Meeting Mary
by fem_castielnovak (saete)

Summary

A resurrection couldn’t have come at a worse time for Team Free Will. With the angels fallen, Sam recovering from the trials, and Cas, Charlie, and Kevin moved into the bunker, their lives are chaos. So on top of corraling the confused and wingless celestial beings, they’ll have to find out how and why the resurrection has taken place, and then come to terms with that they thought they could all ignore. Of course, as with everything connected to the Winchesters, it escalates above and beyond anything they could have expected.

Notes

Ratings are bound to change, so please read the tags and watch for that as well as more characters as I add them

See the end of the work for more notes
Deep Breath.

Grey light filters in through her eyelids.

Another breath, and she holds it this time before opening her eyes.

A bright sky laden with grey clouds and the golden colors of the trees make her think of fall in Kansas as a child. Of taking her baby boy for a walk to collect leaves. Of carving pumpkins and Thanksgiving dinner. Of pumpkin pie - which … no. It must be a trick of the mind. Her imagination.

She smells pumpkin pie.

A scent distinctly similar to her pumpkin pie.

She widens her eyes, looks around more. Old instincts kick in and she searches for danger. She realizes that she does not know where she is. Nothing moves but the wind in the trees, scattering leaves across the top of a hill which … does not look like a hill.

Oddly enough, even though she didn’t make whatever is causing that unique scent, the smell of her pie quells her nerves and puts her somewhat at peace. Enough so for her to approach the not-hill unarmed and then to knock on the strange door which she finds there. The building above stands quiet, appearing abandoned but holding about it a distinct lived-in quality.

Some muffled speech comes through the door before it opens with, “- don’t see why I have to come open the door for you when you – oh!” A shocked looking redheaded woman stands in the cracked open, vault-like entryway.

She waits a moment before speaking to the redhead, “I’m sorry to bother you, but I seem to be lost.” The redhead gapes and gives a long blink. The woman gives her time to respond … then time to compose herself … then waits in the awkward silence before trying again, “Are you alright? … I don’t mean to be a nuisance but I’m not sure where I am or how I got here and I’d appreciate it if-”

“Oh my God,” the redhead whispers almost inaudibly.

“Excu-“

“OH MY GOD,” the redhead screams, startling some birds from a nearby tree. Before she can respond the redhead pulls her across the threshold by her wrists.

And splashes her with … cleaning solution?

She sputters as the liquid drips down her face and is distracted enough to not notice when the redhead grazes her forearm first with a silver knife and then an iron crowbar. The redhead releases
her wrists and replaces all the items she used to attack her. The redhead pulls out a white strip of gauze and begins to talk as she bandages the cut she’s just made.

“I’m Charlie Bradbury, and you …” Charlie looks with wonder into the woman’s face, “are Mary Winchester – Sam and Dean’s mom. Or a monster we’ve never met who bears a striking resemblance.”

Charlie steps back to look around a moment, then begins to go down the stairs and beckons for her to follow. She – Mary – blinks and gives a tentative nod, confused as to what’s going on. She recognizes the typical hunter greeting ritual but is surprised to be thrown into it after so many years away from the life. So she asks a question, looking for more information and context clues, “The silver knife I could have expected, but the borax? That was borax, yes?”

“Yeah, new to earth monster in the past few years. Well, old to earth but new back to earth. Leviathans. From Purgatory. But originally earth. It’s a long story. And how I met the boys; I sort of helped them take down an evil CEO with my mad tech skills.” She grins cheekily.

“The boys?”

“Um, Sam and Dean. As in, your kids.”

For a moment Mary is stunned.

“Are they here?” She asks breathlessly. This was so, so beyond unexpected.

“Dean just left – I thought you were him coming back because he’d left his wallet or something. He insisted he needed whipped cream and Kevin finished the last bit the other morning with his coffee.” Charlie snorts, “By last bit I mean half a can. Dean was pissed, so he left me to watch the pie and go get more.”

Again she nods slowly, “How do you know who I am?”

“As honorary little sister and the boys’ gay best friend, I take it upon myself to be nosy about and know everything pertinent to their pent-up emotional drama. And in general actually. Knowing about you falls into the category of emotional drama though,” she stops to sniff the air, “Which there will be quite a lot of if I let the pie burn,” she dashes into what must be the kitchen and Mary stops where she is to look around.

Huge marble floors and a vaulted ceiling aren’t normally decorations you find in an underground bunker. From where she stands she can see multiple well-lit hallways and across the way there’s a large room with tables and chairs and brimming book shelves. She meanders towards the table at the foot of the staircase she’s just descended. Papers and files with dates from the 30’s are strewn about.

Mary’s a little worried that Charlie trusts her to be alone in what is obviously a secret compound and someone’s home. What if she is a monster?

“Do you need a drink or anything? Pie?” Charlie’s stuck her head out of the doorway to ask.

“I’d love some.” She follows Charlie into the kitchen and watches her plate it up before they head into a room with a long, sturdy table and chairs. There are pieces of technology strewn across most of it but Charlie takes a seat at the empty end and Mary follows suit.

Mary takes the plate from Charlie and wraps her lips around a forkful. It hits her tongue and she’s
taken back to her mother’s kitchen and the first time she made this pie - her own recipe.

She swallows and bites her lip, almost afraid to ask, “Who made this?”

“Um, Dean did,” Charlie scrapes up crumbs from her plate, “he’s a stress baker and Sam’s sick so we have a ton of food in the fridge.”

They hear the door open with a groan and Charlie jumps out of her chair, “Dean! Dean! Oh my God, Dean!” She sprints to the bottom of the staircase as he hurries down to meet her.

“What?! What?! Charlie, are you alright?” He’s drawing his gun as Charlie grabs his other hand, “Yes but you have to come here immediately!” They run back into the adjacent room where Charlie drags to a halt expecting a moment of pregnant silence at the reunion, only to encounter empty chairs.

Charlie gapes, frozen in place at the shock then bends to look under the table and pushes the chairs out to check the seats. But she stands up quickly when she’s met with nothing.

“Charlie? Hey, you okay?” He gently takes her chin in one hand to turn it towards him and leans down to look her in the eyes. “Char?”

“She’s gone.”

“What? Who?”

“She’s, she’s gone!”

“Wait, she? Who was in the bunker?”

“Your mother!”

Dean’s face is a stormy combination of heartbreaking distress and disbelieving offense. His brow furrows and before he says anything, Charlie moves away to feel the seat of one of the chairs. She turns back to Dean, “She was sitting here!” She points to the chair, “It’s still warm! She was sitting here and I was sitting there,” she indicates another chair, “and we were eating pie together,” she holds up the plate that was in front of the chair she had felt, as evidence.

“Charlie, wh-“

“It happened, Dean!”

He huffs a breath and there’s hurt in his eyes, “You can’t just-“

“Dean, this isn’t something I’d joke about. She came to the front door and I couldn’t even process it for a minute but then I pulled her across the devil’s trap and did the tests on her and she was clean, and I could touch her and, and-“

“Slow down, kiddo!” Dean’s trying to rein her in and stop her rambling but his teeth are gritted and the hurt hasn’t left his eyes.

"Dean, I-" she holds up a hand as if she wants to reach out and touch him, "I can tell that you don't believe me."

"Believe you? Char-"

"Dean," she implores. The incredulous look doesn't leave his features. Charlie barges on, "I can't
imagine ... I know how much of a bitch it must be to hear something like this. Believe me, I know,” her voice rings with the empathy of similar experience, "But I swear that your mom was just here." She drops her hand and clenches it as she internally builds resolution and tries to hold back her enthusiasm, "We have to look into this. I did all the tests on her and there’s a bloody rag in the trash by the door from where I cleaned the knife that proves it! I bet you it’s human. We’ve gotta look into what’s going on! We can’t—"

“Charlie, calm down,” his voice is steeled - he’s having none of this anymore.

“Don’t do this Dean!”

“What Charlie? Don’t what? Try to reason with you?” He holsters his gun. "I don't know what you saw, but my mother is dead, Charlie.” A heavy silence follows his words, “She’s … she’s gone and —” A loud cough interrupts him from upstairs. It’s hacking and painful just listening to it. “- and I can’t deal with this right now.” He stalks off to go take care of his brother.
Yellow light this time.

She realizes that time has passed since she was sitting at the table with Charlie.

Knows it inherently.

It isn’t startling and it isn’t worrying, though likely it should be. Now she stands at the base of a spiral staircase. Yes; this was the room with the old papers on the table that Charlie had taken her through to get to the table where they sat and talked. The papers are gone now, replaced by coffee mugs and a few plates.

Obviously the lapse in consciousness means that her time is limited. She wants to explore. She turns to trot up a small set of steps but a sound makes her pause. Cello music, she realizes, drifts down from the level above her. She’d much rather have someone tell her more about what’s going on than spend more time by herself looking at things she doesn’t fully comprehend the meaning of. She’s smart but context is important.

There aren’t other sounds of life so it’s easy to narrow the music’s source down to a room close to the entryway to the dorms. The door is cracked open and bright light seeps out so Mary has no qualms pushing it open further. A young man sits, eyes closed, brow pinched in concentration as he gently elicits a beautiful melody from the cello in front of him.

The door squeaks as it falls open and the young man is yanked from his reverie. His eyes go wide and he pulls the cello protectively to his chest, yelling “Holy shit!” and flailing his free hand for a nearby weapon. He holds a silver knife in his hand, pointed at her as he carefully sets his instrument on its stand and steps forward.

“Okay, who the hell are you?” He demands.

“…Mary Winchester,” she offers, hoping honesty is the best policy based off of Charlie’s reaction.

“Holy shit…” he whispers. Very articulate, she thinks to herself.

“…And you are?” she asks after a beat.

“Kevin Tran … Prophet of the Lord.”

Melodramatic, Mary adds to her list of adjectives as she raises her eyebrows in surprise.

“Prophet of the Lord,” she restates.

“Yeah, not as great as it sounds. Mostly headaches and getting stuck in terrible places for long periods of time doing exhausting, awful things. … But hey, who cares?” he gives a tired laugh too bitter for someone his age.

Mary’s heart goes out to him, “Are you alright?” She reaches a tender hand out to his shoulder. He leans into it a bit – as if he’s nearly touch starved.
He sighs and says resolutely, “I’m fine,” as if he isn’t at all fine but wants to pretend that he is. “Um, so how did you get here? W-What’re you doing here?”

“I was hoping to find someone who could show me around. Or that I could … meet them.”

“Sam and Dean?”

She nods. Kevin gives a small smile, thinking privately of his own mother as he walks with her out into the hall. He gives her a brief tour as they make their way to the dormitories.

As he leads her down the hall, he pauses at the end for a minute to smash his hand against a discretely placed angel banishing sigil. When it has no affect on her, he’s more willing to let her see Sam. But there’s a nagging sense of worry…

Dean is out. Kevin is becoming increasingly alarmed. He doesn’t fully trust her. Doesn’t know what she is besides the fact that she’s corporeal. He’s been in Dean’s room so her image isn’t unfamiliar.

Okay, he’s been in Dean’s room twice, but still. He’s seen all of those pictures. She sure enough looks like the woman in them. It doesn’t mean that she isn’t something else though. But he figures he can take her to Sam’s room and placate her. He’s willing to entertain believing her at all only because of what little Charlie has told him about Monday. It can’t be a coincidence that she sees an apparition of a woman she’s never met and then two days later the same apparition comes to Kevin.

She eyes the sigil, and he gives a nervous laugh, “Preventative measures.” Desperate to fill what could become an awkward silence, he begins to ramble; “Ya know, not sure who you are or what you’re doing here. You kind of made Charlie freak out. When she didn’t see you at all yesterday she thought she was having a psychotic break after being stuck in the bunker for so long. I only found out why this morning but she and Dean weren’t even speaking to each other on Monday and Charlie wouldn’t come out for dinner. They were really tense about it all. I tried asking Dean but he refused to talk about it. I’m pretty sure he growled at me. Things were better yesterday and today though.”

Mary nods, eyes focused behind her on the sigil as they continue down the hallway.

Dean’s room is at the farthest end of the hall. Sam’s normal room is towards the middle though; he’d liked the paintings and book case in it. Kevin knows because he did too and wanted the room because of them when he was moving in. But now he’s borrowed some furniture and his own room is his favorite. Partially because it’s around the corner and away from everyone else.

“Dean and Sam have rooms next to each other at the farthest end of the hall right now since Sam’s not doing so great,” he narrates his thoughts for her to fill the silence.

“What happened to him?”

“He was trying to save the world and it made him sick. Almost killed him. But Dean was able to stop him before it did and so now he’s recovering. That’s where Dean is now, getting more meds for him.”

“I’m getting the impression that they haven’t had the lives I wanted for them.”
Kevin isn’t sure what she means by that.

He open’s Sam’s door and they stand in the darkened space. Kevin carefully walks over to the desk and turns on the dim lamp. She steps closer to the bed.

Kevin stands behind her almost in the doorway to give her space, “He’s unconscious now, but he was awake for the first time earlier. Which is an improvement from when he wasn’t awake at all. But that was when he was first sick.”

She hums in acknowledgement, just watching Sam. She takes a tentative step towards the bed so she’s standing over it.

There’s the sound of the bunker door thudding closed, and Kevin turns.

“Oh, that’ll be D-“ he turns back to Mary, preparing to lead her out to meet her firstborn but no one’s there.
Castiel finally, *finally* ends his trek back to the bunker. To the Winchesters. Home. Dean had promised to pick him up and drive him there, *home*, once the fallen angel made it by bus to Phillipsburg from Colorado. But Cas knew Dean wanted to stay close to Sam, who was still comatose the last time the ex-angel had talked with Dean. So rather than argue with the ever-stubborn, eldest Winchester, Cas simply took busses as far as he could using pickpocketed money - per Dean’s insistence. When there were no more busses, he started hitchhiking, and once he got close enough, walking the rest of the way to the bunker.

The door isn’t locked which worries Castiel, but at the sound of scrambling footsteps below him, he swiftly descends the staircase. Dean enters, silver-plated sword and a flask of holy water at the ready, but the hunter drops both upon seeing the man standing not three feet before him.

“Cas,” he murmurs, astounded, before pulling the ex-angel into a fierce hug. This time, Cas knows enough - feels and thinks enough - to reciprocate. They stand there a moment in silence just holding - long enough for Cas to rest his forehead in the crook of Dean’s neck and close his heavy eyelids.

“Cas,” Dean whispers, tone unreadable.

“Mmm?” Blue eyes stay mostly shut but blink open as the hunter slowly pulls away while still supporting the other man by the biceps.

“Man, you look beat. C’mon. Let’s get you some clothes and a room.”

Dean leads him back up the stairs to the dormitories. He takes him into a room that has obviously already been made up. For *him*. Cas can smell the freshly washed sheets and notes a dust-free bedside table bearing a book on melittology. Cas smiles.

“Be right back,” Dean ducks into the room straight across from Castiel’s own doorway. He returns with a small pile of fabric and hands it to Cas, “So, you can borrow some of my stuff until we get you clothes of your own. Or at least clean what you’ve got.”

“Dean, I-”

“Hey, don’t worry about it man. Save it for tomorrow. You look like you need a solid 12 hours. I’m right across the hall if you need anything.” He starts to leave, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Wait!” Cas calls. Dean turns, pushing it back open and re-entering the room, a look of concern blatant on his face.

“Leave it open. I’m … everything’s too quiet since - without *Angel Radio*.” Dean remains fixed just inside of the entrance like he’s willing - wanting - to hear more.

“It was … disconcerting to not hear any of their voices, or even any errant, general prayers, that
first night. And every night since. And then not having the option to discern thoughts when it would have been most helpful to was a frustrating discovery. Especially when trying to obtain cash.”

“Then you-you weren’t … you didn’t hear my prayers?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Dean nods to himself, “Okay.” He turns to leave and makes it to the doorway once more when Cas stops him, “Dean? … What did you pray about?”

Dean turns and takes a few steps back into the room, standing with arms crossed over his chest.

“Nothing really. I, uh, just told you that even though you probably thought I was, I wasn’t mad at you and that I just … wanted your help with Sam. I kinda needed someone else helping look out for him. Getting him better.”

“And do you still?” Cas asks in a steady voice. Therein lies the unspoken Even without my powers?

Dean gives a small smile – hearing the unsaid question – and nods, “Yeah, I do.” then drops his gaze to the floor and walks across the hall to his room calling softly, “Night Cas,” before closing his door.

The open doorway lets the sounds of life drift into his room. Castiel hopes they will also rouse him when everyone else awakes. He does not want to be alone longer than he has to.

As it turns out, it doesn’t matter that his door was open for that purpose, because he is the first one awake. After so many nights spent jostled in fitful rest on a bus, his body wasn’t used to sleeping for very long. His dreams had been of fire-streaked skies and silent screams. He wants coffee.

oOo

Soft blue light of early morning shifts in from a small ventilation window near the ceiling.

She feels like a ghost.

Maybe she is.

No that’s not right. Somewhere a memory is prompted of her time guarding the house she died in. She was a ghost then. This is different.

She’s alone in the kitchen but a pot of coffee is nearly finished brewing. Someone will return for it soon. She guesses that it could be Kevin, given how exhausted he looked when they had spoken.

But moments later, a dark haired man in an AC/DC t-shirt and Batman boxers enters, carrying a book. His stunning blue eyes widen in shock and his mouth falls open a little.

“Mary Winchester,” he says in a tone verging on incredulity. It isn’t even a question. She nods anyways and pulls open a drawer, unsurprised at finding everything she needs after her encounter with Charlie, and begins performing the standard tests on herself. He is still standing there tentatively as she wipes her hands and arms off and sits down at the kitchen’s small table.
Castiel is thinking.

She is older. You could tell by the way she carries herself and the way that expressions hang on her face. But there’s no telling how much older she is. Time passes differently in the veil, or heaven, and wherever else she’d been since her death.

“Who are you?” she asks expectantly.

“Castiel.”

“Just Castiel?”

“Yes, I’m an An- … former Angel of God.”

“Angel?” She asks, shocked before giving him another once-over and again taking in the Batman boxers and faded-t-shirt. Castiel looks down at himself and scoffs, he hadn’t noticed what Dean had handed him as he’d dressed himself last night.

“Human. Now at least.” He takes a pensive breath, “I suppose I don’t much look like I used to be a warrior of God.” He refuses to acknowledge the existence of silence - he keeps talking, “Though I’ve been told on multiple occasions that my usual attire makes me look like a ‘Holy Tax Accountant.’ By both of your sons, actually. Dean tends to favor the phrase more than Sam.” Mary lets slip a genuine smile at this frivolous yet personal detail about her sons.

“Then this isn’t your usual attire?”

“No, this you can blame on your oldest son. Though I don’t mind the look, they are his clothes and much more suited to him.”

Mary’s face pinches in a puzzled expression, and she laughs a little, “Do you wear his clothes often?”

“No in the past but it appears that I am going to be doing so for a while yet.”

“Holy Tax Accountant phase over then?” she wants more information before she makes any assumptions as to why they’d be sharing clothes.

“Yes, I suppose it is,” finally he moves across the kitchen, “though it is more accurate to credit my new choice of clothing on lack of options.” He pours himself a cup of the coffee and takes another cup from a cabinet, filling it as well while he continues, “Yesterday I only had the clothes on my back and seeing as Dean is approximately my size he kindly offered to share his for now.”

He hands Mary the second mug and she smiles as he sits next to her. Their chairs are angled towards each other. Castiel gives a look of confusion once more before asking, “There wasn’t time for much conversation last night, but Dean failed to mention that you had been resurrected.”

“Ah, yes, well that’s because I have yet to see Dean. Kevin took me to look in on Sam. He and Charlie are the only two people I’ve encountered, apparently since my ghost was put to rest. Castiel tenses a little at this.

“I don’t even know if Dean believes I’m back. Kevin said that Charlie wouldn’t come to dinner on what would have been the afternoon I met her, and that Dean wouldn’t talk about why.”

“Well I’ve spoken to neither Kevin, nor Charlie in the few hours that I’ve been back but it’s
Thursday so someone will likely be going for a supply run relatively soon, unless they went last week. Perhaps you’ll see Dean then. For now, why don’t you tell me more about what’s going on with you? For example, why you’re here?"

“I really don’t know. Before arriving here and talking to Charlie, I remember ... a lot of grey, actually. And a time where I protected my house - the house I died in. I was a ghost then. Maybe for a couple of decades. But I don't really remember dying, just a bit before ..." she drifts off, lost in thoughts of that terrible night.

Castiel sees what must be going on so he interrupts, "But the rest of your memories?"

"They seem intact. I know who I am and remember all of my life that I could be expected to remember as a normal human. Which I'm beginning to feel that I am not ..."

"Do you remember how you got here just now? How long you've been here?"

"When I'm ... sentient? conscious? ... when I'm like I am now and I can appear to other people and interact with my surroundings, that's all I have memories of doing besides my old ones. My time … outside of this plane of existence, I suppose - it isn’t something I track or measure as I live it, but more of a memory of grey, like I said. I don’t even really seem to experience the dragging hours of time passing, but I can vaguely recall them separating my interactions with Kevin and Charlie, and now you."

Cas nods, satisfied with his answers.

"What... what can you tell me about my sons?" she asks tentatively but with an eager edge.

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell me how you first met."

Castiel tilts his head and narrows his eyes. He thinks for a moment how he could go about telling her but decides to state without preface, “About 5 years ago, I saved Dean’s soul from Hell. I ingrained myself in their lives and they welcomed me and I never left. Not permanently, anyhow. And … before you ask, I believe the Hell story is best saved for Dean or Sam to tell you. It was a good reason, a righteous reason …” he gets sort of a soft look in his eyes. “I’m happy to discuss other, more recent things with you though.”

Mary nods for a minute before saying quietly, “I’m starting to think they had the exact opposite of the life I wanted them to have,” she looks back up at Castiel and nods, “I’d just like to know more about them. Anything you can think of.”

“Sam and Dean are wholly devoted to each other and to defending the people they love. As well as the greater population of those who need protecting.”

Mary was afraid she knew what that meant.

“And as individuals?"

“Well Dean became a lot like John in outward respects. He religiously listens to rock music, enjoys good food and attractive faces in busy bars, and he idolizes the impala.”

“That damn car is still running?”

“As perfect as Dean can keep her, and she’s as beautiful as ever.”
“Her?”

“He calls her Baby.”

Mary laughs for a good minute and a half at this. *This* was the kind of tidbit she was looking for.

“But I feel that it’s only part of who he is; the part he likes people to know - so it’s the part that he projects. He’s also very nurturing,” Cas gives a secretive grin and a scoff, “though he might kill me for saying as much.

“In recent years, it’s begun to show more, as he comes into himself. The day after he discovered your recipes it was as if he were preparing to feed a small army. Sam ate nearly every plate Dean put in front of him and Kevin helped too. Even I tried some of your pie, and that was when I was an angel and had no need and little desire to eat. It was really rather pleasing to look at, and as far as taste goes, my senses were limited, however it was not unpleasant. Which I found most food to be at that point. I simply enjoyed eating it with them.”

Mary gives a small smile, “Nothing brings people together like good food. Pie especially. I had some on Monday when I was with Charlie and it was like I’d made it myself.” She smiles to herself then looks back up at Cas, “Please tell him, for me, that it was good – that I enjoyed it and he did a good job.”

“I will.” He looks at the table, “I believe he was slightly upset with himself that of all the times he’d been through his father’s journal, he’d never opened the envelope folded up at the back.” Mary considered asking what that meant but Cas looked as though he regretted saying that last part, so she didn’t push it.

“And Sam?”

“While Dean’s habits could get him a heart attack at forty, were it not for the many times I’ve healed him and his brother, Sam enjoys a more tempered lifestyle. He’s a runner and though the two often share a few beers together, Sam prefers salads to burgers. He’s very smart. A long time ago he was studying pre-law at Stanford University. While Dean has a practical genius, Sam is unrivaled in his research abilities. He can speak and read a fair amount of languages and I believe he had at one point prodded Dean into beginning to restart the organization of files and artifacts in the basement. He is truly apt to carry on the legacy of the Men of Letters.”

“I’m sorry, who?”

“The secret organization who built the bunker we’re sitting in,” he gestured at the high ceiling and the doorway. “They collected information and data on the supernatural. They’re the knowledge- and collector-oriented counterparts to hunters.” Cas isn’t sure how clearly his comparison comes across but Mary seems to understand him well enough. “I say legacy because your husband’s father was a Man of Letters, and John would have been had … the situation with his father not happened as it did.”

“So hunting business on both sides of the family…” Mary murmurs despondently.

Cas’s mind flashes to a line from one of the early Winchester Gospels, but he chooses to ignore her remark so that he doesn’t have to explain anything about it just yet. He’d rather it were the boys who did so.

“These are just things that you’ll notice offhand on a day to day basis.” He pauses before delivering his petite de résistance of analysis; “I’m sure you’ll discern this much faster than I did - being a human, and their mother, and having been married to John – but after years of knowing them I’ve
concluded that while Dean did emulate his father, he was most like you, and Sam was most like John.”

Mary nods thoughtfully, holding tightly to that detail for later comparison and thought.

He goes on about their interactions with Charlie and Kevin, describing the ginger and the teen to Mary as she forms her idea of Cas by the way he describes others. She begins to piece together parts of their collective story, tucking away bite-sized chunks of information to puzzle together when she has enough information to make sense of them. She feels safe here, and trusts the people she’s met so far with what little trust she can muster in this odd situation. The angel continues to go on describing the life that his humans, his family – she can tell that’s how he thinks about them – have built for themselves in this strange underground hideout.

Cas likes the way that praising the brothers makes him feel. He likes it even more when he thinks to himself that he’s probably the most able and accurate source to give this information, and contemplates how important it is that he be the one to give Mary this good first impression of them.

It is then that he hears a loud thump and jerks his head towards the doorway. When he turns back to Mary to tell her he’s going to investigate, she isn’t there. There’s another noise, distinctly the sound of the younger Winchester cursing. Cas pauses in startled wonder, fully ready to doubt his sanity except for the second cup of half-finished coffee and a still-warm chair next to him. But his concern for Sam outweighs his curiosity and he runs to assist his friend.

He helps the moose of a man stagger into the kitchen to take a seat. Sam eyes the two coffee mugs but his sick morning-brain doesn’t try to make sense of it. In any case, it doesn’t seem to matter, because Cas washes one of them out after looking over it warily. As Sam rubs sleep from his eyes, Cas pours him a glass of juice and Dean staggering into the kitchen – awoken by the noise his brother made in the hall. He begins to berate his brother for getting out of bed when he’s so sick but Sam just nods and waves a hand at him. Cas sits back down to his book and with a huff, Dean pulls out ingredients for waffles. Cas doesn’t end up reading, but rather, watches as Dean putters around the kitchen – his kitchen – and reviews his description of Dean to Mary. He’s pulled from his reverie when Sam attempts to stand and walk into the dining room, muttering about “not wanting to be in Dean’s way” if he’s “gonna be mother-henned.” Of course he almost trips over his own feet and Cas jumps up to grab his arm and steady him. Dean had leapt away from the stove to try and catch his overly-independent younger brother but Cas nods that he’s got the much taller man and Dean only hesitates a moment before getting back to cooking.

Once Sam’s seated again with his glass of juice, Cas sits next to him and watches his brother cook through the open archway. Soon, Dean is bringing in breakfast and this time he actually allows Sammy to eat real food – “but only the waffles.” Sam whines that Dean’s just hogging all the bacon for himself and Dean responds, “Well, you’re not wrong.” Sam pouts a little and Cas smiles as he gets up to retrieve his book from the kitchen.

Kevin walks in from the dorms and passes Cas in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, “Nice PJs Cas.”

Sam glances up at Cas, apparently noticing the outfit for the first time all morning. He turns to Dean with bitchface #33, “Batman boxers? Really?” Dean rolls his eyes and attempts to hide what might be a blush while Sam scoffs before taking a long gulp of orange juice.

Cas shrugs, “Your mother liked them well enough.”

Sam does an honest-to-God spittake and Dean lets his mouth fall open and provide a lovely view of
half-masticated waffle. The ex-angel continues while sitting down, “She found them amusing.” Sam chokes and sputters like a fish, laughing while Dean does nothing but gawk at his best friend. Thankfully Charlie enters in time to keep Sam from dying.

Dean closes his mouth and swallows his food, “Please, Cas,” he hangs his head and pinches the bridge of his nose, “Please tell me that you are putting some new-found pop-culture knowledge to use and making a ‘Your mom’ joke, and not that you’ve seen her too now.”

“Wait, Cas? Are you Cas? Is that Cas?” She looks even more elated than she did moments ago as she glances between the boys but then without waiting for an answer to her rhetorical question, turns back to the angel, “Did you see her too!?” she yells, “When? What did she say? How long was she here for?”

“I was making myself coffee and I went to get my book,” he nudges the melittology tome which got a quirk of the lips from Dean, “and when I came back she was there in the kitchen. I watched her perform the typical tests on herself, and then we talked for three hours. She left when I heard Sam in the hallway.”

“Three hours? That’s so unfair! I barely even talked with her for forty-five minutes.”

“Oh, boo-hoo, Charlie.”

“Sorry, Dean. But your mom’s a super cool lady. Pretty foxy actually. I just wish I could’ve had at least an hour with her.”

Before Dean can be thoroughly appalled, Cas steps in again, “Our conversation was enjoyable. She wanted to know about me rescuing you from hell, and then your current lives in general, but I believed that it would be best if it came from one of you.”

“If you wouldn’t talk about our lives, then what else was there to talk about?”

“What do you think, Dean? He gave glowing reviews of the Winchester boys – saviors of the world and all-around boy scouts,” Charlie interjects with enthusiasm and certainty.

Dean gives him a look that says, well? and Cas shrugs, “Well, she’s not wrong,” recycling Dean’s earlier remark, which gets another snicker from Sam.

Dean rolls his eyes and gets up to clear his plate. Cas finishes his breakfast and the first chapter of his book quickly. He gets up to cart away everyone else’s plates and help Dean clean up the aftermath of a bunker breakfast.

The hunter already has a warm soak of soapy water in the industrial sink. Cas drops the dishes from his arms into it and gathers the remaining utensils from the counter. Dean hands him a rag and they get into the rhythm – the hunter scrubbing and the angel drying.

Dean interrupts the muted sounds of bubbles fizzing and the soft cloth brushing over porcelain by asking, “Why didn’t you want to tell her about what we do?”

Cas tilts his head and gives a small sigh through his nose, “You recall your first time-traveling escapade to visit her? I believe she expressed an extreme displeasure at the idea of her children being hunters,” he pauses, giving Dean time to consider this, “She indicated that she already had some idea of your lives.”

Yes, Charlie testing her and the fact that they live in an underground bunker does nothing to
“She’s an intelligent person so it’s unsurprising.” Dean nods at the assessment. Cas slows his drying, “I’ll be honest, she seemed sad and withdrawn at the thought.” He pauses in contemplation. “But I theorize that once she gets to meet you and sees what good people you both are - hears what you’ve done – she will be more willing and able to come to terms with and be satisfied with the thought that you haven’t lived the lives she wanted you to have.” His circles with the cloth build back up to a regular pace, "She already asked me to tell you that your pie was good. Specifically.”

Dean looks at his feet as he gives a short huff of breath and claps him on the shoulder, “You’re a good friend, Cas.” The ex-angel’s eyes brighten at the comment and the lack of a self-depreciating remark.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was so much fun for me to write, please let me know what you thought of it. Also, even though Cas is human I'm going to continue to refer to him as an angel for simplicity's sake. And because, duh, they all totally still think of him that way.

Also, I'm not sure when I'll next be able to update but I'll try to make it before the end of the month if possible. I promise to be on a regular posting schedule by the middle of May though.
A darker blue light coats everything now.

The atmosphere of the room indicates that it is still the kitchen.

If she strains her eyes, she could swear that pinpricks of stars can be seen through the foliage above and beyond the ventilation window. She hadn’t thought about how far from any cities they must be.

The stars will be washed away soon by early morning light, she thinks. It’s too light out to be dusk but too dark to be later in the morning on the same day she had been talking with Castiel.

She had been enjoying her conversation with Castiel and she hopes to see him again soon. She’d like to hear more of anything he’s willing to tell her. She presumes that he won’t be awake until later in the morning given that the stars are still out.

She looks around the kitchen and as her eyes catch on the industrial refrigerator, her stomach gives a sharp growl.

“Definitely not a ghost, then,” she murmurs to herself as she makes her way over to the appliance. Rustling carefully through the immaculately organized bags and containers, she finds a carton of eggs and decides that it will do for now. She peeks into cabinets and drawers in search of bowls, a pan, and a whisk.

The fresh salt-sand-wind scent of the soap is comforting and makes her want to believe in how real this all feels.

As she whisks and cooks the eggs, she finds her thoughts wandering through all Castiel had spoken about to her. Over thirty years since she’d left the life, and things seem as if they haven’t changed at all. Mary has a sinking feeling that it had only gotten worse, based on Castiel’s hesitancy to talk about it all directly.

She cooks the whole dozen – she’d seen another carton in the fridge, so she wasn’t worried about
using them all. Castiel’s take on Dean’s cooking and everyone’s reception of it indicates that they all thoroughly enjoy food. Once the eggs are finished and she’s had her fill, she covers the rest and leaves them on the counter then goes back to the fridge. After pilfering carefully so as not to disturb the obvious order, she decides to keep busy by making sausage.

It is only after she’s finished cooking and turned off the stove that she realizes she could have disappeared while the stove was still on and set the kitchen on fire. That thought sends a shiver down her spine as memories come unbidden and unwanted, of a nursery going up in flames.

She shakes her head, dispelling the thoughts and turning to another task to distract herself.

“Coffee,” she says to the air, “They drink coffee. They’ll want coffee with breakfast.” It doesn’t take long to find the grounds or the filters and she swiftly analyzes the antiquated machine and gets it brewing.

Now aware that she might disappear at any moment, she decides to leave a note for someone that she was the one who made breakfast. She leaves it open-ended and unaddressed, next to the half-full pot of coffee.

It is as she’s walking towards the library to amuse herself and sate her curiosities that she is engulfed by the now-familiar grey.

Dean wakes to the scent of delicious, cooked meat. He sits up quickly, with a wary tilt to his head. This is odd; he never wakes up to food being cooked. He’s the only one inclined to cook without obligation. When he doesn’t make breakfast – on rare and often vengeance fueled occasions – the others just satisfy themselves with cereal or simply a glass of coffee and then come whining to him about wanting lunch early.

He puts on his dead-guy robe and matching slippers then makes his way down the hall. The kitchen is empty when he arrives but his counters looked used, and two steaming plates sit next to the stove. The coffee catches his nose’s attention and it’s as he’s pouring himself a cup that he sees the note. He nearly drops and smashes his mug on the floor.

Cas comes into the kitchen, thinking that it’s early for Dean to be awake but grateful for what smells to be delicious food. Coffee wasn’t going to cut it for him this morning, he needed breakfast and he needed it now. Being human incurred managing eating schedules and it was more difficult than he’d anticipated.

