optimism where his recovery was concerned.

“That you’re asking me that freaks me the fuck out,” Meg replied.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel said.

“Don’t be sorry. Be willing to try,” Meg said emphatically.

“You think it’ll actually help?” Castiel asked as he straightened and looked over at her.

Meg nodded. “I know it will.”

Castiel was doubtful, and the feeling ran deep, but he nodded all the same.

“I’ll try.”

Castiel spent the rest of the evening immersed in thought.

After his talk with Meg, he felt like he’d been shaken out of the appalling dream that the last few days had been and brought crashing back down into the waking world.

He couldn’t go on like this. It wasn’t sustainable in any sense of the word and it wasn’t fair to
himself or to Dean.

Castiel had been cut to the quick by Drew’s reappearance, so deeply unnerved that he’d spent the past week in a state not unlike that which he’d occupied immediately following the assault. He’d told himself that it would get better if he simply forced himself to move forward the way he’d been doing since he moved into Bobby’s house, and had it? Castiel didn’t think so. In fact, with every new thing he learned about Drew and the fraternity he was a member of Castiel felt more distanced from the progress he’d made, if it had been true progress at all.

In hindsight, Castiel saw that letting Dean hold him without having panic attacks and eating regular meals and being caught up on his homework, while they were undoubtedly meaningful and healthy and things he should be proud of, were not a substitute for processing and understanding what he’d experienced and healing from it. That Castiel had wholeheartedly believed such a thing seemed dangerous and naïve, now. Why had Castiel thought that merely ignoring his triggers and the ocean of feelings he still hadn’t acknowledged make them heal? Simply seeing Drew had dragged him almost all the way back to square one. Could Castiel seriously tell himself he was getting better if his strides forward had been so easily undone?

Castiel couldn’t wait for a response that would never come from a boy who had never cared how much he hurt Castiel that night at Heaven and Hell. He couldn’t assume that one day Drew would decide to take the situation seriously and tell him why he’d chosen Castiel, why he’d given him drugs and held him down and violated him. He couldn’t spend any more time waiting for Drew to give him permission to move on with his life. He was beginning to realize that Dean was right when he’d said as much to Castiel the day of the fight, and had been all along.

The thought hurt. It hurt him more than anything ever had in his life; more than his brother leaving or his mother not believing in him or his father dying or Dean kissing him and then acting as if it had never happened. Castiel had always made an effort to divine the ultimate truth of things; since he’d been a child he’d sought to get to the bottom of everything he encountered in his life that lacked logic upon a superficial examination. Understanding things didn’t necessarily make them easier to come to terms with, he’d found, but it had always made him feel more in control of the given situation.

His father had died of a broken neck and punctured femoral artery; Naomi had been raised by abusive parents from Romania who pushed her ruthlessly to contribute to society even if it meant doing so at the expense of her own unhappiness; Gabriel had left because of their family’s relative dysfunction; Dean had kissed him because he cared about Castiel and then ignored it because he cared about his father’s opinion more. All of these explanations were painful, yes, but they made sense and they were truths.

But Drew was different. He had planned what he did to Castiel the night of the party. He had lied to him more than once when he could have been straightforward. He had chosen Castiel to take to bed out of the dozens of girls and boys who had shamelessly thrown themselves at Drew as he walked up the stairs or out to the patio. He had chosen someone he knew was likely to say no if he asked directly and completely ignored that fact in favor of forcing Castiel to say yes with his unresisting body.

Castiel was beginning to think that he was never going to truly understand why, because it made no sense. There was no reason or rationality to it, not really. Drew had wanted to take something from Castiel and keep it for himself, and Castiel’s own wants and desires and personhood had meant nothing in the pursuit of his goal.

The thought made Castiel immeasurably sad and made a strange sort of sense.

To hurt someone the way Drew had hurt Castiel wasn’t coherent or logical. It was cruel and heedless
and irrevocable. Castiel had changed as a person because of Drew’s careless actions, it was true, but Meg was right. He couldn’t continue to let Drew control him, regardless of how much the senselessness of the act itself devastated him.

If he wanted to get better, to truly get better, Castiel was starting to understand that he was going to have to face the fear he harbored of voicing his feelings and try therapy a second time, a real time.

But first, he needed to talk to Dean.

“Can we go to the woods?” Castiel asked Dean when he’d gotten home around three in the evening.

Dean looked up at Castiel from where he was reading at the kitchen table. His brow furrowed for a moment, his eyes tired and drooping at the corners, but he nodded. “If you want to, sure.”

The tree that bore the scars of Sam and Dean’s initials looked the same as it had the first time Castiel had seen it, its large roots curling from the ground like shrugged shoulders and its leaves bright green and petite, caught between the dregs of spring and the tentative beginnings of summer. As it had also been the last time Castiel and Dean were there, the wood felt almost subterranean in the blanket of its own silence, insulated from everything going on outside of its green and brown edges. It was a world apart, and Castiel found himself breathing more easily than he had in days as they made their way through the stillness and the cool dark.

Castiel closed his eyes and tilted his head back when he and Dean came to stand before the familiar tree a few minutes later, feeling almost as if Sam and Dean’s childhood hideaway had an energy all its own. He wasn’t the only one who felt more at ease there, that much was clear as Dean quickly lowered himself to sit on part of the large, natural seat formed by the roots of the tree near its base, drawing his knees to his chest as he exhaled and looked around with a contentedness Castiel hadn’t seen on his face in days. Dean extended an arm and patted the empty space next to him, glancing up at Castiel expectantly with a small smile. He no longer looked tired as he had at Bobby’s kitchen table, but refreshed and settled.

“C’mere,” he said as Castiel obliged and took a seat.

When Dean wrapped an arm around Castiel’s shoulders and pulled him close, Castiel went without resistance or hesitation, turning his face into the warmth of Dean’s skin and the softness of his worn, green henley. Dean loved him, Castiel reminded himself. He was weary of hiding things from him.

“Can I talk to you about something?” Castiel asked

Dean nodded, a gesture Castiel felt more than he saw. “’Course.”

“I…I want to tell you that I’m sorry, first,” Castiel said as he reached out to take one of Dean’s hands, folding it between both of his own.

“You don’t gotta be sorry,” Dean said immediately.

“You don’t know what I’m apologizing for,” Castiel pointed out.

“Fair enough, I guess. What for, then?” Dean asked.
“For…this week,” Castiel said, biting his lip hard enough to hurt as some of the familiar anxiety returned despite the tranquility surrounding them, clamping down sharp like an ulcer in the pit of his empty stomach. “I know it was—bad, and I know it was hard for you. And I know I haven’t told you why I’ve been feeling this way.”

“Are you going to now?” Dean asked.

Castiel nodded, feeling nauseated and nervous and, more than anything, afraid of disappointing Dean by what he was about to say. He loved Dean so much it sometimes felt like an ache in his chest or a stone in his belly. Castiel loved Dean like euphoria and relief and fear all at once, and he knew his life was better for having Dean in it, muddling through everything not by himself, but with Dean walking beside him every step of the way.

Castiel knew telling Dean what he was about to say was an important first step, but he couldn’t bear the thought of Dean looking at him with confusion or disgust the way he looked at himself when he was unlucky enough to catch his own reflection.

He found himself grasping Dean’s hand tightly, stalling the inevitable.

“You okay?” Dean inquired.

“Can you look at me?” Castiel asked.

Dean released Castiel from his hold, turning so that they were facing one another where they sat on the pile of roots.

“I’m scared to tell you this,” Castiel admitted.

“Don’t be scared, baby,” Dean murmured as he framed Castiel’s face in his hands the way he had so many times before. His green eyes looked almost gold in the sun’s fading light, his lips parted in concentration as he stroked his thumbs over the ridges of Castiel’s cheekbones.

“Whatsoever it is, I want to hear it.”

Castiel closed his eyes, breathing slowly as he tried to calm himself. When he opened them again, the naked sincerity on Dean’s face was startling, but it gave Castiel what he needed to start speaking, as afraid as he still was.

“Since I saw Drew again…I’ve been…feeling what happened,” Castiel whispered. Heat flooded his cheeks as he looked down at his lap. “In my…in my body. I…I hurt everywhere, and it’s like he’s there, touching me again. Since Saturday it’s like it…like it just happened. I’m sorry I’ve been such a mess. I just…I just don’t know what to do about it and it makes me feel…small.”

As if the words were too much for Dean to hear without doing so, he surged forward and wrapped his arms around Castiel again, his hands warm in Castiel’s hair and on the back of his neck and shoulders as Dean drew him as near as he could.

“I was worried it was something like that,” Dean said into Castiel’s ear, his words low. “I wish you woulda told me you were feeling that way. Maybe I could’ve done something.”

Castiel shook his head as he carefully freed himself from Dean’s comforting embrace. “I can’t expect you to do that, Dean. It’s not fair of me when you already do so much for me every day. I…I think I need to talk to someone about it. A professional. Not a group, but…someone who does it for a living. They have options on campus.”
Dean looked down at his crossed legs for a few moments before raising his head again and responding. “If that’s what you want to do, I’ll do whatever I can to help. It’s probably a good idea for you to talk to someone, Cas. I just…I don’t mind helping you out.” Dean’s eyes were creased at the corners, his brows drawn together again the way they’d been earlier as he began to sink more deeply into his own thoughts.

“I know you don’t,” Castiel said. “And you’re the most helpful person my life. But…I know that if I keep putting all my weight on you, eventually you’ll…you’ll get tired of carrying it, Dean.”

“Why do you think I’m getting tired?” Dean asked. He sounded confused, and it broke Castiel’s heart.

Castiel shook his head. “I’m not saying you are now, but I know this is hard on you, dealing with my issues every day. I don’t see how it couldn’t be. I want to be good to you the way you are to me, and I—” Castiel’s voice broke, and to his dismay he realized he was about to cry.

“Sorry,” he said as he swiped roughly at his face. “This is what I mean. I’m sorry for all this—this bullshit.”

“You being hurt isn’t bullshit,” Dean said firmly, taking Castiel’s free hand. “Yeah, sometimes I feel a little scared and like I…like I don’t know if I’m doing what’s right for you, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to head out the door. Also doesn’t mean I think things are always gonna be this way. Look…”

Here, Dean paused, his countenance thoughtful in a way Castiel rarely saw it.

“Look, I’m not trying to…to snub what you’re feeling, Cas. I’m not. But I also don’t think it’s always gonna be this hard. Wounds heal up eventually, all of them. Yeah, some leave you with scars, but I think all of them stop bleeding at some point. Yours is…bad right now. Things aren’t easy. But I don’t think it’s gonna be like this for us forever.”

Castiel leaned forward, pressing his face to Dean’s shoulder. The two of them inhaled together, solid and warm and simultaneous in the darkness of the woods.