He finds the hunter not cleaning dishes or even eating the fruits of his labor, but sitting at the kitchen table staring at a note in his hands. Cas can see John’s journal opened to the back cover on the table in front of him. The envelope that had gone so long unnoticed is out and a recipe for chicken casserole lies on top of it. Cas approaches well within his friend’s line of sight, and places
a hand on the hunter’s shoulder, “Dean?”

Dean doesn’t even look up from the paper, “It’s-“ he starts, “- it is …” he drifts off. “But it can’t be.” He looks up at Cas, eyes pleading for answers the angel doesn’t have, “Right?”

Cas sits next to Dean, only after an instant realizing that it’s parallel to the exact same position he and Mary had been sitting in the day before. Dean doesn’t shrug his hand off and Cas leaves it on his shoulder as he sighs.

“Dean, I truly don’t know what to tell you.”

“Just be honest with me, Cas.”

Such a simple request – Cas can’t help but comply; “There isn’t much we can do besides interrogate – talk – with her. I can begin to look at rituals we could use to test her. Charlie would help me, I’m sure. And if it came to it, we could always ask Crowley.

“But nothing about her seemed awry. She struck me as genuine and just as confused as I was about the situation. She was pleasant to talk to and I could read emotions plainly in her face and voice. Though, her posture was guarded, I can attribute that to a hunter’s childhood.

“It is surprisingly easy to see where you and Sam get many of your characteristics, after only one conversation with her.” Dean had kept his eyes trained on the table but at this he looks up and Cas meets his gaze.

The noise of stumbling in the hall doesn’t startle them but it prompts Dean to end the moment and he holds the angel’s gaze saying quietly, “Thanks, Cas.” Cas breaks the eye contact to look at a bleary-eyed Kevin yawning in the archway.

“Hey guys,” he yawns again, “coffee ready?”

Charlie chokes on her food when Dean tells her Mary made it. Kevin shrugs and says over a mouthful of eggs, “She’s a fantastic cook.” But it comes out more as, “Shhs uh fuhtnahst’ cuh”.

Dean tells them he’s concluded that it is Mary’s handwriting at least. Charlie is elated at this and relishes slowly eating the rest of her breakfast. Mary’s recipe and John’s journal have both been tucked away back in Dean’s room.

Sam is late to breakfast and Dean doesn’t think much of it until he’s left staring at the excess of food and thinking about how eager his brother was yesterday for two measly waffles. Charlie volunteers for dish duty and sends Dean to go check on Sam.

He doesn’t answer Dean’s first knock.

Or his second knock.

His fever’s back and his breathing is too shallow.

Cas helps Dean get him into an cool bath – the fever too high to do anything else first. Once the fever falls enough, Dean and Cas towel him down and Dean gets him into some warm, dry clothes. Cas brings in the medicine just as Dean’s tucking in his less-than-fully-conscious brother. They give him the medicine and he stays asleep, which probably scares his older brother more than if he awoke to puke it all up.
Dean is frantic but Cas’s reaction is a slow build over the course of the day. He mindlessly does whatever Dean asks of him until he finds himself in a hushed moment sitting in the library alone and distraught. The chair feels too big and his skin feels too small and he’s sweaty from running around the bunker fetching things. He has no desire for the cloying humidity of the shower and he’s too worried that Dean may need him to allow himself to start one anyways.

When midnight strikes in one of the bunker’s old grandfather clocks, all Cas has been doing for the past hour and a half is sit in the library listlessly. The chiming prompts him to stir and he realizes he needs to bathe before going to bed.

On his way to the communal bathrooms, he pauses in Sam’s doorway. Dean sits backwards in a chair next to the bed with his head on his arms.

“Dean,” Cas calls softly from the doorway. He’s met with a grunt but the hunter doesn’t turn his head. “Dean, his fever’s down and he’s sleeping,” another grunt, “– you should be too.”

Dean doesn’t argue, “Okay, Cas.” Cas knows the hunter won’t move for a while yet so he makes his way to the bathroom and quickly showers. On his way to his room, he can still see the light on through Sam’s open doorway. He isn’t surprised.

He strides across Sam’s bedroom to turn out the light. Dean shifts in his chair a little at the click but appears to remain sleeping. Cas approaches the chair and shakes his shoulder before pulling him to his feet. Barely conscious, they stagger to Dean’s room. Cas seats him on the edge of the bed to pull his shoes off and only just convinces Dean to stand and remove his jeans before Cas tucks him under the sheets.

Satisfied, the ex-angel stands and gets to the doorway when he hears a muffled, “Night, Cas.”

“Goodnight, Dean.”

The screaming starts at four in the morning.

Dean’s door flings open and he rushes out, not bothering with his robe or slippers as he darts across the hall into the ex-angel’s room.

The fluorescence of the corridor lights beat down on her.

It almost sounds like her breathing echoes in the stony silence.

And then it’s struck by a scream.

Aware that she’s unarmed, she cautiously but intently heads in the direction that the noise came from. It’s one of the bedrooms. The door has been left open and she hears soft noises interspersing the yells. She stands in the doorway. A figure sits hunched over the bed’s thrashing occupant. The
seated figure whispers in a man’s voice, “Cas, hey, Cas, shhhh, shhhhhhh, Cas, it’s okay, wake up buddy, it’s alright, shh, shh, wake up for me Cas.”

One last frightened shout punches the air, and then the ex-angel is awake. He’s panting and in a panicked whisper asks, “Dean?”

Mary gasps, and strains to see the face of the figure even as the grey absorbs her consciousness.

Dean tears away from the anxious eyes looking up at him from the face cradled in his hands to check the doorway. He thinks he heard a sound but nothing’s there. The angel looks even more terrified when Dean turns back to him and without bidding, his thumbs run over cheekbones and lightly stubbled cheeks. He has the urge to dampen the chapped lips that his thumbs almost begin to trace over but he reins both actions in.

“Hey buddy, it’s okay,” Cas moves his hand to cover where Dean’s gripping his face in an incredibly intimate gesture. But Dean keeps cooing comforting words at him, “You’re alright now, you were just having a nightmare.” Cas’s breathing is still erratic so Dean murmurs inane phrases until the angel is breathing normally, which coincides with him falling back to sleep. Dean nearly drifts off with him but he carefully draws back his hands and drags himself to his own bed in his own room.
Misty Mountains

Chapter by saete

Chapter Summary

It's not much but I couldn't stop from writing it

Chapter Notes

Really, this needs to be the last chapter I write this month
Read: you'll probably have another chapter by this Friday. With actual plot this time.
Hopefully...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A woman’s voice and the tile floor are what she first notes.

She’s been here before. Recently …

Sam’s room.

And the woman is Charlie. The redhead sits in a chair near the head of the bed holding a book in her lap. She reads aloud, speaking softly with dramatic intonation and alternating character voices. There’s passion in her words, and it only takes a few paragraphs before Mary places the story.

“The Hobbit.”

Charlie startles at the unexpected voice.

“Oh my God! Mary!” Charlie has the sense to use a stage whisper so that Sam doesn’t wake up.
She smiles as the redhead stares at her, gaping.

“How’s he doing?”

Charlie looks at the bed and then back to Mary, closing her mouth when she realizes she’s being impolite. “He’s uh … I’m not gonna lie, he’s doing worse. He was fine on Thursday – the morning you talked to Castiel. He came out and ate breakfast with us but then on Friday his fever spiked … he’s been here since then.” A deeply worried look breaks out over Mary’s face.

“Oh! Don’t freak out too much. It’s only Saturday. We’re hoping he’ll be up and running by Monday. The meds should be kicking in soon.”
Mary nods.
“He was up long enough to get the scoop on you though. So, he knows you’re here and stuff. Hopefully he’ll be awake next time you pop up.”
Mary smiles, “Hopefully.” They both look at Sam, watching his chest rise and fall in a slow rhythm. “Is Dean here?”

“No! And he wouldn’t stay when I told him he should just in case you appeared!”

“It’s alright,” there's disappointment but Mary wants to placate her a bit – it really isn’t that big of a deal.

“I swear I’ll cuff him to a chair next time he tries to leave! But, if it’s any consolation, I think he might believe that it’s really you now.” Mary looks pleasantly shocked so Charlie continues, “The note helped. And by the way, your food was delicious.”

“Really, I just put them in the pan. I didn’t do anything special.”

“But those eggs were perfect! Your secret ingredient is probably just cooking with extra love or something.” Mary gives a small smile at the compliment. She knows she’s a good cook.

“Seriously, though, how did you figure out how to work that dinosaur of a coffeemaker in a single morning? I still can’t use it without Sam’s help.”

“I’ve learned a little about mechanics in my day.”

“Right,” Charlie nods. “Cas had this weird little smile on his face the entire time he was drinking it and Kevin didn’t stop shoveling eggs into his mouth until he was full. That was the most I’ve ever seen that kid eat.”

“How old is he?” Mary’s been wondering since her conversation with Castiel.

“He’s nineteen I think. And he’s even more of a smartass than Castiel is.”

Mary’s surprised at how young he is and his reaction to her caring touch makes sense; upon joining the life he’d probably gone without a mother for longer than he’d ever had before.

“He looked like he could use a hug. … A big one.”

Charlie’s face contorts in consternation and a film of guilt, “He does, doesn’t he?” Mary nods. “I’ll be sure to give him one next time I see him. And one from you too.”

Mary smiles again – when did it get so easy to smile? - “Whatever you said to him about me must’ve been convincing. He seems skittish but he tolerated me once I told him who I was.”

Charlie shrugs, ‘He’s feisty and there are weapons all over the place. Dean’s finally started training him for real and I have too, though I’ve got more experience with a broadsword than an angelblade. And this place is protected to the max: salt in the doorframe, devil’s trap across the entryway, not to mention incredible amounts of warding and spells on the entire building preventing all a manner of beasties from getting in. It makes it easier to trust.” Charlie grows a curious expression on her face, “You passed all the tests, you’re made it inside, and shockingly you aren’t a ghost despite how much you’re acting like one. … So what are you? How’d you get here?”

The question almost sounds rhetorical.

Mary shrugs. “Would you tell me when you find out? I’d love to know.”

Sam stirs on the bed and they both look but he’s only dreaming. Charlie turns to say something else but unsurprisingly, Mary’s gone and the words stick on her tongue and get lost. Sam shifts again and she’s focused on him once more before she can mourn forgetting them.
Chapter End Notes

Once again, I'm reminding you that I can only hope to be on a regular posting schedule by the middle of May
The soft yellow bulb of an old desk lamp stretches to fill the room.

She’s standing beside a bed.
Sam is its occupant.

The room is at a different angle than both of the other times she’s been here and the lamp casts odd shadows. He looks better than when Kevin brought her to see him but not much healthier than when she was last here and talking to Charlie. Directly opposite her sits a man hunched over in a chair. The heels of his hands press into his eyes and his knees are pressed to the side of the bed. He sniffs and draws in a shaky breath. Sam’s hand on that side of the bed lies open as if someone had been holding it and then released it suddenly. “Sammy” he breathes out - the word barely audible.

And she knows him.

“Dean,” she means it as a question but it comes out as a sigh of relief, gratitude, disbelief, all at being able to finally encounter her son after so many separate instances of only speaking with other people she’s never known before.

He sucks in a breath and there’s fear in his red-rimmed eyes when his head jerks up and he meets her gaze. He leans forward protectively over Sam before his jaw drops open and he freezes in shock. His eyes narrow in the soft light and he looks like he’s going to be sick as he chokes out a whispered, “Mom?”

She reaches out, awkwardly across the width of the bed but she has to touch him; know that he’s real and that this is her baby boy. Lovely green eyes, was if caught in headlights, stare up at her where he’s still hunched over the bed. But at the first touch, distress melts into adoration and emotion. He’s immobilized by the shock of what’s going on, she can tell, so keeping one hand against his cheek, she draws his face up so he’s standing and without losing eye contact, she walks around the end of the bed to stand in front of him. Mary cups his jaw in both of her hands and with wonder written all across his face, Dean reaches up to cover them with his own hands. She runs her thumbs over his cheeks and tears form in the corners of her eyes.

She remembers him looking like an adult from when she encountered both he and Sam as a ghost in their old home. They were both so grown up but in comparison to the world-weary faces in the room with her, they looked like infants back then.
Mary peers over his two-day scruff and the bags under his eyes jab at her heart a little, but he’s still-

“My little angel,” she whispers.

And he silently breaks down, wrapping her tightly in his arms, burying his dampening face in the crook of her neck. She holds tight and her own tears begin to fall slowly.

She *smells* like his mom – flowers and pie crust and warmth. And the way she hugged was exactly the way he remembered. It made him feel the same inside, too; that childish sense of nothing being wrong, and of feeling whole. He’d been broken for so long...

“I didn’t – I mean I wasn’t-“ he sounds so abject and he hates it and he just wants to stay in her arms until he fades to nothing. He can’t even finish a goddam sentence. He’s too wrapped up in her.

“Shhh, it’s okay honey.” That only makes the tears fall faster. They stand like that for so long, until Dean sniffs and pulls back so he can look at her. He wants to read reality in her eyes.

They’re still wrapped in each other’s arms – Dean can’t bear to stop touching her, afraid that if he lets go she’ll be gone for good. He can hardly think clearly – there are too many things he wants to – needs to say so he goes with his first thought, “You told Cas to tell me that my pie was good.”

“It was perfect.” She smiles and tears pool in his eyes again. Something that was absent has been filled. She just wipes them away gently as they fall. He hugs her again, “It was your recipe I used,” he’s able to rasp out.

“I could tell,” she says with a weepy grin. He pulls back to look at her once more – it’s so hard to decide which he needs more – to hug her or see her face?

“Really?”

“Mmmhmmm.” At that, he moves to hug her again and muffles a sob into her shoulder. This is so surreal. It’s everything he’s ever wanted and more.

They stand hugging until they both stop crying.

Sam gives a convulsive cough that shakes him so hard the bed lurches. Dean instinctively pulls from her grip to reach out for his brother. He brushes the hair from Sam’s forehead and turns him on his side, propping him up more in an attempt to lessen his brother’s pain, and also the frequency of his own thoughts.

Mary feels a tingling nipping at her consciousness. “Dean, I can’t control when I come and go but I promise I’ll be back. I know I will.”

He turns back rapidly to step towards her again, “How?” There’s fear there in his eyes and Mary’s heart breaks at it. How many people have left him to put that look there?

“I know it. I will fight heaven and hell to get back to you two.” She pulls his forehead to her lips and he closes his eyes to savor the moment. He feels the hands slip from his face but keeps his eyes closed, pretending he doesn’t know she’s gone.
Pandiculation

Chapter by saete

Chapter Notes

Well, well, well, would you look at that? I'm a lying liar who can't keep my hands off of this fic. Who knows, maybe I'll be finished before I have time to set a regular posting schedule in May.

This work is going to be longer than I originally intended but I got a really great idea in the space between the time I last published and now. So here, have a bit of fluff before we get to some actual plot next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

By Monday at 2:00 AM, Dean’s fallen asleep in his chair at Sam’s bedside. Cas had tried to move him to his own room but the hunter was adamant that he stay with his brother.

By Monday at 2:01 AM Sam’s fever has broken completely.

And by Monday at 2:05 AM Sam is awake and yawning, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He props himself on his elbows to take a look around the room – still the one Dean put him in when he first came home after the trials. His phone sits charging on the nightstand and he checks it. He realizes he’s only been out for a few days and takes it as a good sign.

With all of his books still in his real bedroom and Dean asleep next to him there isn’t much he can do. He doesn’t think he can make it to the library, not without help, anyways. So he tries to go back to sleep.

The sound of rustling papers in the still room confuses him for a moment. He sits up.

Muffled sounds – a stretch, yawning, fluttering papers.

The same soft light as last time greets her.

And then a word.

Sam blinks hard and focuses on the apparition before him. His whispered “Mom?” is scared. He sounds like a little boy.

For a moment, a wave of fear washes over him. Is he in the cage? No he was sure he’d escaped. Lucifer, it’s Lucifer again, isn’t it. It can’t be. Nononono not again. Not her. He can’t use her.
She steps forward with excitement in her eyes and puts a hand to his face, “Sammy?”

Awake – he’s finally awake.

It’s all he can do to not flinch away but as soon as her hand makes contact with him, he can smell her and warmth flows from her touch, and it’s her oh my God it’s her. Lucifer was cold. Lucifer only ever looked like the people he impersonated. Everything else was empty of sensory information, but for a hungry heart like Sam’s it was enough at the time whenever the Devil had approached him.

Sam’s eyes look a little teary as he breaks out into quiet laughter and pulls her into a hug, “I’ve never been so happy to hear that nickname before.” His laugh is muffled by her stomach and she wraps her arms around his shoulders because he’s still sitting up in bed.

Dean shifts in his chair at the noise and Sam pulls away to make sure his brother hasn’t woken up. When he’s assured, he pushes back the sheets and swings his legs over the side of the bed. He pauses and looks up at Mary. He wants to talk with her. He has to talk with her so they’re going to his real bedroom. Just as soon as he can stand up.

Mary seems to read his mind and puts a hand on his shoulder, moving so she can help him stand. He musters up enough strength to quietly get to his feet and waver for a minute. Then they move down the hall. Why had he chosen a room so far from Dean’s? Sam wants to roll his eyes at his brain for asking questions that answer themselves.

When they reach his room and he’s seated on the bed, Mary closes the door and turns to him. He realizes the magnitude of their situation and his mouth hangs open before he sputters out, “I can’t believe you’re here.”

“Tell me about it,” she smiles brightly and walks over to a chair sitting at the desk that she pulls out to place in front of him.

“How did you know it was me?”

“Kevin introduced us –“

“Oh, of course.”

“And I saw Charlie and Dean in your room both of the times I was last here.”

Sam nods but she continues frivolously, “It helps that you have the same look of surprise that your father did.” Sam gets the strangest expression of awe and a searching for truth in his eyes at that. He finds it in hers.

“I didn’t really get to talk to Dean when I saw him.”

“Ask me anything. That’s why I brought you here; I want to talk.”

“I almost feel like a bad mother for depriving you of sleep. You obviously need it,” she brushes the hair from his forehead.

“Are you kidding? I’m gonna go nuts if I have to sleep any longer.” His gut clenches at that lie. He resists the urge to cough, or yawn, or let his eyes close.
But Mary distracts him, “Cas … mentioned something – well he mentioned a lot of things that piqued my curiosity. But this one in particular is … I just can't stop wondering what happened. What’s the story about Dean going to Hell?”

Sam’s eyes bug out a little and he fish-mouths for a moment so Mary jumps back in with, “I don’t think Castiel meant to rake up old problems, but I asked him how he met you two and he was candid, but wouldn’t tell me anything else. Said it should come from you two.”

“No, … no, it’s fine, it’s just … not exactly what you expect to talk about during your first real conversation with your mom.” Sam makes a puzzled expression at his own words. Since when had anything in their lives met expectations? Angels were dicks, fairies and prophets were real, and Death enjoyed good pickle chips.

“Oh – I guess –“

“But it’s fine! I’d … I’d like to tell you. It’s something you should know.” She strokes a hand over his cheek, cupping it for a moment, giving him time, showing him that she appreciates what he’s doing even though he obviously finds it stressful. “It’s good that I’m the one telling you because Dean would never get the story right.” She takes his subsequent laugh to mean there’s another reason he doesn’t want Dean to be there for the retelling.

And she’s right. She wasn’t there for those agonizing nights of screaming and sweating once his brother had returned. And Sam doesn’t think Dean would have wanted her to have been there now that (for the most part) they’re gone.

He knows her background and that she was a hunter, so he dives right in, “Well, he uh, he sold his soul to save my life,” because I was at a demon camp, he doesn’t add. “And the crossroads demon he made a deal with, she saw how desperate he was,” and she knew that he was a Winchester, “so she only offered him a year to live. At first, Dean tried to convince me to leave it because he was afraid she’d go back on the deal if any funny business happened, so he just wanted to live it up,” and drink his sorrows away. "But all year Bobby and I –“

“Bobby?” Immediately she regrets interrupting.

Sam smiles and nods, though, “He was like an uncle to me and Dean. Bobby and I, we tried to find a way out of it. At the end of the year, there was nothing we could do and the hellhounds came and …” got scribed on him by the Queen of the Demons, “… they tore him to pieces,” dragged off his soul. He pauses. “He couldn’t stand dogs when he first came back. Wouldn’t let them near the car before, but he could rarely walk past one without patting it on the head. He’s gotten better about it I think.” Sam clears his throat and stifles another yawn, “Anyways, about three months after,” - after I watched him shredded and saw the life drain out of him for the first time - “which turns out to be forty years in hell, he shows up alive and well without a scratch on him. Except for a weird handprint scar on his left shoulder, courtesy of Castiel. Which was how we even tracked him down.”

Mary nods to herself but also in acknowledgement of Sam’s story-telling duties being over for the moment. She was right; things had gotten much more complicated since she’d left. Complicated and worse.

Unable to hold back any longer, Sam yawns and scrunches his face up as he stretches. He wants to keep awake. He wants to keep talking with Mary even if it isn’t a conversation. He wants to be with her. He doesn’t want this to be the only time they have together. But his eyes don’t open when he closes his mouth after yawning.

She murmurs, “Do you need me to take you back to your room?” He shakes his head, eyes still shut. And as if he were still the infant he was the last time she held him, instead of the gangly 6’4”
mass before her now, she manipulates his tired limbs under the covers and tucks him with a kiss, “Goodnight, Sammy.”

He slips off with a smile on his lips at the words, and with him Mary vanishes.

Chapter End Notes

Pandiculation - a stretching and stiffening especially of the trunk and extremities (as when fatigued and drowsy or after waking from sleep). Typically accompanied by yawning.

(you have no idea how many times I yawned looking for a reputable and accurate definition for that word)

I really have no guess as to when I'll be able to update next. Apologies.
New Eyes

Chapter by saete

Chapter Summary

Little things about everyone get unearthed.

Chapter Notes

Extra long hiatus = extra long chapter
If you’ll notice, I’ve changed the story summary and added some tags. Also, I went back and edited some of the chapters some more. Just little things, but they were bothering me.

Be careful where you step - a spoonful of plot and major fluff lies ahead. It’s like a spilled vat of marshmallow spread. Or a large basket of kittens. Just bunker life activity all over the place.

**Warnings (very mild spoilers):**
On a more serious note, there are mild but sad descriptions of nightmares (like what you’ve seen already), PTSD, and symptoms of depression mentioned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sconces line the walls.

An argument is going on somewhere. She can hear the raised voices from where she stands in the unfamiliar hallway.

She follows the direction of the noise.

“- can’t just let this go. She’s going to show up again!” Charlie, Mary identifies the voice.

“Who said anything about letting this go?” Dean.

“Before we do anything we really should get more warding in case-“

“What? In case it isn’t her? It’s her, Kev.” The last word is sneered and, Mary thinks, tinged with offense.
Dean stands leaning over the table in what is subconsciously an intimidating posture. But his eyes dart to his left to make eye contact with Cas.

“Dean-“

“Cas, don’t say anything unless you’re gonna back me up.”

Cas gives him a look that tells him just how much of his audacity and bullshit the angel is willing to take. On a bender, the words ring in Dean’s ears to match the face his best friend displays now.

“Dean,” he continues without any regard to the other man’s request, “there are other things we can do besides simply waiting.”

She’s getting close now, the voices sound like they’re just around a corner.

She reaches the bottom of the steps leading through the archway and into the library. Carefully picking her way up the stairs, the scene unfolds before her. All of the bunker’s inhabitants whom she’s met sit at the long table closest to the entryway. ‘Sit’ being a relative term. Sam’s splayed in his chair at the head of the table furthest from her. Cas, on his right, is tucked up with his knees to his chest, and happens to be the only other person actually sitting. Next to Cas, Dean is standing, both hands firmly fisted and pressed to the table top. Charlie stands across from him, her chair pushed out behind her as if she stood up rapidly. She has one hand on her hip and is gesticulating with the other, looking very much as if she’s explaining something to a petulant child. Kevin is to her left with arms folded over his chest and is managing to remain on his feet with minimal swaying.

Dean has just finished saying something, which Cas appears to be none too pleased about as he responds with, “No, I’m not suggesting we don’t wait at all. Obviously we’re hoping she returns on her own.”

“I think we can safely presume she’s going to come back.”

“Charlie-“ Dean tries to redirect the conversation.

“What is it now, six times she’s been here? At least?”

“And how is she even getting in?” Kevin interjects.

Sam looks like he thinks he’s saying words and participating in the conversation but he’s mostly just coughing violently.

“That’s a fair point, Kevin but I don’t know that it’s our main concern,” Cas notes.

“How? If she can get in, what else can?”

“There’s no way to know until we can determine more, which would require seeing her again. And it seems we’ve decided,” the angel gives a blameful look to Dean, “that waiting is our only option.”

“Well what are we supposed to do?”
“Maybe tell me what’s been going on?”

All heads swivel at her unexpected answer to Dean’s question, and there’s a moment of shocked silence. Charlie whispers, “Mary,” and from the doorway the woman gives a close-mouthed smile.

“I’m curious. I want to know why I’m here. And about what’s going on. About all of you.”

They all become aware of their tense, aggressive postures and make an effort to relax themselves. They sit down like the teacher’s just walked into the classroom during a spitball war. When the awed silence goes unbroken, Sam shakes his head, composing himself to respond with, “Uh... y-”

“Not yet.” Dean looks at his brother as he says this, then averts his face to stare down at the table, feeling all eyes in the room rest on him. “Could we wait?” He pulls his gaze away from the tabletop and is careful to only let his eyes meet Mary’s as he does so, “Until we’re sure you can ... stay around to hear the whole thing?”

Mary smiles gently, nodding, “Of course.” She moves into the room and decides to lessen the weightiness of his request by adding, “I’d rather be able to hear the whole thing in one sitting anyways.” His eyes thank her but he clears his throat and pulls out the chair next to him that isn’t occupied by an angel. She moves to sit in it, when Castiel speaks up.

“It would be wise to use our collective time with you here to investigate ... everything about your presence here, now.”

“I have to say I’d like some answers.”

“We should start with what you know. Cas told us you just remember grey or something,” Charlie pipes up.

“Yes. I have my memories from my life, and then the night I died,” Sam swallows tightly and hopes no one notices, “and then it’s just a grey blur and flashes of time spent between what must’ve been the veil and the house I died in, where I guess I was a ghost. I remember the boys coming and eliminating the poltergeist-”

Sam looks up in surprise, “You remember that?”

“It’s fuzzy but I remember seeing the both of you before dissipating. ... I don’t remember time passing but I know that there was a period of just grey spanning between then and the day I showed up here and met Charlie. And every time since then when I haven’t been here, in the bunker,” she’s pensive for a moment, gazing into the distance at the ceiling, reaching for sensory information that isn’t there.

“That doesn’t seem like anything to go on. At all,” Kevin says dismally.

“Thank you, Eeyore,” Dean retorts.

“I was about to propose finding some means of summoning you, because if we each take to Dean’s method of waiting on you to appear we will lose all ability to function,” Cas takes a sip of his coffee.

Mary gives Dean a look that asks him to explain himself.

“I was waiting on you to show up again, so I stayed in Sam’s room for a few days.”

“He wouldn’t sleep,” Cas’s words are coated in reproach.
Sam carries the same tone, “We had to drag him out here to talk because there wasn’t enough space in my room for all of us.”

“There’s plenty of room! And I wanted to stay in there so you could lie down. Scared the hell out of me when I woke up this morning and you were just gone. You still aren’t fully better.”

“I’m doing fine, Dean.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Dean, play nursemaid later,” Kevin demands. “Can we please get back to the subject while she’s still here?”

“Maybe we should try and figure out why she’s here? Got any ideas?” Charlie looks hopeful but only just so, and her question is met with silence.

Cas speaks up, “I suggest we follow Kevin’s inclinations and determine how she’s here. Since she’s corporeal, we should take a look at the bunker’s records on resurrection.”

“But we can also see if there’s anything about why, right?” Sam asks.

“I don’t see why not,” Cas nods, “You and Charlie can look into that and Kevin and I can research resurrection.”

“And what about me?” his voice is matter-of-fact but Dean looks bothered that he wasn’t put into a group.

“I suggest you and Mary look into summoning spells in case she disappears. That will likely intersect with the materials on resurrection. It would be wise if we all do our research in here like normal, but at one table, and compare notes as we go. Point out things and share information that overlaps or could prove to be a lead.”

“Damn, Cas. You’ve got some major planning skills,” Charlie looks impressed.

Dean stands, clapping his friend on the shoulder as he moves past, “They didn’t make him an angel army strategist for nothin’.”

Charlie can’t help but smile when Cas actually looks bashful at the compliment. He was so stoic in the books, at least for a while. Being human must be getting to him.

Dean turns to call Mary, reveling in the words he is about to get to say, “Come on, mom.” Sam ducks his head and smiles too, as Mary pushes away from the table to follow her oldest son.

Cas and Charlie head into the stacks as well but Sam stays at the table while Kevin goes to the kitchen. By the time each person has their own little pile of tomes, Kevin’s returned with mugs of tea for himself and Sam and they all get to work.

They sort through the heavy reading for hours. Eventually Dean leaves to go fix dinner and after a moment, Cas begs off to go help him. Sam forces himself not to let his smile show at this. Seeing Cas do human things like set the table and whine about coffee in the mornings makes him feel like he does when he sees Dean cooking or coming in from parking the impala in a garage.
Comfortable – like maybe he’s on his way to finding a home somehow. But it isn’t home. He’s not sure he can let himself have one. Not yet.

Shortly after Cas leaves, Charlie slams down the book on the table. She stares at Mary for a moment before jumping up with a, “Be right back!” and darting from the room. Mary takes this chance to ask, “Can one of you point me to a bathroom?” Kevin gives her directions and she finds it without difficulty, but is surprised at the communal nature of it.

On her way back, before she can turn down into the last hallway leading to the library, she hears hushed voices and she pauses.

“I want to keep an eye on her.”

“So do I, Dean. But it’s not like we’re keeping her on lockdown. Or like we can do anything when she does disappear on us. We may as well let her have her freedom and her privacy.”

“Like we’re letting her do anything.”

Sam scoffs, “Yeah, exactly. So we put her in a room next to Charlie’s and be done with it.”

“Charlie’s? But that’s so far– oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Good thinkin’, Sammy.”

She hears what must be a pat on the back before two sets of footsteps trail down the hall.

Upon re-entering, she finds that Sam is back in his seat as if he hadn’t left and that Charlie has returned. The redhead jumps up, “You are coming with me.” She grabs Mary’s hand and leads her to the main staircase. They walk past the front door and down the corridor Mary took to find Kevin the first time. She also recognizes it as the one she stood in when Cas was having his nightmare.

“We’re going to pick out a room for you. Sam and Dean want you in the one next to me, but seriously, you’re their mom. You can do whatever you want.”

“The room next to your sounds fine ... Though now I’m almost tempted to pick the one across the hall from you just because I can.”

Charlie flashes her a grin, “You really should. It won’t even make that much of a difference.”

Mary laughs, “Alright. Across the hall it is.”

Charlie takes her to the end of the hall then makes a left and stops in front of a storage closet. She throws open the door, to reveal stacks of identical sheets, pillowcases, and blankets, “I know the variety in choice is overwhelming, but you can pick whichever ones you want.” Mary gives a small laugh at the sarcasm and grabs out one of each item then turns back for an extra blanket. They make their way back down the hall but Charlie stops abruptly in about the middle of the hall but closer to the bunker’s entrance than not. She turns to the door on her left and barges in, then immediately begins stripping the sheets from the bed.

“Just let me go throw these in the washer and we can make up your bed. I’ll grab some cloths or something we can use to dust with, too.”

Mary goes ahead and starts making the bed and when Charlie gets back set everything up in no
time. Once they’ve finished Charlie goes to across the hall and returns bearing some pajamas and some regular clothing.

“I don’t know if my jeans will fit you but I brought some in case they do. And at least you’ll fit into the sweatpants and shirts. Also, there are showers down the hall to the right that you can use after dinner if you want. They’re communal but just tell everyone beforehand and you’ll be fine.”

As if on cue, Dean calls from the end of the hall, “Soup’s on!” Mary sets the new clothes on her bed and follows Charlie down to the dining room.

When they get there, Cas and Dean are ferrying platters between the kitchen and the table. Dean brings the last one in just as Charlie and Mary pull their chairs out.

“Mary is officially all set up in her new room now,” Charlie says as she serves herself shepherd’s pie.

“Congratulations. Having your own room goes quite a long way towards giving yourself a sense of belonging,” Cas says, eliciting a small smile from Dean, “but I recommend personalizing it as well.”

“Yeah,” Charlie says around a mouthful of food, “Get some books from the library or have one of us get something from the store for you.”

“Just tell Charlie if there’s anything you need and she’ll grab it for you on Thursday.”

“Dammit, it’s my turn isn’t it?”

“If there isn’t anything that catches your eye, I have some books in my room too that I’d be happy to lend you,” Sam looks eager about this particular line of discussion.

“Yeah, Sammy’s a little nerd. Got piles and piles of books all over his room that he’s hoarding,” Dean says then after a moment adds, “but same here.”

“Look who’s calling me a nerd, nerd. I haven’t seen any Heller on the casual reading shelves since we got here. Or Vonnegut for that matter.”

“Shaddup.”

Dinner continues in this manner full of friendly banter. Charlie tells stories about her times working for Sucrocorp and everyone’s sides hurt by the time Kevin tears himself away to do the dishes.

Because Mary’s ignorance allows them all for one evening to ignore the horrible things going on in the world and to pretend, as usual, that they aren’t hurt from things that have been said and done.

\[oOo\]

Three days are spent like this, with research, and food, and inane chatter, until Dean goes to call her for breakfast on Thursday morning and she isn’t there.

He lets Sam sleep in and tells Kevin to go back to decoding the tablet. Charlie heads straight to the
stacks after breakfast, but Dean dawdles with cleaning up. Cas goes in to help him – he’d offered to do everything himself but Dean insisted on doing it. They fall into the same rhythm they do every morning and Cas is quiet until Dean turns away from handing him the second to last dish. Cas grabs his wrist with his free hand.

“Cas-“

“She’s going to come back.”

“What happens when she doesn’t, Cas? Huh?” He looks up and searches Cas's face, "Everything is going to be so much worse than if she’d never come back at all.”

“When is it ever that simple with us, Dean? She’s going to keep coming back until whatever she’s back for is over and done with. And that can’t very well happen until she does more than read which is all we’re doing until we figure out why she’s here.”

Dean sighs and turns back to the lone plate. He scrubs it quickly and instead of draining the sink and waiting for Cas to finish, as he usually would, he leaves Cas drying the plate and heads to the library.

Cas goes to join him but when he gets there, it’s just Charlie.

“Everything okay? Dean just came in here to take a few books and said he’d be researching in his room today.”

Cas sighs, “Yes, everything is fine. Relatively speaking.” He looks to the other room where the stairs lead up to the dorms. “Are you still going to town today?”

“Oh! I need to do that soon. Did you wanna come with?”

Cas nods and Charlie sends him to go get dressed as she pushes her books back from the edge and asks Dean for the keys to one of the cars.

Cas has managed to pilfer a good portion of Dean’s closet at this point and chooses a Zeppelin tour shirt. He puts it on and gives a deep sigh. It still smells like Dean, and he takes another breath. Home.