“I’m sorry I’ve been scaring you. I haven’t meant to,” Castiel said as more tears welled in his eyes. He was grateful that Dean couldn’t see his face.

“You didn’t ask for this to happen,” Dean said. “And this is new for me, too. I’m not always sure I do the right things when you get scared or you need help. I hate not knowing if I’m hurting you or helping you.”

Castiel shook his head.

“Dean, you’re more than I could have ever hoped for,” he said. “You’re more than I deserve. You make everything so much easier, so much…so much better.”

Castiel pressed his lips to side of Dean’s neck, the kiss chaste and soft.

“I do?” Dean asked, his voice small.

“You do. Always.”

That evening, with Olivia the calico by his left side and Dean by his right, Castiel navigated to the
university’s website on his laptop to see if he could schedule a counselling appointment before the end of the semester.

Chapter End Notes

Retraumatization is both extremely difficult to experience and to watch someone else go through.
If you or a loved one are experiencing retraumatization, below is a list of resources you might find helpful, and I hope you never feel afraid to tell your loved ones how you're coping so they can help you out.
https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/coping-traumatic-events-resources
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Castiel attends therapy, and he realizes a few things about himself.
Love, closure, and healing are present in this chapter, though things are not perfectly resolved. I hope so much that you enjoy this update <3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If Castiel was completely honest with himself, he’d been hoping on some level that there would be no counseling openings before the semester ended and he’d be forced to forestall the inevitable. As clearly as he’d come to understand that he needed help, he felt something close to panic at the thought of actually beginning the process of getting it. His personal misgivings were inconsequential, though, and when Castiel had gone to sign up for a counseling session on the school’s website there had been an immediate opening with a Dr. Julian Morte. His short biography said he’d been employed at the university as a counselor for almost ten years.

It was currently eight in the morning on the last full Monday of their spring semester, and Castiel’s appointment with Dr. Morte was scheduled for four o’clock that evening. Castiel had a plate of toast and eggs in front of him that he’d barely touched and Dean was sitting across the table from him, his hair still wet from the shower he’d just taken.

“I think you might feel better once you actually, y’know, get in there and start talking,” Dean said. He looked tired, the impending end of the year already taking a toll on him.

“I just thought—I guess I thought there’d be more time,” Castiel admitted. He looked down with a vague feeling of nausea at the yellow lump that had been speared on his fork for the last five minutes.

Dean reached out to grab Castiel’s empty coffee cup, clasping Castiel’s hand for a second before he withdrew to stack their cups near the sink.

“Don’t we all wish we had that?” Dean asked as he turned away.

Later that day Castiel arrived at the Student Life Center almost twenty minutes early, his hands sweating while Dean walked close beside him, a comforting presence as they entered the building together. Castiel had told Dean that he didn’t have to go with him to the appointment if he’d rather spend the time at the studio preparing for finals, but Dean had brushed him off, telling Castiel he’d feel better waiting for him.

Selfishly glad for Dean’s company even as he felt a creeping guilt for keeping him from the studio, Castiel grasped Dean’s hand and held it tightly as they walked.

The offices they walked past were all bustling with a surprising amount of activity considering it was Monday and there were only a few days before the freshmen, sophomores, and juniors started their finals. The seniors had begun taking theirs a few days earlier, and neither Dean nor Castiel envied them (Charlie had taken to spamming their group chat with rapid-fire texts imploring them to put her out of her misery, preferably with a baseball bat).
The office where the counseling sessions took place was upstairs and away from the general crowd, and far too soon Dean and Castiel had found the small room and stepped inside. Then, there was nothing to be done but pretend like Castiel was ready for the appointment.

“Hey, there,” the purple-haired student working as a receptionist said as Castiel took a step forward to sign in. “Are you Castiel Novak?”

Castiel nodded as he returned the plastic flower and puffyball-bedecked pen to its cup next to her, flecks of multicolored glitter now dotting his fingers.

“I have an appointment in a few minutes,” he said unnecessarily.

She nodded seriously. “Dr. Morte’s in the first room, if you want to head back now.”

“Uh, now?” Castiel asked.

“Yeah. He said he finished up sooner than he thought, so you’re good.” The girl smiled up at Castiel, clearly not sensing his unease.

As the silence stretched on and Castiel didn’t move, Dean interjected. “I’ll be here,” he told Castiel, reaching out to squeeze his hand one last, quick time. “I promise. Okay?”

Castiel nodded distractedly, already looking toward the hall beyond. “Okay.”

As he had when they went to the clinic, Dean took a chair in the waiting room and pulled out one of his textbooks. Castiel made himself take the gesture as the cue to move forward that it was, forcing himself not to clench his hands as he turned away from the reception area and toward where the girl had pointed, finding the room and reluctantly letting himself in.

The first thing Castiel noticed when he passed through the doorway was how colorful the little room was; while outside the walls were plain and white and the only color to be seen had been the receptionist’s Lisa Frank-esque desk decorations, in the space where the counselling actually took place the walls were painted with flowers, butterflies, and trees, and there were cheerful tangerine curtains draped over the tall window on the far end of the office. There was a general feeling of brightness and joy created by the many colors clashing with one another everywhere Castiel looked, and on the coffee table in the center of the room there was a messy stack of books and a few neon stress balls long morphed out of shape with some of their stuffing spilling out onto the scratched surface of the wood grain.

Overall, the room looked almost more suited to school-aged children than it did to college students, but Castiel couldn’t say that he disliked what he saw. He briefly speculated if Dr. Morte had decorated the room this way himself or if it had been someone else’s idea. Likely the latter, he thought absently before he was reminded, suddenly, that he wasn’t alone.

“Would you mind closing the door behind you?”

Dr. Morte was British, a subtle accent audible within even the brief inquiry. He was sitting behind a cluttered desk, his head down and his face obscured as he wrote something quickly on a notepad.

When Dr. Morte looked up a few seconds later at Castiel where he waited awkwardly just inside the office, he had a smile on his thin face.

“Castiel, I presume?” he asked as he got up and extended a fragile-looking hand for Castiel to shake. Dr. Morte’s eyes were small and almond-shaped, his nose long and bony. He was almost skeletal in his thinness, and his white button-down shirt appeared too big for his frame.
“Yes, it’s nice to meet you,” Castiel said. He couldn’t decide if he meant the words or not.

“I’m Dr. Julian Morte, but you can call me whatever you like. Doctor or Mister Morte or Julian or whatever, really, I’m not picky.”

There was that lilting, almost soothing accent again. Castiel found himself wondering where Dr. Morte was from and how long he’d been living in the United States, but he didn’t feel it relevant or polite to ask, so he simply nodded. “I understand, Dr. Morte.”

“Ah, you’re a more formal type, hmm? Me, too, truthfully. Both my parents were doctors, you can probably tell where I get it from. I was every adult’s favorite growing up,” Dr. Morte said with a gentle laugh.

Castiel only nodded stiffly, unable to relax even though he wanted to laugh along with Dr. Morte. If he’d been feeling less on-edge he would have commiserated and said that both of his parents were scientists, but as it was he said nothing.

Dr. Morte gestured for Castiel to sit on either the overstuffed purple couch pushed back against the far wall or one of the green armchairs near the window. Castiel chose one of the chairs without much in the way of deliberation and sat down, trying to look more at ease than he felt (and failing, if Dr. Morte’s reaction was anything to go by).

“Is there something I can do to make you more comfortable, Castiel? I have bottled water, more pillows, or a blanket if you want it.”

“A…blanket?” Castiel asked.

Dr. Morte nodded. “People get cold, or some just like to feel more—secure.”

“Can I have it?” Castiel asked as he looked down at his lap, his hands pale where they were clasped between his legs.

Dr. Morte only nodded as if it were a completely normal request and rose to dig behind his desk, producing a rather ugly plaid blanket and handing it to Castiel.

Once the blanket was spread over his knees and tucked beneath his crossed legs, Castiel was surprised to notice he did indeed begin to feel incrementally less vulnerable ensconced within the soft fabric. The feeling reminded him somewhat of the sleepy, close mornings he spent under the covers with Dean.

Dr. Morte smiled at him again.

“Better?” he asked.

Castiel nodded, smoothing his hands over the blanket once, twice, three times, taking comfort in the barrier it made between himself and everything else.

“Good. Now, what brings you in today?” Dr. Morte asked as he pulled his notepad open and looked with a cautiously expectant expression toward Castiel from his place in the other green armchair.

Castiel froze, unsure where to begin now that he was here in front of a counselor at last. “I—” he pulled at a loose thread on the blanket, then made himself stop. “I, uh— I came in because I—” he paused again.

Dr. Morte said nothing, he only waited patiently as Castiel fumbled a few more times in an attempt to
“I’m having trouble moving past something that happened a few months ago,” was what Castiel made himself settle on. “I thought I was getting better. I know I was, actually, but something happened last week that—that’s made me feel like all the progress I’ve made is…um, is gone.”

“I see,” Dr. Morte said with a nod of his head, looking as if it hadn’t been an incredibly vague thing that Castiel had just said. “Well, what happened initially and what happened last week, if you feel comfortable briefly describing both events.”

Castiel glanced down at the pattern on the blanket, tracing the yellow threading through the blue and green with the tip of his finger.

“How detailed of a description do you need?” he asked without looking back up.

“As detailed as you feel comfortable with so I can at least get a general idea,” Dr. Morte said.

“Someone, ah…” Castiel stopped again, debating internally if he should simply bite the bullet and make himself come forward with the explicit truth of the situation or if he should keep his depiction ambiguous. The thought of telling Dr. Morte he’d been raped made him want to vomit. Castiel opted for the latter, still fighting a vague feeling of nausea even as he deliberately skated over the details of his assault.

“Someone hurt me. A few months ago. It was. It was—bad. I saw that person again last weekend for the first time since it—since it happened. We ran into each other on campus.”

“Unexpectedly, then, you ran into this person?” Dr. Morte clarified.

Castiel nodded.

“And seeing them again made the negative feelings from what they did to you…resurface, as it were?”

Castiel nodded again.

“What were some of those feelings, if you think you can give me a short list?” Dr. Morte asked him.

“I was surprised. No, not surprised. I was…shocked. I couldn’t think. Like everything in my brain stopped. I was afraid. I…I hated myself,” Castiel said, his voice dropping to that of a whisper as he pulled at one of the loose threads on the blanket again. “And I…I don’t like myself much as it is, but since I got hurt it’s been worse. I feel like…anything could happen to me, around me. Like I don’t have control. Control is—is an illusion, I know that, but I feel…I feel I used to thrive off of knowing I could control myself. Always, I thought. I could at least control myself. When someone lost their temper I used to tell myself, ‘I would never do that’. It used to be true.”

Castiel thought of the tinkle of broken glass as his father threw one of his bottled ships into the trash. He thought of John Winchester and the way he’d attempted to destroy everything his oldest son cared about.