He heads down to find that Charlie’s elected to take the T-bird. It was a “turquoise monstrosity” as Dean put it so it didn’t get a lot of road-time. Cas suspects that Charlie favors it because she feels sorry for it.

They drive to Phillipsburg for their supplies so that they don’t draw attention in Lebanon. It’s a long drive and a lot of gas and mileage so they limit the trip to every other week and Dean typically insists that they use a car other than the impala.

As soon as they’re on the highway, Charlie turns down the radio. “I know we haven’t really had a chance to talk until now, but I think this is the perfect opportunity to make you my new best friend. So spill. What’s the deal?”

“The deal?”

“Yeah, the deal. Tell me what’s whirling around in that angel brain of yours,” she turns back to the road, “What’s going on with Dean? Obviously something’s the matter. I’m taking it upon myself to make sure that you’re okay, because I know he isn’t but we can deal with that later.”
Cas gives a short sigh, “I’d rather not push him about anything. Truly I’m just grateful that he allowed me to stay. I was concerned he was going to turn me away,” he huffs a breath, “even after I’d spoken with him on the phone.” Charlie is obviously waiting for him to continue. He isn’t used to having to support this much of a conversation. “Throughout the entire journey I made to the bunker I was afraid that I’d get there, and that he’d hand me some money then slam the door in my face.”

“But you’re like family to them. You’re Dean’s best friend! What could possibly make you think that?”

Cas looks out the window at the pastures flying by and says quietly, “Every decision I’ve made for the past three years.”

Charlie recognizes that he means much more than he’s saying with his vague phrasing, and there’s a lot of guilt there that she’s neither ready to deal with nor capable of relieving.

She turns up the music from her mix-CD and the majority of the duration of the drive is spent in near-amicable silence. It is, of course interrupted frequently by Charlie belting out the lyrics to some of her favorite tried and true pop songs which Cas seems to find amusing.

Before they know it, they’re pulling into town and Charlie’s parking the car.

“Okay bestie, here’s what’s on the list: various foodstuffs, gun oil, ammo, clothes, and a package from the post office. Man I wish Lebanon had a Walmart. Not that Mr. Paranoid would let us use it.” She sighs and tucks the list in her pocket, locking the car door once Cas is out. “So groceries last because of melting hazards, and boring stuff first,” she points her thumb at the hardware store they’re parked in front of. They make it in and out in fifteen minutes with a bonus pair of wire cutters Charlie decides she needs and then head next door to the post office.

But apparently someone gave Sam the credit card and let him go on a shopping spree because despite the unbelievable size of their library, the man has ordered five packages of ancient manuscripts and several computer accessories (though Charlie approves of the new router he’s chosen).

“When did he even have time to order any of this? Hasn’t he been unconscious for the past three weeks?” Charlie shoves the last box into the trunk and they head over to the largest clothing store the town has to offer.

“Well, I got some of my shirts torn and stained – and not because of sexy reasons – so I need to head to the women’s section. I’m going to pick up a couple of things for Mary, which you can help me with. Oh, we should get you your own stuff while we’re here too, shouldn’t we?”

He hasn’t even considered wearing anything besides Dean’s clothes until this point. He doesn’t really think he wants to.

“I’m alright.” He nods as if to confirm the fact to himself.

They cross through the men’s section anyways and as they pass the undergarments, something catches Cas’s eye and he stops. He picks it up.

“Cas?” Charlie drags the cart to a halt when she realizes she’s lost the ex-angel, and she backtracks, “Whatcha got there?” She peers over his shoulder to find that he’s holding a package of boxers, but these are not your average boxers, oh no. This package contains boxers in several shades of blue, all with tiny, minimalist bumblebees printed on them sporadically. She snatches the package from his hands, “Those are adorable, you have to get them.” She tosses them in the cart
and moves on and all Cas can do is follow.

They make short work of the women’s department – Charlie having checked Mary’s size on her discarded clothing specifically for this reason. Charlie grabbed a few graphic tees for herself which she was pleasantly surprised to find, and she coerced Cas into getting some for himself when she told him she was getting one for each of the boys as well. Cart brimming, they marched to the cashier and maxed out a blue card belonging to one “M. Swindlerton” (the shipping and holding fees the post office had imposed were a bitch). Before making their way to the grocery store, Cas hears Charlie mumble something about “small town monopolies” and “jacked up prices” but he’s satisfied with their trip thus far.

In the grocery store, Charlie starts messing around. She teaches Cas how to ride a grocery cart up and down the aisles without throwing it off balance or crashing into anything. They grab bread, flour, meat, cheese, ice cream, eggs, and four gallons of milk (Charlie checks the list twice then texts Dean – sure it’s a mistake, but “apparently we’re real milkoholics” she says, putting an extra gallon into the cart per Dean’s request). On the cleaning aisle, instead of merely grabbing the air freshener they need, they pause for a broom-duel which Cas surprises Charlie by winning. Out of breath, they go to grab the produce but screw around by tossing fruit to each other across displays. When they see a manager come out from behind a door in the wall, Charlie has to grab the first bag of potatoes she sees and yank Cas and the apples he’s carrying away from the scene of the crime – attempted fruit murder and reckless operation of vegetables are serious matters. Charlie drops his hand once they reach the checkout and soon they’re out of the store, making their way to the car, arms laden with food.

The drive back is easier, more lighthearted and it flies by. They unload the groceries and Dean comes down to help them before he starts dinner. Cas goes to find Kevin and help him make sense of the tablet and Charlie goes in to finish up the notes she was making on her text.

Mary makes an appearance late after dinner. Sam had turned in early – you know, dying from saving the world and all. But she finds Cas and Dean curled up on a sofa in a mostly dark library. The laptop is on a table they’ve dragged over and she can hear the Imperial March from across the room where she stands in the entryway. Kevin sprawls on one end of the sofa as if he’d intended to watch with them but had fallen asleep. His feet rest pushing against Dean’s thigh and it appears that he’s exiled both of them to a two and a half foot space at their end of the couch so that they’re pressed together. Surprisingly, no one seems to mind all that much.

Mary hears a noise in the kitchen and finds Charlie, who had been watching with them earlier but is now making herself a cup of bedtime tea. Mary lets her know she’s in the bunker and they talk for a moment before the blonde heads off to bed.

When she passes (or rather diverts her path to look into) the library on the way up to the dorms, she sees that the drowsiness she’d previously noted has graduated to full-on slumber.

She pulls two blankets off of two of the other couches in the room, as she approaches them. She drapes one over Kevin, freeing a hand to pause the movie and close the laptop.

Hunter’s instincts kick in at the sudden lack of noise, and Dean stirs, “Mom?”
“Shhh,” she tucks the blanket around him and Cas, “go back to sleep.” He blinks slowly in the dim light and she barely makes out the movement. She presses a kiss to the top of his head, “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

He obeys her, satisfied that she’s returned, and afraid that if he wakes himself up he’ll only find out it was a dream.

She hears him settle back in and on the way out of the room, throws a glance over her shoulder before turning out the lone lamp, and sees him resting his head on top of Cas’s where the ex-angel is sleeping on his shoulder.

Getting ready for bed, she smiles at the thought of an angel on her son’s shoulder.

oOo

It’s a week before she greys out on them again. A week during which some rather eventful discoveries are made.

The first being that Kevin has only seen one Indiana Jones movie. And it was the crappy 2008 one. Given that Cas hasn’t seen them either and it’s been years for either of the boys, Dean declares it to be movie night. Friday was spent doing heavy filtering through a bunch of unhelpful books and seeing as it’s Saturday, a movie marathon would be the perfect way to end the week. Charlie makes the executive decision that they need a TV to watch it on. She sends Dean and Cas to the nearest electronics store with specifications for what TV to get, afraid that Dean will try and be frugal when “this is the pixel quality of Kate Capshaw and Alison Doody we’re talking about,” she stresses. “And Harrison Ford, of course,” she adds for Dean’s benefit alone. When they return, she spends the better part of the afternoon hooking it up to her laptop so they can use a possibly less than legal internet source.

While Mary and Cas push couches together, they hear Dean in the other room sending Sam to bed to nap before dinner because “you’re still not better” and “you really need sleep” and “I’ll get mom to back me up on this.” Mary looks at Cas and they try not to laugh as they sit back down to keep researching while Sam grumbles and comes close to stomping his way upstairs. Dean joins them after a moment and Kevin’s grateful for the company – having been the only one to continuously slave away at this all day.

When Charlie finishes early, Dean decides he can’t wait any longer and runs into town for pizza so that they can quit research and start the marathon as soon as he gets back. They make snacks and pick seats with Mary being the first to lay claim to the large, plush, leather armchair. If it’s the seat that happens to have the best view of the room and the other seats then that’s surely just coincidence. Sam sprawls on the loveseat and Charlie jumps over the back of it to lay down with her head resting on Sam’s thigh. Dean seats himself in the middle of the couch between Kevin and Cas after retrieving the remote and none of them move until Charlie calls for an intermission halfway through Temple of Doom so she can go to the bathroom.

Before they can even get ten minutes into The Last Crusade, Mary sees that Sam and Kevin are passed out (honestly they lasted a lot longer than she expected them to) and that Charlie is dozing. She had eaten half a pizza without help and had sentenced herself to an eventual food coma which looked to be fully kicking in any minute now.

But Dean and Cas are wide awake and enraptured. She watches as Dean gestures at the screen and
leans over to whisper something to Cas for the sixth time in as many minutes. It’s so surreal to her that she gets to see any of this. The knowledge that she has died and yet finds herself with the opportunity to get to know her children is the most satisfying sensation.

Other, less pleasant discoveries are found out as well. That first consecutive week she’s sentient in the bunker takes a hammer to her heart. Despite the boys’ attempts to place her far from everyone else, she does not go unaware of their problems. Those nights during that week are like sleeping in a hospital ward for PTSD patients. That short moment she’d seen with Castiel was nothing compared to what the first week held on the whole.

During the day the group works like a well-oiled machine, moving in a carved out rhythm they’ve created over time: cooking, researching, eating, chores – methodical but never boring. They do the Men of Letters proud. But they each had their tells for nights that would be bad.

Mary knows that they probably don’t realize that they’re giving themselves away but she learns the signs and wonders if they’d be as obvious with these sorts of things if they were playing poker.

It starts Saturday night or sometime early Sunday morning. Before they’d all turned in, Kevin had been sitting in the library. It was far too late, but he wasn’t working and when the others said goodnight and left him, Mary followed their lead. The next morning he’s already in the kitchen when Mary enters. Dean is cooking breakfast but he’s not saying anything to the younger man the way he normally talks when he cooks and then Mary notices Kevin’s red eyes. He doesn’t make any jokes with Charlie or Dean at breakfast, and doesn’t tease Cas or even invest in the conversation when Sam starts talking about historical accuracy in one of the manuals he’s researching in.

She can almost never tell beforehand with the other three boys - it's as if they have integrated night terrors into their lives so well that there isn't an ominous cloud over them beforehand or a psychological break in the aftermath. She's afraid that she's far too close to the truth with that speculation.

The physical damage, though, is obvious. Dean comes into breakfast with his voice shot from screaming all night. Sam will have hand and neck cramps for the first few hours from clutching the sheets and curling into himself. Cas is the worst and Mary blames it on his poor transition into humanhood. After a bad night he’s reluctant to eat and seems deep in thought. The heaviness that normally rests in his eyes is replaced by black bags. He sits quiet or, more often, silent during breakfast and heads into the kitchen to clean up before anyone else is done. Occasionally Dean will follow him but he typically leaves the angel to himself, knowing there is nothing he can really do. They all go through this.

Some part of her wishes she didn't sleep so well and that the walls weren't so soundproof. She actually thinks Charlie’s fine until one night the girl’s door is left ajar and Mary’s coming to bed late. She hears soft noises that sound ... pained or sad. She steps closer so she can almost see into the dark where Charlie lies on her bed. Mary can’t see the way her body shakes but she can hear the soft whimpers and then a soft sob before the sound of a throat clearing breaks the air. Charlie begins humming, something somber but Mary can’t identify it. She wants to go to her but is afraid that she will only be intruding, and crosses the hall to her room, leaving the girl to quell herself.

She wants to comfort them all. She thinks back to the first few years after what should have been one of the happiest moments of her life – when John was proposing but Azazel had shown up and murdered everyone she loved. And she thinks of how grateful she’d been, after, when John was
there to hold her and whisper to her. How he’d tell her how much he loved her and how it would be okay. He’d remind her to slow her breathing as he rubbed circles in her back with one hand and wiped tears from her cheeks with the other, gently kissing her face and hair every now and then. The night she lost her parents, she had almost lost everything, but then she’d gotten John back and she escaped the life. In those first few months, it was easier to fall back to sleep when she could wrap her arms around him and remind herself that she had something.

Monday night, she walks to the bathrooms, passing Kevin’s room from which she hears the deep choked breaths of someone crying their eyes out. She clenches her fists and keeps walking down the hall; it’s not my place, I’ll only be invading if I intervene. Heading back to her room, she sees his door thrown wide open and the room empty. On a whim, she goes down to the kitchen where she finds him sitting at the table holding a steaming cup in his hands. She moves to the stove where a hot kettle still sits and she pours herself a mug and grabs a tea bag from a cabinet before sitting down across from him. He continues to stare blankly into the cup before him.

So she talks.

She talks to him about little things. She tells him anecdotes and things that make her happy. She tells him about making different shaped pancakes for Dean as a treat on the weekends. She talks about how baby Sammy loved to be brought out into the backyard while she gardened. And she keeps talking until they’ve both finished two cups of tea and Kevin doesn’t look frightened and tormented anymore. She gets up and gently pulls the mug from his hands to put it in the sink with her own. Behind her Kevin stands and when she turns around, he tentatively reaches out to hug her. She pulls him in tight and wraps him up in her best mama-bear hug and they stand for a moment before she pulls back with a gentle smile and sends him up to bed.

She thinks everything might be okay when he comes to breakfast the next morning after sleeping in and makes fun of Dean for his uncreative pancakes – “Circles are so basic, Dean.” He eats them anyways.

Mary is a restless sleeper and nearly every night she gets up to get water or go to the bathroom and someone will be in the throes of a nightmare. If their door had been left open she could hear from a few feet down the hall but when they were closed she’d have to be standing just outside of it to make anything out.

Most often, when the door’s ajar, it will be either Sam or Cas’s room and the sounds won’t last for long because Dean will be in there soothing them. He’s a very thorough consoler, waiting long after their cries have died out before leaving their sides. Mary’s only caught him exiting the rooms twice. He looks sleepy when he leaves Cas. But apparently whatever’s making Sam sick gives him dreams that make Dean exit his room looking even more worried than usual.

On Wednesday night Mary gets up to go to the bathroom. But when she passes Dean’s door she can hear muffled screams. Pleas for mercy that tear at Mary’s heart. Before she can stop herself she’s opening then quickly shutting the door and striding over to Dean’s bed. He wails for Sam and tells someone named Alistair “no, no, no, no.” Over and over.
She’s never heard him like this before. It’s always been him comforting someone else when she wakes up during the night. But she’s here now and he needs her.

“Dean, Dean, honey wake up,” he tenses and shifts, still asleep. “Shhhhhhhhhhh. Dean, it’s okay,” she rubs his back and brushes the damp hair from his forehead. “Dean,” she calls him again, a bit louder, “Dean.” He gasps and his eyes blink open, searching frantically in the dark and lit up by the glow from the clock on his night stand. “Hey, shhh, you’re alright. You were having a nightmare. It’s over now.”

Dean looks up at her, confused, “Mom?”

“It’s me. You’re alright,” she brushes her hand over his forehead again. She shifts and moves up to the head of the bed so that she can lean against the wall and headboard and let him rest his head on her thigh. She runs one hand along the top of his back and the other makes circles on his shoulder. He reaches up to grab the one on his shoulder and just hold it, resting them, clasped, on her leg. He choking back tears and refuses to sniffle since for some blessed reason he has control over these things in this moment. Just as he starts to drift off, Mary begins humming for him and he remembers when he’d only ever thought of that song as a lullaby.

They play the waiting game now that she’s with them. It’s all they can do to see how long she’s going to be here as they try to answer why, how, and what is going on.

After day two of her prolonged presence, they begin to speculate.

Sunday afternoon Sam looks up from his book. “Why haven’t you disappeared yet?” He shakes his head, “That came out wrong, I –“

“No, it’s a good question. I just have no idea what the answer is.”

“Perhaps meeting all of us triggered something?” Cas theorizes later over an afternoon snack.

It doesn’t really matter. She’s here now.

oOo

On Monday they discover that there are books they don’t have that could help them. It’s the first real lead they’ve had since starting their research. At this point Dean’s given up on a summoning spell and focused his and Mary’s efforts on resurrection information that the Men of Letters have. He’s been a bit frustrated at having to rely on hope that Mary will be there when he wakes up and then not disappear during the day, or that she’ll appear at some point if for some reason she isn’t in the bunker, but the books that Sammy’s found give him motivation. They order them and play yet another waiting game.

When Kevin starts to whine about having to wade through more materials, Dean berates him as he walks out of the room, “Jeez, quit being so melodramatic. You’re worse than Crowley.”

Mary turns to Kevin, “Who’s Crowley?”

Still pouting, he turns the next page in his book and responds without looking up, “King of Hell. Real asshole. Snobby, Scottish, lives in our dungeon.”
“...Dungeon?!”

Charlie nods.
How has she not heard anything of the prisoner – the King of Hell no less – being held captive in their **dungeon** until now?
Cas chooses that moment to enter.

“Oh yeah, it’s super cool,” Charlie continues casually, no trace of joking on her features, “Chains, shackles, the whole kit-n-caboodle.”

“I thought the Men of Letters were the good guys?” Mary appears genuinely concerned.

“While that statement is relative,” the angel interjects, “and it would be more apt to describe them on the whole as benign, the dungeon was mainly used for detaining creatures who intended to harm innocents. Demons in particular.”

“Oh.” She’s shocked but satisfied with the answer, and they return to their manuscripts and flaking texts. And Mary completely forgets to ask more about the bunker’s sixth inhabitant.

On Tuesday Mary discovers the wonderful world of LARPing. Sam is staying in bed and Dean’s gone to bring him food and meds. But as they eat, Mary and Cas are regaled with tales from the Queen’s own lips including stories of a few ferocious battles led by her handmaiden that leaves Cas grinning and Mary in a fit of giggles. When Dean enters the room asking what’s so funny, it only makes the problem worse.

On Wednesday Mary discovers why Kevin sounded burdened and like he was obligated to be proud when he’d told her he was a prophet. Being gifted by God knocks the hell out of you apparently (*Dean would agree*). He gets into what Charlie aptly calls his “Prophet mode” – locking himself in his room and blasting classical music until night falls and Dean bangs on his door and tells him to put in headphones. When he comes out that first day to stock up on supplies (so that he doesn’t have to be interrupted for meals) he already looks like he’s puked after running half of a marathon. Mary brings him soup a few times but the door is locked and he doesn’t answer it. Sam tells her a bit somberly that it’s normal for him. Nonetheless it worries Mary that the only sign of life the teen offers is the empty bowls she finds in the mornings.

On Thursday, Dean gets a desperate call from another hunter begging for his help with a large family of rugarus. They’re the closest backup he’s got according to Garth and this family is about to demolish the town they’re in. Dean deliberates – arguing with Sam about staying to take care of him and how he’s no good helping if it’s just him going, because no way in hell is Dean letting Sam out of the bunker yet. Then he’s fighting with Charlie until she convinces him that she’s a good enough fighter and that they really do need to take care of this before more damage is done in that town.

Mary doesn’t comment on any of this.
Not when she sees Dean packing blow torches and lighter fluid and a handful of lighters.
Not when Charlie puts a huge medical kit in her bag closely followed by a flask which she’s filled with alcohol.
Not when she notices the devil’s trap on the inside of the impala’s trunk as they toss in their bags.
and she waves goodbye.
But especially not once she closes the door after being met with blatant proof that her children aren’t researchers like the Men of Letters, but full-fledged hunters.

Yet perhaps the most extraordinary discovery is made on her eighth consecutive day without graying out. Kevin and Sam are both conked out as far as she knows and Charlie and Dean are still on their hunt. Cas went out not too long ago to fetch Sam’s books from the post office.

Exhausted but determined to milk some answers from their rapidly depleting pile of new material, she stares blindly at the page in front of her. After a moment she shakes her head to regain some semblance of concentration, but a noise catches her attention.

Singing.
In the empty bunker.
The only other people there with her are very unlikely to be singing this considering that the last time she checked on them they were both dead to the world. She follows the sound and is eventually able to determine that it’s a drinking song of some kind.

She goes down hallways she hasn’t bothered visiting before. The singing gets louder as she continues until she comes to an open door.

She steps into the doorway and the singing stops. Through a set of pushed open book shelves, she can see where a man sits chained to a table. She steps forward to lean against one of the bookcases. He angles his head to one side and peers at her suspiciously, “You,” he accuses ponderously, “I know you from somewhere.”

“That would surprise me greatly.”

“No, no. We haven’t met. But I’ve seen you …” he drifts off and tilts his head in the other direction. “Ever been to hell?”

She wants to smirk, “Can’t say that I have.”

He silent for a moment, “Well if the Winchesters let you into their little clubhouse then you’re involved with hunting,” he sneers the word, “somehow…”

“How do you know I didn’t just get in of my own power?” she’s enjoying toying with him a bit.

“Are you kidding? Angels can’t even find this place without an engraved invitation. Or a lovelorn prayer,” he mumbles as a second thought.

She smiles and steps further into the room. The light hits her fully and Crowley holds eye contact. Realization dawns across his face.

“You! You’re one of them! You’re her!”

Mary remains unresponsive, taking another step closer before stopping.

“My, my. The world is about to turn itself on end and I’m tucked all the way down here. How did they do it? Did they sell their souls to an angel? No one in hell at the moment has that sort of ability … but an angel, maybe. Besides, I don’t think you had a reservation with us.” She crosses her arms and he takes another moment to gaze over her pensively.
“Oh,” he dramatically coos in exaggerated surprise. “They don’t know, do they? They don’t know how you got here or why.” He gives a fake shiver. “Spooky.”

She clenches her jaw and shifts her weight to the heels of her feet and regrets immediately allowing herself to swallow when it comes out nearly as a gulp.

He cackles in delight at his deduction. How simple – all it took from her was a cocky smile with those undeniable Winchester (well, Campbell) eyes that both boys possessed. She’s absolutely confirmed it with her stern reaction.

Quite frankly, Mary’s becoming unnerved and has an intense desire to leave but doesn’t want to walk out of the room in defeat. A tingling surrounds her consciousness and she realizes she’s found a solution, but sees a hitch in this plan at the last minute.

“Shit! I didn’t even get to write a note,” are the last words Crowley hears her speak.

“Mother of God. What the hell was that?” he whispers to himself and an empty room.

Dean and Charlie make it back from their hunt a few hours later and Cas comes home not long after. They are greeted by a cursing King of Hell yelling for someone to “bloody get down here and explain what’s going on!”

How time flies.
They’ve kept busy with research when Dean realizes Mary’s been involved to some capacity in their lives for the past 3 weeks. And since she’s spending longer and longer on this plane, they obviously have time.
So Dean makes a decision.

Chapter End Notes

Fear not; the fluff is about to take a vacation and the angst is on its way.
The version of “Misty Mountains” that Charlie hums to herself is from the 1997 animated version of the Hobbit. Again, here’s the link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUXP8VEXWMs.
I headcanon that Charlie just devours everything Hobbit related because of her mom reading it to her.
When Sam Winchester takes the time to read it is not often he gets to do so for pleasure. With Dean kicking him out of the library and sending him off to "rest" after only a couple of hours of research, he has few other places to go besides his room.

His room is familiar - *empty, quiet, dark.*

If he tried to follow his brother’s prescription, nightmares would plague him. Unable to sleep, and cut off from the books in the main library, he frequently finds himself wandering the bunker. It was on such an occasion that he happened upon a smaller, more private library. It was cozy; pillows, rugs, a fire place – the works. And there was a whole shelf of books for amusement (including a rather wide selection of vintage porn).

So when Dean kicks him out he comes here. It’s a private getaway – his own little part of the bunker. Though how much longer that’s going to last is anyone’s guess. He thinks Cas may have found it because occasionally books he’s sure he’d left out will be put away or pillows will be moved around. It doesn’t really matter, because for now, he’s going to use it to catch up on some Ray Bradbury since Dean hadn’t stolen all or any of the copies from *this* library.

_oOo_

New room.

Musty. Leathery. Mildewy.
It could use a good airing out.

Books and chairs like the main library.

And Sam.

He sits facing away from her in a leather seat near an empty fireplace. She wonders where the flue leads. She hadn’t seen any signs of a chimney on the exterior.
She’s hesitant to interrupt but she certainly isn’t going to miss out on a chance to talk with her son. “Sam.”

“Mom!” He turns around, shocked, and it’s a testament to how safe he feels in the bunker that he doesn’t immediately go for a weapon. They should probably start stashing some more knives around for that reason alone.

Mary smiles at the word and from the expression that flits across Sam’s face, it must feel foreign on his tongue. She moves to sit at the matching chair closest to Sam. He puts down his book and sits up straighter.

“I’m glad to see you up and about.”

“Yeah, well, Dean kicked me out of the library. Said I needed to stop researching to go get rest because I’m still sick.”

“So instead of reading, you’re reading.”

He gives a short laugh, “It’s how I relax. … and I can’t really sleep.”

Mary’s mouth tenses in a small frown that makes Sam think of Dean’s own expression of disapproval. Sam clears his throat, warding off some violent coughing, “So I heard you met Crowley.”

Her face pinches, and Sam laughs again, “Yeah, he can be …”

“Unnerving. And devilish is an understatement.”

“Well that’s a given, considering who he is.” Sam doesn't bother to mention that the actual Devil is so much worse.

"I'll have to get you to tell me sometime how on earth you managed to capture the King of Hell and lock him in your dungeon."

Sam inhales sharply and looks into the empty fireplace with a sigh to counter it. "You, uh, you might just get that chance soon."

Mary's eyes light up, "When is soon?" She doesn't pretend to think he can be talking about anything besides the story - their whole story.

“I honestly don’t know. The reason Dean’s been hesitating was because he didn’t know how long you’d be here. He wants to sit down once and be done with it - no interruption.”

“Yes, I understand that. Me vanishing couldn’t have helped.”

“No, actually it was what made him want to tell you I think. You staying around for a week, I mean. Not disappearing. But disappearing must’ve been what triggered his decision. There wasn’t really anything else that could have made him change his mind.”

“Good.” She nods to herself, imitating Sam’s earlier action by looking into the fireplace. "I wanted it to happen."

"What?"

"This last time that I disappeared, I wanted it to happen. Crowley was being ... is hellish an inappropriate description?"
"It's a little on the nose," Sam smiles wide, like he wants to laugh.

"I suppose it is. Well, he was making me uncomfortable. And I wanted to leave but I wasn't about to walk out just because of that. That would only have confirmed his suspicions," as an afterthought she says, "not to mention it would've felt like he'd won."

**Stubbornness on both sides of the family then,** Sam thinks. Although now, he remembers something about that from their time traveling. Seeing her be this way as an older adult - the image of a mother from pictures that he grew up knowing - is somehow different.

"But when I wanted to leave I didn't know it would mean that I'd disappear. I don't think I controlled it. It just sort of happened. I'm not eager to try it again to see, though, since I don't have a say in when I get back." She pauses in thought for a moment. “I don’t even know if it’s me making myself disappear. It could be that whoever it was that brought me here controls when I come and go. Maybe they're reading my mind and taking my wishes into account.”

"There's gotta be more to go on that we're missing. People - *creatures* that do these sort of things don't just walk away after. Not without … something. There's too much power and effort invested."

"I'll take that to mean you've dealt with resurrection before." Mary says almost grimly.

Sam just gives a pained looking sort of quasi-smile.

The clock chimes 11 and they look up at it, startled. Moments later footsteps are heard at the hall and they turn to the doorway.

A questioning "Sam?" echoes down from far away. The footsteps move on and the next call of his name sounds further distanced.

"That's Charlie. Come on, the others will want to know you're here."

They make their way down the hall and catch Charlie as she's making her way downstairs to the kitchen.

"Mary!" she exclaims, but her voice is tired and lacking its normal buoyancy. Mary smiles in greeting.

“Did you need something Charlie?” Sam asks, stabilizing himself on the railing before he falls over and starts getting babied anyone again.

“Um, no, no. Dean just got worried since you weren’t in your room,” she looks at Mary, “Come on, he’ll want to know you’re here.”

They find Dean and Cas standing in the kitchen, Dean leaning against the counter and Cas standing in front of him, holding tightly to a steaming cup of tea. His arms are pulled to his chest and he’s blowing on the mug. Dean watches him as if he’s said something equal parts concerning and amusing.

When Charlie says, “So did Sam tell you …?” the two men turn to see who’s interrupting them and are both startled to see Mary. Mary nods in response.

“Mom!” Dean looks like a deer caught in the headlights. When Mary turns to see the expectant expressions on Charlie and (to a lesser degree) Sam’s features, she realizes why.
He’s stepped forward from the counter and stands tense, until she hugs him. As Mary pulls away, she quietly lets out a frustrated sigh, but says, “Sam told me that you’re ready to tell me about everything,” Dean shoots Sam an almost panicked look and that only confirms Mary’s inklings. “But we should probably wait until tomorrow morning to do this. I’m guessing it’s going to be an all day event. It’s too late anyhow – we all need sleep.” The look of relief that washes over Dean is almost enough to counterbalance the disappointment Mary feels. “So it’s off to bed with everyone.”

“Yeah-yeah, Cas and I were just – uh, Cas was just finishing drinking and I was just … yeah, heading to bed,” he shuffles towards Cas even as he looks to the doorway.

“Now that I’ve found the elusive Sasquatch,” Charlie quips, “I’m gonna turn in too. Wanna walk up with me?” she asks Mary.

Mary nods and after bidding the boys goodnight, they exit. Sam goes to the fridge to grab a drink to take up with him. He turns to his brother and best friend with a goodnight and finds that they’re standing without talking but it’s in separate silences.

Minutes later, Dean goes to his room to tuck in.
Sam and Kevin both get up and down a few times – or he thinks it’s them – before he hears the door across the hall from him close signifying that Cas is in bed. The knocking he hears further down the hall doesn’t go unnoticed but he tries to ignore it in favor of staring blankly at the ceiling.

oOo

Charlie’s gentle rapping sounds secretive in the quietude of the bunker.

“Come in.”

Charlie pokes her head around the door, “Were you asleep?” Mary shakes her head and Charlie comes all the way into the room. They’d separated when they’d reached their rooms and now Charlie is in her pajamas. “Good. I wanted to talk to you.”

“About?” Mary tilts her head and leans forward to pat the mattress.

Charlie sits down tentatively, “Tomorrow. The story.” She sighs, “Look, if I know the boys – and I do – they’re going to cut the story down to the bare bones and you’ll be missing a lot of background info that you should hear.”

“Charlie-“

“No, I know. This is so, so, beyond my place. But you need to hear this.”

Mary rolls her tongue nervously in her mouth before speaking, “Sam already gave me a sort of run down on Hell. It was brief but it was something.”

“I seriously cannot see Dean starting before Hell –“ Mary nods in acceptance but Charlie continues –“so I’ll tell you what you need to know.”
“If they don’t want me to—"

“Look, you want to hear the whole thing, right? You want to know who these two boys are and what they’re doing and how everything happened and to do that you need to hear even the things they don’t want to tell you.” When Mary looks unconvinced, she goes on, “I’m only okay with doing this, because I don’t think that they would really mind if you heard what I want to tell you – they just don’t want to have to tell you about it themselves.”

Mary clenches her jaw and swallows. She exhales, “Okay.”

Charlie lets out a short, relieved breath, “That all being said, I don’t know how comfortable I am answering questions … because of being biased and because I’ve only heard this information … as a story, and not as it happened.” ‘Character’ names, and bitter opinions with sarcastic taglines, and scraps of meta flit through her brain as she issues her caveat. “So, just, no audience participation, okay?”

Mary is even more displeased than before but she accepts the terms.

And Charlie dives in. Mary is swept up in it. The investment Charlie has in all of it: in the people she’s certainly never met, in the experiences she’s only read about. Mary finds her breath bated frequently and has to force herself to relax repeatedly. Azazel, Meg, Bobby, the Colt, Bela, Ruby, Lilith - every detail is gripping and she soon is in league with Charlie as to how deeply the story affects her. Possibly more so. She bites back questions; pinches her tongue and cheek between her teeth to contain anger; purses her lips and holds back tears.

“… which is where the hellhounds drag him off.” Charlie’s been looking down at her lap for the past few minutes but now she looks up to Mary’s unreadable face. It makes her turn back to the floor. Which means she’s surprised when Mary pulls her into a rib-crushing hug. Charlie gives as good as she gets though and they hold each other as Mary stifles the few, audible sniffles that attempt to escape her. Charlie has no inclination to let go until Mary draws back, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Thank you,” she can hardly keep from choking on her words but they manage a steadiness that reinforces the depth of her appreciation.

Charlie swallows, shocked at how terrifying she finds their story in this moment, “They’ll probably sit down with us, everyone, after breakfast.”

Mary nods, she’d gleaned as much.

“I um, after you hear everything from them, I have a written version. It’s more objective? I guess?” She says both assertions like questions. “I’ll bring them to you so that you can read them whenever.”

“Alright.”

Charlie pauses, “I’m going to sleep now.” She gets up but before she touches the door, she turns back, “I’m – I’m glad you know,” and she walks out.

oOo
It's hours later. The sounds of doors shutting and muffled conversation have long since been traded for dark halls and soft snores.

Dean can’t sleep.

It’s not unusual, but so far, his emergency stash of Jack isn’t doing the trick. And it’s not nightmares or self-worth issues keeping him up. No, that would be too easy, those are things he can blind himself to with exhaustion and alcohol or porn, even. No, tonight his insomnia is taking its inspiration from the anxiety tomorrow is causing him. It’s apprehension with a twist of fear stemming from years of repressed memories that he’s going to have to dig up first thing after breakfast. So Dean can’t sleep. Why wouldn’t - how could he? With his past hanging over his tomorrow, ready to rear its ugly head.

oOo

Castiel has searched fruitlessly for sleep for hours now. It evades him not because of any fears keeping his eyes locked open but because of the sheer blankness of his mind. And then he hears a door creaking and knows it’s what he’s been waiting for. His cue. *He was waiting for something?* It’s Dean’s door. He can tell. And strangely enough he wants to pretend that it’s not only because Dean’s room is directly across from his – as if there could be some inherent thing within him that could tell it was Dean stepping out from behind the swishing and unseen door.

He would have been able to say that were he still an angel.

He debates with himself for a moment – *his cue!*, for what?, *his chance!*, for what? – before rousing himself and moving out of his room towards the kitchen.

If he's being honest Cas isn't the person he was hoping to see. Mostly because he was hoping to be alone. Misery loves company but Dean was intending to drink enough so that he wouldn't be miserable for much longer - rather, he’d be asleep.

This was about to be something though. They’d almost had this earlier when the others were lost in the depths of the bunker and it was just the two of them and the opportunity for things to come to a head.