“I was starting to feel in control again, I think. Maybe not as much as I used to, but enough to get on with my life,” Castiel concluded.

“Since the encounter you don’t feel you have control anymore?” Dr. Morte asked.

Castiel shook his head. “I can’t trust myself to be okay when I need to be, not lately. I’m not…I’m
not stable. I feel like I did right after the—right after I got hurt. Now I’m always upset, even when I’m pretending I’m not, but since I saw D—since I saw them again I don’t feel like I can even pretend anymore. I don’t know why. This person hasn’t hurt me since. Seeing them shouldn’t—it shouldn’t make me feel this way.”

Castiel stopped as he noticed he was getting progressively louder as he spoke, and he sighed shakily as he dragged his hands over his face, exhaling into his palms.

“This is what I mean,” he said.

“There’s nothing wrong with being upset,” Dr. Morte said.

“I don’t want to be upset,” Castiel said, pulling his hands from his face. “I want to get over this and move on with my life.”

“That’s often easier said than done. When someone hurts you it can fundamentally affect how you view the world and yourself. That’s not a pleasant experience to have,” Dr. Morte responded. How he could sound so endlessly patient, Castiel didn’t know.

Castiel was quiet for a long time. His breath felt hot and stale in his lungs. It had been less than ten minutes and he already wanted to leave. He wanted to stand up and give the blanket back and forget he’d given therapy another unsuccessful attempt. He wanted Dean, wanted his arms around him and the silence of their bedroom. He wanted to be able to heal himself, but had no idea how.

Castiel abruptly felt like crying. He felt his mouth begin to quiver and covered his face with his hands again.

“Castiel?” Dr. Morte said.

Castiel moved his hands from his face again a few minutes later, once he no longer felt like he was about to burst into tears. When he spoke, his voice had become dull.

“I tried to talk about this in a group therapy session a few weeks ago. I couldn’t do it. I thought I was better off dealing with everything alone,” he said.

Dr. Morte nodded again, and this time the motion was slower and more thoughtful. He wrote a few things down on his notepad.

“So you’ve tried a form of therapy before and found it to be unhelpful, but now want to try again due to recent events?” He surmised.

“Yes.”

“Why do you feel the first attempt was unsuccessful?”

“I…I don’t know how to talk about it. I felt out of place. I was…well, I couldn’t—” Castiel stopped again, feeling warmth spread uncomfortably over his cheeks. In that moment he realized he was either going to have to tell Dr. Morte what had happened or leave.

“Does anything I say leave this room?” he whispered.

Dr. Morte shook his head. “Not unless I believe you are in imminent danger of hurting yourself or someone else.”

Castiel nodded, looking down at the blanket again. He tried to breathe in, but felt his breath catch in
his chest. He thought of Dean waiting outside in the cramped lobby for him, of how soon he would be with him again and how this room would be only a memory. Castiel breathed in again, and this time he was able to.

“I was raped at a frat house in January. The group I went to was for victims of sexual assault and I was the only…male person in it,” Castiel said at last. “I couldn’t make myself go back after the first time.”

Dr. Morte’s eyebrows furrowed for a brief moment before relaxing again, and he straightened in his chair before responding.

“First, I want to tell you that I am very, very sorry that happened to you,” Dr. Morte began. “And I want to say secondly that sexual assault can happen to anyone, any age or orientation or gender. I say that because you brought up that you were the only man in the group. Did you feel like you couldn’t voice your experiences with those of the women?” he asked.

Castiel shook his head, “It wasn’t anything that they said or did. They tried to make me comfortable, but I just felt…stupid.”

“Because you’re not a woman?” asked Dr. Morte.

Castiel shook his head. “No. I just…I felt weak. It…I let it happen.”

“Rape is never the survivor’s fault. You did not ‘let’ anything happen to you, it was done without your consent.”

“I don’t…I don’t know if I agree,” Castiel said.

Dr. Morte didn’t look surprised. “Many people don’t, initially, and mostly for the reasons you mentioned earlier. You want to feel in control, and telling yourself that you could have prevented what happened but somehow failed to makes you feel more in control than admitting that other people can be unpredictable and the world is a dangerous place in which controlling things is not always possible. But with time, you might change your perspective. I hope that you will. But to return to the earlier point: even though you felt unable to verbalize your experience with the group, that is something you would like to do here with me?”

Castiel nodded. “I want to get over this. I need my life back, and my...” He hesitated before resuming, for a moment wondering if Dr. Morte would think he had invited his assault if he admitted he wasn’t straight. “My boyfriend deserves a normal relationship.”

Dr. Morte nodded. “Your boyfriend, is he aware of what happened?”

“He was with me, um, just after. He knows.”

“Is he a supportive partner?”

Again, Castiel nodded. “Dean is... he’s always there for me. Things between us didn’t start out in the most ideal way.” Castiel briefly thought back to their ill-fated first kiss and the bleak weeks that had followed. “But since it happened, he’s helped me. I...I don’t intentionally tell him what I’m feeling very often, because I don’t like to worry him, but he can usually tell when I’m feeling...upset, and he’s so kind. I don’t deserve him.”

“Do you think he would want you to tell him how you feel more often, even if he probably already knows?” Dr. Morte asked.
Castiel was quiet for a moment. “I know he would,” he said at last. “But if he knew the truth, how awful I’ve been feeling since we ran into Dr—the person who assaulted me…I don’t know what would happen. I don’t want him to feel responsible for making me feel better when I don’t even know if I can feel better.”

“You can, Castiel,” Dr. Morte said seemingly reflexively before he continued. “However, while I think it’s always a good idea to have a solid internal foundation for healing that isn’t reliant on outside sources, I also think you should take the support that’s offered as long as it’s healthy and feels stable to you. If your partner supports you through your moments of fear and anxiety, there’s nothing wrong with that. In fact, that’s what most people strive for after something like this happens.”

“Dean doesn’t mind helping me. That’s how he is,” Castiel said, his voice heavy. “He’s a generous person. He likes to help the people he cares about.”

Dr. Morte tilted his head to the side, looking at Castiel closely. “Relationships are a partnership, and it seems you’re the one he’s chosen regardless of the imperfect situation. As long as you’re offering emotional reciprocity and doing your best to support him as well, there’s not a reason to think that help is something you don’t deserve from your own partner. Healing is much easier when one isn’t isolated.”

“You think I can?” Castiel asked without thinking. “Heal, I mean?”

Dr. Morte set his notepad down on the table beside him and looked intently at Castiel. “I know that you can. Humans are amazing creatures, and more resilient than you could ever imagine. And right now, Castiel, I think what you’re experiencing is something called retraumatization, when the trauma feels fresh to you because it’s been triggered again. Seeing the person who attacked you can be a very disturbing experience regardless of how much one has already healed, and from what you’ve told me it sounds like the initial assault didn’t happen that long ago. This, what you’re feeling now, is not indicative that your progress and healing have gone backwards. It means that you’re going to have to be gentle with yourself for now and let those wounds begin to close again. All hope is not lost, Castiel.”

Perhaps it was the way he said it. Perhaps it was because he had the credentials Castiel’s friends lacked. Perhaps it was both of those things combined, but Castiel believed him.

“How’d it go?” Dean asked as Castiel emerged into the lobby afterward. He was clearly trying to appear casual, but his brow was furrowed and he stepped forward to take Castiel’s hand as soon as they were standing close enough to one another for him to manage it smoothly. Castiel felt himself blush at the concern.

“He gave me a book on…well, you know,” Castiel said as he held out the book Dr. Morte had sent him off with, a novel-sized paperback with the title ‘Recovering from Trauma: The PTSD Patient’s Toolbox’. “He wants me to read a chapter on grounding as soon as I have time, and I’m seeing him again on Thursday.”

Dean’s eyebrows lifted in question.

“He wants to get another appointment in before finals gain too much momentum,” Castiel explained, and Dean nodded. They left shortly after, returning the enthusiastic parting wave of the purple-haired receptionist.
That evening, the sense of well-being Castiel had felt as he left his appointment with his new resource in tow had faded by the time he and Dean finished dinner and settled in to get some reading done before bed. Dean had the study guide for his literature class open in his lap and four novels of varying sizes stacked beside him on their bed, and Castiel had the book Dr. Morte had given him opened to the chapter he was supposed to have finished by their next session.

Castiel felt almost as if he was experiencing the withdrawal of his earlier optimism as a physical crash as he and Dean sat together. His muscles and head began to ache as he clenched and unclenched his hands, and he got up two or three times to drink a glass of water he didn’t need or to pointlessly stretch his limbs.

Though the most intense of the sense-memories seemed to be fading gradually as each day passed without another encounter with Drew, Castiel was still far from free of them; the moments of silence and relative stillness were when the feelings tended to flare up sick and dark inside him again, distracting and distressing. This moment in time was no exception, and Castiel had a progressively harder time sitting still as sweat gathered on his skin. He shivered, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Cas?”

“I need more water.”

The chapter of the book Dr. Morte had asked him to read was a chapter on ways to distract or distance oneself from dissociation and panic attacks, but what Castiel felt now wasn’t necessarily extreme enough to be classified as either; he simply felt wrong in his body, uncomfortable and unnatural. Beyond that, he’d been rereading the same line over and over for the last ten minutes, losing his place and struggling to find it again once he realized too late that he’d drifted into the recesses of his mind.

A few times, Dean reached over and ran a hand over Castiel’s shoulder or the inside of his wrist, but while the touches were comforting, they weren’t enough to ground Castiel. He bit the inside of his lip to stop himself from chasing the contact, reminding himself that in less than two hours it would be time for bed and he and Dean would crawl under the covers together and Castiel would be able to hide himself in the warmth and security they made of their bed. He only had to force himself through a little more discomfort. But Castiel’s body didn’t know this, and he got up a few minutes after the thought crossed his mind, planning on going back to the kitchen for yet another glass of water.

Dean looked over at Castiel from the bed as he stood.

“Cas?” he asked. “Are you…feeling bad?”

Castiel opened his mouth to tell Dean he was fine for the second time before he realized that it was the last thing he wanted to do. He was exhausted, and had been for days.

He nodded wordlessly, feeling his shoulders slump with something like relief as Dean immediately gestured for Castiel to come sit down beside him again, moving a few of his books over to the edge of the bed to clear a space.

“What’s wrong?” Dean asked Castiel once they were sitting together. His full lower lip was stained with pen ink from when he’d sucked the tip into his mouth without noticing, and his green eyes were closely focused on Castiel.
“I…” Castiel started. “I’m feeling…” he gestured vaguely at his own body. “What I told you about yesterday. The physical feelings are…” Castiel shook his head, crossing and uncrossing his arms as he struggled to describe what he meant. “—I can’t think past them right now. Can I…do you think we could lie down? Just for a few minutes? I’m sorry, I know you’re busy, I just—”

“It’s fine, Cas. Let’s lie down,” Dean said, delicately cutting off what was on its way to becoming a winding apology.