They've steadily and continuously been making deposits in “Well Intended Bad Friendship Moves Savings and Loan”, and interest has built up to where they’ve got a nice little nest egg. When they’re finally forced to talk about this it’s going to be one hell of an apology. Dean is nowhere near ready for that – the wounds are still too fresh – and Cas has only just begun acclimating to being human. For as long as it could be ignored it will be.

But now, for some reason, Dean just hoped that this wouldn't be that dreaded conversation. Not with the whole night spanning before them, promising the two insomniacs uninterrupted solitude and unforgiving honesty.
Why had he thought drinking would help him earlier? Even sober he was acting stupid.

Instead of greeting or acknowledging him at all, Cas crosses the kitchen and sits at the table with Dean. They’re both silent. *Fuck.* This should be awkward. But it isn’t. Why isn’t it awkward? *Because it’s Cas,* the still-sort-of-sober part of his brain answers.

“I can’t do it, Cas.”

*Fuck.*

“I can’t tell her that I’m the one who got him back into the Life.”

*Why is he talking?*

“I can’t tell her that I’m the reason she doesn’t have grandkids right now, because I’m the one who took him away from Jess and that she died when he wasn’t there to save her.”

_The silence wasn’t even uncomfortable! Or was it?_

“I gave myself so much shit for that the first year and I … “

Fuck, he’s drunk. If he’s talking to *Cas* about this. Because they damn sure aren’t talking about anything else.

Then again it’s not as if there is anyone else to talk to about this. Or that it would matter if there were.

“…I can’t relive it …”

“And you don’t have to.” Dean looks at him with wide, hazy eyes. “Start the story where you’re comfortable starting it.”

Dean wants to say something but he doesn’t know what there is to say. *Was he making it awkward before?* He feels too drunk to think. _Is he making it awkward now?_ It’s probably a good idea he can’t articulate if he’s not going to be able to filter his words. *Ugh.* Why does he even care? *Cas won’t give a shit.* _He’ll just sit there and take whatever Dean’s gonna give him like the fucking fantastic best friend that his is._

Dean wants to laugh at that: _it’s easy enough to say when they’re both human and neither is trying to kill the other._

Cas goes on, “I believe Sam would be uncomfortable starting back that far as well …” he takes a stiff breath, “And, now seems appropriate, so I feel I should tell you; I’m nearly certain that had you not gone and brought him with you to search for your father that he would have become the Boy King, the way Azazel and Lucifer wanted.”

Dean had given a long enough pause that the slight topic diversion makes sense, to his clouded mind.

“Sam said that he’d been having dreams of Jessica’s death. Yes?” Dean nods. “She would have died anyways, at another time while Sam was out – a more inane one that would have made him feel worse that he hadn’t just stayed home. Grocery shopping or going to speak with a teacher are much less valid reasons for not being present at a loved one’s death than seeking out your father who is in direct and obvious danger from both the law and the evils of the world.” Dean is surprised and enraptured by how long Cas is going on with this. “And it still would have torn him to bits. Only you wouldn’t have been there to help pick up the pieces. Would he have called you? Invited you back into his life when the way you had parted was so stressful and your reaction to the situation would have been uncertain after going for so long without contact?”

Dean snorts, “Not unless he was drunk.” He suppresses a hiccup, reminding himself of his own, current inebriation.

“He would have found himself in a dark place,” Cas says with intent - “He would have been
vulnerable.” – like he wants Dean to figure this out himself. “To anything or anyone who had the precedence to seize upon his broken heart and untapped potential.”

It dawns drowsily upon the hunter, “Demons.”

Cas nods in response, “Would you have had Ruby find him any sooner than she did?”

He shakes his head staring into his drink, “That bitch had her claws in him long enough.”

Their conversation fades to silence – it’s natural. The way they talk makes Castiel think of the ebbing of the tide.

Dean’s face has contorted and Cas puts a hand on his shoulder to reassure them both, to ask if Dean’s okay. Dean nods at the table, Cas’s words hanging above them, and he purses his lips. After a moment, he stands, gives a shiver at the light contact Cas’s fingers make across his skin as his hand slides down his arm from his shoulder. He walks through the entryway.

They’ve both been consoled. Dean is going to bed. Cas will follow him to his room after he thinks Dean’s asleep and leave a tall glass of water with some aspirin on his nightstand. Dean will breathe slowly and listen to the soft padding of Castiel’s feet as he goes through these motions and then walks to his own room. Castiel will pause in Dean’s doorway when the hunter exhales a goodnight and simultaneously tumbles into slumber.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to dedicate this entire chapter to that scene from 4x18 where Dean and Cas talk about archangels and prophets which proves that Cas is subtle as fuck (something tptb have decided to conveniently forget)

This was tough for me to write because other chapters kept distracting me. Lots of hugging because I loved how contact oriented everyone (especially Dean) was in season 8.
I’m still writing how Charlie tells Mary the story on the off chance that I decide to finish and publish it.
Charlie’s role in this chapter has been decided for a while now but after that godforsaken, piece of shit episode, I made it more dramatic and important than it previously was. Because I’m fucking furious.
Bam! You’ve made it to the halfway point!
Here is where things get explained to Mary and I explain that I’ve tweaked a few things. It’s just minor plot holes I’m filling for the long run.

Chapter Notes

This is a disaster. I have no idea what happened here, this didn’t turn out the way I thought it would because the characters wouldn’t listen to me and instead of 5k words I wrote 15k.
But it’s all good. Everything’s still on track for the rest of my outline.
Fair warning, the boys are brief and repetitive of pre-established stuff mostly because they don’t know what Mary is and isn’t aware of.

Anyways, thanks for your patience

I’ve made some announcements about the next chapter at the end of this one, so check those out.

***********
Seating arrangement:
Sam ... Cas ... Kevin
------TABLE------
Mary . Dean . Charlie

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cas can see their need to do this.
Yes, he can understand it, but he can also physically see their need to tell her and unburden themselves. And more importantly he can analyze why.
They, both of them, want to know what her reaction to this – their story – will be. And whether they themselves know it or not, Cas can easily read the desperation for understanding and forgiveness and approval that they hunger for.
The angel feels it as well.
He finds his place at the library table (temporarily void of research materials) to the left of Sam.
Dean takes a swig of his glass and sighs, “Where do we start?” He looks between his brother and the ex-angel who both sit across from him. Mary is to his left. Charlie is on his right and Kevin is across from her. Their best bottles of liquor sit within arm’s reach of them all and everyone has a glass, even Kevin.

Sam shrugs, “Hell?” Dean closes his eyes and resists the urge to take a deep breath. It’s still so hard for him. He’d been down there for longer than he’d been alive. Longer than he has been alive.

Cas knows exactly what he’s thinking. He puts a hand on Dean’s arm, “Shall I?” Dean hesitates to acquiesce, “I believe I remember it with more clarity if not objectivity than you.” The hunter nods.

Sam doesn’t mention that he meant post-hell or that he’s already told Mary this portion of the story. Mary takes this to mean the angel’s version is something she should hear. And she isn’t wrong.

“Dean’s soul was reaped expeditedly. He’d made a demon deal to save Sam’s life and the demon had only offered him a year. Hell was eager to get its hands on a Winchester soul and unbeknownst to them, it had everything to do with the biblical Apocalypse.

“I was only notified that Dean was in Hell when Dean was offered reprieve from his torment in exchange for joining the demon Alastair … in torturing souls. This, the delay, was something which we later found out was done on purpose. His acceptance of Alistair’s deal solidified his position as the Righteous Man and broke the first seal to starting the apocalypse.”

Charlie watches the faces of her three friends as Cas tells the beginning of their story. She sees guilt seep into each of their eyes and realizes that they all blame themselves for the breaking of that seal.

*If only I could’ve gotten to him sooner,* says the set of Cas’s mouth.

*If I hadn’t died he wouldn’t have made the deal that got him there,* reads in the clench of Sam’s jaw.

*I broke it, that was me, I should have held out,* sings Dean’s expression.

Dean’s arms are crossed defensively and resting on the table, his hands gripping his upper arms. His face is beet red with shame and he looks like he’s about to swallow his tongue.

“They told me we were too late to prevent the first seal from breaking, but if I had been sent for him any sooner, it wouldn’t have met the needs of my commanders.”

Mary is slightly confused at the twisted morals and priorities but she suspects that they’ll become untangled as the story unfolds.

“As soon as he accepted Alistair’s offer and stepped off the rack, my garrison was notified and I led them to retrieve his soul. It took us ten years in hell-time to reach where he was. I never expected to be the one to find him – we had to battle through hordes of demons as Hell itself attempted to expel us – but I maintained my status at the forefront and was the first to spot his soul. It wasn’t hard to notice; in fact I’d say it was the easiest part.” Cas gets a glazed over sort of look as he pauses, reminiscing, “He was a blinding spot of pure light in a setting of sulfur and darkness. I honed in on it - it possessed an almost magnetic force.”

Cas had mustered a second wind he had no clue he was capable of possessing after ten years in that void, and he flew to his target at what was a frightening speed, even for an angel.

“I expected the guard upon him to be more secure after the heavy hordes of demons my garrison had battled through but the largest struggle I faced upon reaching him was reining him in and
enveloping him in my grace." Cas smirks, "His soul was rather wild. It forced me to use more power that I’d originally intended to."

Dean’s hand strokes up to absently brush over his left shoulder in a nervous gesture.

Cas shivers at the provoked memory.

Dean inhales shallowly. It sounds so much prettier like this. No sounds of torn flesh or screams of death. No clacking of chains or cracking of whips. No engulfing heat or sensation of brimstone filled lungs.

“I’m sorry – I, I seem to have diverted greatly from the main point of the story.”

“It’s cool,” Dean says in a low voice, despite the remark being directed at Mary. He remembers parts of this if he really tries, like they’re bubbles floating only just now to the surface of his consciousness. Like the angel's words have the power to summon the veiled pictures in his mind. Before this he didn’t have context for the memories – they just seemed like delusions of Hell or a trippy, unexplainable dream. But hearing Cas describe it is … mind-blowing, breathtaking. The word ineffable floats around his head but he’s not sure if he’d be using it correctly.

“Keep going,” Mary urges.

“My garrison was leagues behind me when I saw the opportunity to take hold of Dean’s soul and escape.”

“Oh, come on man,” Dean interjects, spotting a way to lighten the situation and draw away from the magnitude of Cas’s descriptions, “it sounds way less dramatic when you say it like that.” Cas cocks his head, waiting for an explanation. “You didn’t save me from hell; you ‘gripped me tight and raised me from perdition.’” Dean wishes it were as funny as he's trying to make it; that is, funny enough to make more than relaxed smiles appear on the faces of the group members.

Cas scoffs at his mocking imitation, “Yes, well I would have liked to see you attempt to explain in the five seconds in which I had to answer you what it’s taken me ten minutes to explain today.”

“You were an awkward sonofabitch and there’s no denying it.”

“Be that as it may, I still find it an accurate description. And justifiably grandiose considering that me carrying you from Hell to Earth was rather important. Not to mention it was what caused the mark on your physical form …” It seems as though there’s another half to the sentence hanging on the tip of his tongue.

And…?
Which…?
Dean wants to ask a question, find a means of finishing the sentence for him.
But he doesn’t.
That would be stupid.

Cas continues, “I escaped Hell within ... moments of securing his soul. That, I can only attribute to
a lapse on the part of the demons in combination with my own speed and Hell’s innate desire to expel uncorrupt angels. As much as gravity will slam you to the ground, hell would eject you back to whatever plane you came from. “I cloaked myself as best I could and brought the soul to his grave.”

“Ever think about making a donation to the Arbor Day Foundation for that little number?” Dean quips.
Cue the squint/head-tilt combo.
“The entire forest around my grave that you demolished on touchdown?”

Cas looks appraising, as if he hadn’t considered the possibility before. “I was rather careless in my haste to deposit you and return to heaven.”

“’Deposit me’? That’s another thing – couldn’t you’ve given a guy a hand and maybe deposited me outside my grave?”

“I believe I’ve already apologized for this at some point, but if it makes you feel better,” his words are laced with condescension, “then I’ll say once more that I’m sorry for leaving you inside your coffin instead of a more convenient location.”

Dean rolls his eyes at the near farcical apology. But it served its purpose to buoy the mood once more.

“As I said, I had to return to heaven since it had been so long. There I was debriefed and given new instructions before I went in search of a vessel.”

Cas stops there and after a moment turns to Dean.

Oh.
It’s his turn. The part of the story where he starts talking. And they’re waiting on him.
He clears his throat, “Well I, uh, I dug myself out.” Wasn’t too hard, he adds mentally. I was rusty but I’d had practice before. “Made my way down the road ‘till I found an empty gas station. Got some supplies, discovered my angelic tramp stamp,” he shrugs his shoulder, “and got treated to a cosmic serenade that nearly broke my eardrums and literally blew out all the glass in the gas station.”

Dean takes a breath and Cas interrupts, “An angel’s true voice can be overwhelming.”

“Understatement,” Kevin mutters, rubbing his temples with the memory of a headache.

“As I was saying,” Dean intones, “I went and tried getting in touch with Sam and Bobby. But that didn’t really pan out – ended up having to hotwire a junker and drive to Bobby’s door where I got the third degree, just like I expected.”

He goes on to talk about finding Sam and then tracking down Cas.

But you could say that he’s not 100% there.

Dean hates this. With every fiber of his being. Lately he’s been opening up more frequently than a whore’s legs. It’s driving him nuts.

He isn’t supposed to be the one talking about this – about any of it. He’s the one who’s supposed to
be there to listen to and take whatever shit they need to give to him; whatever shit they need him to
take. He’s big brother and best friend. It’s his job to be unbreakable so that they can give him their
worst and he can still be standing to give them something to lean on.

He can feel the waters lapping low at the mental floodgates already; rising like every word from
his lips is a drop adding to them. So he takes another shot of whiskey to try and strengthen them.

“So Bobby and I are sitting in this old barn that we’ve warded with every damn sigil and symbol
in the books and we’re waiting to ambush whatever carted me out of Hell, armed to the teeth, when
in struts Cas, all Holier than Thou and special effects. He pulled all the stops: thunder and wind,
sparks flying, even whipped out his wings.
And of course, we try to kill him but – angel, so instant healing and immortality. He knocks Bobby
out, says we need to talk, then tells me that God has work for me.”

*Which scared the everloving shit out of me because what the hell did God want with me?*

“I feel I should mention that revealing myself as his rescuer was delayed by orders of heaven and
my inability to find a vessel.”

Mary lets the word roll around her brain as she ponders what it could mean in this context and Sam
picks up on it, “Uh, vessels are the people angels possess, but it’s different than demonic
possession. Angels need permission from the person and they have to have the right lineage – one
that coordinates with the angel doing the possessing.”

Mary pulls a face of concern and suspicion, “And the man you’re possessing? Or were?”

“In heaven now. As it was, he would have been unable to live without me possessing him and then
I – we, were killed protecting a prophet. When I was recreated, it was without his soul.”

Mary seems satisfied by this.

“But, um, while I was in Hell, Sammy had been trying to get the evil demon-bitch who killed me.
*Lilith.*” Dean just wants this part of the story over as fast as possible. “So Ruby, a demon who had
helped us before, promised to help him get Lilith and she started to train him to use his powers.”

“Train him?” Mary’s eyes widened with trepidation.

A gap of silence opens across the table.

“Dean, we didn’t tell her how she died,” Sam whispers in the pause. Dean goes speechless for a
moment and feels practiced anger well up in his stomach. It’s the blindly channeled rage of his
youth he now knows to direct at the very dead yellow eyed demon. They hadn’t accounted for
having to explain to her demon blood, or Sam’s psychic abilities, or Azazel.

“Yellow Eyes,” Mary says unwavering.
She shocks the others by speaking.
“It was … he was in Sammy’s nursery. I got up to check on you and I saw someone, I thought John
… but it was Yellow Eyes. When I realized – I-I ran back up. I should have grabbed something – a
weapon. But I’d put them all away. All I could think about was getting back to you.
“And I remembered what I’d promised him – that he could come back in ten years. I was so afraid
he was going to take you – I had – *have* – no idea what he wanted with you. I just started chanting
an exorcism and he stepped away from you. He turned to me and then I … and … everything
caught fire.”
Mary feels a biting shiver down her spine at the memory; can still see the glowing yellow eyes in her mind.

Dean gulps and nods. Sam just looks like he wants to throw up.

“He wanted to poison Sam,” Dean says after a moment, “Not just him, he did this with dozens of kids. Made deals and ten years later came back to the homes of the deal makers to feed demon blood to the six month old babies they all had. The demon blood – it uh, gave them all abilities. All of them were different. Then when they turned 23 he kidnapped ‘em and pitted them against each other. Put them in brackets and had the winners face off in new brackets. Winners being people – the person who survived each round.”

“I made it to the end,” Sam says solemnly.
Mary’s heart lurches.
His jaw clenches, “He said I was his favorite.”
Sheresists the urge to bite her tongue.

“They wanted him to become a demon general. Basically a male Lilith.” Dean refrains from mentioning that Sam’s role as Lucifer’s vessel had factored largely into this. “Sam had psychic visions and telekinesis. The training Ruby gave him let him exorcise demons with the telekinesis. But a lot of that training was just Ruby feeding him her blood. Which was basically making him part demon. Not that he knew that, or what else she was prepping him for. It became an addiction.”

Sam isn’t sure what to make of Dean’s assessment but he feels the urge to note his own reasoning, “She told me the exorcisms would help me when I had to kill Lilith. I thought they were good because this way, the human the demon was possessing got to live. When we use the demon knife it kills both of them.” Sam looks off at a bookshelf.

With Sam’s commentary, Dean realizes he’s getting ahead of himself so he diverts the conversation; “So we go on a hunt, come back, and with no warning Cas zaps me to the past.” At this point, Dean scrubs both hands over his face. Shit’s about to get complicated. As if it weren’t weird enough already.

Mary had in no way expected that plot twist.

“At first I thought it was terrible, then it was pretty cool, but it was mostly terrible.” Then as if there’s nothing more important he could offer he says, “I helped dad pick out the impala.”

“You’re the one who told him to get it?” Mary is incredulous.

Dean, still striving for levity, smiles, “It was trippy as shit but yeah. He said you wanted him to buy a van but I convinced him to go with her instead.” Back to the topic - being matter of fact is going to be key; “Um, I met Samuel and Deanna, your parents. It was weird to find out I was, well that Sam and I were named after anyone. I met you too, but you don’t remember it because an angel wiped your memory. I met Azazel. Tried to kill him. Tried to warn you about the night you died. But like I said - brainwashing. And you kind of know the rest.” Dean sips his glass and lets out a heavy breath, “In the end it was Heaven’s way of telling me to fuck off because I couldn’t change
anything."

“And yet, here we are,” Castiel almost lets a note of pride slip into his words.

They think quietly for a moment on the accuracy and unexpected depth of that assessment.

"But I mean besides that, we still kept hunting. There were a few new and weird monsters. Met a rugarou, a siren, shifter who gave a new meaning to ‘cinema complex’. But they were still monsters and we still just hunted them."

Her father had been the most experienced and knowledgeable hunter she and the hunters in her family’s circles had known. Mary has heard of these monsters before. Even helped her mother hunt a siren before. She remembers thinking he was cute.

“Sam finally met Cas on Halloween of that year.”

“Yeah, up until then I just thought Dean was going nuts.”

Dean lobs a cork coaster at him and it hits him in the forehead.

“Ow! Jerk!”

Charlie wants to make a remark about how much of a fangirl the books made Sam out to be when it came to meeting angels for the first time.

They summarize Samhain, the significance of the 66 seals, and meeting Uriel.

Sam silently recalls his talk with Uriel – the choked and cornered sensation he’d had the entire conversation and a good half hour after.

Dean and Cas share a glance, a memory. One of a bench where small children played nearby and doubts hung above their heads.

The next piece of Old Business their eclectic committee covers is one Anna Milton.

Charlie’s been itching to hear this story. Kevin notes her attentiveness and perks up.

They cover how they met her, discovering who and what she was, her role in the apocalypse. Cas seems sheepish when Dean mentions that him getting pulled from hell was what kicked on Angel Radio for her.

When they speak of her, Mary notices that to some degree the boys all bear varying expressions of
discomfort. Cas misses how they interacted before she Fell and regrets the measures he felt he had to take to deal with her. He recalls strains of jealousy he once held for so much of her situation. Dean experiences cognitive dissonance. Sam thinks offhandedly that in some ways she was similar to Crowley – unpredictable, all-or-nothing, a risk taker.

They mention learning about the angel banishing sigil – “The thing I showed you in the hallway,” Kevin offers – and bringing Pamela to speak with her. Sam closes by revealing his plan to force the demons and angels into a face-off.

Neither brother bothers to recount their return to their old high school but both are washed over with a wave of odd fondness. It was simple and not wholly awful.

“Then we um, we run into Alastair.” Dean sits there for a moment. Sam and Cas trade a glance – it isn’t their place to pick up the story. The pause allows Mary to recollect exactly who Alastair is and she grows hyper-attentive.

Dean sighs, “He was helping part of Revelations come true, breaking more seals, by kidnapping a reaper.” He looks to Mary before he continues and she nods in understanding, knowing what the creature is. “To get with the program Pam had to help us go to the spirit world.”

“We died,” Sam remarks.

“They saved a seal and we captured Alastair,” Cas’s tone is near reproving.

“Yeah, and Pam died and it turned out that the angels had led us to the whole case on the sly,” Dean says gruffly but before anyone responds he sighs and waves a hand, “We got back to our bodies, anyhow. But it was only a handful of days before the angels called us again.”

Dean’s brow pinches, this is a story he had actively been dreading. “I got angel-napped,” his voice is light but the hard swallow he makes around the lump in his throat does his cover no favors. “They wanted to know how angels were getting killed by demons and figured that my buddy Alastair might have a clue,” – how the hell is he supposed to phrase this? – “And that I could get him to talk.”

Cas has his arms crossed and he directs his gaze downward. He has so much remorse for this event in particular. Forcing Dean to do this had caused more damage to Dean emotionally that he’d originally anticipated. The thought that he would have once allowed emotional damage of any sort to come to Dean, that he’d once preferred an option where the hunter incurred emotional damage … He understands the logic he’d had but it’s difficult to confront what’s changed him since.

“So I went to town on him,” he scoffs but looks wholly unamused, “Funny thing about the Chief Torturer of Hell, he’s good at getting under your skin. Especially when you’ve spent forty years
with the guy.”
Shit. He hadn’t meant to say that.
“So it was less of him telling me what they needed to know and more of …” he makes a flippant
hand gesture and sips his whiskey.
He hadn’t been lying – it was cathartic to torture that bastard. But the aftermath was what had
gotten to the hunter. Knowing that he was still capable of these things even after he was safe from
Hell’s clutches.

“Alistair told us that it wasn’t demons killing the angels and then he almost escaped. But Sammy
and Cas came to the rescue. Sammy used his powers to kill Alastiar for good measure.”

“At this point,” Cas says, “I consulted Anna and returned to the warehouse, where I confronted
Uriel. He had defected to Lucifer’s supporters and had been the one killing the angels. He asked
me to join him, but Anna arrived and killed him.”

Without preamble, Dean progresses to the next part of the story. He’s eager to distract them all
from the repulsive things he can do.

“The angels really took to screwing with our heads,” he lets out a strained laugh. “They sent
Sammy and me on a vacation. Set us up with fake memories and lives. We were normal, we didn’t
know each other, we worked at the same company. But it was just some team building exercise set
up by Zachariah – the guy who held the title for Heaven’s Biggest Douchebag before Metatron.”

Before Mary can ask who Metatron is, Sam interjects, “It was supposed to prove how we were
always meant to be hunters.”

“Real It’s A Wonderful Life shit. Only our Clarence,” he jerks his head towards Cas, “didn’t get
the invite to the costume party.”

Charlie snickers – she’d been ready to make the joke herself.

Cas makes his bird-esque gesture with the head tilt and narrowed eyes, “Is that the movie Meg is
always referring to?”

Dean rolls his eyes, “Yeah, buddy, we’ll get around to it sometime.”

“We got our lives back without hassle and we moved on to the next case,” Sam says with a stretch
of his back.

There’s a lull, then a dawning between the storytellers. The brothers exchange glances – they both
know what happened next: the Winchester Gospels. Sam clears his throat, "And then we met
Chuck Shurley, the prophet before Kevin."
"No clue what happened to him," Dean notes.
Cas pipes up, "but with Kevin coming into prophethood it can safely be assumed that Chuck is
dead, as there can only be one prophet at a time."
"Don't sugarcoat it," Charlie says with an eyeroll. She’s a bit peeved that they failed to mention the
Winchester Gospels but she’s going to have Mary read them anyway so it doesn’t matter much.

“Augh, shit,” Dean groans, putting both hands over his face. Sam gives him a look and Dean
responds, “Adam.”

“Shit.”

Charlie – eyes wide with mirth and anticipation – wants to laugh at how awkward this is about to be. Not because of anything malicious, just … this is going to be hilarious. Cas seems resigned. To be fair, she's far more detached from the situation than the brothers. Kevin and Mary both have their interests piqued at the unfamiliar name.

“So, uh, in … fuck, when was it?”

“1990,” Sam offers with a pinched expression. Charlie wonders how Sam even knew what he was asking.

“In 1990, dad got injured and hospitalized on a hunt and he met a nurse. Nine months later, the Winchester boys have a baby brother.”

“No that we even knew anything about him.”

“No, we met him for the first time when he was 19 and he called dad’s old cell phone about a hunt. He told us that dad didn’t have contact with him until he was twelve.”

Castiel notes privately that the timing coincides with Sam’s move to Stanford and simultaneously resolves to never mention it.

Mary’s confused. Their flippant attitudes suggest adjustment to a painful fact after years. But there’s also … guilt? At least in the way Dean fidgets his fingers and the look in Sam’s eyes that Mary’s able to catch. There are too many mixed emotions racing across their faces for her to pinpoint the source of the guilt, as well as a lack of information.

“But, uh, when he called us it wasn’t him. It was a ghoul – two of ‘em. They’d killed Adam and his mom and were looking to get revenge on John for killing their own father. So we ganked ‘em and got out of Dodge.”

Mary holds her questions for now.

For a full second – and Cas is watching him aware of that full second, no, two of them – Dean’s mind races across the memory of a dream visit and an encounter with Jimmy Novak.

Cas briefly experiences a wave of nostalgia for the company his vessel’s soul once provided. It’s light and quick to pass. The regret he holds for not telling Dean about Lilith being the last seal is more prolonged.

Sam thinks of a desperation for a blood fix and a convincing speech he issued to an obstinate Mr. Novak.

They move on without noting their thoughts aloud.
“Then Sam – uh, we hit some trouble. And Sam’s addiction to demon blood came back full swing.”

As much as hearing Dean say it hurts, Sam’s grateful to his brother for not making him tell their mom to her face about his addiction.

“We put him in Bobby’s Panic Room to get the blood out of his system and played the waiting game until he was clean.”

Sam remembers that on that blood-trip he’d gotten to see Mary. He’d almost been grateful for her visit. He thinks he would enjoy the memory it if it had been a djinn dream or anything besides a blood-detox hallucination.

They get quiet again and just as Dean thinks they aren’t going to cover it, that he needs to move this along, Sam speaks up, “Dean promised to help the angels, to keep me from going to Ruby. Um, after I gained consciousness I broke out – went off to find Ruby and,” he swallows quietly, “get more blood.” His shame is overwhelming.

“She tricked him.”

Sam snaps his head up. He hadn’t expected Dean to say anything at all during this.

“Again.” Apparently Dean isn’t finished, ”She told him things that made it sound like he needed to kill Lilith if he wanted to stop the apocalypse.

And he didn’t? Mary thinks to herself, well aware of the lore.

That’s it.

With that he knows that he has Dean’s forgiveness. The doubt has always been there that maybe Dean had just forgotten and not forgiven. But Dean would’ve made him tell this by himself as a sort of penance, making him live with his consequences, if he hadn’t forgiven Sam.

It makes the next part a bit easier to recount. Because they’re both here now.

“But Dean found out I’d gotten more blood and,” he kicked me out, “we split up.” He rephrases his thought. God, it had hurt so much more hearing the words come from Dean than it had with John. He makes eye contact with Dean; that fight had nearly broken them both.

Dean turns to Mary, “Bobby told me I needed to patch things up but before I did anything I got zapped off by the God squad to a fancy waiting room. Zachariah,” - Mary notes that each time he says the name there’s more disgust in his voice – “wouldn’t tell me what was going on except that nearly all of the seals were broken and that they were keeping me there until ‘the grand finale.’ They used my promise to the angels as leverage to keep me there.

“I tried to call Sam. Left him a voicemail, tried to get Cas to let me see him,” fuck, he hates talking this much. “But they locked me up.” He clears his throat, “Then Zachariah shows back up to give his villainous monologue and whaddaya know, it turns out that the whole time the angels have been gearing up for the apocalypse and not trying to stop it.”

Mary would be floored if she hadn’t expected funny business from the way they’d spoken about
the angels the whole time.

“The upper tier of angels in command wanted to initiate the battle of Michael and Lucifer in order to bring Paradise to earth, disregarding the destruction and human lives that it would cost,” Cas elaborates.

Sam’s anxiety is building. With every sentence they account, Sam’s terrified that he’ll look up and find disappointment and shame on Mary’s face. He’s barely looked at Dean, certain that his mind’s eye will find both in his brother’s features, whether they’re there or not.

Dean feels almost the same way. But it’s because he couldn’t protect Sam. He’d let his brother down and it had almost ended everything.

The shame of having to reveal all of this to Mary is revitalizing guilt they all believed they’d conquered. Before, there had been no one else to answer to.

Sam decides it’s his job to tell it from here.

“Ruby and I were headed to a convent where I was going to face off with Lilith. Before we went in I listened to Dean’s voicemail,” why is he mentioning this? – because it had hurt him, “I guess I was looking for a reason to stop. Maybe I knew something was wrong. But it didn’t exactly convince me,” he knows he sounds bitter. He’s rambling. He feels too sick to be doing this. He wants to sleep, but he doesn’t want anyone to worry. They need to be doing this.

The pause is too long though, and Dean speaks up, “Cas broke me out and we went to Chuck, the prophet, to find where Sam was. He sent me to Sam and took on an archangel who was trying to stop us so that I had time.

“Breaking into the convent was easy,” Sam interrupts. “We cornered Lilith and Ruby stopped Dean from getting in.” He give a grim upturn of his lips, “I heard Dean yelling through the door and I almost stopped,” so many details that are only making him look worse, why can’t he stop talking?, “But Ruby was yelling to me and Lilith was saying …” I’d turned into a freak for nothing. He doesn’t even realize he’s drifted off. “And I thought she was right. That if I didn’t kill her, nothing we’d done to stop the apocalypse would have mattered. And I just … I killed her. She bled out and the blood made a spiral on the floor. Then Ruby told me … Ruby told me then that me killing Lilith was the last seal.”

Now Mary is floored.

“Her blood was the final key to opening Lucifer’s Cage, and Ruby had been pretending to help us all along so that she could get me there to open it. She said it had to be me … I was too drained to kill Ruby by myself but Dean broke in and I helped him stab her with the knife she gave us.”
For some reason Mary finds a drop of satisfaction in that cosmic irony.

After hearing Sam’s account, Castiel concludes that while Dean wants to ignore the offending memories, Sam seeks absolution through confession for the parts of his past he feels guilty for. He simply doesn’t because Dean is the only person who he’d want to apologize to or seek absolution from and Dean never wants to talk about it when he can move on instead. This experience is far more enlightening than he’d anticipated and he isn’t sure that’s good.

“Next thing you know, the floor starts glowing, and Dean and I get left in the room when it blows.” He takes a breath, “And then we’re on a plane. And we can see the explosion out our window.”

Dean refills his glass again, “We went to Chuck’s and when we got there the whole place was like a meteor crash site. He told us that Cas was dead.”

“The archangel Raphael killed me for my interference.”

“While we were there,” Dean is undeniable exasperated now, “Zachariah popped up again, and he decided to finish his evil monologue. Told me I was needed to fight against Lucifer and that Satan was on the prowl to hop a ride in some sucker’s body.”

Sam scoffs.

Dean eyes his brother and continues, “I told him to fuck off and banished him.”

“Whatever saved us from the blast,” Sam knows that getting into the whole ‘does God care?’ game won’t help their story, “it wiped the blood from my system too. I stopped feeling side effects and cravings.

“We holed up in a hotel and hid ourselves from the angels with Hex Bags, and we decided to hunt down Lucifer.”

“Before anything really got underway, a pack of demons showed up, led by our favorite little Hell-rat, Meg.”

Cas makes a face at Dean’s phraseology. The hunter doesn’t look at him, though, and continues, “Turns out the demons thought I was important, too, and wanted me dead so the angels couldn’t use me to stop Lucifer. One of them was actually possessing Bobby. When Meg tried to have him stab me, Bobby won back control, and stabbed himself instead.”

Mary is impressed to say the least.

“The demons scattered and we ran Bobby to a hospital before heading to one of dad’s old storage units.”

“Chuck had gotten a message to us that the angels had lost the Michael Sword,” Sam smirks as he says the title and Dean narrows his eyes in annoyance; it sounds so pretentious and they had been so off base with their theories. “He told us it could be found in a castle, on a hill of 42 dogs. We figured it was code and eventually it led us to dad’s storage unit.”

“So we get there and find that the Sharks and the Jets are throwing us a welcome party. Only they started the dance-off without us so just Zachariah and a couple of stunt angels were left by the time we got there. He told us that we had the Michael Sword all along,” he takes a gulp of his drink, “Because I was the Michael Sword.”
Mary doesn’t know how to respond. She wants more information.

Cas, of course, acquiesces; “It was the reason he was saved from Hell. Once he broke the first seal, Heaven needed him back on earth so that Michael could use him as a vessel. Dean, as the Righteous Man and because of his bloodlines, is Michael’s True Vessel.”

“So when Zach told me I was going to defeat Lucifer, he meant that they needed my sweet ass to do it, not that I could take on Satan,” Dean scoffs at himself, “but I told him ‘no.’ See, like Sam said, angels have to get consent before they possess someone.”

“Even Lucifer must submit to that rule,” Cas adds.

“And Zach got kind of offended at that, so he starts beating up on us. Breaking Sammy’s leg, threatening Bobby, giving me stomach cancer - trying to force me to say yes.”

Mary is appalled that angels would act this way. Her entire schema for constructs of goodness and light has been twisted. Not to mention the way she used to bid goodnight to her children, tarnished.

“But I kept saying no,” Dean drawls. “The only reason we made it out of there was thanks to Cas.”

“I had been resurrected by God, who was also the cause of the boys’ teleportation to the airplane. I made these implications to Zachariah and it scared him enough to drive him away. Then I placed Enochian sigils on their ribcages to hide them. It prevents angels from finding them unless Dean or Sam directly summons one.”

“Then he ditched us, and we went back to Bobby. The doctors said he probably wouldn’t walk again and there wasn’t anything we could really do about that. But we decided that we were gonna have to do something about all this apocalypse crap, even if it wasn’t going to do any good.”
Dean’s mind races across a civil divide in a small town straight out of the Twilight Zone, “So we started collecting class rings – hunting the horsemen.”

“War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death.”

“We started with War. That bastard was wily but we ganked him by cutting off the ring that gave him his power. Without it he just sorta stopped existing.”

“Um, after that, Dean and I split for a while. He wanted to keep hunting, I didn’t.”

“Then Cas showed up and told me,” here Dean laughs humorlessly, “that we had to find God.”
Cas huffs a breath that could be mistaken for a scoff.
“But that wasn’t all. Cas wanted to ask an archangel for help, specifically, Raphael.”

“The one who killed him?” Mary asks, incredulous.

“That would be the one. We went and found his vessel but that wasn’t much help, so we set a holy oil trap and summoned him.”

“How did you get any?” Mary had read about it in lore when researching Hebrew monster myths.
as a young hunter-in-training.

“Heavenly Postal Service,” Dean jerks his head in Cas’s direction. “Cas said he didn’t think he’d live through the trap, though, so we hunkered down and prepped for our second Last Night on Earth.”

Dean and Cas snag each other’s gaze as memories of rain and holy fire overlap images of a brothel and the sounds of unprecedented laughter. A smile darts across Dean’s lips, “But this time, we were gonna do it with a bang,” Cas narrows his eyes at Dean’s innuendo, “and we went out on the town. When we came back, Raphael was waiting for us. But we’d gotten the jump on him and trapped him in a backup ring of holy oil. He told us God was dead and Cas called BS and just left him there and we bailed. Cas decided we should look for the Colt,” Dean looks to Mary and registers recognition of the infamous firearm, “because the demons were the last ones to have it, and Cas thought it could be used to kill Lucifer.” Dean looks to Sam and hands him a segue, “That night Sammy gave me a call.”

“Lucifer had found a vessel and he visited me,” Sam swallows hard, “He couldn’t find me because of Cas’s carvings on my ribs but he came into my dream. He um, he told me that I was his True Vessel.”

Mary’s eyes widen in shock.
She can feel her jaw ready to drop open.
Both of her sons are vessels for two of the most powerful beings left on the chessboard of their earth.

“I had no idea what to do once I woke up, so I called Dean.”

“Sam wanted back in, to hunt Lucifer together. I said we were better separate; we were the matches that Heaven and Hell were going to strike to start the apocalypse.”

“He said that they’d use us against each other no matter what, and he was right.”

“Then I got a trip to the future-“ a fear grips Dean and he stops mid-sentence. What if that universe could still come to be? Or even just parts of it? What if Cas being human leads to that version of himself even though the apocalypse never happened? He can’t calm himself but he clears his throat, “A future. It was shit, and it kinda made me realize that Sam and I needed to stick together, so we teamed up again.”

Sam watched the array of emotions pepper his brother’s face when he cut himself off, and he was able to identify each one. They all concern him.

"We met the antichrist. No clue what happened there. Probably something we should look into at some point."
At that, Sam sports a bitchface and Cas cocks his head with a grimace.

Mary wonders when she’ll start to feel jaded to those kinds of remarks.

"Then Sam had the brilliant idea of inviting along Loki to join our apocalypse protest rally."
Sam rolls his eyes, "We'd met him before and I thought he'd help!"

"To be fair it was better than anything you two had going on at the time."

"Thanks for the support, Cas."

"You’re welcome, Dean."

Sam clears his throat, "Loki, was a trickster we’d met before," he fidgets uncomfortably as he continues, “And he didn’t want to help us with the apocalypse. He claimed he didn’t side with heaven or hell but that he wanted us to ‘learn our places’ so that we could start the apocalypse," his jaw clenches, “so he put us in a warped pocket reality-“

“TV Land,” Dean interjects.

“We got inserted into TV roles and we couldn’t move on to the next show-”

“Or commercial,” Charlie says under her breath, and Sam shoots her a look.

“-until we’d played our role.”

“Cas told us that he was more powerful than just a trickster but got zapped off before he could give us more. We fooled around trying to get through every shitty drama and awful gameshow. Then, first chance we got, we trapped the trickster.”

“Dean came up with the idea to try holy oil and,” Sam sighs, “it worked, because Loki was actually an angel.”

“Specifically, the archangel Gabriel,” Cas adds.

Mary isn’t sure she knows what’s going on anymore.

“So he gave us a speech and we told him ‘no’ and left him in the ring of holy fire and walked out.”

It sounds so simple put like that, Sam thinks. From that description there wasn’t a trace of hopelessness or betrayal.

Dean sighs and thinks for a moment, opens then closes his mouth before starting, “We went to go find the Colt from Crowley who had it at the time. He just handed it over to us. Said that he wanted Lucifer dead because dude was going to kill all demons once the humans were gone.”

Charlie tucks away the fact that they’ve skipped over every instance and mention of the Winchester Gospels. She also decides that now would be a good time to start emptying that pitcher of water Dean had brought out so they wouldn’t get headaches, and everyone gets a glass.

“He told us to head to Carthage to find Lucifer. Then we rallied the troops and had another Last
“We found Lucifer summoning the horseman Death,” Sam says, “But when Dean shot him with the Colt, he healed from it like it were any other gun and told us that he was one of the five beings that the Colt couldn’t kill.”

“Presumably the four archangels and God,” Cas notes.

“While Lucifer was distracted by summoning death, Cas got us out of there and back to Bobby’s.”

“Not long after that, we discovered that Anna was no longer imprisoned,” Cas tells her. “I had inadvertently thwarted her attempt to kill Sam and so she traveled back in time to kill John. Her purpose was to prevent Sam’s conception. We followed her into the past, to 1978, in order to stop her.”

“What happened?” Something about Castiel being the one to talk makes it feel okay for Mary to interrupt with questions.

Dean smirks, “We showed up at your door and when you recognized me from my last visit you tried to send us away. Smart move.”

Sam actually smiles when he speaks, “Dad was thrilled to see us and get to meet your relatives.” That was probably his favorite memory of his father; young and in love and just as focused on family as ever – but for the right reasons.

“Anna set a trap for John, though, and the three of you went to rescue him,” Cas remarks.

“We escaped but, um,” Dean isn’t sure how he feels about telling her this, “when we got to a safe place, we told you who we were and, uh, we tried to talk you into leaving dad so that we wouldn’t be born.”

Mary bears an expression equal parts disturbed and appalled. She can’t even imagine any version of herself that would give up her children.

“Then Anna and a young version of Uriel ambushed us and in the fight, Sam got killed. And right before Anna could kill you, Michael, the archangel, possessed dad and killed Anna.” Dean sneers, “He went on to give us a spiel about being destined since great granddads Cain and Abel, to be his and Lucifer’s true vessels. Then he brought Sam back, and sent us to the present after he erased your and dad’s memory.”

“Hunting kept us busy until we came across Famine, the next horseman on our checklist. We got his ring,” he clears his throat before a cough can make its way out, “but only after I drank demon blood to kill him.”

Dean shocks him again with defense for his actions; “Famine made everyone hungry for things; love, food, power … Even Cas was craving himself some White Castle and angels don’t eat. Or taste.”

Cas wants to correct him and remark that his taste is on the molecular scale, that certain–
“The Whore of Babylon was after that, on our apocalyptic scavenger hunt.” Dean and Sam are sharing a look when a surprised Cas brings his attention back to them, “But we took care of her and moved on.”

Cas and Charlie both make openly displeased faces. Cas at his thought being interrupted even though Dean couldn’t have known he was being a nuisance by speaking; Charlie at the fact that they’ve skipped their roadtrip to-slash-in heaven.

Cas’s line of thinking follows Charlie’s shortly after. They’ve skirted a rather important grouping of events – another death, the Axis Mundi, the rift between them that that trip had caused, the end to his search for God … well …

Cas feels the need to comment on that though; “By this point, I’d ended my search for my Father. We had begun to focus solely on how we, ourselves could stop Armageddon.”

“Except first, I tried to call it quits,” Dean admits. He grits his teeth.

Shoot something. The thought rings through his head, shoot something. He just wants to go to the practice range and fill a target so full of holes you wouldn't be able to see the silhouette anymore.

Everything about this is making him feel vulnerable. He hates it and he just wants a weapon in his hand - anything he can use to defend himself. But when the thing you're combating isn't something you can fight the way you can fight a ghost or a shifter, Dean is at a loss.

So he feels insecure and oversensitive and ready to burst - with anger, sadness, weakness, frustration. Anything to relieve this tension inside himself.

Why does he feel like he needs to explain himself? He's never felt like he'd had to explain himself before. He's used to walling in and blocking out a sense of obligation or weak urges that come with being human. Not this soft wanting, pushing him to pour out his soul.

It's the look in her eyes. They're a siren song with verses of "Let me kiss your scrapes better" "Hold my hand in the parking lot" "I'll dry your tears, put you to bed, and be here when you wake up" , and a chorus of mutual "I love you"s.

So he sighs, goes on, “At that point, I thought saying yes to Michael was gonna be the only thing that could do the trick and defeat the devil. To make sure I didn’t do anything stupid, Sam and Cas took me back to Bobby’s.”

Dean bets that if he tries to breathe it’ll be shaky. He’s thinking about what he said to the three of them; things specifically tailored to nail them in the chest and break them so they’d let him go easier. He’d been so casual and angry about it too. Almost sarcastic.

‘You’re not my father’
‘I-I don't believe … In you’
‘Cas, not for nothing, …’

“Adam got resurrected by the angels,” he startles himself, but he’d rather be blunt and get this over with than pussyfoot around anything. Especially not details. “They’d gotten fed up with waiting on me to say yes and apparently Adam was a good enough substitute to be Michael’s backup vessel.

“We tried to rescue him, but of course, it was a trap. We had a little spat, Zachariah nearly killed Sam and Adam but I stabbed him in the face-,”
There’s that little drop of satisfaction niggling at her brain again.

“-and Sam and I booked it just before Michael showed up. Cas and Adam didn’t make it out of the angel waiting room.” He takes a drink, “At the end of it, I was back on board and ready to go find them both.”

“We decided to expand our religious horizons,” Sam jokes. Mary and Dean make faces at him (Dean for the poor introduction to the already distasteful impending topic). But Charlie and Cas latch on to the defensive sarcasm readily. Kevin, as he has been this entire time, is listening as if watching some twisted play he isn’t sure he wants to be attending, slowly filling his underaged self with good liquor.

“Some pagan deities took us hostage when we stopped at their motel. They wanted to stop the Judeo-Christian Apocalypse and to use us as bargaining chips. Then Gabriel showed up, not as Gabriel, but Loki. We tried to get him to help us escape but Kali-,” he looks to Mary who nods, knowing of the goddess of destruction, “Kali was keeping him there with a blood spell. And, get this, none of the gods knew that he was actually an archangel since he was in hiding.”

Cas thinks that he would have liked to witness this. The gathering of gods and Gabriel interacting with them would have been … legendary, to say nothing of what it offered in perspective of how other deities and religions were affected by the apocalypse.

But Sam has been talking, “-figured out who he was and wanted his archangel blade. It and the other three archangel blades are the only things that can kill archangels. There was some messing around, and Gabriel left, but then Lucifer showed up. He- he started killing all the gods,” Sam coughs into a tissue. He ignores the blood it gets stained with. “Then Gabriel came back. He gave us a DVD and sent us off with Kali – she was his ex.” Sam’s getting distracted and feels like he’s slurring, “But the DVD,” he reaches for a drink knowing that alcohol won’t help the speaking problem so he fiddles with the glass, “that gave us our new game plan. In it, he told us that we couldn’t kill Lucifer but we could put him back in his cage. We just needed all four rings from all four horsemen to open it then we could push him in.” His phrasing reminds himself of how simple Dean had tried to make it seem at the time.

“There was some hoopla-,” (Dean considers saying ‘horsing around’), “- about it but we got the rings from Death and Pestilence.”

Sam takes back control of the conversation at Dean’s pause for breath; “Then we set the trap. I was the bait.”
Mary’s eyes widen - anxious and eager to hear this.
“The plan was for me to let Lucifer possess me so that I could throw myself in the cage and lock him in there with me. But it didn’t take. I couldn’t get enough control over myself to get us through the gateway. Lucifer closed the portal and took the key then left to go meet Michael.
“During the setup we’d gotten help from Bobby and Cas - uh, sorry, Cas had been cut off from heaven and was basically human but he was back and like I said, he was still helping us. So they
went with Dean once they found out from Chuck where the showdown was gonna happen.” Sam fights back memories of the interim where Lucifer set him up against the people he’d once cared about.  

“Noon. Stull Cemetery. Lawrence, Kansas. Michael arrived wearing Adam.” He rubs his eyes and tries to give a laugh, “It was funny, for a sec there Michael almost agreed to not fight Lucifer. But he decided that he had to since ‘God wished it.’  

“Dean, Cas, and Bobby showed up and put up a good fight. Cas distracted Michael by tossing a Holy Oil Molotov cocktail at him. That just made Lucifer blow Cas up. Then he killed Bobby too. “Dean kept trying to bring me back, telling me to take control while I-Lucifer was beating him up. “And then I did. I got control, took out the key, opened the Cage just as Michael reappeared, and he tried to stop me, but I pulled him in with me. Which put an end to the two biggest threats to humanity.”

“And that was it. Game over. Apocalypse averted.” Dean says.

Mary again finds herself confused. Then she’s worried. They way they’d talked about it made it sound as if it had all happened so long ago. But had it? If Sam was out, where was Lucifer? Had Michael escaped? She’d only briefly been outside the bunker. Was this group the last of the humans on earth?

But Dean doesn’t notice her panic as he gears up for the next portion of the story. He gives an aborted laugh, "When I say the apocalypse was over, I just mean the first one – the biblical one. Because shit certainly didn't get easier.” Dean wards off a dry throat with a sip of his drink. “Before Sam jumped in the cage he told me to get out of the life. That was his one wish. I went to live with a girl, Lisa and her son Ben. I knew her from a long time ago when I was still barely more than a kid. We’d come across each other during a hunt after that though. So I tried and it could have worked if I’d been about five years earlier. But the way things were, it wasn’t gonna happen. She and Ben eventually got their memories wiped when I left. But that was after I found out Sammy wasn’t in the cage.”

Mary turns to look at her youngest.

He flounders – how do you tell your mom you were once missing your soul? - and says the first thing that comes to mind, “I was hunting. With your dad.”

Mary is reeling. This all sounds too fantastic.

“Cas had pulled me out,” which is probably the biggest mystery of that whole thing, he thinks, “but my soul got left in the Cage to be tortured by Michael and Lucifer. Crowley had resurrected Samuel for his hunter knowledge. So I went around hunting with him and I left Dean because I knew he was out of the life.” Sam turns to Cas.

“When I left Dean after Sam threw himself in the cage, I essentially started a war in Heaven. The old regime – the archangel Raphael and the loyalists – didn’t take my rebellion or the defeat at Stull Cemetery well. I had supporters, but against an archangel … I held concerns. He had more power, more claim, and the same plan that heaven had always had for earth – one that would end in its destruction.

“And in my desperation to maintain normalcy for the world,” for Dean, “I turned from rational
thought,” and reliable help, “and involved myself with Crowley. “We planned to open a gateway to Purgatory and claim its souls.”

“Purgatory?” the disbelief in her tone has only increased.

Dean steadfastly ignores prodded memories: ‘brave little ant,’ ‘favorite pets.’ “Yeah, only not the Vatican-approved version.”

“It’s the place where monster souls go after death,” Sam elaborates, “Just one big forest with no way out except a hard-to-find path to Hell. We didn’t know that at the time, but we still weren’t happy with the idea of Cas taking souls or dealing with Crowley.”

“But when the souls boarded the S.S. Angel Of The Lord, Cas got some surprise passengers,” Dean rolls his tongue pensively.

“In addition to the current, commonplace monsters, I also absorbed the souls of more primordial beasts. They gave me immense power. I ruled as God, actively doing my work to mold the world into something I saw fit, until the souls were able to overpower me within our shared body.” Regret and disgust garnish his words.

Dean sees the opportunity to summarize and move this along: “So, Sam got pulled from the cage, we met your dad, Sam got his soul back, Cas made a deal and opened a doorway to Purgatory, and the Leviathans got into the world.”

“What?” Mary is close to veering off the path they’re laying out for her.


“We discovered it completely by accident,” Sam’s mouth twitches in a near smile at the memory. He actually smiles at the thought of his mom meeting Jody. “Borax and decapitation work on them as long as you keep the head separated from the body.”

Dean leans back in his chair a little, “That whole year was a battle against the Leviathan and trying to keep Sammy sane. When Cas cured him from it, he made himself nuts. But it was hippy-dippy, ‘Satan made me crazy’ nuts, not ‘I’m God’ or ‘Am I still in Hell?’ nuts.”

“On one of our tries to take them out, the alpha Leviathan killed Bobby but he stuck around as a ghost for a little before moving on.”

Charlie jumps in, “The Leviathans were planning their world domination through a corporation. They wanted to harvest and farm humans. Their leader took the shape of Mr. Dick Roman, CEO of Sucrocorp. It was really almost a perfect plan – they had everything they needed to poison, fatten, and feed on humans. Like I told you before, they met me when they needed an in on the corporation. I gave them intel.”

“And before she moved on she helped us steal a major weapon: the Word of God – specifically the Leviathan tablet. Almost right after that we met Kevin,” Sam’s been able to suppress most of his coughing but now a violent one surfaces. He takes a drink and continues, “Only a prophet can read the Word of God and so Kevin was drawn to the tablet, tried to steal it from us, helped us figure out what it was, and –“ Sam is cut off by more coughing.

“And I almost got kidnapped by angels, demons, and Leviathan.” Kevin sniffs a bit indignantly, “I
helped them with getting what they needed to kill Dick. The tablet said that we just needed to ‘cut off the head and the body would flounder.’”

*Keep a straight face,* Charlie tells herself at Kevin’s poor phrasing. She almost loses it when she realizes she’s told herself to have a “straight” anything.

Sam has recovered from the coughing and in good show picks up again, “We made a plan to use the weapon the tablet told us to create but we needed Crowley’s cooperation and that was risky in itself. Then when we got to the headquarters we found out that Dick knew we were coming—Kevin and Charlie separately try to hold back a snicker at Sam’s unintentional pun, “—because on all the video feeds we were monitoring in the building we saw a bunch of copies of him and we couldn’t tell which one was the real him. That was important since we only had one weapon and one shot at killing him.”

“We figured that Cas would be able to identify the real one, though. So we raided the building hoping for the best, and Cas and I searched it for the real Dick Roman. When we found him we double teamed it - stabbed him in the neck. And then ..." He drifts off.

Dean looks up from the table and makes eye contact with Cas.

Oh yeah.

This part.

The angel finishes his thought, "Purgatory."

Mary’s on the edge of her seat.

Cas and Dean keep staring at each other.

“We landed. Cas told me where we were, that we got there when the alpha leviathan goo exploded all over us, and then … we got—“

“I left,” Cas breaks the long lasting eye contact to look at Mary – *away from Dean* – when he interrupts. But his gaze flicks back to the hunter.

“Yeah. So I went looking for him. Didn’t really know what else to do. Well other than run from every goddam creature that was trying to eat me. Which was all of them. Then I met Benny – a vampire, but good people. Real Cajun, southern boy. He helped me escape Purgatory on the condition that his soul could hop a ride with me. My condition was that we find Cas first.”

He licks his lips before going on, “The Leviathans were on our asses. Most of ‘em were gunning for Cas but we came across a few of our own.” He moves his gaze to the ceiling, as if to better recall the events, “Uh, once we found Cas I had to really work him over to convince him to come back with me.” Dean pauses, but doesn’t let himself get deep in thought. He sniffs a breath, “Then we went searching for the portal to get us out.”

Mary’s face suggests she remembers Sam’s comment about a lack of entrances or exits.
“Benny said that Purgatory – the whole dimension – wanted to spit me out ’cause I wasn’t a monster soul. Hell, I wasn’t even a human soul – I still had my body.”

*Just get it over with, come on,* “Anyways … we found the portal and, uh,” he doesn’t look up at Cas, “Benny did the ritual so that I could smuggle him out. The portal was closing though, so Cas and I had to scramble to get up to it fast enough. We were almost there when some Leviathans popped in and ambushed us. We fought ‘em off but by then the portal was nearly closed. Right below it, there was this ledge we had to climb to reach it.”

Mary wonders why this isn’t as simple as it should be.

“I was ahead of Cas. He was struggling to make it up. I got through, stood in the doorway of the portal and turned around to give him a hand. He grabbed it, but only for a second. He sent me through without him …”

Dean stops but he doesn’t sound like he’s done speaking.

*And there it is,* Mary thinks.

He pulls his stare away from where it’s been focused on the ceiling.

Fuck.

That **look** Charlie is giving him. It means she’ll want to talk later. But she’d never approach it that way. She’ll just offer to listen and he’ll just vomit up all the thoughts he’s been having because she’s so easy to talk to. Even if he didn’t say specifics or bring up everything, it felt like she knew everything. And then she’d have something she wanted to say about it. And it would be something Dean wanted to hear. Or needed to hear more often than not.

Sam picks up, “While Dean was in Purgatory, I spent the year trying to be normal with a girl named Amelia. It didn’t work out, for a lot of reasons.” The shorter he keeps this, the less exposure that wound gets. “When he and Cas disappeared I didn’t know what to do and then Crowley kidnapped Kevin so I tried to sort myself out, but before I got a game plan,” he sniffs, “I got caught up in small stuff that was important to me.”

Dean wants to clear his throat but he takes a drink instead, “Up top, Sammy and I got back together. We found Kevin. Saved his mom. After I put Benny’s soul back in his body, we called it quits. But the whole year we sort of stayed in touch and kept helping each other out.”

“While we were out of it, our friend Garth had organized the hunters. He took up Bobby’s old job and we helped him out on a case,” Sam’s pretty sure she’ll be meeting Garth at some point and giving her background info now can’t hurt.

Dean looks to Cas then Mary, “Then out of nowhere Cas came back.” There’s assertion in his expression when Dean looks at Cas once more. Then the hunter turns to Kevin.

The prophet takes his cue, “But around the same time, Crowley captured me. He forced me to translate the tablet and that lead him to find out about the existence of the angel tablet. What Sam and Dean forgot to mention,” he says with accusation, “is that I had the demon tablet and had
discovered that there was a way to close hell permanently.”

“No demons, no deals, …” Sam says with a borderline plaintive air.

“No get out of jail free card,” Dean says dismissively. Obviously they’ve been sorting out what this opportunity means in terms of everything.

Cas takes up the slack; “We began a search for Crowley’s half of the demon tablet so that Kevin could translate it and Crowley wouldn’t possess such a powerful relic.”

“Yeah,” Dean says with a grin that’s more determined than anything resembling mirth, “Cas became a hunter for about a day and a half.”

“However, I was in a place where it was most suitable for me to spend my time otherwise.” The combination of his naïveté in the art of hunting, with Naomi’s manipulation of his actions, factored with his personal comfort at the time is something he doesn’t care to explain at the moment. He wonders how he’d fare now.

“Cas and I went to go rescue an angel that Crowley was torturing for info. That was when Crowley found out about the angel tablet,” Dean says.

“After that we met up with Charlie.” Dean’s looking at Sam as the younger Winchester says this so neither sees Charlie mouth to Mary, “Handmaiden.”

Mary flashes an amused smirk before quickly schooling her features as Dean turns to her.

“Then we met dad’s dad, Henry.”

“And Abaddon.”

“I thought he ran off and they never found him,” damn, she’s supposed to be saving her questions until the end.

“That’s the thing,” Sam exchanges a look with Dean, “he didn’t abandon his family, Henry traveled here, to 2013 … and he never made it back.”

“Henry belonged to a secret society, the Men of Letters. They’re the guys who built this place. They were the brainiacs of the hunting world. Never really did much hunting, actually,” it irks Dean when he sounds less condescending than he tries to.

“But he knew rituals, and exorcisms, and all about relics and lore. It was part of his training to be initiated. He even knew a spell that he used to travel to the present. He used it because the demon Abaddon had infiltrated their society and was killing the members.”

“She’s a Knight of Hell – one of Lucifer’s hand-picked favorites to help lead the demon underlings,” Dean takes a bored sip of his drink. “Super powerful too. Demon knife, salt, exorcisms; none of the normal stuff works on her.”

“While we were on the case, tracking down Abaddon and the Men of Letters, we found out about this place,” Sam gestures to the room they’re in and though familiar with their home, everyone in the group takes a moment to observe it.

“And of course, things got hairy. Abaddon kidnapped Sam, Henry and I went to go after him,
Henry volunteered to be bait, Abaddon double crossed us, and she stabbed Henry. Not before he could shoot a bullet with a devil’s trap in her skull, though. Gave us a chance to kill her … but he died too.”

There’s a respectful pause before Sam dives back in, “That was when we discovered the trials.”

Kevin, though tipsy, jumps in again, “I finished translating enough of the tablet to tell that there were three trials that one person had to perform to close the gates of Hell, and that the first one was to bathe in the blood of a hellhound.”

Mary is slightly disgusted but doesn’t show it. The rituals involved in the hunter life were one of her least favorite parts. Don’t even get her started on witches.

“I was supposed to be the one to do them,” Dean says in a tone quieter than anything else he’s said all day. Nightmares of Hell may plague him but this guilt over the trials is still fresh. “Sammy jumped the gun – he didn’t have a lot of choice but to kill the thing and get its blood all over him. But he wouldn’t agree to go find another hellhound and let me do the trials.”

“It didn’t make sense to,” Sam looks like a petulant child, small in his chair, curled into himself with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Starting the trials was what made him sick. And he purposefully didn’t tell me because he knew I’d make him stop.”

“And what good would that have done us?”

Dean rolls his eyes, and before he can retort to this dead and futile argument, Cas pushes them along, “And then we went to one of Lucifer’s crypts.”

Dean snaps his head to his best friend. There had only been two major cases – James and Prometheus – between the start of the trials and seeking the crypt but it still startles him that they’ve gotten this far, this fast.

“In it was a relic, or so I’d told Sam and Dean. In reality it held the angel tablet.”

Why had Castiel lied?
Mary isn’t sure how much longer she can hold back her questions.

“We performed some interrogation,” – Dean almost resents the way Cas says that, as if he hadn’t been killing people – “And they led us to Meg, whom the demons had been holding hostage. As the daughter of Azazel she’d known higher-tier information, like the locations of Lucifer’s crypts. But she and Crowley aren’t and haven’t ever been on good terms to the best of my knowledge, so she wasn’t willingly giving them the coordinates. In fact she was giving them false information. She told us this and proceeded to lead us to the crypt’s actual location.” Castiel considers how to approach the Naomi situation, which bears mentioning, and in his pause, Sam begins talking.
“So Dean and Cas went into the crypt for the parchment while Meg and I stayed outside to ward and guard the place. We fought off some low-level demons before Crowley showed up. Meg sent me in after the two of them and stayed behind to fight Crowley. For all the shit she pulled on us over the years, even when she was helping us, I never expected her to go down fighting for –“

“Meg’s dead?” Cas interrupts, shocked.

“You didn’t tell him Meg was dead?!” Charlie can barely believe this.

“You knew she was dead?” Cas asks looking somewhat offended that Charlie knew before him.

“No, but they should have had the decency to tell you as soon as they could!” she nearly shouts in the general direction of both brothers.

This is some rather unexpected drama, Mary thinks.

Dean can’t even bother to look sheepish about this. Sam hadn’t seen Cas to tell him until well after the event and by the time Dean knew and had a chance to sit down with Cas they had more important things to discuss. Like fucking being separated for eternity. Besides it wasn’t as if Dean had particularly liked the demon.

“Yes, she’s dead. I’m sorry that we were too busy trying to balance the universe to tell you that tidbit,” Dean snarks, “She was a wonderful demon and we’ll all remember her fondly.”

Cas looks slightly affronted but Sam’s progression of the story breaks his focus and he’s thrust back into an emotional tidal wave; “Cas and Dean were the ones in the crypt. I don’t really know what happened in there …” he waits for one of them to carry the story from there but all either of them do is look at the other.

And for Cas, everything comes into perspective. He sees an opportunity here. He hadn't wanted to say much because this was the boy's story but here they needed his input. It was his turn to speak because they hadn't dealt with Naomi or Metatron as many times or in the same way as he had. It was his job to explain things. And that entailed explaining himself. Redemption. The hope that he could earn a sliver of redemption in the eyes of his closest friends leaves his heart soaring and he prepares to seize the opportunity.

Cas doesn’t look away when he begins to talk, “I believe this segment deserves a preface.
“I had no memory of escaping Purgatory because my mind had been wiped by the angel who, for lack of a better word, deported me from Purgatory back to earth. From my escape in Purgatory until this journey to the crypt, Naomi had held control of my mind unbeknownst to me.”

Cas switches between looking at Sam, Mary, and Dean, now.

“Under her direction I lied to Sam and Dean, I-I killed Samandriel, the angel we rescued from Crowley, I was ruthless whenever she asked it of me. I had no discretion but also I had no qualms. “So it came as no surprise when, once Dean had found the tablet and refused to give it to me, she ordered me to kill him. In fact she’d trained me expressly for this moment by having me kill clones of Dean.”

Dean’s mouth hangs open slightly, lips parted enough to let out a shocked breath inaudibly.
“I beat him within an inch of his life, but then …” his eyes rest on Dean before once more turning back to Mary, “I was able to regain control and in doing so I recalled my memories from all my sessions with her. It gave me insight to her plan.” He licks his chapped lips.

“What broke her hold?” Her voice is broaching a whisper.

Cas should be more surprised at how well Mary’s question almost echoes Dean’s own words from the crypt.

“Dean,” he says simply. “But despite his persuasions, I took the tablet anyway for safekeeping from everyone who intended to use it. And I went on the run.”

No one’s heard this before. Dean got a snippet but none of them have had any time to adjust to these base truths and going over them is salting the wound then applying vinegar to make it that much more bitter.

The pause is by far the longest if not the heaviest.

“Then, Kev figured out the next trial,” Dean, as usual, feels like it’s his duty to lift the weight.

“Rescue an innocent soul from Hell and send it to Heaven,” Sam recites.

“So we found a way to sneak across the border, by getting a reaper to take us through Purgatory.”

“That’s when we found out about the entrance to Hell. I went by myself to meet the reaper since I had to be the one to do the trial.”

“While he was gone, that bitch, Naomi showed up and chewed me out about how Cas didn’t want to come back and how we were wasting our time with the trials.” The comment isn’t altogether necessary but it makes him feel better when he can vent about angels he doesn’t like.

“The soul I rescued was Bobby’s. Crowley had taken him when we’d burned the flask keeping his ghost tethered to earth.”

Charlie makes a plan to go down and harass the king of Hell about his feelings at some point. Maybe check his phone for certain pictures.

“When we got back to earth, Naomi and Crowley fought over Bobby’s soul but eventually it got sent to heaven.”

“Meanwhile,” Kevin bitterly sputters, “Crowley was in my head driving me nuts and then he kidnapped me and the tablet,” he just barely resists the urge to sarcastically speak in third person.
“We kept our ears open for signs of him, but before anything hit our radar, Charlie came for a visit and we helped her on a case.” Dean keeps it vague like everything else. If Charlie wants to get into it later she can certainly handle it herself.

Dean wants to blow a raspberry but instead he sighs, “Enter Metadouche.”

“Metatron is the scribe of God,” Cas says when Sam doesn’t immediately decode Dean’s remark for Mary.

Sam shakes his head to bring himself back to the conversation, “Uh, yeah, um, … he uh, wrote the tablets down so he can read them.”

He’s starting to feel nauseous. Shit, is alcohol going to start making him puke, now? He usually uses it to make the nausea go away.

Dean realizes that Sam isn’t up to it so he begins explaining, “Cas was still on the run. So the angel tablet front was a bust. But before Kevin disappeared he left us details on how to get his research back and when we got it, it led us to Metatron who’d been hiding out with the Native Americans … just … reading.”

What is it with powerful angels bailing when they can’t take the heat?, Mary thinks critically.

“It seemed like Metatron was gonna be able to do the trick and get Hell closed for us. He even rescued Kevin. He told us that the third trial was going to be to cure a demon.”

What in the name of all that is holy-?

“And, I mean, we had no clue what that meant and Metatron wasn’t any help. So we headed back to the bunker and picked up Cas on the way when we found him in the road.”

How can he be so casual about finding his friend in the road? Mary could understand this relaxed attitude towards events long gone but this had taken place within the past few months, apparently. Then again, given all that’s happened to them it isn’t the strangest thing they’ve encountered.

It is at this point where Dean remembers that he’s supposed to be mad at Cas still. As in, really fuckin pissed. One look at his friend, however reminds him why he hasn’t chewed the poor guy out again. He’s sitting back in his chair, with his legs tucked up in it. His arms hang freely in a subconsciously open gesture and Dean finds the loose-fitting, grey, Metallica tee, reassuring. Cas took to liking all of the band shirts almost more than Dean does.

“We got home and when we were tearing through the archives for demonic possession information,
we found the dungeon and a video of a freaky exorcism. The video eventually lead us to another film of a priest purifying a demon and essentially making the demonic soul human again.”

This is it. This is where Mary draws the line. Until she sees it with her own eyes, her little hunter heart isn’t going to believe that there is a cure for what she’s always known to be one of the rarest and possibly the most terrifying things to go bump in the night.

“Uh, but,” Sam clears his throat, “by then Crowley had started killing people we had saved. He was going all the way back to our first cases we’d done without dad. It was leverage to get us to quit trying to close hell. We stopped and he’d stop. We didn’t know anything about this until we’d started the third trial though.”

“While they pursued the trials, I went to confer with Metatron.”

Castiel realizes that he never finished his gift-laden apology. He considers attempting it a second time. Perhaps Charlie would be willing to take him to town for it.

“He suggested that we work together to cordon off all the angels – who had by this point broken themselves into warring factions, just one of which was led by Naomi – and that forcing them together would get them to work things out as well as keep peace on earth.
“His logic was sound enough and we began immediately undertaking the tasks necessary to close Heaven and lock the angels inside.”

“Back at the homestead, Sammy and I had decided on Abaddon as our demon of choice for the purifying ritual. She was convenient and could have been a danger in the future. Go big or go home, you know?
“We took her to a warehouse, tied her up, sewed her back together. But we weren’t fucking d*md*ss. We left her hands off, locked in a box. When Crowley called to interrupt us before we’d even started and we stepped outside, we made sure to take the box with us. And a good thing Sam thought to grab it too, they started jumping around in the box once we got fifty feet away. She could’ve escaped if we’d left them nearby. But we had to go take care of the Crowley situation and we couldn’t just leave her there. So we took the stitches out, left the devil’s trap bullet in, boxed her up to cement her later and went after it. Now she’s stored in concrete blocks in a couple of closets in the basement.”

“She’s here?!” Cas exclaims.

“What the hell?!” Kevin screams and looks panicked.

“Fuck! Do you guys ever tell Cas anything?!” Charlie accuses.

“Hey! He wasn’t here when that happened and it hasn’t come up ‘till now.”

Sam just winces at the yelling.
“Can we chill out?” Dean asks and waits a moment before moving on, “So we keep trying to save the victims-“

“And at the same time, I’m completing the rituals to close heaven.”