He moved all of their things to the floor and then lay down on the far side of the bed, holding his arms open. Castiel went to him with an audible exhale, pressing his cheek against Dean’s chest as he closed his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said into Dean’s worn Cowboy’s t-shirt. “I—I know I’m not there, I know he’s not touching me, I know I’m fine, I don’t know why I keep—”

“It’s okay,” Dean murmured. “Just try and relax a little if you can. When you’re feeling better we’ll go back to studying.”

Dean rubbed his hands over Castiel’s back and the contours of his sides, and then folded Castiel’s head under his chin, anchoring him to that real, tangible moment.

Castiel wrapped a hand around Dean’s shoulder, trying not to squeeze too tightly as he clung to his warmth.

He didn’t notice he was shaking until Dean began to hum a song he didn’t recognize, pulling Castiel closer until the low timbre of his voice was all Castiel could hear, until the vibration of it hummed through Castiel’s veins, chasing out the memories.

As he lay there, Castiel was too tired to worry about whether he was alienating Dean or if he was going to regret being so forthcoming in the morning. He only breathed in and out, listening to Dean until, slowly but inexorably, he felt himself begin to calm.

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When Charlie texted Castiel the next day he wasn’t expecting it, and for a solid ten minutes he debated whether not he was feeling well enough to go out with her for a ‘coffee break’.

“I’m desperate to get out of the studio. What do u say?”

Eventually, though, Castiel decided he owed it to his friend to meet her, thinking with guilt of how much he’d visibly affected Charlie when he paused to dwell on the memory. He didn’t want her to think he wasn’t thankful for how she’d continued to maintain their friendship.

Around four in the evening Castiel bid Dean goodbye with a quick kiss on the cheek after telling him where he was going, saying he would likely be back in a couple of hours.

“Tell Charlie I said hi,” Dean called as Castiel let himself out.

Castiel drove his damaged Nissan out to the little café near the grocery store he’d met Charlie and Dean at only a few months before, unsurprised to find that virtually nothing had changed since his last visit as he parked and made his way toward the entrance.

Castiel was tired and distracted even though he thought his sleep had been better than usual the night before, and he hoped the smile that he aimed in Charlie’s direction looked genuine as he entered the
café and immediately spotted his friend sitting in a corner booth.

“Hey, you,” Charlie greeted him with a grin as Castiel took the empty seat across from her. She was wearing a faded ‘All Hail the Queen’ shirt with Galadriel’s face emblazoned across the front and had a few splotches of blue and red paint stuck to the side of her neck. The worn normalcy of these small details were oddly calming to Castiel as he settled into the booth, realizing after only a few seconds that he likely wasn’t going to be able to get more comfortable than he already was.

“No offense, but you look like you could use this.” Charlie slid a large cup of coffee across the table to him.

Castiel wondered how tired he looked that two of his friends had taken it upon themselves to force coffee on him, but discarded the thought as he pulled the cup close to his chest. He lowered his face over the plastic white cap to inhale its warmth. When he looked back up Charlie was gazing at him without much of an expression on her face, her eyes weary. Castiel could tell her last set of finals was draining her.

“How much more do you have to do before you’re finished?” he asked.

Charlie gave a long-suffering sigh, knowing what he was referencing without the need for specifics. “One more take-home exam and my capstone for Harvelle.”

Castiel winced; even though capstones for art majors were less rigorous than those of other focuses, they still involved creating a professional portfolio and a cohesive artist’s statement. Harvelle wasn’t known for her high standards because she simply accepted anything handed to her.

“Did you already take all your pictures?” he asked sympathetically.

Charlie nodded. “Yeah. I got those done first and they look great, I’m just…” She paused for a moment, self-conscious. “I’m worried my artist’s statement isn’t gonna cut it.”

Castiel shook his head almost involuntarily, speaking immediately. “Don’t worry about that, Charlie. Your series is original and beautiful. Harvelle can’t wait to pass you.”

What he’d said was true, and everyone seemed to know it except Charlie herself. Though Professor Harvelle did her best to appear impartial where her students were concerned, it was still obvious that she was impressed by Charlie’s paintings and beyond that, that she was almost as fond of Charlie as she was of Dean and Jo.

“You think?” Charlie asked.

Castiel nodded again, and Charlie smiled, reaching out to grab his hand where it was resting palm-down on the table before seemingly catching herself mid-movement. She abruptly withdrew, frowning.

“I’m sorry,” she said with a little shake of her head. “I should’ve asked if I could touch you.”

Without conscious thought Castiel shook his head even as part of him wished that she had, too.

“It’s—it’s fine, Charlie,” he said. “You don’t need to second-guess—”

“Don’t I?” Charlie interrupted. “C’mon, Cas. Since we first met you haven’t liked people getting close. I always knew that, too, but I—I think I thought ignoring it was…good for you. Like I was helping you socialize. Like that was something I had a right to do.” Charlie’s words were flat, as if saying them that way was meant to minimize their emotional impact.
“You knew?” Castiel asked with genuine surprise. He had always assumed that his unease with others touching him had been something he managed to keep hidden. Now, he wondered if it had always been obvious how awkward he was.

Charlie nodded. “Listen, Cas, I’ve been wrong and I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what I just did, I’m sorry for what I said about Meg, and I’m sorry for how clueless I am. I haven’t been a good friend, and I would’ve realized what I was walking into last week if I’d just paid attention the last few months.”

Castiel felt stunned into silence, staring at a blue stain in the shape of a teardrop near Charlie’s pale collarbone without actually seeing it. He wasn’t sure what caused him more disquiet, the fact that every time Charlie had violated his personal space it had been with intent, or that she now thought she had to apologize for it. He blinked and let go of his coffee cup, suddenly uncertain.

It wasn’t Charlie’s job to observe and coddle him, she had her own life and her own problems, and he didn’t feel it was his friend’s responsibility to understand or validate his laundry list of issues. Maybe she was right about helping him socialize. It was true that the first few times she’d touched him he’d been uncomfortable, but after he’d felt less so, hadn’t he? Castiel thought he might have. But she had—she had known it made him uncomfortable and done it anyway. Why—why had she done that? It was to help him, though, she’d said. Didn’t that absolve her of the need to apologize? Additionally, as fond as Castiel was of Meg, he was also aware that she could be incredibly abrasive. He didn’t blame Charlie for not leaping at the chance to heap her with praise when Meg had made little to no effort to ingratiate herself.

“Charlie,” he said after a few minutes had passed. “You—you don’t need to feel bad about touching me,” he told her. “I don’t—”

He cut himself off as he realized what he was about to say, but Charlie seemed to hear it all the same.

“I don’t deserve it.”

Charlie shook her head, biting her lip as she looked away, across the café to the other side where the exit was.

For a few minutes they sat there without speaking. Castiel wished he knew what to say to make the situation go away, but he didn’t. He didn’t know if he even wanted to. Had she been right to do what she’d done, or did it simply hurt too much to admit that she hadn’t?

When Charlie split the quiet between them she said, “You like to help and go along with what your friends want as long as it makes them happy. You listen when people talk and you don’t judge. You spent hours with me in the hospital when Dean got his surgery, and I saw how much you did for him when he was getting better. You don’t withhold your friendship because of someone’s reputation. You didn’t shit on Gilda for having a problem, and you didn’t lie and tell me you thought she was good for me when she wasn’t, either. You tell people their work is good when they don’t see it and I can tell you do your fucking best to support us even when you’re feeling awful. Cas, you’re kind. You’re sweet. You’re trying to tell me what I did was okay when it wasn’t just ’cause you care about me. But where’s that kindness when it comes to you?”

Castiel didn’t have an answer. Instead of trying to find one, he held out his hand so Charlie could take it across the table as they drank the rest of their coffee. Charlie’s hand was damp with sweat, but she didn’t let go until they parted ways ten minutes later.

That night Castiel got a text from Anna.
“Gabriel said he’s coming back this summer. We’re going to talk with the family. It’s time.”

Castiel stared at the message for a long while.

When he responded, he said only, “Tell me when, and I’ll come home.”

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Wednesday was the last day of class for the semester, and the general mood on campus was one of mixed exuberance and dread as summer drew ever nearer and so did the all-nighters, dependence on coffee and illicit Ritalin purchases, and general exhaustion that permeated campus until every test had been taken and every project finished and turned in.

As relieved as Castiel was to have the end of the academic year in sight at last, he could also feel the anxiety and self-doubt he’d become so accustomed to gradually ratcheting up at the prospect of finals and testing week, which began less than a week later the following Monday. He’d caught up considerably in all of his classes since the assault and felt he was mostly back on track regarding the material he knew he was likely to be tested on. All the same, though, he couldn’t help but worry. That his own struggles might jeopardize the academic career he’d worked so hard on frightened him.

Dean, for his part, seemed to be in good spirits as the day wore on, though. His usually sparse text messages were adorned with emoji’s and hearts and his responses to Castiel were far more frequent. As mystified as Castiel was by Dean’s elevated mood, he was also glad his boyfriend apparently wasn’t feeling the same misgivings that Castiel himself was.

As they made their way to the Impala in the student parking lot to drive home later that day, Dean pulled Castiel close and kissed the tip of his nose, cupping his cheek with a gentle hand. Castiel let out a burst of laughter in his surprise, laying his hand over Dean’s for a moment before they parted and clambered into the car.

“Happy?” Castiel asked as Dean turned the car on and backed out of the parking lot.

Dean smiled over at Castiel, but they were almost to Bobby’s when he actually answered.

“It’s gonna be summer soon, and I’m spending it with you.”

An hour or so later, as Dean made dinner at the old stove and Sam studied at the table across from Castiel, Castiel decided to take a brief break from his printmaking review (which Dean insisted he’d gotten an offensively early start on considering most of the questions were process-oriented) to retrieve Anna’s book from where he’d been keeping it beneath his and Dean’s bed. He’d been waiting for a good time to read more of the story, and the calm tranquility of the Singer’s dining room felt as solid an opportunity as any. Castiel brought the book back to his seat at the table and opened it to the spot he’d left off the last time he’d been able to read it, which was only about one fourth of the way through.

Most of the story and characters were as Castiel remembered he and his sister brainstorming and writing together as pre-teens: Temil was short in stature and timid, whereas Othras was outgoing and big-boned, and they’d met completely by chance as their neighboring cities were invaded and occupied by the hostile forces of a corrupt and far-reaching empire. Temil had been a priestess of the moon and Othras a warrior-in-training. While on the surface the two characters were as different as it was possible for two people to be, desperation and need had bound them together, and a vision Temil had as they grew to be friends in captivity prompted them to sneak out of the city in a
dangerous attempt to confront the queen of the east. These details were still the same, as were the bones of the story, but what had started as a piece of fiction Anna and Castiel made up as homeschooled children to escape the isolated drudgery of their lives had been transformed into a work of unique high-fantasy. It was immersive and comprehensive, and without being conscious of it Castiel found himself eagerly drinking it in, turning its pages ever more rapidly as he became engrossed in the drama and character development of the two protagonists.