“But we really have no way of saving them and we don’t want to risk any more lives so we called a truce with Crowley, or at least he thought so,” Dean lets a smirk wander over his lips. “We met to sign a contract but when we got there we use the Men of Letter’s demonic handcuffs and brought him to a little church and Sam started the ritual.”

“Then they came to me and had me start translating the angel tablet,” Kevin and Cas make brief, awkward eye-contact.

“Without Metatron I needed another way to figure out what the next portion of the ritual to close heaven was. Dean came with me afterwards to carry it out.”

*One more Last Night on Earth*, Dean thinks.

“By then, Sam was almost done with the ritual.”

Sam dives back into narrative, “And it turned out that Crowley was a piss-baby human.” Okay, now Dean *knows* that Sam’s been awake too long. “The guy just wouldn’t stop crying and going on about our friendship or whatever.”

“Uh, yeah. And Cas and I got a visit from Naomi. Kevin had just told us that Metatron’s trials weren’t showing up on the tablet and she came to us saying that Metatron was going to banish all angels to Earth. Then as a gesture of good will,” disdain drips from his words, “she kindly informed us that if Sam completed the trial’s he’d die.” Dean swallows. They’d come so close to death yet again and that conversation in the church had been fucking traumatic, even for them.

“I doubted Naomi, though. I brought Dean back to the church so he could stop Sam then returned to Heaven. However, when I arrived, I found Naomi dead where Metatron had killed her. He restrained me in Naomi’s … torture chair and,” Cas shivers at a sudden sensation of *emptiness*, unsure of why – he’s discussed this before, hasn’t he? – “He cut out my grace. It was the last piece to closing the gates of heaven. But it wouldn’t lock the angels in. As Naomi had said, the spell would cast all the angels but himself to earth.” The feeling passes.

“I got to Sam in time to stop him but most of the damage had already been done. The magic wanted out of his system and it wanted to kill him. He collapsed on me and I dragged him out to the car when we saw the angels falling just before he went unconscious.

“I couldn’t take him to a hospital – they don’t exactly offer magic antidotes at city generals. So I tossed Crowley in the trunk, strapped Sam in, and sped all the way back here to look up every remedy the Men of Letters had on file. There were some basic things but it was just putting a bandaid on an amputation. I was able to get some quality prescriptions from a hunting connection and those seemed to do the trick but they’re treating the symptoms and we need a cure. Soon.” He looks over at Sam who’s chewing on his lip.
“Halfway through the trip, Cas gave my cell a call and told me what was going on and that he was human. I told him what he needed to do to get to the bunker.” Dean had basically been falling asleep at the wheel at the time and had been glad for something to keep him awake. Even when he was a human, Cas was saving his ass. “He showed up a few days after you first talked to Charlie.”

“Wait, so you’re human?!” Kevin asks in delayed shock.

“Yes, why else would I be eating and borrowing Dean’s clothing and living here; sleeping and showering?”

“I just thought you guys had finally-,” he shrugs.

Charlie cuts him off with a jab to the ribs, “This is why we don’t give you alcohol.”

“Ow! You don’t have to give it to me. There’s bottles stashed all over this place.”

Sam quickly picks up where they left off, “You came back right after that, yeah, Charlie?”

“Yeah, I arrived before you guys though.” She turns to Mary, “After they helped me with my case, I went to go tie up loose ends then I came right back.”

“When I gave her the full tour, I think the first thing she said when she saw the map table was ‘we are so playing Risk on that later,’” Dean smiles at Charlie.

“And I will hold you to that,” she replies.

“I think that just about wraps it up,” Sam says looking around the table for confirmation.

“Yeah, you pretty much know the rest,” Dean’s stomach churns with anticipation for what’s next. This is where he has to give up control of the conversation and let Mary direct it with her questions.

Both of their voices are getting hoarse. Cas’s too. They’ve skipped lunch and dinner and they’re ready to fall into bed and forget that today had to happen. Try to rest without falling asleep – nightmares dancing in their periphery. But they aren’t done. There are questions to answer and no one is willing to leave them until tomorrow.

Sam is the one to ask, “Is there anything else you want to know?”

Mary nods gently and mostly to herself, focused on the table while she sucks her lower lip into her mouth and prioritizes her questions.

“Did you grow up hunters?”
She thinks fleetingly that there were other ways they could've fallen into the life - it drags in anyone and everyone it can.

Sam and Dean share a glance and Dean takes his cue to answer, “Yeah, yeah we did.”
“How long?” she asks.

“How long?” Sam reiterates.

“How long after I died?”

Sam gets a pained expression and Dean feels like the guilt on her face is his own fault when he says, “A couple of months maybe.”

“How long after I died?”

“Dad got good at it. Almost as good as Samuel,” Sam comments. “Well, closer than anyone else,” he amends.

“What happened to them?”

And Dean had thought they could escape that question.

“Dad died when he made a demon deal with Azazel after a car crash,” Sam knows Dean still hates to think about it so he finds the energy to speak up for this in his brother’s stead, “Dean’s soul in exchange for his own. But a year after that his spirit escaped hell and helped Dean kill Azazel.”

This goes with what Charlie had told her, but she’d wanted to hear it from them as if somehow it makes it more true.

It doesn’t make it easier to hear.

“As with most of what they’ve said so far, this information is shocking to say the least.

They offer nothing more and Mary isn’t sure what else to ask on the topic. Maybe those books of Charlie’s will give her some direction to ask them about it later. She musters her composure to move on.

“Where’s Adam?”

Excuses get caught in three throats:

‘Our lives were chaos—’
‘I could barely get Sam’s body out—’
‘The damage my soul had after only—’

Sam’s ready to speak, just oozing guilt for having pulled him in when the original trap had been
meant just for Lucifer, but Dean steals his chance, “The long and short of it? He’s still in the Cage with Michael and Lucifer. And there’s not a whole lot we can do about it.”

Sure there is, Sam thinks, But what would the price be? What damage has been irreversibly done? It’s the same thing he and Dean conclude every time they have this conversation. Maybe they can put it to rest soon.

Mary lets it drop.

“Benny, the vampire. You said you helped him. I don’t get it. Why?”

Because he saved Cas even when he wanted nothing more than to ditch him, and because he always had my back; he never let me down. “Purgatory brought us together, and it didn’t exactly let go of either of us.”

Exhausted of all questions she can handle asking, Mary nods to herself, eyes on the table as they were when she first began asking her questions. A picture has formed in her mind from all she’s been able to gather and what each of them has told her.

Her voice is paced and steady; “You fell into the life when John did after my death. You were raised hunters, on the road. You chased Yellow Eyes for your whole lives until you killed him. John died trying to kill him. You’ve fought and dealt with demons. You’ve fought and bargained with angels,” – you make deals with demons and you bargain with God – “You’ve met and destroyed gods. You started and ended the Apocalypse. You’ve both been to Hell and back. You’ve both died repeatedly. You’ve both been to Purgatory. The lines between monster, supernatural creature, and ally aren’t black and white anymore. God left instruction manuals that put the world, the universe at risk of falling out of balance. His scribe turned against the other angels and used his knowledge to manipulate you. And now the angels are fallen and Sam might be dying.”

There is affirming silence.

“Yes?”

Sam and Dean nod in tandem.

Mary nods to herself for a third time. She’s never felt so introspective. She’s always been able to take action.

“I think I’d like to go to bed now.” She stands and pushes her chair in and makes as if to look up but her gaze doesn’t fully lift and she steps away with a soft, “Goodnight.”

Her footsteps fade quietly across marble and stairs then tile. Her door creaks and clicks shut.
Sam feels so hollow. He wants something from her, or a verbal confirmation of some sort from anyone but he doesn’t know what he’d be asking for and he can’t imagine actually seeking it if he knew.

Dean isn’t sure he was ready for the conversation to be over that soon. Anxiety tightens his throat and fear that she won’t be here in the morning wells in the pit of his stomach. Her presence is making him feel so vulnerable and he’s shocked that he can even admit that to himself.

Charlie and Kevin – even through his drunken haze – both recognize that they’ve been witness to something important.

Cas wonders if it’s normal for humans to be waiting for something to break when there’s been no real accident. That’s how he feels after the weight of that conversation.

They sit quietly, each lost in their own world of thought or avoidance thereof.
Charlie takes a dozing Kevin up to bed and then goes to her own room.
Sam leaves to go take medicine and then ends up in the small library.
Cas stands but he doesn’t want to leave Dean again so he touches his wrist and tells him, “I’m going to the kitchen to make tea. You should get some water.” And Dean shakes his head and Cas makes his tea but stands by the counter – in eyesight and earshot of Dean in case the hunter decides he wants company.

A box is left in the corridor outside of Mary’s room. When she goes to answer the knock that summoned her to her doorway to find it, the hall is empty. But Mary doesn’t need to thank Charlie for leaving it, she is content to explore the contents herself.

No one sleeps that night.

Once Charlie leaves him, Kevin goes to pick up where he left off translating. He’ll sleep when there’s daylight to be seen if he dares to leave his room and seek reassurance of life outside the bunker.

Charlie numbs her mind by blindly re-reading fanfiction she knows by heart. She’ll have the same sentence on her lips at 1am that she will when she pours her first cup of coffee in the morning.

Castiel recites Enochian prayers he’d learned before the first sunrise. They almost comfort him the way they used to but they speak of beautiful things so he doesn’t mind their devaluation.

Dean and Sam would have twin nightmares if they so much as laid a finger on a pillow. Instead of seeking his usual solitude, Dean wants the reassurance of another human being. So he seeks out his brother.
Mary, though, applies herself with fervor. Her newest topic of study being the Winchester Gospels.

Chapter End Notes

Right about now you may be thinking “hey, fem-cas, you skipped [insert scene of choice]. That’s my favorite scene. What the fuck, bro?” to which I riposte, “I gotcha covered.” If I skipped a dramatic or intense scene, or a scene that you loved, chances are that I loved it too, and I’ll cover it. At this point I’d like to remind you that Mary has yet to read all of the Winchester Gospels and form opinions for herself *wink, wink*

So that’s that. Except it’s not because I’m going to come back and actually fill in Dean and Sam’s conversation.

Ugh this fic is too long and I can’t stop writing. I’m sorry for the delay but you got 15k+ words and the next chapter will be posted really soon because I spent time writing it when I should have been finishing this chapter.

I’m not sure I’ll ever be done editing this chapter but it needed to be published. Let me know if I fucked anything up. I have yet to begin my summer SPN marathon rewatch so I’m a bit rusty.

--------------

Thank you all for your comments and kudos! The comments are especially motivating.

And even if I don't include your suggestions (which is unlikely but possible) I love hearing them so let me know what you're thinking.

{How I wanted to write the scene:
Mary: So what happened to Benny?
Dean: *stares off into the distance*
Dean: Benny Lafitte is a beautiful cinnamon roll too good for this world, too pure }

^Pretty sure that was the eulogy he gave
Chapter Summary

“A llama? He’s supposed to be *dead*!”

Chapter Notes

First off, let me just thank you all for your kudos and comments – they’re incredibly motivating. I cranked out so much of this chapter within the first few days of posting the last one because of your feedback.

Secondly, I’m Brothers Trash(TM). Happy Fourth of July, everyone.

So the, uh, introduction you get in the middle is weird but I have plot reasons for it which you find out about in this very chapter you are about to read. (I tried dropping hints during the last chapter but no one mentioned it so I don’t know how well I did it).

And I swear there’s destiel fluff at the end this one. Plus a Charlie thing.

Precedents are being set, my friends.

Warning for Mature content after the introduction when Sam starts musing but when the destiel fluff after that hits, it’s safe to read again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean stands up.
He’s been sitting in this chair all day and his thighs and ass are starting to go numb from not changing position for the past half hour. A half hour in which he’s been thinking and dammit if it didn’t make him feel worse than when Mary had left the room earlier.

He doesn’t want to be alone.

On his way to the Sam’s room, Dean runs into Cas, who stops him with a light grip to his sleeve at his elbow. “Are you on your way to talk to him?”

Dean nods. Cas tells him about the private library and that Sam will likely be there right now. He
He’s glad that he didn’t have to say anything to Dean – the hunter would have been unlikely to listen to his counsel if all Cas had to suggest was opening up to his brother. Maybe Sam can get some of that absolution now.

The hunter pads quietly back down the stairs and across marble and tile. After this, after Dean has heard Sam's perspective on the big parts of the apocalypse and the other little things that have brought them here, Dean wants to sit down and have a good cry because holy fuck his baby brother went through so much by himself while Dean was going through his own shit, and why had they ever thought not talking was a good idea? Because they had been raised that way and they both sucked at it, that's why. Because talking meant having to deal with it and talking meant admitting there was a problem, that’s why. Because it made him feel like this, like shit when they did. That’s why.

He can’t change that this has happened. He can’t will false memories true in which they commiserated together and grew stronger because of it. He can bring them together now by talking about it. He can try to rebuild those bridges and repair the cracking relationship they’ve got. He can still strengthen their bond and get back to the both of them being who the other needs them to be. He hates that that involves more talking but if it means making Sammy better – if it means making them feel like brothers once more … then Dean will be damned again if there’s anything that can stop him from doing it.

And he finds himself in the doorway of Sam's library long after everyone has pretended to go to bed. He stands silent. He wants to collect himself even though he has no grand introduction:

"I didn't know."

Sam looks up to respond, unsurprised, but attention now captured wholly by his brother.

"Me neither."

Dean shoves his hands in his pockets. He treads over to the chair across from Sam. It’s the one that Sam was sitting in when the younger Winchester and Mary spoke the night before the talk. But Dean doesn’t know that. The fire is low but still burning. Sam had wanted the comfort of
something warm and living. Now that Dean’s here he will only tend it as a task for his hands as they talk.

The floor, finally, is open.

“All of the people who warned me … and I didn’t listen.”

“About…?” Dean can guess.

“My powers, my fate.“

“Sammy, we screwed fate a thousand times over. And despite the shitstorm your psychic mojo caused, you wouldn’t have been used to the blood or had enough power to take on Lucifer if you hadn’t. Remember Cas making you drink all those gallons of blood before we first tested the key?” Not exactly the most pleasant means of persuasion, but true nonetheless. Sam can’t deny it. But he tucks it away to let it sink in for acceptance until a later date.

Dean takes a deliberate breath. “Why did my voicemail make you … why didn’t it … help? Before you opened the cage. With Ruby.”

Sam makes a pinched face and clears his throat, “Dean, you told me I was a monster. You called me a bloodsucking freak. And-and you threatened to kill me!” He isn’t raising his voice but the intent is there, “You said that dad had told you you’d either have to save me or kill me but you were done,” his voice cracks, “trying to save me.” Sam’s hurt that Dean didn’t know how much that wounded him at the time – how much it still wounds him to think of it.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean bites out. Sam watches him, waiting for expansion of that thought.

“What you thought was hatemail,” Dean says almost through gritted teeth, “was me pouring my damn heart out. I apologized. Told you I wasn’t dad. That we were still family.” Dean shakes his head, anger caught in his throat. “I’ll bet it was Zachariah, the dickweed. Or-or fucking Ruby-“

“It doesn’t matter.” Shock deadens his voice. Sam is too tired to be bitter, “Ruby would have talked me back into it. She was going to get me to that convent one way or another. There was too much resting on it.” He is not, however, too tired to appreciate the large thorn this news removes from his memory and his relationship with Dean.

“I never really … I never actually saw you as a monster. Even with everything you did … I’d still look at you and … and all I’d see was my kid brother. You were never far enough gone to be
anything else.”

Sam gives a sad smile at this revelation.

“How’d you get control? At Stull?”

Heat prickles down Sam’s spine. A phantom pressure in his mind of Lucifer’s explosive, nano-second of a reaction to losing control before Sam toppled into power.

“The army man stuck in the ashtray of the impala’s back door. It – I – “ Sam can feel his thoughts jumbling and coming out before he has a chance to sort them, “It was you – you broke it, but it was the impala.” His forehead wrinkles as he breaks down the parts of what rocked him into dominance. “She’s our home, she was where we grew up and-and there was a glare on the chrome. Lucifer had to look away, and I saw my reflection in the window and past that, the army man and then all I could see was my memories – jamming the army man in there, getting the legos caught in the AC, carving our initials into the door, driving with you,” – these are happy things, but he doesn’t feel it right now, his vision is starting to blur – “you pranking me when I was asleep in the passenger seat, eating plastic wrapped food and gas-station coffee for breakfast, winning that lottery ticket, singing along to the radio together,” his words start to slow down, “… getting to drive, … flashes from every case we did together, and then all I could remember … was waking up after Jake killed me in Azazel’s trials,” Sam’s on the verge of tears, voice cracking as he recalls the heartbeat he’d felt in that moment – knowing he was about to leave his brother for eternity, “and the way it felt to hug you.”

He’s tired and emotional and he never got to have a good cry about this because of going to hell and being soulless and –

“Sammy?” Dean’s voice is soft in the way it only gets when Sam is vulnerable and Dean feels helpless to do anything about it.

Sam sniffs and rubs his eyes, “Yeah,” he sniffs, “I’m good.” He squeezes his eyes shut and rubs them again before looking at the dying fire. Sam channels his attention away from the overwhelming emotions he’s experiencing and into stoking the fire.

Dean waits for Sam to say something else but it takes a few minutes.

“What would you have done if I’d finished the trials?” The question burns Sam after their talk in the abandoned church. It’s been burning him.

“God, Sam,” Dean covers his face in his hands, “You can’t keep up with this crap. We’ve gotta find you a way around your goddam suicidal tendencies.”

Sam raises his eyebrows accusingly – how the man manages a bitchface while still looking so ill is beyond Dean. “Yeah, I know, I’m one to talk. But you took it to a whole new level, Sammy.

“There was no point. It wasn’t going to do anyone any good as far as I can tell – we both knew it was too good to be true.”

Sam looks unconvinced. There had been hope up until Naomi had warned them.

“Look what happened when Cas tried to close heaven.” Dean’s voice is breathy with concern as Sam just sits there letting the words bounce off of him without absorbing any of it. “And really,
when has anything worked out that well for us sans colossal hitches?”

But – possibly because of Dean’s lame, second-hand excuses – Sam still isn’t getting it so Dean, in this godforsaken hour of exhaustion and desperation, at the end of an emotionally tumultuous day lets slip; “I can’t take it if you and Cas are both gonna do this!”

That gets Sam’s attention.

Dean can’t look at him but he says, “You and Cas both- both fucking giving everything up to try and atone for whatever sins you think you need to pay for. And I’m the one who gets left … ”

Alone

“I get left looking for another way around it that doesn’t leave me in a world with more goddamn problems than I can handle by myself. ’Cause Hell knows I can barely handle them with you. “I nearly – I did lose Cas to Purgatory. He came back but – and then thinking I’d lost you to the trials … I can’t go on trying to chase after and find both of you and piece you guys together over, and over. Not when you’re both suicidal and intent on doing your best to keep me from doing my best.” He gives a sad laugh, “Because I’m gonna break one of these days if I have to keep playing along.”

“Dean-“ Sam whispers.

“You scared the hell out of me, Sammy. You and Cas …”

Mean the World to me.

He swallows, “So I gotta know when you start thinking that bullshit. You-you-you tell me and I’ll set your dumb ass straight.” He offers his best forced smile only to have it melt into a look of pained concern. “You deserve to live. We’ve saved the fucking world.” Dean can say this. He can say this for Sam.

“We live our lives every day trying to make it a safer- a better place. We’ve more than atoned for anything else we’ve done. Because we keep trying to fix it.”

The words sink in.

“So do you.”

“What?”

“So do you. You deserve to live too. But you can’t do it the way you have been.”

“You mean worrying my ass off over keeping you and Cas alive?” Dean’s voice escalates slightly with the panic that his actions are about to come under scrutiny. This is about fixing Sam and making them a better team. Dean doesn’t want himself analyzed unless there’s an “us” attached.

“No. I mean that you can’t do this to yourself Dean. You can’t try to handle everyone’s problems and fix them and then completely ignore your own feelings and issues. It’s all you ever do and you can hardly help it because it’s all you’ve ever known, … but somethin’s gotta give, Dean.”

Dean doesn’t get a chance to divert the conversation or defend himself.

“You shut down whenever someone tries to help you with whatever your deal is or even just talk it out with you. Because for you, it’s easier to pretend the problem isn’t there; whatever it happens to be at the time. How do you expect to be able to take on everyone else’s problems on if you don’t
deal with your own?"

Normally this is the point where Dean angrily cuts him off and leaves the conversation. But …

But he doesn't.

Because they're talking about it.

All of it.

“"You can’t let the negative crap in when half of it is completely untrue or-or exaggerated. Especially if you won’t take the good stuff, the true stuff that the people who love you are telling you.”

Sam is shocked that he’s gotten to say this much. He's waiting for Dean to stop him but refusing to do so until Dean speaks up.

_If Sam had to be put through actually acknowledging his suicidal tendencies then Dean’s damaging behavior should be brought up as well._

“You’re allowed to be okay. Emotionally.”

_It’s worth it for both of them._

“Let someone care about you.”

_The big guns;_ Sam can tell he’s hit a nerve when he sees Dean discretely bite his lip and ever-so-slightly furrow his brows in a near-pained expression. It’s all subtleties with his brother’s deepest concerns.

“We want to be allowed to love you.”

Dean turns his head so Sam can’t see his face anymore. If it was any other situation, Sam might just think he was looking into the fire.

Dean doesn’t acknowledge what Sam’s said.

Instead he diverts the conversation to something equally as sensitive that he hopes Sam will eagerly latch onto:

“Remember how we’ve said we’ll be more honest with each other? And then we never acknowledge it again?”
Sam’s silence reads like a book.

“Could … Are we gonna stick to it this time? Be honest more often?”

Dean can practically hear Sam’s smile and it’s like looking into the sun when he turns to face his brother again.

“It’s just- it’s all about trust, man,” Dean gives justification to his needy-sounding question.

“I know Dean,” his tone comes out harsh because that’s what he’s been trying to say for the last ten minutes. “I know,” he corrects himself more gently. “Yes, I’ll be honest. Of course. If doing that means you’ll … I want you to trust me. It’s a two way street. I know it’s hard. I know I scared you and …” Sam drifts off before he lets his tongue tie itself in knots by bringing up too many of Dean’s insecurities. “I really want us to be able to trust each other again.”

“Me too.”

Trust and honesty.

Ever the ideas have been strained and fraught between the two brothers; despite their vitality to the general concept of codependency. (Though when the boys last fit a general categorization is beyond anyone’s recall).

The line of conversation prompts long unanswered questions.

“When I called you after War, you never told me why you changed your mind about us working together.”

“Do you really want to know?”

Sam shrugs but it’s half-hearted.

Dean sighs, “I hung up with you and went to sleep but when I woke up I found out Zachariah had sent me five years into the future. He wanted me to see what the world would be like if I kept turning down Michael.”

He tells Sam about waking up to the ruins of Kansas City, going to Bobby’s and finding the bloody, bullet-shot wheelchair, and the picture of Camp Chitaugua. How he traveled there and snuck in, and for perspective, mentions that he saw Baby broken down and abandoned just before getting knocked out.

He describes meeting his future self and the gist of their conversation – who each of them were, how they got where they were, the Croatoan virus, the final showdown in Detroit.

He doesn’t mention his proof of identity.

He goes on about how he escaped once his future self left and encountering Chuck before going off in search of Cas.

Describing that version of Cas to Sam, after so many years and never having spoken of it to anyone before now, is almost as odd as it was to meet the drugged out version of their friend. Telling it
isn’t like it was to talk with Mary earlier, this is more of a cautionary tale.

He doesn’t mention the things he tried not to notice about future Cas’s interactions with his future self, especially because he couldn’t – and still can’t – tell what it added up to.

Dean reveals that his future self had found the Colt and planned on using it to kill Sam.

He doesn’t mention how they got it or his own disgust and anger that any version of himself would use tricks he learned from his stint in Hell so freely.

He tells Sam about his future self wanting to say ‘yes’ but being unable to. He summarizes the mission; watching Lucifer kill his future self; the speech that the Devil gave him.

He doesn’t hold back anything on that part.

He talks about being zapped back to his hotel room, and with a bitter laugh, that Zachariah again tried to convince him to cave.

“– And then I called you because all I could think was that maybe there was still a chance, that if we got back to working together, that future would never be real.”

“Wow.”

“… yeah.”

Dean’s subtle reluctance to take on cases in Detroit makes more sense to Sam now. And his exceptional, though discreet distress as Cas had become more and more human during the apocalypse, as well.

“We should hide my meds.”

“Are you kidding? No. I’m gonna give him the same talk I gave you once you got old enough to get into the med kit.”

Sam gives a nod.

He gnaws the inside of his cheek when his next worry hits him. “What do we do if she asks about dad?”

Dean leans back in his chair and shrugs, “We give her the journal.”

Oh.

Sam hadn’t considered that.

“I’ve been thinking about showing it to her. It was the first thing I came up with to avoid giving her the talk ourselves but it didn’t seem right. Still, she should probably read it at some point. It’s got some stuff besides hunting, you know. About us.”

“Yeah, I know,” Sam says, biting his lip as the next topic presents itself. “I’ve read it.” Dean looks up at him when Sam says, “The whole thing.”

As far as Dean knew, Sam had never paid more attention to the journal than scouring it for case
information. He didn’t really take to reading John’s journal – that was always Dean’s job.

Sam knows how much the journal has meant to Dean over the years.

He’d sat down and read it all the way through when a specific note had caught his eye: *Sammy took his first steps yesterday. He walked toward Dean…*
Sam had turned back to the beginning and didn’t put the journal down until he’d read it cover to cover as Dean slept across from him on the other bed with all of his clothes on and an arm slung over his face. It was a grounding sight to attach himself to whenever he’d put the journal down to rub his eyes.

“I learned a lot about myself actually. More about you, but …” he drifts off. “It was- it was like finding out you were the one to carry me out of the house when I was a baby, all over again.”

What it had done was put Dean’s life more into perspective for Sam. His own as well - the way John described Dean’s attitude towards little Sam added depth to Sam’s memories. From a third person perspective, the seed and roots of their codependency are much more glaring. And reading about it in John’s words made it obvious that while it’s all Sam’s known his whole life, it was an instinct that Dean had bred into him. As Sam read, and intermittently watched Dean sleep, his memories –fond or otherwise – and under-acknowledged emotions wove together into familiar attachment for his brother.

It only further solidifies, for Sam, the idea that the brothers are tied together permanently for the rest of this life as well as the next.

He isn’t as opposed to the idea as he’s found himself to be before.

For a heartbeat Dean feels exposed – though maybe not as much as he would have if he’d known the full extent of what Sam had gotten out of his readings. But all he responds with is a passive, “Oh.”

With that they reach a silent understanding and establish a new grounds for perspective.

They’re content to sit. At least for a moment. They’re weathered; both of their throats hoarse and the hour, late.

They’ve worked their way down and Dean is glad they started with the big stuff. Sam too. The mutuality lies visible on both of their faces and felt in the air between them.

It’s easier to segue into breakfast from anecdotes than apocalypses.

Sam finally breaks into a smile. He’s started to feel it and the relief begins washing over him externally and internally.
(Cas will see this sense of absolution in the morning and resolutely not comment on it)
Sam leans his head back against the chair in contentment, shutting his eyes to savor it all. But the
next thing he knows is Dean tucking a blanket over him. He sits up a little.

“Nah, go back to sleep, Sammy.”

“Okay, Dean,” he gives a soft sigh before he murmurs, “Thank you.”

When the sounds of feet on tile stop, Sam opens his eyes and is just in time to catch his brother glancing over his shoulder at him.

“Sure thing,” Dean says with a smile and a wink.

Sam is waiting to close his eyes until Dean is well down the hallway and past his line of sight but his brother stops in the doorway. He looks like he’s gearing up to take up a wendiego without so much as a match.

“You-you know I … that I love you, right Sam?”

Ah, so reciprocation is the monster in this metaphor.

Sam smiles. He hears the unspoken words in every “bitch,” “jerk,” “Sammy,” and “Dean,” that collectively crosses their lips.

”Yeah, Dean. I know.”

Dean nods then turns to leave.

“And, Dean?”

He takes a step back into the room and looks at Sam.

“I love you too.”

Dean grins at him and Sam bites his tongue for a split-second but tells him, “We should say that more often.”

It feels good to say it. It’s reassuring, and warm. It’s what their unique blend of codependency could constantly feel like if they keep adding trust, honesty, and affirmation.

And instead of cheapening the moment with a mocking accusation, Dean lets his eyes get squinty and soft with tenderness and replies, “Yeah we should.”

He walks from the room and Sam turns to the fire for introspection.
Everyone is sufficiently exhausted at breakfast.

Too much so to make an effort at conversation.

They sip their coffees and stretch and snuffle and munch on Dean’s stress-cooking-omelets.

The chef is in the kitchen when Charlie walks past the entryway in the direction of the dormitories. She halts her tracks and backpedals a few paces to poke her head in. With a yawn, she greets Mary, “Hey, I just finished printing.” She hefts the armload of printer paper she’s carting. “I’ll go put them on your bed.”

Before she can step out of the doorway, Dean reenters the room drying his hands on a towel. “What are those?”

Charlie blanches but Mary unaffectedly responds, “The manuscripts for the Winchester Gospels.” “What.” “You showed those to her?” “Yes, Sam, I showed them to her.” Immediately she’s on the defensive, “You guys told her the whole story and she … had some questions from before and I didn’t want to answer them and then you didn’t cover the answers in the story … So I sort of figured that this would be an objective way to –“ “Objective?” Sam looks like he can’t believe his ears but is prevented from saying anything else when a full-body cough overtakes him.

Dean is pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes, “Charlie, I swear, if you didn’t censor that shit –“ “And what would I censor?!”

When Dean responds with, “I’m full frontal in that! God knows what else happens!,” Sam feels a creeping sense of déjà vu come over him.

Dean begins using dramatic hand motions, “You’ve read the goddam thing! For fuck’s sake – for the sake of Sam and myself, filter it! Leave fucking sticky notes as warnings if that’s all you can bring yourself to do.” He shrugs, pointedly, “Better yet-” he reaches for the stack of papers, “-don’t have her read them at all!”

Charlie jerks away to prevent him from grabbing them but in good big-brother fashion this does nothing to deter Dean. Before they can really begin to grapple, Mary interjects, “I’ve already started them.”

…”

“You-“

“I’ve started them and I don’t want to stop. I’m learning about you. About all the parts of your lives I’ve missed. Things I’ll never get to experience otherwise.” She pauses to phrase her thoughts, “And if – if it really bothers you then I’ll give them back. I’ll hate it but I won’t invade your lives that way.”

“It’s not our lives I’m worried about.” Sam mumbles and squeezes his eyes shut when a jabbing
pain zips across his shoulders.

“You can …” Dean huffs, “You can read them. Just – I’m serious about the censoring thing. And Chuck liked to … dramatize. So, fair warning.”

“The Prophet?”

“Yeah, he, uh, he sort of wrote the books. It’s how we met. They came to him like visions and so he started to make a living off of them when he couldn’t keep a real job.”

Charlie starts to retort to the unfairness of that statement but Mary turns to Kevin, “And do you get visions of their lives?”

The boy shrugs, “Not about them. Mostly translating and tablet stuff.”

Mary gives a short hum of acknowledgement/acceptance.

“Well, I’m done with breakfast so I’ll go ahead and take those up. You eat.” Mary vacates her seat and nudges Charlie into the chair. She has to take the manuscripts away like a mother removing toys from the fist of an unrelenting child before naptime. Which, she supposes, she sort of is.

It’s as Mary’s heading to the library after her shower that morning when Dean stops her. He’s waiting outside of her room, leaning against the wall. He stands upright and steps towards her when she approaches.

“So, uh,” he rubs the back of his neck, “I’ve been thinking about this for a while. Really thought you were gonna ask me and not that I’d bring it to you or anything …” he halts – unsure of what he needs to say next. He continues anyway, “But some time you should, l don’t know, give this a look.”

He pulls out the Journal from under his arm.

He extends his hand and she reverently reaches to take it from him.

With a tight smile he says, “I’m uh, heh, gonna need that back.” He physically winces in instant regret of how cheesy and needy that sounds. He tries to compensate with, “gotta keep those recipes on hand.” He clears his throat, “I just figured that if you were reading the books you should get the prequel too,” he conjures a nervous smile.

She pulls him down into a hug and when he wraps his arms around her she says in a clear voice, serene with depth, “Thank you.”

They draw back and her lips curve gently upward in a way Dean’s begun to grow far too reattached to. She runs a hand over his cheek before turning to enter her room and putting the journal safely on her bedside table.

Charlie finds Dean napping that afternoon in front of a Dr. Sexy marathon. When she suggests he eat then go to bed he shakes off his sleepy demeanor and turns her down. He heads to the library
for research duty – doubling up searching for info on both Sammy and Mary.

When Kevin leaves and Charlie and Mary have long since turned in, Cas comes down to send Dean upstairs but Dean ignores him. That is, until Cas joins him.

Dean feels justified going to bed a few hours later because with two people working they’ve theoretically gone through twice the material. (Even if Dean’s eyes were only barely open for a lot of it).

In the four days it's been since Mary visited him, Crowley has spent his time listening. Well, first they were spent complaining and demanding they tell him what was going on but that got him nowhere. He cursed a blue streak and even sang until the prophet came down and used a spray bottle of holy water on him. The little brat had only left once the ginger girl pulled him away to dinner. So his more forceful methods have gotten him nowhere

Listening, though, listening has proven lucrative.

Even with demonic senses, the walls and warding are dulling his abilities so it’s a strain to hear most of the time.

This evening hasn’t had much interesting going on. The only thing that really happened was the angel and Thing 1 going to bed later than usual. He isn’t sure if they were researching or “researching.”

But the day they chose to enlighten Mary was also the day they enlightened Crowley. Now he’s in on almost all of their little secrets, or the ones Moose wasn’t coughing up a lung over. The bit about Abaddon is of particular interest to him. It relieves his largest fears and fabricates new concerns.

Without a leader, Hell was bound to be a hot bloody mess by the time he got back. Which would have been fine for the old days when Lucifer’s top picks were still running the show. But Crowley likes order. He likes maximizing profits and balancing power and harvesting energy from souls. Not torture and mayhem.

If these desires have increased since the third trial then that’s really no one’s business but his own. **No one’s.**

This morning he’d heard the nonsense about the Winchester Gospels. Really, what were they so afraid of? Their actions were just as transparent whether you read those stories or not. It was all summed up in the first two books – everything since then had been a reiteration.

Since then, everything has kept rather quiet. All it’s been is the sound of turning pages and the other soft noises of research.

But then just before lunch he’d heard the heavy, shuffling steps of one very ill, younger Winchester followed quickly by the light movements of the redhead. He thinks they must be talking in another small room nearby – maybe a well-furnished storage space or a cozy library. The moose sounds surprised when the ginger speaks up. The girl speaks in one rapid string of words insisting that he’s blameless in the case of the first seal because Dean was going to rescue
him in whatever way it took; and that he can’t help that he had demon blood or that Azazel
kidnapped him; and if it hadn’t been him there would’ve been someone else and unlike Sam they
wouldn’t’ve been able to stop the apocalypse they unknowingly helped start. She departs before
gigantor can formulate a response. Although he manages a wheezing cough after she’s left.