He knew vaguely that Sam and Dean were talking to one another and that Dean came to the table to help Sam study at one point, but that was the extent of his awareness as he read Anna’s book. When a bowl of vegetable soup was placed before him Castiel didn’t even abandon the book then, instead mechanically making his way through his dinner while continuing to read. Temil and Othras were forming their plan to infiltrate the capital and growing closer every paragraph, and though the stakes of their mission were high and death almost a guarantee, Castiel found himself holding out hope that they made it out alive and together and mostly unscathed even as the two planned on sacrificing themselves to accomplish their goals.

Castiel was only roused from the trance he’d fallen into when Dean gently shook his shoulders a little while later in a dining room that had become dark and empty.

“Good book?” Dean said to him with a half-smile as Castiel blinked a few times and rubbed at his eyes, sore now from how closely he’d been focusing on the small print.

“You kinda zoned out,” Dean remarked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you do that besides when you’re painting.”

“I guess I did,” Castiel said with mounting surprise as the amount of time he’d spent reading became more and more obvious. The sun had set, and outside the pale light of the moon and stars was falling softly through the nearby window. Castiel could hear the faded chirping of crickets and the buzz of cicadas. He truly hadn’t noticed how long he’d been sitting curled up at the table with the book, and as he’d read Castiel hadn’t been focused on the sense-memories that still crept their way under his skin or the specter of his upcoming tests or the self-hatred he struggled with every other minute of his life; Castiel had been focused on Temil and Othras.

“Maybe you should try and read more often, give yourself a break. What kind of books do you like?” Dean asked.

“I guess…things like this,” Castiel said.

As children, Anna had been the one more invested in constructing the backbone of Temil and Othras’ stories while Castiel had made suggestions and sketched the characters in various scenarios at his sister’s behest. Now, however, Castiel wondered if he might find the same enjoyment that Anna had in the fantasy books hidden in the low shelves of her closet.

Castiel had spent most of his life being intensely visually-focused, mostly enjoying movies and TV shows that employed imaginative special effects work and colorful scenery, and much of his free reading had been almost entirely devoted to art, its makers and meaning, or poetry anthologies. He’d enjoyed the Harry Potter movies and, due to Charlie’s enthusiasm, the Lord of the Rings movies, but now he considered that the books themselves might be even more captivating.

As if divining his thoughts, Dean took Castiel’s hands and pulled him up from the chair, leaning forward to press a kiss to his cheek, his lips lingering on Castiel’s skin as he hugged him, his breath warm and his arms solid.

“There’s way more to read after this one, y’know. Sam can probably give you a list. He loves
fantasy, it’s why he and Charlie get along. He’s got a whole shelf of books like that.” Dean’s breath ruffled the tips of Castiel’s hair.

Castiel closed his eyes and let Dean hold him for a few moments more, feeling a lightness of being he hadn’t experienced in weeks.

“Hon?” Dean asked. Castiel realized he hadn’t answered, and shook his head apologetically as he pulled away enough to meet Dean’s eyes.

“Yes, sorry. I—I think I feel…better.”

It felt strange to say, but it was true in that moment.

The smile that graced Dean’s face was blinding in its sincerity.

“You do?” he asked, his eyes no longer tired.

“I do,” Castiel said. “I think you’re right. It…gave me a break.”

Dean hugged Castiel tightly, bending his head to press his face against Castiel’s neck.

“Good,” he said into the skin there. “Good.”

When Dean released him, he was still smiling, and Castiel smiled in turn, laughing at the absurdity of their situation as Dean leaned in to kiss his nose the way he had the day before.

“You deserve it,” Dean said.

As if in slow motion Castiel felt himself freeze at the words, the levity he’d felt bursting and dissipating like the delicate bubble he’d known it to be.

He turned away, gathering the book and carefully extricating himself from Dean’s arms.

“I—” he started, and then stopped. Dean’s face fell.

“Let’s go to bed,” Castiel said when his voice had returned.

Dean followed Castiel wordlessly down the hall, the weight of his disappointment almost too much for Castiel to bear.

***

Thursday was both the first day without classes to go to and the day of Castiel’s second appointment with Dr. Morte.

“You sure you don’t want me to come with you to this one, too?” Dean asked as Castiel pulled a shirt on and then slipped into his oldest, softest cardigan. “I don’t mind, y’know.”

“You need to study,” Castiel said as he bent to kiss the corner of Dean’s mouth where he sat on the bed surrounded by test review pamphlets. “I’ll be fine by myself.”

If Dean could tell that Castiel was attempting to convince himself the words were true more than he was Dean, he didn’t say so. He just nodded and squeezed Castiel’s hand.

“Okay.”
“I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Bye, baby.”

The first thing Dr. Morte asked Castiel when he entered the brightly-colored room and chose to sit in the same armchair was if he wanted the blanket again. Castiel took him up on his offer for a second time, taking his shoes off this time and pulling his legs up onto the chair before wrapping his lower half in the throw.

The counselor looked much the same as he had the first time they met, only his shirt style and the date setting the sessions apart.

“How have you been feeling since our last meeting?” Dr. Morte asked after Castiel was as settled as he was going to be and they’d gotten a few rote bits of small talk out of the way.

Castiel thought for a moment before answering. Even though it had only been a couple of days since their intake session, he didn’t want to simply say that he felt the same and leave it at that when he didn’t think it was the truth. While there hadn’t been a huge improvement in his situation, he believed there’d been one all the same.

“I’ve been feeling…well…not as bad, actually. I think, at least,” Castiel responded carefully.

“Actually?” Dr. Morte asked with a small smile as he jotted something down in his notebook.

Castiel shrugged. “I guess I didn’t think anything would change at all,” he said. “But I’ve been…trying to let Dean help me more. I also did some reading for the first time in a while that wasn’t for school, and it…made me feel less focused on the negative, I guess.”

“Those are both great things. So your partner has continued to be supportive?” Dr. Morte asked. He sounded genuinely happy with Castiel’s lukewarm response.

Castiel nodded. “Yes, he has been. Things don’t feel like they’ve changed between us since I’ve been more open.”

“Good, that’s great. Now, I meant to ask the last time we met and I forgot, but is your partner the only person in your life who knows what happened? Do you have a support network?” Dr. Morte asked.

Castiel was quiet again, and then said, “My close friends and my sister know, and they’re…they’re being very kind.”

When Castiel didn’t elaborate, Dr. Morte tilted his head to the side, his brow furrowed. “Do you dislike that they’re kind, or is that part of what’s making you feel better?”

Castiel shook his head. “Of course I don’t dislike it. Well, I—I don’t know. I guess I don’t.”

“You don’t sound terribly convinced,” Dr. Morte commented.

“I just…I don’t see why they need to be. Kind to me, I mean. I want to be comfortable with it, but I…I guess I’m not.” Castiel wrapped his arms around himself, feeling awkward.

“You don’t think you deserve kindness from your friends the same way you deserve it from your partner?” Dr. Morte asked.

Castiel looked down at his lap, knowing already what sort of reaction the counselor was going to
have to his next statement.

“I don’t think I deserve anything from anyone, friend or not. It was my own dumb mistake. Do you coddle people who drink and drive and wreck their cars? No. Because they should’ve known better.”

Dr. Morte was quiet for a long time, the end of his pen pressed to his mouth as he considered his reply.

“People who drink and drive knowingly put the lives of others in danger. They know the risks and take them anyway because they want to drink more than they want others to be safe. Did you know there was a strong chance you’d be raped if you spent time with your attacker?”

The sharpness of the word ‘rape’ made Castiel flinch and turn away. He looked over at a flower painted on the far wall, picking at the edges of his nails even as he heard in the back of his mind the familiar reprimand of Charlie or Meg telling him to stop hurting himself. He felt his fingers begin to bleed.

Again, Dr. Morte waited quietly for Castiel to speak, not commenting on the self-destructive behavior or how long it took for Castiel to respond.

“I thought Dr—I thought he was my friend,” Castiel said as he brought his fingers to his mouth to worry at the cuts he’d just opened. “I thought he just wanted to be my friend. He seemed like he… cared about me, or at least like he liked hanging out with me. But I was wrong. I didn’t even know what was happening until I couldn’t move. Then it was too late.”

It was the first time Castiel had revealed Drew’s gender. He saw Dr. Morte nod and write something down as he did. “So, it took you by surprise because he hadn’t previously indicated an interest in you?”

Again Castiel was quiet, the familiar feeling of shame surging up his throat, thick and sour. He moved his hand back down to his lap as he fought the urge to gag, tasting the copper of blood and wishing he had a glass of water.

“Yes. Suddenly I just could—” Castiel’s voice cracked, and he stopped to clear his throat before continuing. “I couldn’t move. I don’t think I even said anything to him, maybe I did. I don’t remember. I don’t think I told him no, though,” Castiel said, voicing one of the many thoughts that had eaten at him since Drew’s reappearance. “I think I just cried. Or maybe I didn’t even do that. The—the drugs he gave me made me sick, I can’t remember it that well.”

I gave you a good time.

“I can’t remember all of it,” Castiel said again, his voice shaking. “Just—that it hurt.”

Dr. Morte shook his head. “Castiel, being unable to physically stop an assault or to verbalize your rejection does not mean it was consensual. You understand this, don’t you?”

Castiel must have hesitated for too long, because Dr. Morte leaned forward in his chair. “Castiel, when you first came in you said you went to a sexual assault survivor’s meeting, didn’t you?”

Castiel nodded.

“That indicates you knew what was done was not consensual, and the way you’re sitting in front of me describing what happened also indicates it wasn’t consensual.”
Castiel shook his head. “I went to the meeting because a friend asked me to go and I thought I—I thought—Look, I don’t know how I feel about it sometimes. It…what he did to me, it ruined me. He ruined me, but I know I didn’t do enough to stop it. Nothing my friends say has any meaning when they don’t know what happened. They weren’t there in the room with me, they didn’t see how I just lay there and—”

Castiel stopped himself before he could go further, covering his face with his hands and exhaling shakily. He could feel his legs trembling under the blanket. Any good humor he’d felt from his day spent at the house with Dean was gone, replaced with the same god-awful churning in his guts that always seemed to occur when he voiced his darkest thoughts.

“From everything you’ve said to me, I think it’s extremely clear the act was not consensual, Castiel, and that the kindness of your friends is in order,” Dr. Morte said gently. “Not knowing there are risks and being badly hurt by someone else is not the same as knowing there are risks and taking them to the detriment of others. I cannot in good faith allow you to compare yourself to a drunk driver as if your experiences are similar.”

“I was naïve,” Castiel said in a brittle voice, letting his hands fall back into his lap. “I trusted him.”

“Had he given you any reason not to?” Dr. Morte asked.

From the patient tone and rhythm of his voice it was clear that Dr. Morte was aware he and Castiel had just discussed the same topic only minutes before but was willing to delve into it as often as he needed to until he got the desired outcome.

“Had he ever indicated through words or behavior that he wanted to have a sexual relationship with you, Castiel?” Dr. Morte asked when Castiel didn’t answer.

Castiel thought harder this time than he had the first, forcing himself to consciously sift through his memories of Drew rather than blurting out the first self-deprecating response that came to his mind. But as he had before, Castiel still found nothing in the past that indicated there had been more than casual friendliness between himself and Drew, the occasional hug and Meg’s teasing aside.

“No, I don’t…I don’t think so.”

“Then why compare yourself to a criminal?”

Castiel didn’t know what to say. He felt stupid, an emotion he’d been growing accustomed to lately. He knew what he was supposed to say, he knew the color of the corner that Dr. Morte had so neatly and easily painted him into, but it felt like a lie inside him, as if he’d somehow fooled the man in front of him even though he knew he’d been as truthful as he was capable of being.

Dr. Moore continued, taking Castiel’s silence as the relative acceptance that it was, “And why think that you don’t deserve compassion for simply not knowing?”

“I’m supposed to know things,” Castiel said, the answer coming to him without conscious effort, a knowledge that came to him as easily as breathing.

What’s the point of your schooling if you don’t retain any of the knowledge, Castiel? I don’t spend hours giving you lessons so you can forget them as soon as you go outside to play.

“Why is it your job to know things?” Dr. Morte was asking. “What kinds of things are you supposed to know? Are you supposed to know them from birth or is it okay to learn them as you go along?”

“You don’t…you don’t know what I mean,” Castiel said even as he began to question his own
response. “My family, they—it was the one thing I needed to be able to do, and I thought I was good at it. I...I was good at it.”

“But does not knowing make you undeserving of compassion?” Dr. Morte asked.

“If you asked my parents, they would tell you yes,” Castiel said, the response again an almost involuntary regurgitation.

“Even in this instance?”

Fool me once, shame on me.

There are a hundred excuses for everything that happens in this world, Castiel, but none of them are anything but that, excuses.

Fool me once, shame on me, shame on me, shame on—

“Especially in this instance.”

Castiel began to cry without realizing he’d done so, looking with confusion at the drops of water appearing on the backs of his hands as Dr. Morte set a box of Kleenex from the nearby table on the blanket covering his knees.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel muttered, holding the tissue box dumbly in his lap.

“Don’t be sorry. If you want to cry, you should allow yourself to.”

“I hate crying,” Castiel said.

“Crying releases oxytocin and endorphins. It can physically make you feel better,” Dr. Morte informed him. “There’s nothing wrong with crying when you’re upset or something affects you. It can help get you through those feelings.”

“I...didn’t know that,” Castiel said as his tears began to subside and he finally took a tissue from the box, wiping his eyes and blowing his nose.

“You mentioned your family. I don’t know your history, and I suspect that’s a topic we should save for another day, but you seem to have a hard time feeling compassion for yourself and validating your own experiences because of something you were raised believing,” Dr. Morte said once Castiel had calmed a few minutes later.

Castiel blinked slowly. “I guess so.”

“If your partner did every single thing that you did and he was assaulted the same way you were, would you accuse him of being complicit in his own trauma?”

Castiel’s response was immediate, the barest thought of Dean experiencing what he had filling him with abject misery. “Of course I wouldn’t. I...I would just want to make sure he knew how much I loved him. I would be there for him and help him however I could. I would do whatever he needed me to do.”

Dr. Morte nodded, “See how easily that came to you? If you can so instantly feel that for your boyfriend and understand that he wouldn’t have been to blame, why can you not do so for yourself?”

“You’re not the first person to tell me that this week,” Castiel said. “Everyone wants to tell me what I deserve.”
“Because they care about you.”

“I know they do,” Castiel said quietly. “I just…don’t.”

“At the risk of sounding trite, loving yourself is important. It is at every major point in your life, but especially during a recovery process like the one you’re going through. Part of processing and healing from trauma is understanding, not just intellectually, but **emotionally**, that you did **not** deserve what happened but that it happened all the same,” Dr. Morte said. “And you need to try to forgive yourself.”

Castiel had no idea how to even begin feeling compassion for himself the way he did for his friends or for Dean.

As if sensing his confusion, Dr. Morte smiled sympathetically. “There’s a chapter about midway through your book that I want you to read. I think you might find it more useful than the last one I had you look at.”

After the session ended, Castiel went to the studio and spent an hour or so working on his project, finally starting on the second-to-last portion of the process. He began to carefully place the small squares of painted canvas on the long, stretched lines of thread he’d glued down on the frame for reference on Monday, making a randomized checkerboard pattern with his own re-purposed art.

However, though he wanted to get more done that evening, Castiel found he hadn’t made much progress before he felt the need to go home. His skull felt overcrowded, too many concepts and ideas whirling through it to parse any of them out and make sense of his own feelings regarding them. His session with Dr. Morte had shaken him far more than he’d realized.

*I wish you would take more responsibility for your actions, Castiel. This textbook is rudimentary and you should have no problems understanding it.*

Castiel wanted nothing more than to smell the familiar scent of Dean’s hair and warm skin as he held him. He wanted to feel safe the way he always did around Dean. He wanted to stop reliving every traumatic and upsetting thing that had ever happened to him and fucking **sleep**.

When Castiel arrived back at Bobby’s less than twenty minutes later he found Dean fast asleep in their bed, his plaid oversherit and jeans still on and one of his books open beside him.

“Dean,” Castiel said as he reached for Dean’s shoulder, giving it a careful shake.

When Dean woke up it wasn’t all at once, but gradually. He smiled sleepily up at Castiel as he opened his eyes, reaching out to touch his cheek.

“You been crying?” Dean asked as his eyes grew clearer and his smile faded. He traced the edges of Castiel’s eyes, his fingers gentle.

Instead of answering him, Castiel bent his head and kissed Dean’s cheek, crawling into bed with him.

“I need to rest,” he murmured into Dean’s shoulder as he curled in close and closed his eyes. “Just let me rest a while.”
Dean didn’t ask how the session had gone even though it was clear he wanted to. He simply did as Castiel had asked and let him fall asleep there, pressed flush against Dean’s side.

***

Early on Friday (around four-thirty in the morning) Castiel slid out of his and Dean’s bed as quietly as he could, not wanting to wake Dean.

With the book Dr. Morte had given him tucked under one arm, Castiel shrugged a sweater on over his undershirt and made his way to the kitchen. He found with muted surprise that he was not alone in the early hour; Bobby was sitting at the dining room table with a plate of toast and a large, steaming thermos of coffee reading yesterday’s paper. The kitchen smelled of rich, black coffee grounds and margarine, and the scents as well as the familiar sight of Bobby and his newspaper made Castiel feel incrementally more awake as he crossed the room to pour his own cup from the pot.

“Morning,” Bobby said gruffly, speaking into his coffee.

“Good morning,” Castiel responded as he breathed in the curls of steam where they rose from his cup.

“ Couldn’t sleep?” Bobby asked. Usually Dean and Castiel woke up around six or seven, and they weren’t often separated in the mornings.

“Unfortunately,” Castiel exhaled. “Thought I might at least get some reading done before Dean wakes up,” he said as he sat down at the table across from Bobby with his coffee and book.

“It used Dean in here way too early, gettin’ under my feet and talkin’ about what Sam needs and what he’s gotta get from the store after school,” Bobby said with a tired laugh as he took another sip of coffee. “Boy’s never been good at relaxin’. Not even when he was little.”

Castiel looked at Bobby over his mug. “I wish I’d known him when he was young. Both he and Sam.”

“You didn’t miss much,” Bobby said. “Things’ve been better since Dean met you.”

Castiel was surprised.

“What?” he asked.

Bobby shrugged a shoulder, his eyes still on whatever story he was skimming. “He acts more like a person now, less like a single parent.”

Castiel was quiet for a while. Then, “I’m glad that’s changed, but I don’t think it was my doing.”

Bobby snorted, but not rudely. Castiel waited for him to respond, but it soon became clear he wasn’t going to add anything more.

After taking a few sips of his coffee and generally trying to will himself into feeling more awake, Castiel opened his book to the chapter Dr. Morte had told him to read. Its title was *Irrational Feelings of Guilt and Responsibility.*

After having read only a few pages Castiel could easily see what it was Dr. Morte had wanted him to take from the chapter, having indirectly stated a few of its points already during their session. There was an exercise midway through that instructed Castiel to ‘think of how you would feel about and
treat someone else going through the same thing’ when he began to feel complicit in his trauma.
‘Validate and love yourself the way you would a friend, family member, or person you admire if they were going through what you are. You deserve love and compassion as much as they would.’

While Castiel wasn’t sure it would be an effective method for helping with his particular issues, he admitted that it seemed to make sense in theory. Despite his reservations, he resolved to try and practice the exercise the next time he found himself struggling with intense negative feelings.

By the time Castiel finished the chapter Bobby was standing up to leave the kitchen and head back to his office, and it was a few minutes past five. The sky outside was still dark and cloudy, however, and it almost appeared no time had passed since Castiel climbed out of bed.

When Dean shuffled into the room ten minutes later, his steps heavy and his hands loose by his sides, Castiel had started reading on past the initial assignment, curious what the other chapters of the book contained. He turned to look at Dean as he ambled over, holding out a hand for Dean to take.

Dean bypassed the offering to wrap his arms around Castiel’s shoulders, pressing a pink, pillow-creased cheek to the top of Castiel’s head.

“Hey,” he said, his voice coarse with sleep. His body was warm against Castiel’s. “You okay?”

Castiel nodded. “I couldn’t sleep, and I had some reading to do anyway.”

Dean bent to press a kiss to Castiel’s cheek, and he turned his face to make it easier, closing his eyes at the gentle weight of Dean’s lips on his skin.

“It feels weird wakin’ up without you, now.” Dean laughed, but it was without humor. Castiel set his book down.

“Did you have another dream?” he asked.

Dean straightened and looked away. “Weird night.”

Castiel stood and wrapped his arms around Dean’s shoulders, having to stand on his toes to do so comfortably. Dean’s blonde lashes were soft on his freckled cheeks in the dark of the early morning.

“Mine, too,” Castiel said into Dean’s ear.

Dean pressed his face to Castiel’s shoulder, breathing out slowly as he relaxed in Castiel’s arms.

The same day, Dean drove himself and Castiel to campus at around two in the afternoon to work on their respective final projects in the painting studio. Fueled by caffeine and no small amount of anxiety, both of their sessions were relatively productive, and just before six in the evening they partially cleaned up their cubby spaces and left the Fine Arts Building, intent on returning to Bobby’s to grab some dinner before coming back for a few more hours of work.