When she brings the angel down, after lunch, Crowley muses that it’s because the areas near the
dungeon are rather far from the main part of the bunker, providing privacy and a quiet place to talk.
She’s gentle at first with him, telling him matter-of-factly that the first seal wasn’t his fault.
Is she doing this for all of them? Crowley wonders. He marvels at their guilt complexes.
The ginger goes on to explain that he can’t blame himself because he; “didn’t even know Dean or
really have free will back then. And you couldn’t have known he was down there because – you
said it yourself – no one even told you. And it wasn’t like you could’ve made the trip to hell by
yourself to save him if you had.”
There’s some shuffling and mumbling from the angel but they ascend to the centre of the bunker
together so the ginger must have gotten what she wanted from the conversation.

Surprisingly enough, all Dean gets is a quick, “Fuck you! The first seal wasn’t your fault! You
were manipulated by both Heaven and Hell!” as they pass in the hallway and then the girl storms
off.

But her drive-by must’ve had some affect. He doesn’t hear Dean move from that spot for some
time.

The rest of the afternoon and evening leave Crowley in silence and a pensive solitude.

The boys, he thinks to himself, have an advantage over him. They are on an equal plateau in terms
of childhoods without the presence of a mother but theirs has returned. He shivers at the idea of his
own returning after so many centuries but he wouldn’t put it past her.

Though they differed in parenting style, Crowley thinks bitterly, they are both intelligent, strong,
resilient, and knowledgeable in the Supernatural. Both are women of power in the cosmic scheme.
Important playing cards in the deck they’ve all been dealt.
At least, before Mary became a player instead of just a card.

Crowley won’t deny his envy of the boys’ lifelong knowledge of a mother loving them, even
without her physical presence or verbal affirmation.

He wonders if there is some manner in which he can turn the boys’ advantage into an impediment.
Yes; a mother is a terrible thing to waste.

Mary’s begun to really enjoy waking up normally.

Not finding herself standing in the middle of a room but coming gradually to consciousness and
letting her eyelids drift open. Taking the first deep breath and being surrounded by a soft cotton
pillow and smooth, slightly worn sheets tucked about her.

She stretches, pausing to consider that she and Sam have the same motions when waking up. Mary climbs out of bed and pads softly to the kitchen. She opens the fridge to survey her options and after a moment’s consideration in which she skims through her mental file of recipes, she begins to gather her ingredients and utensils.

But before she can even start, she feels the tingling in the back of her mind and she scrambles for the notepad on the fridge to write: “Started making my mom’s French toast with hollandaise” I’m not writing a recipe, get to the point, she reprimands herself with urgency, “but before I could start, I felt myself –“

“Looks like she blipped out on us,” Dean says after he and Cas read the note.

Cas doesn’t mentioned how unnerved Dean seems that she’s gone so soon after their big discussion.

Dean looks at the spread of ingredients on the counter. “What d’ya say Cas? Up for trying a new recipe?”

“Always,” he replies, and for a second they just stand there holding eye contact. They manage to tear away simultaneously and both turn back to the note for another place to look besides each other. Dean clears his throat, “Let’s free hand it, yeah? See how far we get without real instructions.” They work around each other in easy, fluid synchronization. It’s simple, like they’re dancing but neither of them is thinking about the next step.

They’ve just put the last piece on a platter when the bunker is struck by a loud noise. Three deliberate knocks of impossible magnitude. It sounds like someone’s taking a sledgehammer to the impenetrable metal door, except for something about the rhythm and ring that says it’s an intelligent life form asking for permission.

Cas and Dean are up the stairs in a flash, each drawing weapons – Cas carrying his angel blade and Dean holding one of his own in his left hand and a gun with silver bullets in the other. Kevin peers out from around the corner at the far end of the hall and Charlie is pulling on a shirt and wielding a sword as she bursts from her room. Sam stumbles out of his bedroom, bleary-eyed, a second after.

The knocking rings out again. They’re all quiet as Cas and Dean step forward. With deliberation, Cas shifts his eyes to Dean but brings them right back to the door, “We should open it.”

“Yeah,” Dean shifts his weight from foot to foot. Would it have killed the Men of Letters to have installed a peep-hole?

Cas moves forward, given that he’s got a free hand. After a pause and a nervous swipe of his tongue over chapped lips, he yanks opens the large slab of metal and steps back, blade at the ready.

“BOOM, Baby!”

Lo and behold, into their bunker bursts a formerly deceased archangel of The Lord.
Posing dramatically with a wide grin smacked on his face.
Wiggling his hips and fingers.
Like a five year old.

“Gabriel?” Cas looks confused – head cocked and brows drawn together.

“The one and only!”

“As in, the archangel?” Charlie lowers her sword – if it really is him, it won’t do her much good. “Loki? Trickster of a thousand Tuesdays?”

“Ooh, I like that last one. How was the entrance? I’m not sure it was enough after being dead for so long.”

“The Emperor’s New Groove? That’s what you go with?” Kevin who’s made his way to their end of the hall looks repulsed at the abuse of his childhood.

“It was either that or confetti and trumpets. Dean’s pissy face about the confetti everywhere would’ve been much less enjoyable than the adorable one Cassie made at the reference. Speaking of which,” he cuts himself off to step forward and wrap Cas in a tight hug. Still shocked, it takes an instant for Cas to reciprocate. When he does, Gabriel stiffens and takes a sharp breath, closing his eyes and tightening his grip. Then at a level only Cas can hear, murmurs, “I’m so sorry, Castiel.”

Before Cas has a chance to respond, Sam speaks up, “What happened? How are you here?”

The archangel’s eyes snap open and over Cas’s shoulder he catches sight of the inquirer. His eyes widen and his expression clouds.
Gabriel pulls out of the hug and pushes past his brother, walking to where Sam is standing with the majority of his weight on the railing.
He reaches up to gently cup Sam’s face, looking into the hunter’s eyes with concern. Without turning away he asks no one in particular, “What’s the matter with him? Why’s his soul look funny?”
The gentleness in the archangel’s tone does nothing to buffer the implications of the question and Sam’s face drops completely.
There’s always something broken about him, isn’t there?

Dean bows up in a defensive stance, “Nothing’s wrong with –“

“He started the Trials.”

Gabriel whips his head around at Cas’s blunt statement, “The Trials?” Gabriel’s too surprised to ask how Cas knows what they are, despite not being an archangel. He turns back to Sam whose face he still has cupped in his hands, “Oh, Sammy.”
Sam won’t meet his eyes and Gabe just watches him as if the hunter is a puzzle he has to solve within a time limit. “What step?” he asks in a tone as gentle as before.

“None,” Sam mumbles, “Dean stopped me before I got to finish the third trial.”

“I should damn well hope so!”

Sam looks up at that but the archangel is pulling away and moving to descend the stairs. Cas
immediately follows him and Dean exchanges a look with Sam before they both copy the angel. Dean glances up at Charlie and Kevin and jerks his head in a “come with me” motion.

The former trickster has darted into the kitchen and they find him rifling through the cabinets.

“How long have you been back?” Sam’s proud of his steadiness and professionalism despite how betrayed he finds himself feeling on a deep level he’s doing his best to ignore.

“Freshly minted, Sam-o. Possibly re-hymened, but we’ll have to see about fixing that, won’t we?” Sam can see out of the corner of his eye Dean giving him a weird look at that comment. The angel gives an audacious and lewd wink. Because only Gabriel could make a wink that cheesy and ridiculously inappropriate, Sam thinks as the archangel stretches to snatch a jar of nutella from a cupboard with a cry of victory.

“So what have you guys got going on here?”

“What do you mean?” Cas asks.

“Well first I’m resurrected. I find myself just outside of your bunker,” he intones condescendingly, “And once I get inside I get tuned into the freakiest vibes. Gives me the willies,” he makes an exaggerated shiver. “Cas’s trueform is now a soul-shaped bundle of grace. And with the trials off your plate I can’t imagine that there’s much keeping you busy here at chez Winchester.”

“Freaky vibes?” Cas tilts his head.

“Like you’re being haunted,” the brothers exchange panicked glances before he continues, “but it isn’t at all ghosty.”

“So she isn’t a spirit,” Charlie asserts.

“I think we confirmed that when she started eating.”

“She? So you do have a spooky house guest.” He licks off his nutella-covered finger. “And you find her suspicious but not unwelcome.” He hums around his still chocolatey finger. “Wonder who it is. No, wait! Let me guess.” He gets off the counter to rifle for a spoon in a drawer while making deductions, “Alright, clues: you’ve got a demon in a storage room, a prophet on a leash, and baby sister makes three,” he looks over his shoulder to nod at Charlie. He hums thoughtfully as he shoves the drawer closed and begins searching the next one.

Kevin crosses his arms over his chest, “How did you-“

“Archangel superpowers,” he wiggles his hips and throws a glance over his shoulder.

“But you can’t find a spoon,” Dean mutters.

Gabriel glares sarcastically, “Hey, I’m a celestial being who channels my energy into popping up candy and miracles and reading energies. Not determining which poorly organized storage space contains what specifically shaped hunk of metal.”

Dean bristles at the insult, “It ain’t my fault you can’t use my kitchen.”

“Ha!” He thrusts a spoon into the air and after a moment, dramatically whips around, “First guess: -” he thrusts his spoon in Sam’s direction, exclaiming, “you’ve got a time traveler visiting.”
“Gabriel-“ Sam tries to dissuade him.

“No, Samsquatch, no hints!”

“Samsquatch?” Kevin asks a room of ears deaf to his voice.

“Our mom got resurrected,” Dean states coldly.

“Aww, Dean, you spoiled the fun!” Gabriel whines.

Dean’s fists clench at his sides as if he can barely maintain his restraint. Cas puts a quelling hand to Dean’s elbow as Sam extends his arm slightly in Dean’s direction. “Did you not hear me? Our mother is alive!”

Gabriel waves a chocolatey spoon at him, “Yeah, I-“ the spoon freezes midair and his eyes widen slightly. He lowers his hand and his face registers understanding, “Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh,’” Dean mocks with sarcasm.

The archangel grows gravely serious and the air in the room becomes tense, “What did you knuckleheads do?”

“That’s just it!” Charlie jumps in, “No one did anything! Mary doesn’t even know what’s going on.” Gabriel jerks his head to face her. “Hi! Charlie Bradbury; resident techie and as you stated, honorary little sister.”

“Well hello there,” Gabriel smirks flirtatiously at her.

“She’s gay,” Sam remarks dryly, closing his eyes and rubbing a hand tiredly across his forehead.

“Shame,” Gabriel shrugs.

“I don’t know, I think it’s pretty great.”

“Funny too! I like you already.”

Charlie beams at him.

“Well that’s fucking fantastic. But you still haven’t said why you’re here and now breakfast is getting cold.”

“Oooh, what’re we having?” he lights up at the mention of fresh food.

“‘We’ are having nothing. You don’t get any.”

“Excuse me?”

“Alright then, obviously we need to have some separation.” Sam jumps in, “Gabriel, you said you were getting weird vibes?”

Still glaring at Dean he responds, “Yeah.”

“Okay, then you’re coming with me. We’re going to go around the bunker and see if you can sense anything else. We need all the information we can get.”

“Right now? But Sammy, you know how much I like to fraternize with the mortals.” Sam clenches
his jaw at the innuendo. All of his patience is gone by now.

“Let’s go.”

“What about breakfast?” Dean asks.

“Not hungry,” he calls, already down the hallway with an archangel tripping lightly after him.

They walk silently through the library. Sam is unnerved that his guest isn’t talking and finds himself growing frustrated that Gabriel doesn’t seem to be sensing anything in a room Mary spent so much time in. Why is he this upset? It’s been ten minutes – tops – how is the archangel already so far under his skin?

He takes a hallway towards the smaller library. He’d turned all the lights out before, and has to cross the room in the semi-dark to get to the nearest lamp. Before he can reach it, the light coming in from the hall is cut off – the door closes and a voice behind him purrs, “Oh, Sammy.”

He blindly tugs the lamp cord on and turns to find Gabriel pressed against the door with an arm stretched across it and a seductive gleam in his eye.

“If you wanted to be alone, all you had to do was say the word and-“ he cuts himself off with a snap and vanishes. “-you’d have had me,” he reappears inches away with two hands planted firmly on Sam’s pecs.

“Gabe, we’re not-“

“Sammy! That’s the first time you’ve called me that since I got here.” He rubs his hands down, then back up the hunter’s chest.

“It’s habit,” he grouses, trying to grab at the flighty fingers making their way towards his ass. “And I’m serious, we’re not-“ he captures the smaller man’s wrists (fully aware that Gabriel could crush him with a thought) “-doing this.”

“Doing what?” Gabriel looks up at him with dewy, innocent eyes that belie his intents.

“This,” he lifts Gabriel’s wrists.

“Why Sammich-“

“Don’t, Gabe.” He pinches the bridge of his nose, “This was a bad idea at Crawford Hall. It was an awful idea all those nights you popped up when Dean was out. It was a fucking terrible idea after Mystery Spot –“

“I give great makeup sex. We always have great makeup sex.”

“– It was a tragedy of an idea after TV land –“

“But angry sex is so hot,” Gabriel whines, leaning against Sam’s abdomen.

“-and I don’t know how it’s possible, yet somehow it was an even worse idea the weekend before Elysian fields.”
“Oh! Did you watch my DVD all the way through? I give you a little shoutout at the end.”

Sam sighs in frustration (then has to hold back a cough). He’s hanging his head a bit and Gabriel stands on tip-toes to give him a peck on the mouth.
Sam steps back and drops the archangel’s wrists, “Gabe, I know you hate confrontation but stop deflecting this.”

“Fine, but we’re watching that DVD together sometime.” He folds his arms over his chest.

“No Gabe, we aren’t. You’re going to tell me what you can about our mom’s resurrection and then you’re going to fly off to wherever the hell you go to fuck around with someone besides us.”

Resentment.
Gabriel hadn’t really expected that. Not with the way he went out (although he hadn’t truly had time to consider how he’d be received should he be resurrected).
And he isn’t ready to leave either.

“Fine, I’ll tell you what I can,” not that I have anything to tell you, he thinks, “but I need time to soak up all the data. And food first.”

The fact that he’d willingly agreed to help them at all was a miracle to Sam so gladly he accepts the terms and with a terse, “Fine,” they head back to the dining room.

Kevin doesn’t know what to think of their new guest. In his opinion, the bunker already has too many people living here. He won’t hold it against the boys for letting their mom stay, but Charlie had taken some getting used to. And having Cas back so soon after the “Buck up; you’re a prophet” lecture stung a bit. Crowley was another matter entirely.

Crowley is number one on Kevin’s hit list. As soon as he thought the Winchesters wouldn’t have his ass for doing it, Kevin was stealing the demon knife and offing the King of Hell.

Kevin just wants to be alone and drink decaf tea and maybe some watery whisky and never have to see anything supernatural ever again. Except Cas was right (something he resented the angel for) – he’d never get out, not with this Prophet crap on his shoulders.
At least his mom would be proud.
But the archangel unnerves him. He’s too ostentatious and too familiar with … everything. And what did he mean by saying he could sense freaky vibes?

So Kevin isn’t really buying it.

Nonetheless, Gabriel and Sam return to the group still eating breakfast.
Gabe plops down jauntily in a chair, legs thrown over one of the arms, “So Cassie, how’d you lose your grace?”

Cas swallows guiltily, Sam exclaims “Gabriel!”
“No, it’s alright,” Cas puts down his fork and swallows again, “I was trying to close heaven so the angels would no longer be able to interfere with the lives of humans but I was misled.” His tongue feels heavy over that last part.

That’s dangerous shit. Gabriel sits up straight, palms flat on the table. “By whom?” he growls.

“The Scribe.”

“Why that pretentious, self-serving, windbag – of all the – who in the hell – …“ he can’t seem to form a coherent sentence in his anger. He sucks in a breath through gritted teeth, “And the others?”

“Fell to earth. But their graces should be intact for the most part.”

Gabriel puts his elbows on the table and clasps his hands into one fist, pressing them to his mouth and chin. He taps his foot in agitation, “There’s a reverse-hack somewhere.”

“That’s what Kev’s lookin for,” Dean remarks.

“Don’t rush me,” Kevin grumbles, forking more than a mouthful of hollandaise-drenched French toast.

Dean rolls his eyes. “No one is rushing you,” he insists with exasperation.

Charlie catches their attention, “Did you find anything out about Mary?”

Sam turns expectantly to Gabe, who’s eyeing the hollandaise. Gabe is spaced out and he shakes his head gently to wake himself from his daydream. It still takes a moment before he responds, “No, I … I didn’t get any certain signals.” He begins to serve himself, despite the heated glare a full-mouthed Dean sends him. “If I could chat her up … maybe spend a couple of days here, I could get a better read on it.”

Dean’s about to swallow and shut this shit down when Sam scrubs a hand over his face – *why is he doing that so much this morning? Was he doing it before the angel got here?* – and sighs, “Whatever, it’s better than anything else we’ve got right now.”

Gabe grins and winks, “Damn right I am.” He takes a large bite of French toast but puts his fork down and doesn’t attempt to finish his plate. He makes a funny face at nothing in particular.

Charlie, ever ahead of the game, asks, “Oh, should we set up one of the rooms for you?”

“He doesn’t sleep, he doesn’t need a room,” Dean grouses.

“I could always share.”

There’s almost a gleam in the archangel’s eye when he says it, except why would Sam imagine that sort of thing?

Gabe’s face scrunches up in the funny expression again.

“Not happening,” Dean insists. Gabe shakes the expression off.

“Come on, this’ll be fun. We’ll get into all sorts of zany adventures.” Sam rolls his eyes but the angel continues, “You be Kronk, I’ll be your shoulder angel. Dean would make a great llama.”
“I thought you were supposed to be Kuzco.”

Why is he humoring Gabriel?

“Fine. Compromise: I’m Kuzco, you’re Pacha,” he pushes his plate away but keeps going, “ginger is Chaca, prophet boy is Tipo, Cas is Kronk, and Dean is Yzma.” He sits forward a bit and once more the funny expression swipes across his features, “Now if you’ll excuse me, I think I might need to pass out right about now.”

Cas jumps up as Gabe’s forehead meets the table and Dean’s on his feet a second after. Sam’s jerked backwards in surprise, as has Kevin but the prophet clutches his plate possessively.

Sam stands up to lean Gabe back in his chair and try to wake him, as Cas and Dean make their way around the table.

“He’s out cold,” Cas assesses. “We may need to give him a room after all.”

Dean won’t let Sam help when he and Cas carry Gabe to one of the empty rooms. Sam huffs and indignantly leaves the kitchen. Stupid coughing fit. That’s what had made Dean turn down his help. It’s hard to win an argument for carrying someone upstairs when you can’t breathe.

He wants to be useful right now. If he isn’t doing something then his mind’s going to start wandering and – there he goes; he’s already thinking about it all. All the times Gabe showed up and Sam did everything but hand feed him dinner, put on his slippers, and light his pipe for him – although, given Gabe’s proclivity for sweets, had made multiple appearances in their sex life. Sam is only temporarily relieved of his sour memories before it all washes back over him. How had he let things get this far? How had he done this for so long with Gabe and had it always been this stressful before? Or is this just guilt?

He’d thought he’d gotten over this after they found out Gabe was an archangel.

He’d gone back to the motel that evening and lain in bed astounded at his stupidity. How could he have let himself believe anything the Trickster said? Spending those following days dishing himself extra helpings of self-loathing and heavy-handed reprimands was supposed to serve as the punishment he felt was needed for him to be able to move on and be wary of future mistakes of this nature.

And until Gabe showed up this morning, Sam had thought he’d gotten it all out of his system. He scoffs at himself and supposes that hooking up with the archangel the week after the big reveal hadn’t exactly supported that theory. He’d just done enough internal damage control so he could ignore his guilt.

Gabe was right.

Their angry sex was hot.

But so was their routine sex, and surprise sex, and quickies, and car sex, and the I-haven’t-seen-you-in-weeks-but-let’s-do-this sex, and basically any sex they ever had was consistently hot. It was one of the reasons why he kept letting the Trickster back into his bed. His bright eyes would sparkle and he’d make witty jokes and they’d banter and he could make Sam smile and they’d laugh and Sam would find himself with a lap full of pliant, kissable gold.
Seeing him could literally make Sam forget about whatever shitstorm was hitting his life at the moment: demon deals, impending death, the apocalypse, and even Ruby a handful of times. Feeling guilty about cheating on a demon he was only sort-of dating had given him enough cognitive dissonance to make his head spin and very near to physically ill. Even when she would abandon him for weeks at a time. Because he wasn’t that kind of person; never had been.
But the trickster was someone he wanted to be with badly enough that he’d ignore other things. He would literally just forget. And that was the scary part; the unhealthy part.
It had always been a game to the trickster – ‘How long will it take to get the pesky human hard for me?’ – while it had been a way Sam sought fulfillment.

He finds it odd now that he’d never asked for the trickster’s name, and then remembers how enticingly the archangel had shivered the first time he’d called him "Gabe", how easily the nickname had slipped off his tongue, and then how hard the angel had come when Sam climaxed with a groaned, "Gabriel".
It was only after Mystery Spot that the information had been voluntarily revealed to Sam.

What a stupid kid he’d been when he first hooked up with the "janitor" at Carlton Hall. That guy could have been a suspect, and then he was, and then he was the culprit. But Sam remembers how gorgeous he thought the older man had been – how flirty he was despite Dean being a cockblock and stuffing his face full of dead guy food.
It was an easy enough gimmick to fall for when the guy was hot and experienced but didn’t make him feel like a twink. So fall for it he had.

To be honest, Sam had thought their second time together was a dream. When Sam had said as much to Gabe the next time he’d seen him, the trickster had looked horrified and summed it up with, "shit," and a gaping jaw. Sam had told him he was okay with the situation but Gabe had reacted as if Sam was insane and as though the mistake was the least okay thing Gabe could possibly have let happen. In retrospect Sam theorizes it has something to do with the whole angels-being-sticklers-for-explicit-consent thing.
He hadn’t even batted an eyelash when Gabe told him it hadn’t been a dream. During the entirety of the “dream” sex Sam had been pining away like a lovelorn teen, wishing it was actually the Trickster, thinking he was lucid dreaming. Then he'd woken up feeling guilty for his attachment. He remembers that on that third visit, when the Trickster told him it had been real, Sam convinced him of how okay he was about the mistake with a great blowjob. The Trickster had reciprocated with an equally fantastic one to make up for the misunderstanding.

And the time after that … after the apologies, when morning came and reality hit, when Dean walked back into the shared motel room where Sam was alone in bed, when they dragged themselves off to another case … there weren’t really any excuses.

The next time he’d seen Gabe had been weeks later at a bar. Dean had long since left with a buxom brunette and Sam was about ready to leave with his own prospects looking dim. He had pulled out his wallet to pay the tab when another beer was slid in front of him and the bartender told him in a familiar voice, “On the house.”
When Sam just sat there wearing look of consternation, Gabe began wiping down the bar and
asked, “So, you gonna kill me?”

Sam had given him an appraising look before jutting out his lip and giving a shake of his head. He was taking a sip of the beer when Gabriel asked, “Why?”

Sam had shrugged and then as if the answer had been obvious to himself before the moment the words left his lips, he’d said, “Because you won’t die anyways. You’ve stopped harming people,” he’d been tracking trickster-like activity and none of it had this trickster’s MO or other hunters had caught and killed it. “You like me. And,” he took a gulp of beer, “I don’t dislike you.”

The Trickster had winked at him and said, “Now you’re getting it.”

And just like that, Sam wasn’t lonely.

So they played their game. Somehow the Trickster had always known when to show up for good times on a squeaky motel bed while Dean was getting burgers, or a handjob in the backseat of the Impala while Dean was paying for gas. It was fun and enjoyable and Sam was getting laid on a regular basis.

But Mystery Spot happened. It had been a couple of weeks since he and the Trickster had hooked up which didn’t seem unusual given the lack of free-time Sam had gotten. Watching the Trickster appear in front of him when he cornered the man from the diner had been surreal. He had felt so betrayed. But he took care of it – found a way to deal by not dealing with it. When the Trickster had made his appearance in Sam’s room a week after it was all over Sam was drunk, and trying to forget things. Sam was almost ready to try and sleep but seeing the Trickster standing in a corner of the room, looking as close to sheepish as he probably ever would, sent Sam’s adrenaline rushing and he stood. They’d nearly brawled but somehow it had ended in sex.

Really, really good makeup sex.

Sam doesn’t know why he hadn’t stopped himself at some point before they really started going at it on that occasion, but he’d been so content to just do something instead of sitting and feeling helpless. And he’d just wanted to keep hearing from Gabe that litany of “come on,” and “let me give this to you,” and “want you to feel better” and “let it out.” And he had felt better. Sam was so exhausted from the emotional and physical strain of all of the past … however long, that he’d passed out even before he’d had a chance to clean up. He’d woken up without a hangover, in the middle of the night to the Trickster gently combing through Sam’s hair with his fingers. It wasn’t often that the Trickster stayed for longer than a good fuck or three. He’d cuddled before, on occasion, directly after the main events, but every time Sam had woken up in the night, he’d been gone. The Trickster had stopped his ministrations once he’d realized Sam was awake and come back from wherever he’d spaced out to and they’d had one more round before he left.

To this day, Sam can’t believe he ever did anything with Gabe after Mystery Spot. But all it takes to rationalize his actions is remembering waking up to kisses that instigated another round, and the crinkles and glimmer of Gabe’s eyes when he smiled, and the positively golden sound of Gabe’s laugh.

Besides, now the experience sort of paled in comparison to the Cage. Not to mention those months after he actually lost Dean to Hell. But really wasn’t that a testament to the idea that he should stop
involving himself with archangels?

After that they got back into routine without another word on the topic. Sam should hate himself for it but he doesn’t. The Trickster made him feel better and he could get lost in the sex.

Their dynamic didn’t change, Sam tells himself now. Not noticeably, not at first.

And then the apocalypse was gearing up. The Cage opened. Lucifer got out. And Sam thought that for all his pranks and lessons that the Trickster could be counted on for this one big thing. All he had to do was ask – it couldn’t hurt.

Simple. Easy.

Gabe never did anything that had helped them without some harm done. Never really acted like Sam meant more to him than great sex and fun, diverting conversation. (He’d made it crystal clear that they weren’t to be exclusive).

But after Mystery Spot he figured that the Trickster might lend a hand – even though it had been years since. Gabe was going to owe him for eternity for that adventure. So Sam was planning on approaching him.

And what could possibly happen except that he’d walk into one of Gabe’s traps?

So the point became moot.

When Gabe popped up in his bed two nights after TV Land, they didn’t talk. They fooled around and kept about their routine as if the actual apocalypse wasn’t going on outside their bedroom door.

Sam had felt Gabe’s heartbreak at the situation, knowing firsthand the dilemmas of a runaway. This time Sam was hurting because of and for the trickster. Again he felt betrayed by Gabe. And again he’d accepted Gabe’s wordless apologies in the bedroom.

He’d been glad that Gabe had come back to him.

Gabe had become a different – a better – person towards the end. Sam could hope now that those indications would fledge out and become an actual improvement. Because then … then he wouldn’t be looking at a horribly unhealthy relationship anymore.

Not that it mattered. His “new-leaf” attitude had paved the road to his death and Sam was resigned to it. Sure he was going to miss Gabe and all the comfort the archangel had brought him. It was easier for Sam to ignore all the shit Gabe had pulled in the past. He’d stopped pulling it towards the end. Which was what mattered. Sam had really been grateful for all the give-and-take affection they shared.

They’d said their goodbyes the weekend before Elysian fields – knowing whatever was coming was happening soon. Then Gabe had sacrificed himself and that was it.

But four years later and all it took was Gabe feeling him up, showing interest, and he’d found himself having to relive the rationales of why this was the bad idea and put himself through the self-loathing all over again.

Sam is nowhere near prepared to handle this.
“Well that explains his less than explosive entrance,” Cas grunts, “as well as why he was unable to identify whatever it was he said ‘gave him the willies.’ And why he didn’t know where the spoons were.” He shifts how he’s holding Gabriel under the arms, “I should’ve known there was a reason he wasn’t using more of his grace. It must be injured. Or at the least weakened.”

“Will he be alright?” Dean isn’t worried so much about the archangel as having to keep and take care of him.

“Yes, it should replenish itself. He merely needs rest.”

They walk a few steps.

“… Are you alright?”

“How do you mean?” Cas asks tentatively.

“I mean,” Dean grunts, shoving a door opened and walking backwards into the room, “He kind of sprung that question-and-answer session on you. And then –“ He unceremoniously drops his half of the archangel onto the bed. Cas is more careful and goes so far as to remove Gabe’s shoes and tuck him in. “ – before that, he hugged you and apologized for no reason.” Dean must’ve been closer than Cas realized - he hadn't thought anyone else was able to hear that remark. “So I’m guessing it had something to do with whatever he read from the hug … It’s not that big a jump to figure it was about your grace.”

They exit the room and Dean gently clicks the door closed before moving down the hall with Cas, “Which, by the way, you’ve said zero about except that it’s not really there anymore and you’re human.”

“I’m not sure what Metatron did but yes, I’m fully human. Soul included. Or enough of a semblance of one to pass.”

Neither of them realizes that they’ve begun to aimlessly wander the halls.

“So it isn’t as if I don’t have an identity. It’s just completely different. I don’t feel like myself.” Cas shrugs, “Though, really, the self I’ve known for eons has been drastically altered in the past decade.”

Dean lets him collect his thoughts.

“You recall the external emptiness Sam acted with when he had no soul? That’s nearly what I feel like without my grace. Exaggerated, maybe, but it’s a good approximation.”

They’ve made their way to the main library without thinking. Wordlessly, both of them go and sit down on the sofa in front of the dormant TV.

“Of course, as you’ve said, I still have something acting as my soul. Providing my identity and defining me as human … But for all the value and energy of a soul, it lacks the immediate power of my grace.”
Cas is a guy who holds his privacy in high regard. Dean is a guy who doesn’t like to talk. It’s just never worked out to have a heart-to-heart. Except of course for the times when it did. Or almost did anyways. But Cas being human makes Dean feel like someone needs to take care of the guy. Like he needs to take care of the guy.

“So, do you…” Dean swallows, “do you want to get your grace back?”

Cas sits thinking.

Dean feels more on edge with each moment, which, shouldn’t Cas be the one who’s unnerved here?

“I’m unsure, though I’m inclined to say yes.”

Dean exhales a breath but whether it’s out of relief or resigned and dutiful acceptance, he can’t tell. “I haven’t given the matter much thought.”

How is Dean so conflicted over this?

“Why not?”

Cas grimaces, “It’s rather an unpleasant – a discomforting subject. Considering that I have no clue if I can actually re-obtain it or not.” He shifts backwards to nestle further into the couch. “It … it would be much easier for me to handle if I don’t have to … have my hopes dashed? Am I using that phrase correctly?”

Dean sighs, “Yeah, Cas.”

They teeter into silence once more.

Dean stands and walks around the back of the couch. He stops to lay a hand on Cas’s shoulder, “If you figure out something, let me know.” He pats Cas’s shoulder once and moves over to the table to begin research.

They don’t speak of it for the rest of the day. But when bedtime comes early to the bunker’s inhabitants, he finds himself lying awake in his room, staring at the light creeping in from the hallway at the crack under his door.

It doesn’t really feel like anyone else is asleep and Cas, knowing full well his own predicament, wonders what could be keeping the others up. Is Charlie reminiscing about Moondoor? Has Sam started to try and catch up on his reading? Perhaps Kevin has begun composing again; Castiel had read his proficiency in that art before the fall.

The Fall.
How did Castiel feel about it?

Other than the obvious overwhelming sense of guilt and pain and loss.

He begins to mull it over.
What good would it do to think of possibilities?
What harm would it do if the possibilities amounted to nothing?
Could anything be done about the situation?
Did he have any control in the situation at all?
Was he allowed to blame anyone but himself?

Obviously, none of this would have happened if Metatron hadn’t become involved but Castiel had been the one to listen to the Scribe’s advice.

This had become too … objective. If he wanted anything, he would have to figure out what it was and what, exactly, it meant for him.

There is nothing more that Charlie wants than to wrap her video game-stiff fingers around Dean’s brain. But she isn’t about to go after this like a big cat stalking its prey. Dean is bound to clam up at the first sign of thoughtful prodding. And Charlie is sure he knows she wants to talk already.

So she makes a game of it.

Which is why, on the second evening after the Life in Review talk (the day Gabriel had arrived) Dean gets a text summoning him to her room.

She wants to have this on her own territory where she’s got an upper hand and the ability to surround him with things he likes that will provide the optimum amount of comfort and encourage openness. She has a playlist softly singing from her desk top with handpicked songs set to loop. Two glasses and a bottle and a half of whiskey sit next to it. She stopped by the diner in Lebanon closest to the bunker and picked up two bacon burgers with fries to share, and a boxed up pecan pie. There are pillows and blankets on the floor like a little nest but she’s still sitting on the bed. Having him come to her room also means that he won’t feel cornered by her coming to his room or finding her surprising him in the kitchen or anything. So with Mary gone leaving the room across the hall empty of people who would notice, it’s a good time for a party.

“What’s up?” He says from her doorway with a borderline wary expression. She smiles and motions for him to come in and he sits down on the edge of the bed.

Time to pull out the little sister card; “I am going nuts. I need some … I just need to do something normal right now. So we are going to sit here and have a sleepover and you are going to braid my
He stands up to leave, “Charlie-“

“Come on, I’ll teach you. It’s easy.”

He sighs.

“Please?”

She’s making this about the braiding now, Dean thinks to himself, but you know she’ll turn it into something else. No, worse; she’ll wait for you to turn it into something else. And dammit, Dean’s had quite enough talking to last himself a lifetime.

Except hadn’t he decided just the other night that talking had its benefits despite how shitty it could make him feel? Fuck, he’s screwed for this conversation they’re about to have.

She gives him a quick demonstration then scoots forward so he can sit behind her. She relaxes as his fingers begin coming through her hair and is suddenly grateful for the length of her locks; she knows he will be a perfectionist about this and end up undoing and redoing sections until it meets his standards.

“So we just gonna sit here until I’m done, your highness?”

“We could talk.”

There it is.

“Charlie, whatever y-“

“Tell me about Benny.” She hears him sigh but his hands don’t stop working.

When he’d sat down, his thoughts had still been absorbed in wonderings about Cas’s grace. Memories of Purgatory capture his full attention though.

“Benny’s a great guy. Cas and I would be dead if it weren’t for him.”

He doesn’t offer anything else.

“… When you sent him after Sam … did you know he wasn’t going to come back?”

Right for the heavy stuff.

“Nnh-nhhh,” he grunts as a ‘no.’

He licks his lips, “I didn’t burn his bones.” He gives it a beat, “Maybe I should’ve but I didn’t. I want him to have the chance to come back.”

“Do you think he’d ever want to come back?”
“I don’t know… He always said that Purgatory was pure. Not sure if that meant he wanted to belong there but he was right.”