On the way back to the Impala, however, Dean and Castiel crossed paths with none other than Arnold. He was alone where he walked down the sidewalk, and he looked busy. His arms were filled with books and a sweating water bottle, but he smiled and greeted the two of them all the same when he looked up and spotted them.

“Hey, babes!”
Arnold leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to both Dean and Castiel’s cheeks, his water bottle swiveling precariously in the crook of his elbow as he moved. He smelled like coffee, Axe deodorant, and sugary body spray, and his short hair was messy and his shirt collar rumpled. Castiel imagined he and Dean looked about the same, both of them also feeling the mounting pressure of finals.

“Hey, Arn,” Dean said with a smile.

“How’s it going?” Arnold asked, the question directed toward both of them.

“Ready for the semester to be over,” Dean responded, making Arnold burst into good-natured laughter.

“Oh, preaching to the choir. Why do I always look forward to this part of the year when I also hate it?” Arnold rolled his eyes.

“Always seems worth it before summer’s actually in sight, huh?” Dean said ruefully, making Arnold laugh again.

“Every time.”

Castiel pulled at the sleeve of his t-shirt, growing gradually uncomfortable in the heat. He wondered briefly if he should have tried to get Dean to let them work a little longer before breaking. They only had a week and a couple of days to complete their projects, and Castiel still needed to—

“How about you, honey?” Arnold was asking.

The words made Castiel blink, and he realized that Arnold was speaking to him.

“I—I’m sorry, what?” Castiel asked, unsure if Arnold had said more and he hadn’t heard or if he’d just asked the one question.

“How are you doing?” Arnold repeated. He glanced over at Dean, who Castiel saw now looked slightly concerned. Castiel shook his head and forced a smile, looking at Arnold and meeting his friendly brown eyes.

“I’m…I’m fine. Obviously a little distracted.”

Arnold laughed with something that looked like relief and immediately began commiserating with Castiel and describing all that he had to get done before the following week. As he tried and mostly failed to listen, Castiel found himself thinking of his and Balthazar’s conversation and what his roommate’s parting words had been.

You want to know more, ask the other frats.

Would Arnold have any information about Drew or KA house and its history? Would he even know who Drew was beyond a passing recognition? Or, worst of all, would he know exactly what Castiel was referencing and choose to protect the other fraternity and brush Castiel aside? Arnold had never struck Castiel as a dishonest person, but he also knew how seriously many fraternity and sorority members took their organizations and their reputations.

Not knowing what would happen and for the second or third time in his life deciding to risk it anyway, Castiel spoke again, interrupting Arnold without meaning to in his haste to say what he needed to before he lost his fleeting nerve.
“Can I talk to you about something, Arnold? Please, it’s important,” he said.

Arnold looked surprised by the intensity of the inquiry, but he nodded readily. “Sure, yeah. We can talk. You guys want to come back to the house with me?”

Castiel nodded, and though Dean gave him a questioning glance, he did nothing to deter him and answered Arnold in kind.

The two of them then headed back the way they’d just come, trailing behind Arnold’s brisk gait.

As they drew near Frat Row and the line of storied brick buildings bedecked with various colored banners and wrought-iron Greek letters, Castiel felt his heart begin to race. Even simply being in the general vicinity of KA house made him feel uneasy, like the bottom had fallen out of his stomach. But he made himself move forward on legs that felt increasingly unsteady, reminding himself that he would only be here for as long as it took to talk to Arnold about Drew.

As if he knew, beside him Dean took Castiel’s hand and held it as they walked.

Once they were safely inside the mismatched confines of Iota’s house den, Castiel breathed a sigh of relief he didn’t notice was audible until Arnold canted his head to the side, clearly unsure why the trip over had been so taxing. Castiel shrugged uneasily in response at the silent question. Arnold seemed to take it in stride, though, and they made their way up the stairs to his room without running into any other fraternity members. The house was uncharacteristically quiet, most of its inhabitants presumably busy with finals or studying elsewhere, and Castiel was grateful for the relative privacy.

When they entered his room Arnold turned his desk lamp on and set his things down, gesturing for Dean and Castiel to take a seat on the unmade bed or the desk chair. Soon, they were all seated and as comfortable as they were likely to get, with Dean and Castiel sitting close by one another on the bed and Arnold spinning slowly in the chair.

“Okay. What’s up, hon?” Arnold asked Castiel as he swiveled back around, taking a sip from his water bottle.

“…” Castiel was unsure how to initiate the conversation now that they were here and he had the opportunity to do so. “It’s about the frats here. I want to—I want to ask you a few things.”

“Okay,” Arnold nodded slowly and set his water bottle down on the desk. “Are you…wanting to join one? I mean, I think ours is the best, obviously, but I’m in it so we know I’m biased—”

While Castiel was tempted to let Arnold continue to talk so he wouldn’t have to, he shook his head and gently cut Arnold off, extending his hand and momentarily touching it to Arnold’s.

“No, I’m not. This is…this is about something else.”

Arnold looked uncertain, then, sitting back in his chair as he studied Castiel. “Okay…what’s it about, then?”

“Do you know people who have been raped at KA?” Castiel asked, crossing his arms without consciously meaning to.

Arnold waited almost a minute before he responded, looking out the nearby window for most of it, seemingly thinking of what he wanted to say.

“Why do you want to know?” he asked.
“Because I’m one of them,” Castile said without prelude. He crossed his arms more tightly across his chest, his knuckles whitening. He felt sweat began to bead on his skin where the fabric of his shirt and jeans chafed him. It was beginning to feel as warm in Arnold’s room as it had been outside.

Castiel looked down at his feet where they fell over the edge of Arnold’s bed as his chest began to tighten, thinking of the few grounding techniques he’d read about in his book. If he didn’t manage to emotionally distance himself from the conversation in some way he was going to have a panic attack before Arnold could say much of anything, and Castiel knew Dean would simply take him home if that happened.

Castiel shuddered, blinking a few times and straightening his spine as he thought of the first technique his book had listed. He began to count how many blue objects in Arnold’s room he could find as he prepared himself to speak again. Castiel wanted to stand up, but forced himself to stay where he was, keeping his arms wrapped around his torso as he catalogued all he could see that fit the criteria.

— a book titled ‘The Trial’ by author unknown on the bookshelf, a stress ball on the far end of the dresser —

“I want to know if my experience was an anomaly.” Castiel tried to speak with confidence even as his voice trembled.

Arnold shook his head slowly, and Castiel felt himself grow tense.

— a lid on a water bottle in the corner of the room, a pair of shoes with broken laces by the door —

“It—it wasn’t. Um…that house has a reputation, Cas. It…it’s not safe there. They’ll cover for each other, too, so even when things are reported nothing ever happens. Been happening since I first came here and pledged freshman year. My friend Alex, she…it happened to her. No one believed her because they all said they didn’t see who she went upstairs with, said she’d had too much to drink so she probably just thought Al was who took her upstairs. Nothing happened.”

Castiel inhaled with a small measure of difficulty, switching to red items.

— watchband made of leather on Arnold’s wrist, a blanket on the edge of the bed —

“I mean, assault has happened at every house at some point, even ours, but KA’s not called ‘Rape House’ for nothing,” Arnold said with what was clearly mounting discomfort, fiddling with his hands where they gripped the armrests of the chair.

—a mechanical pencil near a textbook on physics, a solo cup filled with water on the far window ledge, a small Flash figurine on —

“What about Drew Miller?” Castiel asked as he lifted his hand to his mouth and began to bite at the edges of his nails, the healing cuts from the day before throbbing beneath his teeth.

“I hate that piece of shit,” Arnold said with an uncharacteristic amount of vitriol. “He hurt my ex. Gave him something in a drink, took him up to his room. Drew told him after that he asked for it, that he should be thankful he gave him the time of day. He transferred schools ‘cause of what happened. Couldn’t stand to see him every day on campus after. Drew basically ruined his life.”

Castiel wanted to throw up as Arnold’s words registered through the barrier of counting and colors and Dean’s hand where it wrapped around his and pulled it from his mouth.

“Did your friend move to North Carolina?” Castiel asked in a whisper, thinking of what Madison
had said during his first and only meeting with the girls at the coffee shop.

“Yeah,” Arnold said, clearly surprised by Castiel’s question. “He did. How did you know that?”

Castiel was quiet on the way back to Bobby’s.

In.

\textit{mile 242.}

Out.

\textit{exit 243 Highway 90 Southeast}

—\textit{make me a stone}—

In.

\textit{right lane ends in .5}

Out.

\textit{mile 245.}

—\textit{please god make me a stone}—

In.

When they reached Singer Salvage and got out of the Impala together, Castiel said nothing and neither did Dean. As they let themselves in through the front door Dean asked Castiel if he still wanted to go back to the studio after they ate, and Castiel couldn’t bring himself to answer. He’d managed to avert an anxiety attack both while talking to Arnold and during the drive home, but doing so had been no small feat; now he was completely drained, shaking and overly warm and almost nauseous as he followed Dean inside.

Why had Castiel thought he could do anything about Drew? Why had he thought finding out more would do him any good, further? What he’d just learned he’d already suspected since Balthazar had hinted as much. Drew’s family had money, and so did the fraternity he’d hidden himself inside. From the rest of what Arnold had said no past charges had ever stuck and no disciplinary actions had ever been taken. If Castiel were to try and report Drew he knew he was likely to be brushed aside the same way the others had, and he wasn’t sure he would want to report Drew even if he were somehow provided a guarantee he’d be listened to and taken seriously. Talking about his experience to a sympathetic professional had proven agonizing enough, Castiel didn’t think he wanted to know what might happen if he tried to do so with school administrators who didn’t know him from Adam.

Castiel felt disoriented and disconnected from his own body, as if the steps he took through the entryway and living room were someone else’s and he was watching a hyper-realistic movie about someone who wore his pants and shoes. Dean was saying something to him, but Castiel heard him about as well as he would have if he were underwater.

Castiel had felt almost galvanized for a moment as he began to talk to Arnold, feeling that perhaps if he gathered enough information he could form a clear picture and help other students avoid the same fate. Now, the idea seemed ludicrous. If the school itself didn’t already care about its students being
sexually assaulted, Castiel doubted he could make them do so now. And beyond the obvious glaring issues, who would even listen to him, anyway? Castiel was soft-spoken and awkward; he shrank away from physical contact and he wore sweaters even when it was hot outside; he was not unique or interesting or particularly arresting. What could he possibly have done to get the attention of the student body even if he'd somehow managed to compile evidence and testimony worth bringing to their attention?

Castiel was so absorbed in his thoughts that he almost tripped on the hem of his jeans as he and Dean walked down the hall together. Dean caught him before he could fall, of course, a look of alarm on his face as he wrapped an arm around Castiel’s shoulders and braced him for the remainder of the few steps to the bedroom. Though the continued support was unnecessary, Castiel didn’t ask for Dean to stop, instead leaning fully into the crutch Dean’s arms made as they entered the bedroom.


Once the door was closed behind them Dean moved so that Castiel was in front of rather than beside him, keeping a few points of contact as he grasped both of Castiel’s shoulders and held him a little closer than arm’s length.

“Cas, look at me,” Dean said when Castiel couldn’t seem to make himself look anywhere but at a spot just above Dean’s shoulder.

Dean lifted a hand to cup Castiel’s cheek, his thumb stroking over the ridge of a sharp cheekbone. “Cas?” he asked.

“I don’t think I can do anything about it, Dean,” Castiel said. His own voice sounded far away. “About—about him hurting people.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Dean said. “This isn’t on you.”

Castiel shuddered, shaking his head even as Dean tucked two fingers beneath Castiel's chin, bringing them eye-to-eye with one another. Unable to do anything else, Castiel met Dean’s eyes.

“All you need to do right now is focus on you,” Dean said. “No one asked you to take this on, and you don’t have to.”

As if the words calmed some part of Castiel he hadn’t even known needed soothing, he exhaled shakily.

“I don’t want to,” he whispered. “I want to forget any of it ever happened. But I…I feel like I have to.”

“You feel like that ’cause you’re a good person. But you don’t. Not if it scares you this much.”

Dean tilted Castiel’s face up slowly, pressing a kiss to Castiel’s forehead, the ridge of his cheekbone, and then the corner of his mouth.

“It’s okay, baby,” Dean said.

Castiel closed the scant distance between them and clung to Dean as he let himself absorb the words, his hands tight where they fist themselves in the back of Dean’s t-shirt.

“I don’t want to,” he repeated. “It scares me.”
“It’s okay,” Dean said again. “You don’t have to do anything. You don’t owe anyone anything.”

Castiel closed his eyes, feeling as if he’d been given permission to let go.

“Thank you,” he murmured as he lay his head on Dean’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

***

That weekend was almost a quiet one, which would have been a relief after all that the week itself had piled onto both Dean and Castiel’s plates. However, when there came a forceful knock on the door Sunday evening that hope was dashed as Sam, Dean, and Castiel heard a familiar voice ask, “Can I come in? I want to talk to my sons.”

The three of them were sitting together on the sofa in the living room, a spread of snacks and half-finished sodas on the coffee table in front of them. Sam was home for an increasingly rare night (apparently Jessica was coming down with something and had needed to go to bed early) and Dean and Castiel had been taking advantage of it with a movie break after hours of studying when they realized in unison just who was standing outside.

Dean was the first to react after almost a full minute of apprehensive silence. He stood up from the couch with a low sigh, leaving Castiel’s left side cold.

Sam and Castiel turned to look at one another as Dean crossed the short distance from the sofa to the door, identical uneasy expressions on their faces. But neither of them told Dean to stop.

Dean shook out his arms and shoulders and conspicuously straightened his posture before unlatching and opening the door.

“Dad,” Dean said as he faced his father for the first time since the gallery opening weeks before. His voice was strangely flat, and his hand was rigid and tight where it was still wrapped around the doorknob. The tension in that short moment made everything feel as if it were suspended in amber, from the few fireflies buzzing beyond John Winchester’s tall frame to the sound of Yoda’s voice emanating from the television no one had muted.

Without conscious thought, Castiel got up from the couch and moved to stand by Dean’s side. He knew doing so that he ran the risk of making John angry, and that the memory of what had happened the last time the man lost his temper still haunted both Sam and Dean, but Castiel didn’t think he could sit a few feet back and watch Dean confront his father alone.

It turned out Castiel needn’t have worried, though; John’s tired eyes flicked only briefly toward Castiel before they moved back to his son, and he said nothing of what he saw or what he might think of their proximity. When he spoke, it was directly to Dean.

“Hey, son.”

John’s voice was broken and gritty, as if he’d been sick, and he looked dreadful. He had deep purple bags under his eyes and he was growing a beard that didn’t look as if it had ever been groomed. But he didn’t smell of body odor or alcohol or cigarette smoke, and his eyes, as weary and ringed with darkness as they were, looked clearer than Castiel could remember ever having seen them in the months he’d known Dean.

“What do you want?” Dean asked.

Castiel reached down and grasped Dean’s hand in his own the way Dean had so often done for him, feeling Dean squeeze his hand briefly in return as they braced themselves for John’s answer.
To Castiel’s surprise (and Sam’s, if the sharp intake of breath he heard behind them was any indication) John said only, “To tell you I’m sorry.”

Dean didn’t immediately react, his face going somewhat slack for a moment. Castiel recognized the reaction for what it was, though. Despite his appearance, Dean was far from indifferent to his father’s words.

“What? What’re you sorry for?” Dean scoffed, a muscle in his jaw ticking beneath the skin. It was obvious he didn’t think John truly knew.

“For everything,” John said without reluctance, lifting an arm to rub the back of his neck the same way that Dean often did. “I’ve been tryin’ to get back on my feet the last few weeks and I guess I’m...seein’ things differently than I used to. You and Sammy are good kids, and I know I messed up. I messed up bad.” He appeared genuinely contrite.

Dean didn’t respond for a few minutes, his eyes guarded and his hand stiff in Castiel’s. When he finally did he only said, “I don’t know if you’re serious or not, but either way, I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

When John simply nodded, Castiel again found himself surprised. This man did not act or speak like the John Winchester who had screamed at his son in front of a crowd of art-goers for the smallest of infractions.

“I’ll give you however much time you need. I just wanted to say that to you, and you won’t answer my calls, so. Bye, Dean, Sam. Tell Bobby I stopped by.”

Dean didn’t say anything in response to his father’s goodbye, and John sighed quietly in resignation before he turned around and began to walk back up the driveway.

Once John had disappeared into the dark and Dean had closed and relocked the door, there was silence in the house again.

When the sound of a throat clearing sounded from the hall, Castiel and Dean turned around to see that Bobby had come to stand under the archway, a stack of papers in one hand and a tumbler of whiskey in the other.

“John?” he asked.

Dean and Sam both nodded, and Bobby said nothing, only exhaling heavily before he shook his head and turned to go back into his office.

That night as they lay in bed, Dean couldn’t seem to get comfortable. He turned to face the wall, then back toward Castiel, and then back toward the wall twice before Castiel reached out a hand and laid it on Dean’s shoulder, stilling him.

“Dean?” Castiel said into the dark.

Dean turned for the third time with a choked exhale, swallowing audibly as he crept close to Castiel almost hesitantly, as if he felt uncertain he should do so.

Castiel opened his arms and took Dean into them. He was shivering and breathing rapidly, clearly still on-edge from the encounter with John. Castiel pressed his forehead to Dean’s and closed his eyes, laying a hand on the center of Dean’s chest in an effort to calm him. Dean almost immediately
covered Castiel’s hand with his own, his palm damp with sweat.

“You don’t have to forgive him,” Castiel said. “If you’re not ready, there’s nothing wrong with that.” Castiel paused for a moment, then, afraid of overstepping, but at last he continued. “He abused you, and constantly demeaned you, and made you hide parts of yourself to make him happy. I don’t think it’s unexpected that you might need more time.”

Dean shook his head, breathing out slowly before speaking.

“He’s done this before...said he’s sorry and gotten me to come back home, then gone back on everything a week later.”

“So...there’s no guarantee he’s serious this time,” Castiel surmised.

Dean nodded, and Castiel felt rather than saw it.

“Yeah. I mean, we’ve never had a fight exactly like that...I’ve never told him how I really felt before the gallery opening, but shit’s happened before and I’ve taken a day or two, but never this long. Never this real, I guess.”

“He might be telling the truth. Maybe he’s finally taken a step back and realized how badly he messed up,” Castiel said as he reached out to stroke Dean’s hair, lank with nervous sweat as it had become.

Dean made a noise of disbelief. “I doubt it. I’ve wanted him to say sorry and mean it since I was a kid.”

“You deserve a real apology. You deserve to know that your father cares that he hurt you and knows he was wrong,” Castiel said.

He only realized what he’d said after he’d spoken, and in a moment his thoughts were pulled inexorably to the chapter he’d read the day before in Bobby’s kitchen. Without meaning to, Castiel stopped stroking Dean’s hair, and his hand fell from Dean’s chest to the comforter they lay on.

‘Validate and love yourself the way you would a friend, family member, or person you admire if they were going through what you are.’

Dean shifted in his arms.

“Cas?”

Castiel had seen the way John treated his eldest son. He’d seen Dean insert himself into his father’s life at the expense of his own well-being more than once, knowing John was only going to abuse and beat him in return and doing so all the same. He’d known Dean could leave the situation if he wanted to but that he refused every chance to do so because he loved his father. Castiel had been aware of all of these details and the complexity of Dean and John’s relationship, yet he’d never once thought that Dean brought John’s cruelty upon himself through word or deed, nor had he berated Dean for being naïve enough to believe that one day his father would see how much Dean loved him and change his ways. Castiel had only felt concern and love for Dean, and had only wanted him to heal and to understand how loved he was and how little he deserved the way his father treated him. Castiel had always valued Dean and had known inherently that the things John did to him were unfair and unwarranted; he had never assumed Dean deserved it.

Dean had seen Castiel as he stumbled from the frat house, drugged and incoherent and bleeding into the seat of his jeans. Dean had seen Castiel have a panic attack in the library bathroom and burst into
tears without warning and the way he sometimes had inexplicable bouts of nausea, and he didn’t seem to think that Castiel was lesser as a person or boyfriend for it. Dean knew better than anyone how deeply damaged Castiel was by the rape and still allowed him to press kisses to his cheeks and make them plates of toast in the mornings and to fold Dean’s laundry when it was fresh out of the dryer. Dean had willingly taken on Castiel’s brokenness because he didn’t blame him for what had happened, and he didn’t think Castiel had deserved it the same way that Castiel didn’t blame Dean for John’s behavior.

He saw Castiel through the lens of love.

In that moment Castiel saw himself through Dean’s eyes, and he understood.

“Cas? You asleep?” Dean asked.

“I…” Castiel opened his mouth and then closed it again, not knowing what to say not from a lack of words, but an abundance of them.

“I didn’t deserve what happened when I went to the party,” Castiel said.

“You never have,” Dean said.

Castiel had loved Dean from the moment he saw his painting in the Fine Arts lobby, and had chosen him despite everything that stood in their way, and as Dr. Morte had said, Dean had chosen Castiel in return.

For better or for worse.

Chapter End Notes

Please tell me how you felt about this chapter. I will be honest, I have a lot of anxiety about this installation as so much happened and I had such high expectations for it narratively. Any reassurance or love would be so very appreciated <3

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