She waits to see if he’ll continue before asking, “Did you guys ever talk about life before Purgatory?”

“Yeah. Yeah, he was in a nest that hunted and looted pleasure yachts in the Americas.”

“Hold up,” she turns to face him and feels the braid slipping out, “You’re telling me that he was a vampirate?”

“That’s what I said! Apparently no one had thought of it before.”

“How? That’s gotta be the first thing you say!”

Dean throws his head back and laughs hard at her unknowing quasi-quotation of him. He begins to resume braiding but she gasps.

“Waitwaitwait,” she starts to grin, “Was he friends with DraculArrrr?”

“Oh my god.”

But she’s still laughing at herself, “Where’d he keep his money? In a sandbank or a blood bank?”

He rolls his eyes but she can’t see it.

“At least being a sailor he knew he wouldn’t get stake for dinner.”

“Charlie.”

“Oh! Oh! Did he sail on a blood vessel?”

“Charlie.”

“Okay, okay, I’m done,” she composes herself, and formulates her next question.

“I know you said that Purgatory was pure, but what was it like? Not the place. What was it like to be there? How’d you get through and stay sane and interact with Benny and Cas?”

He scrunches his nose up as he attempts to equate it for her. “Picture an endless forest full of creepy crawlies targeting you because they want to eat you or take out their vengeance on you. Imagine you’re with your friend. Then you get separated and end up alone. Then one of the things you think is trying to kill you offers to help you …” he doesn’t want to go on about muddling trust with blind faith or hopelessly fighting for someone who wanted to be left alone. “It wasn’t so much staying sane as it was completely changing how I viewed everything to fit Purgatory.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Dean shifts on the mattress behind her.

“What was Cas like down there?” she asks, picturing angelic badassery.
“… Tired. Almost like it was harder for him to connect to heaven. Like using his power drained him a little … At least that’s what I thought. But I found out that he seemed that way because …” he drifts off and if Charlie were facing him she’d be able to see his face twist as if in concentration on his task. As it is, she can almost hear his expression contorting.

She’s afraid to disturb his train of thought or spook him into not talking at all but she hears herself ask, “Because…?”

“Because he wanted to stay.”

Dean’s voice rings with resolution. Charlie finds it somewhat upsetting. She lets it rest for a bit.

“Do you know if Cas was okay? About what happened there?”

“What? I mean, sure, he seemed fine when he got back.”

“After the mind-control ended. Did he have some sort of break down or did he ever bring up Purgatory?”

“Not… no?”

“Did he ever try to talk to you about it? Or Naomi?”

The fingers silently continue plaighting.

“Because if I see what Heaven’s become – what I – ... what I made of it... I’m afraid I might kill myself.”

“… Did you ever try to talk to him?”

The fingers stop. Their owner lets out a sigh.

“Charlie, look, he took off right after the crypt-“

“And that’s another thing, what the hell did he mean you were the one to break the mind control?”

“I just … talked him out of it?”

“Uh huh.”

“Cas is a stubborn bastard,” the fingers pick up their work once more, resuming where the braid’s begun to unravel. “He would’ve gotten himself out of it eventually. I just set the ball rolling a little faster.”

“You sure about that?”

“What d’you-? Yes. Yes, I’m sure.”

“Hmmm.”

Dean sighs at her hum which is not one of belief or acceptance.
They’re quiet for a few minutes. Dean can’t see or tell that his ministrations are slowly lulling Charlie towards sleep or that her eyes have drifted shut. So he’s feeling his pent up concerns bump around in his head in the silence.

“I gave her the journal. To read.”

That perks Charlie up.

“It’ll answer the questions she’s going to have if she reads those books.”

Charlie says nothing.

“I … I wanted her to get the full story. No matter what you say, Chuck was biased and he couldn’t have gotten the full picture. Dad’s journal is gonna help with that. Or I hope it will.”

Charlie tries not to hold her breath.

“I’m mostly trying to figure whether or not she’ll freak out about what she reads. My dad didn’t always explain his logic when he was making his notes …”

Charlie’s shocked to hear him mention John at all.

“It could sound pretty … pretty awful if you didn’t know what was going on …”

“Dean-“

It’s the first she’s spoken since he began this line of conversation but he cuts her off.

“Y’know, Purgatory was hell-adjacent but it was cold as fuck. I don’t know what the sun was even for. It wouldn’t have surprised me if I’d died from hypothermia instead of a monster attack.”

Charlie takes it as the end of all meaningful conversation for the night, but she’s satisfied for the most part. So she lets him tell her stories about Purgatory and Benny until she can’t stay awake any longer.

He left Charlie passed out in the pillow nest on her floor. He’d tucked her in and turned out the light before going back down the hall to his own room. But Dean finds Cas sitting on the floor, back against the wall outside of Dean’s room. Cas’s eyebrows are drawn together and the former angel stares at his hands. Dean sits down next to him against the wall. Instead of waiting for the awkward conversationalist to speak up first, Dean prompts him; “Somethin’ on your mind?”

Cas’s gaze moves to the wall across from him, “I want to go after Metatron.”

For all Cas’s waxing earlier, Dean hadn’t expected this.

“Okay.”

They sit for a few more minutes until Cas stands and goes into his room with a quiet, “Goodnight.”

Dean waits on the floor a moment longer before standing with a grunt and getting ready for bed.
Yay! Gabriel’s back. Mostly because I needed cosmic knowledge later on and also because I’m a sucker for Sabriel.

And hey! I gave you a beautiful BM moment at the beginning, so please don’t hate me (I made myself horribly sad rewatching clips to write this and going through my bm moment tag). Not to mention the Charlie-Purgatory scene (I am so proud of those jokes).

For future reference, I’m headcannoning for this story that the online books ended at the season 7 finale because season 7 was when Kevin started getting involved as the new prophet, and there’s no real implication to the end of book publication by anything in canon. And also, this is taking place right after the end of season 8 so not a lot of time for season 8 stuff to be published anyways (especially if purgatory and sam’s life in the year before Dean got back was being written as well).

Um ... updates. Iiiii know I've got a lot of fluff planned. Can I get bonus points for angst? Because that's in store too. I'll try to get another update in before the end of the month but I don't have a lot of it written yet.
Btw I'm really sorry this took so long. The whole time I was trying to write it I was like "Why is it taking so long to type 5,000 words?" Once again it was because I was accidentally I writing 13k+ words...

And now I’m off to go listen to FOB’s Fourth of July and moan about codependency issues and the perfection of that song for the boys…

P.S. It is completely accurate to describe Benny’s ship as a blood vessel. Just for the record.

--------
8/11 - hey guys so I wanted to let you know that I am still in fact actively writing this fic. I'm just doing it slowly and out of order so it's taking longer. My job and my DCBB and the fact that I'm helping someone move are also interfering but I swear to you that you will have chapter 12 before the end of August.
Dean wakes up pretty as you please, thinking only of making breakfast. He gets to the kitchen, scrubbing his face and only vaguely noting the presence of another person in the dining room. He offers a grunted hello as he walks past, then approaches the stove. He yawns, picks up a skillet, looks into its shiny but nonreflective surface and can think only that he's had quite enough of this bullshit.

Setting the pan back on the stove and swiveling to find Mary with one of Chuck's books in her hands does nothing to remedy the situation. Kevin's presence is of no consequence to him at the moment.

He stands feeling the weight of his thoughts shifting inside him and concludes that the atmosphere is too much. He can’t take it.


So instead of cooking breakfast he goes off to shower in an attempt to wash away the cloying tightness in his chest.

Dean strips and steps into the shower stall. He is unprepared when a voice in his mind references all the talking he’s done this past week and then vocalizes surprise at his continued possession of a dick after such displays of openness. It absolutely does not sound like his father.

Up until now, Dean has managed to keep preoccupied by worrying about Sam but with their talk in the mix, and Charlie’s attempt on top of that, Dean’s thoughts have turned back onto himself once more.
Someone who couldn’t sound like Alistair – *not after all this time* – practically cackles in his mind that Dean should have known he wouldn’t be strong enough to handle some simple talking without cracking. He was too *weak*.

Dean scrubs his hands over his face and holds his eyes closed.

“*Does it feel with talking like Sam helped?*” The demon-esque voice is getting stronger in conviction. “*No, no, of course it doesn't - because, why else would I be here?*”

Dean sloughs water down his arms and torso.

“I’d say ‘I hate to break it to you’ but I think you already know that was your last resort.”

Dean had lain awake, tense under the stress of his confessions. Particularly the last one. Things they loved got hurt or broken or killed. But the way Sam had talked about letting people care about him had gotten to Dean, as scary as that was. And somewhere in his mind he’d needed to make sure Sam understood. If it gave Sam a reason to keep going then Dean really shouldn’t regret doing it.

“Oh, yes: Sammy. You told your baby brother you’d work on your trust issues. But don’t we both know that those are only manifestations of your frankly adorable abandonment issues. *Hm?* Now aren’t they?”

He doesn’t want to keep listening to the voices. But neither does he try and bite back. He finds he can believe them and they’ve been right before:

"*Cas left you*  
*Sam left you*  
*Benny and Bobby and Ellen and Jo and Daddy left you.*"

He tries to object that *It wasn't their fault* or *I'm okay with it now*. But the words get buried at the back of his mind under all his doubts.

"*It's only fair, really. I mean given all the times you've left other people and they've gotten hurt - even when you help them. Like, hmmm ... Lisa? Ben? Jody? Everyone on Crowley's hit list?*”  
The voice fucking ‘tuts’ at him.  
"*After such a continuous string of colossal failures you could only expect a little of your own medicine, Dean.*"
Dean sneers into the steam of the shower and jerks the knobs on the wall to shut the water off. He runs a towel over himself and dresses as fast as he can, thinking only of getting out to the impala and onto the highway until he finds a few skulls to split.

But it’s not fast enough to escape Alastair saying, “Would your mother want you to act that way? Would it make her proud of her little angel?”

And that isn’t fucking fair because that voice shouldn’t get to play both sides like that.

He storms past the still-occupied kitchen and slams the door to the garage.

Charlie wakes and blearily stumbles her way to the bathroom, fully expecting Kevin to be waiting for her when she returns.

It was just something he’d begun to do. Kevin would slip into her room at odd hours and wait there for her to finish what she was doing or return to her room from wherever she’d been. They’d talk about normal things. Non-hunter things. He’d start up a conversation as if it were the most natural segue from complete silence; like he was merely going into another point of discussion the two had been holding together on a mutual train of thought.

Charlie washes her face and goes to run a hand through her hair but finds her fingers tangled. She has to check the mirror before she remembers Dean braiding her hair last night. Immediately she’s hit with dissatisfaction at the fruits of their talk, and amazement at the braid-ception her hair has going on. Somehow, Dean had managed to get four layers of braids formed and the smallest one is thinner than her pinkie. Charlie marvels at it before carefully undoing each of them.

She comes back from the bathroom and finds Kevin sitting on her nest of pillows and blankets with a ping pong paddle, bouncing a ball repeatedly into the air. Together they’d discovered a make-shift game room when during one conversation Charlie had insisted on exploring the bunker.

She doesn’t cross the threshold, but jerks her head in the direction of the hall and says, “C’mon, let’s walk.”

Kevin stands without his eyes leaving the ball, still bouncing it on the paddle. They begin to wander and Charlie waits for him to pick their topic for the morning.

“Do you ever wonder,” he takes a step back to get a better angle on ball, “What you’d be doing right now if, you know, you weren’t doing … this?”

If we hadn’t met the Winchesters, her mind supplies. Because that’s what Kevin means. Charlie knows the kid resents his new life. She mentally kicks herself and wants to yell at her mind and at Kevin; No, if they hadn’t saved your lives, dummy.

She shrugs, “Don’t have to wonder. I’d be dead. Dick Roman would’ve had one of his people replace me to get my skill-set when I figured out what was going on. It was just easier for him if he didn’t have to.” They turn a corner. “But if you mean like ‘what would you be doing if you weren’t a prophet’ and ‘what would I be doing if I weren’t tech-savvy’ then that’s a whole ‘nother alternate universe we’re talking about.”

Kevin grunts and Charlie takes that as not a bad thing. Especially when he moves on to another
“You ever read *The Chronicles of Narnia*?”

They get about fifteen minutes of hunter-relief therapy in before Charlie’s stomach starts growling and they head to the kitchen.

He didn’t turn on the radio.

He didn’t even buckle his seat belt or pull his keys out or do anything else to pretend like he’s going anywhere.

He’s just been sitting.

And now he’s staring; at the garage wall of the only other home besides the impala that he’s ever been able to call his.

He drops his forehead to the steering wheel.

Dean loves and thrives here in the bunker but he wants the familiarity of the road. Driving is venting. A good six hours of sunshine and pavement is something he can cling to. He needs diesel-and-pine scented wind blowing in his face at seventy miles an hour; the purpose and focus of a solid lead dead ahead of him.

When his phone rings, he curses in surprise.

Dean can practically hear some cartoonish, too-perky fairy godmother chanting at him, “*Be careful what you wish for,*” when the caller ID reads “Garth.”

He figures his moments of peace are over and opens the car door when he answers, “Yeah?”

“A coven of witches are tryin’ to start a kelpie ranch.”

Dean stops halfway out of the car, “What?”


“Do you have more info than that?”

“Yeah, I’ll email it.”

“Uh, send it to mine. And could you give me a run down? Now?” He sits back down.

“Gosh, is Sam still sick? I was callin’ you ‘cause I thought you’d have a team.”

“Yeah. Yeah, he’s still sick. And I … I’ve got a team.”

He doesn’t *not* have a team.

“Well, good. Because you’re gonna need one. Kelpie sightings have been down the past couple of
centuries. And it looks like this coven wanted to take matters into their own hands because they’ve started turning people into kelpies. Or half-breeds at least. They’re less magical, harder to train, and twice as vicious as the real thing.”

“Wait, how do you know all this? And why do you need me- us? It sounds like that case is all wrapped up.”

“Wrapped up and waiting for someone to deliver; a hunter stumbled over it but she’s by herself and says she can’t wait around for help. These witches already have half a stable ready and every supernatural black market in the southeast itching to buy them up.”

“There’s an organized supernatural black market?”

“It’s more of a casual, word-of-mouth underground, but essentially, yes.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “What else?”

“Well kelpies are naturally magic, associated with destructive rituals, and they eat humans. And you know, power-mad witches are never a good thing either.”

“No…”

“There’s an off chance of demons and y’all are closer than anyone else who could handle it. I know you said Sam’s still sick and Charlie’s new but she was good.”

“Yeah.”

“So you in?”

Dean sighs, “Let me call you back, Garth.”

“Okay, but don’t take too long! They’ve already started selling pre-orders.”

“Yeah, Garth. Later.” He hangs up the phone and leans back against the tan leather.

Sam watches his brother’s face contort as he presses the phone pensively to his mouth.

He steps back over the threshold before Dean can realize he’s heard the whole conversation.

Sam feels himself tense in discomfort and he scuffs his feet along the floor as he makes his way to the small library. When he arrives he’s met with wide blue eyes looking up at him from a chair near the fire.

“Sorry, I’ll go,” Sam turns to leave but Cas calls out, “You’re more than welcome to stay. I believe you have more claim to this place than I do.” Sam turns in the doorway. When he maintains eye contact with Cas, the angel squints and Sam immediately feels analyzed. He stands under silent scrutiny until Cas demands, “What’s wrong?” And Castiel looks at him the way Castiel has always looked at him, but this time Sam feels reduced once more to the fawning boy enthralled and terrified with meeting a celestial being.
“Nothing, it’s-“

“What’s wrong.”
If Cas has to ask a third time, Sam’s sure to get the Angel of the Lord voice and that just makes everything uncomfortable and pressured. Powers or not, the guy can still make the hairs on the back of Sam’s neck stand up.

“I, uh, ‘m just feeling a little lost at the moment,” he steps further into the room, “Not sure what to do with myself.” Sam shuffles over to the chair opposite Cas.

“You want to be occupied.”

“Yeah, yeah. I guess. But Dean isn’t exactly letting me.” Sam shifts in his chair, “If I try to research and cure myself, he sends me to bed. If I try and reshel suff stuff he sends me back to my seat. Yesterday he got pissed at me for trying to make a sandwich.”
Sam omits that Dean had been walking past and been close enough to see Sam’s hands shaking as they tried to grip a knife.

“To be fair you are still cosmically ill.”

“I mean I can understand that I guess, but,” not taking a case right away because he’s worried about me? “I’m not useless!”

He’d meant to say ‘a baby’ but useless is exactly how he feels.

“I believe I can commiserate with you on this topic.” Cas closes his book where he had been marking it with his finger.
Sam thinks for a moment; “Oh.”

Going from boundless and divine wavelength of power and light to vulnerable bag of meat could certainly do things to someone’s idea of self-worth.

“I’m not sure what to do with myself besides work but it doesn’t feel like enough.”
When the angel doesn’t continue, Sam looks up just as Cas moves his gaze from the fire to focus on him.

“Sam, what’s this really about?”

Sam doesn’t say anything, feeling petty for not wanting to confess his eavesdropping.
“Dean has a case.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah and he didn’t take it right away. Garth called, it’s a big one - dangerous. At the end Dean said he’d call him back.”

Castiel doesn’t understand the issue: Dean is being prudent. That should be a good thing.
Sam looks up and reads the confusion. He huffs a breath, “Dean’s been dying to get out of here …
I was looking all over and finally found him just sitting in the car like he was going to drive off any second.”

Cas frowns, there isn’t a practical reason for Dean to leave; they’re fully supplied. And why wouldn’t Dean tell Sam he was leaving?

“He should have said yes right away. That would’ve been normal Dean behavior.” Sam tugs nervously at his lip as he waits on Cas’s response.

“You know he’s concerned about you.”

“Well, yeah-“

“He wants to ensure your safety before anyone else’s. Not to mention the dilemmas he’s probably fretting over, considering Mary’s situation.

“I just wish there was a way that I could ‘prove myself’ to him or whatever.”

The words resonate with Castiel.

“I need to feel like I can do things. Like I’m not about to die. Even if- especially if I am.”

Cas wants the right words but he doesn’t have them. He stands and shifts from foot to foot for the moment it takes him to come up with something to suffice, “I don’t plan on letting that happen. And neither does anyone else. Dean most of all. I can assume that’s why he’s behaving as such.”

He walks to the exit. Sam feels compelled to follow, and easily catches up to him.

Dean is used to ignoring things
So for a few days he wants to not talk to anyone about anything at all. In fact, more than anything else he wants to hop into the impala and drive until he gets four or five states away and maybe keep going even after that.

But he can’t.
Because Sammy is sick. Cas is ... well, they sure as hell ain't squared. And they still don’t know why Mary’s here.

Not that he actually expects to find out anytime soon.
God, is he tired of searching. Dean knows they’ve essentially run out of places to look for both causes. And that’s driving him nuts because he’s both genuinely expecting and terrified of disappointment.

The wall holds no answers and neither does the floorboard.

Dean feels hungry.
He can admit that the talking has been relieving on many, many levels. But they’ve also left him feeling empty without all that weight; and drained from the effort of the conversations. And he wants to replace that emptiness; to fill himself and erase the gnawing inside of him. So he’s hungry for hot air whipping through open car windows and the focus of a fresh case.
But they’ve got to keep searching;  
It’s what they do.

And Dean knows it’s what he’s going to keep doing long after everyone else has given up.

His reflection in the windshield is more disconcerting than comforting.

No. No. He’s not letting anyone quit on this. Sam and Mary are too important to him. This is an opportunity that was probably never supposed to happen and isn’t ever going to happen again. He won’t let the ball drop on this. And-

Wait a minute.  
Just moments ago he was resigning himself to disappointment. A fate he is terrified of. Now he’s going to be the one to keep any mutineers from giving up?

These thoughts are the nasty cracks in those floodgates of his. He feels like he can outrun them. Like if he can just get back on the highway he could use the familiar miles of asphalt to patch the growing gaps.

Has he really changed that much for her? Does she really instill that sort of determined and desperate inclination – instinct, into him? Does she just intensify the normal tenacity he experiences when it’s Sammy’s safety at stake? Or is it another animal entirely?

It’s a combination of it all, he decides. And again he frets over how easily she’s tearing his guard down. It’s like she’s got an entire construction team taking some backhoes and a wrecking ball to what defenses he has left standing.

He can’t even bring himself to resent the questions she’s been asking, not really. Sure, they make him uncomfortable and he hates answering them. But Dean’s too glad for her company – her investment in their lives and interest in them as individuals – and that overshadows anything gripping in terms of negative feelings.

He’s never had a parental dynamic of this nature before.

His mind diverts and Dean finds himself, for a moment, being glad that he gave Mary the journal before she started asking questions about John.

Airing out that wound has done him no palpable good so far. And if Mary can answer the questions for herself, then all the better.
Dean runs into Sam and Cas in the War Room.

“Hey, I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Yeah, I was in the garage.”

“This early? Doing what?”
If he won’t fess up, then Sam will have to call Garth himself to ‘check in’ and ‘see about any new cases.’

“I, uh,” was having a wanderlust-induced breakdown, “just got a call from Garth.”
Shit. He still hasn’t decided what he wants to do about this.

“Does he have a case?”

“Mm-hmm,” Dean affirms with pursed lips.

“Are we going to go?”

Dean takes an open-mouthed breath as if to reply but pooches his lips out instead. Without realizing it, Dean lets his gaze drift up to the bunker’s door as he thinks. Sam notices, however, and glances between his brother and the exit.

“You’re worried about me.”
Better to be upfront about it.
Sam breathes in deeply – almost a reverse sigh – as he gears up to deliver his most lawyerly persuasions. This, of course only causes a violent coughing fit.

Dean can’t find it in him to hold back when he says, “Gee, I wonder why?”
Well there’s the defensive snark that Dean sustains himself with when the confrontational spotlight hits him. He’d been wondering where all his condescending remarks had been hiding lately. He walks into the now empty kitchen with the other two men trailing behind him.

He grabs some toast off a plate on the counter, “So to answer your question,” he takes a seat, “we, aren’t going anywhere.”

Sam crosses his arms and puts on bitchface no.27,

“What’s the case?”

“Coven with a chance of demons. They’re turning people into kelpies.”

“You can handle that alone?”

“No, Charlie’s coming.”

“Okay, let me rephrase: You think the two of you can handle that by yourselves?” Sam feels shaky so he covers it up by taking a seat, “Charlie’s great and she’s a fast learner, but you need someone with experience for something like that. Or at the least you need a third person.”

“And you think you’re that person?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Sam it isn’t even noon, you’re stone-cold sober, but I bet you a hundred dollars you couldn’t pass a sobriety test if you took one. You’re dead on your feet and you’re not going anywhere.”
“Despite how misleading you seem to find the length of my hair, Dean, I’m not Rapunzel and you can’t keep me locked away in here forever.”

“I can as long as you’re dying because right now I could push you over with a love-tap to the shoulder.”

“Dean, you and Charlie can not handle this on your own. Especially not with a demon threat. Look, my fever hasn’t spiked in days. I can come with you!”

“No Sammy, you can’t.”

“Well it’s not like you can just go on your own. You’ll get yourself and Charlie killed.”

“Then we won’t go.” Dean pushes away from the table and goes to the fridge for a beer. “Someone’s gotta take care of your sorry ass since you’re obviously in a reckless mood. I’ll just tell Garth to find someone else.” He pops the cap.

“Dean.”

“Sam.”

“I’ll go.”

The Winchester boys simultaneously jerk their glares away from each other and redirect them to the speaker in the doorway.

“I’m a capable fighter,” Cas steps forward, he hadn’t moved from the spot he took when they entered. “I have basic hunting knowledge and I’m sure that given time,” he walks to the sink and begins washing his mug from where it had been sitting since breakfast, “I could learn the nuances. But for now,” he wipes his hands on a towel and swivels to face them, “I’m sure my abilities will suffice for this case.”

Dean’s expression is one of surprised confusion. “What? No.”

Cas turns and give him a look of expectation. To Dean it says, ‘oh really?’

“Cas, what do you know about kelpies?”

“What do you know about kelpies?” Cas tosses back.

Dean narrows his eyes but straightens up. “You aren’t used to combat without your powers.”

“Dean that’s not fair to me.”

Sam is proud of Cas. He himself is weary of Dean’s smothering. But Dean’s protective nature seems to be going the extra mile since the trials. Especially where Cas and Sam are concerned in their current, vulnerable states.

There is a momentary flare of jealousy at the fact that Dean seems to see Cas’s suggestion as an argument valid enough to debate against logically instead of emotionally. Ah, the freedoms of being well.

“You know I’m well trained and more than able to defend myself and teammates with only a handheld weapon.”
This is unbelievable. Dean’s brother and his best friend – who were both borderline suicidal not that long ago – those two are ganging up on him

“Cas – “

“Sam’s right Dean, you and Charlie would be foolish to go on your own. Mary can stay here and watch after Sam and Kevin. And Gabriel, should he awaken.”

No one notices Sam blanch at that addendum.

“Cas, you getting killed isn’t gonna do anything for this mess. And what if mom blips out again?”

“Kevin is a capable young man. We’ll tell him he needs to set alarms and leave his room every few hours to check on Sam.”

“Don’t you think baby monitors would be more effective?” Sam retorts in offense.

“No, what’s effective is not coming home to find that you coughed yourself to death or puked and cracked your head on the toilet.”

Cas offers Sam a sympathetic glance, “It isn’t as if you won’t be able to research. And we’ll more than likely call with questions that you and the archives could hopefully answer.”

Sam shoots Cas a glare, he’s earning points for himself by siding with Dean. The traitor.

Cas turns back to Dean. “Let me prove my capability. You can test me; my combat skills and validate that I’m ready to go hunt with you.” Cas can cater to this particular whim. He’s got nothing to lose and this will be for himself – he wants to have a warm up session before he’s tested in the field.

Dean sits considering whether or not he actually has a say in this anymore but he relents, “Fine.” He stands, “Do whatever you gotta do to get ready then meet me in the gym in a half hour,” and he walks to the sink to pour out his beer, then exits the kitchen.

Castiel is satisfied with his performance. At the time he was rather upset that his skills were well below what he expected them to be. Wielding a gun without his grace to naturally balance and aim the firearm is proving to be his biggest obstacle. As it is, his skill is enough to deter and harm attackers if not take them out.

He’s good with hand to hand, though not nearly as good as he’d once been (his grace had heightened his senses), and is practiced in a majority of martial arts. Handheld weapons are of no consequence, each one Dean brings to test him with becomes an extension of his arm, similarly to his angel blade.

In any case, it had been enough for Dean to be satisfied and now they’re loading up the impala. They, being himself, Dean, and Charlie.

Cas can see Mary watching their motions as she sits at the library table with Kevin, sipping at her
It looks as though most of the excess manuscripts have been cleared away and Kevin is back to tablet translation.

Sam went and locked himself in his room while Cas and Dean trained, but had eventually come out and joined his mother and Kevin in the library. They’d been digging through the archives for kelpie lore but apparently the Men of Letters hadn’t focused very much on these particular waterbeasts. They were mentioned in two tomes and only covered lightly. Sam pulled out his phone and before anyone knew what he was doing he’d spoken to Garth and arranged to have some key information mailed to their PO box.

Cas had begun planning to go pick the books up once they came in, debating what car to take for the most space, when he realized he’d be away on the hunt. Cas finds it strange that he’s become used to his chores.

As he tosses his small and sagging duffle into the back seat he wonders if it’s been easy for other ange-

“Cas, gimme a hand?” Dean calls from the doorway. He loses the thought as he goes to help Dean fit an ambitious armload of bags through the doorway.

They depart without too much ado. There isn’t anything to say when goodbye is a four letter word. So it’s “be back in a week” with a burst of exhaust and they’re gone.

The bunker seems too quiet to Mary – more so than the last hunt. Maybe it’s that more people are gone this time.

But to Kevin, this is status quo. And it equates to the best time for him to work on … well, whatever he wants. No one’s breathing down his neck to translate the bane of his existence. Which, also happens to be the reason for his existence in heaven’s eyes.

Stupid God.
Stupid angels with their stupid tablets.

And since he isn’t feeling pressured to work on it for once, he’s going to work on it.

Ah, the luxury of volition.
You’d think those three would have some respect for freedom of choice, considering their official team name.

Yet here he found himself; Kevin Tran, Prophet of the Lord. Doing what prophets were supposed to do: reveal the word of The Lord.

He thinks maybe this time he could get more than a handful of symbols figured out before he passes out from migraines.

He stifles a heaving sigh and sucks in a stuttered breath.

For all his snark, he’s sad.
A lot.

His mornings, and afternoons, and whenevers with Charlie are nice. They’re relaxing - enjoyable, even.
This morning’s conversation was unexpected. It was bound to happen at some point; Kevin had just figured that he’d plan it out, maybe practice it once, before he actually broached the subject with Charlie.

He had also been surprised to have found comfort in her words. They held logic. There was a sort of relief once it had been put out there. And he wasn’t quite certain how he felt about that.

One thing’s for sure; Kevin would never have picked Charlie’s favorite Narnia character to be Reepicheep.

If Mary thought the house was quiet yesterday evening, it’s dead silent now, in the early morning. Her walk to the kitchen feels like touring a mausoleum.

She’s midway through pouring a glass of juice when she sees the note. Kevin’s left it for her saying he got a call from the post office and is out picking up the packages. He also mentions that Sam and Gabe were both passed out when he left.

The expanse of the war room and the uncharacteristically empty library seem less daunting now that she can explain it away. She checks on Sam and is returning to the kitchen to make herself breakfast when the front door is thrown open.
Kevin grunts as he teeters on the stairs with the box he’s carrying. Mary sets down her glass and goes to help him. There are two more outside and a third, larger one still in the car that they have to drag and carefully manoeuvre down the spiral steps.

They cart them into the library to open them up and are met with an inordinate amount of books.

Kevin pulls out a note from the first box he brought in and reads it. Apparently Garth not only sent them the kelpie lore they requested (all, thankfully grouped in the top layer of the first box) – but also a portion of Bobby’s collection for the archives. He promises that more are on the way, but that he couldn’t get them packaged in time for this batch.

Kevin notes that Sam will probably be elated by this and Dean might even “run his hand fondly over a few covers in a moment of sentimentality.” Mary can’t hold back a laugh.

Kevin and Mary are halfway through sorting and shelving the largest box when they hear a ringing. Mary pulls herself off the floor, joints creaking and shuffles around some papers and stacks of books before finding Sam’s phone. Apparently in his exhaustion he’d left it out here last night.
She flips it open.

“Sam?”

“No, it’s Mary. Sam passed out a few hours after you all left.”

“Oh.” Dean sounds more chagrined than surprised.
“What did you need?”

There’s a pause but then; “Let me put you on speaker … Can you hear me?”

“Loud ‘n clear.”

“Hey Mary!”

“Hi, Charlie.”

“Cas is here too.”

“Hello, Mary.”

“Hi, Cas.”

“So we need to know if there’s a way to force kelpies into their human form.”

“Let me see what I can find.” She balances the phone between her shoulder and ear, “There was a spell book here that Garth had marked as mentioning kelpies.”

She manages to get them all the information they need. During the conversation she gleans snippets of their plan but they try to keep the focus on lore.

“I guess this is your initiation as an official Woman of Letters. Welcome to the club. Our membership has recently risen to the astonishing number of two.”

Mary laughs at that and tells them all goodbye, feeling satisfied at having been able to help them. She ignores the metaphorical lemon twist bittering her emotions at the thought that she’s helping them hunt something that goes bump in the night.

Sam sucks in a small breath when he finds Mary curled up on a couch in the small library. She’s reading the first novel Chuck wrote and released about their lives. He backtracks, hoping she’s too absorbed to have noticed him.

“Don’t go!” Sam halts at her call. “I was hoping you’d come here if you woke up. It’s the only real reason I invaded your part of the world,” she says with a smile.

That’s the second time in two days someone’s established the small library as belonging to Sam.

“I…” Mary’s face pinches, “If you wouldn’t mind, I wanted … I’d like to ask you about a few things.”

Sam stands, waiting for her to clarify.

“If you’d rather just sit in here and read, or go eat, or something, then that’s fine. We don’t have to talk about this. I –” Mary stops herself when she takes a good look at Sam.

“… It’s okay. I can … yeah. What, what would you like to know?” He takes a seat on her end of the couch. Sam gets the undeniable and completely foreign desire to have her hold him.

“Why didn’t you ever stop running? Why … haven’t you?”

Sam looks positively stricken at her question but Mary wants an answer so she feigns as though she
doesn’t notice.

“You wanted out but you’ve never put down roots. Not even once you got free.” She’s being careful but direct with her words, “I know what it’s like to want that. Every day after the one I realized that there was another way to live outside of hunting, I had this unquenchable desire to take off.

“But then I got out of the life and got married. I bought a house. I know you aren’t used to having a home, but —”

“I’ve had homes,” he interjects.

“The Impala, my apartment with Jess, the house I bought with Amelia … They’ve just all been temporary.” Sam wrinkles his face, “That’s not right. I say that like I knew they were. And with Amelia, I … I guess I did expect it to be temporary. To some degree.

“The Impala will always feel like home but that’s – she’s something else entirely. She has her own category. But I genuinely thought I’d found one with Jess. She was supposed to be the person I could make a life with.

“I didn’t want to be a hunter. I found my out at college and then there she was. She was making her way in the world and I knew she could take me with her.”

“When you lost her, you started running away again. From her death.”

Sam huffs a breath, “I didn’t see it that way. I thought I was running towards her killer.”

“But you didn’t outrun it. Because you can’t outrun things like that, Sam,” she says with certainty.

“Time brought you to a place where you could live with it.”

He nods, “Yeah, time and people. Dean pretty much kept me from going nuts. I would’ve gotten myself killed going after Yellow Eyes if he hadn’t reined me in. I think Bobby tried being that way for dad, but they met too late for it to matter much.”

Mary feels unnerved talking about the toll her death took on her family.

“Bobby was always there for me when I needed him. But that was mostly when I was a kid. I didn’t really have him after Jess. Not right away, when it counted.

“The apocalypse was a distraction from losing her. I just didn’t have time to be upset over it when the end of the world was happening.

“And since then there are other ways I fill the gap; family being one. Cas and Bobby and Ellen and Jo. Then Kevin and Charlie. Now you.” He pulls his long legs up onto the couch and it makes him feel smaller. Sam isn’t willing to admit fully internally or out loud that this is it for him but he’s starting to expect that it is. The Life; this life with his brother and adopted family. And now his mom too.

“I think I’m going to be okay with this family. I like living here with all of you.” Something tickles his nose and he sniffs.

“I want a home.” He looks up at the intricate drop ceiling tiles, “I’m just not sure I can let myself have this one.” He brings his gaze down to his mother, “Homes are other people – family. It can’t be a place in this life. Not when you aren’t able to put down roots.”

_Not when you’re always ready to die._

Mary looks up towards the ceiling, but for inspiration.
“When you’ve invested yourself in someone as much as you and Dean have invested in each other, there’s a finite amount of rope. And you can only run so far before you run out of that rope. “It’s … it’s how John and I made it work. I was banking on him. We loved each other. I’m not saying that was always enough or that we never fought …”

“He idolized you when you were gone.” Sam rubs his thumb over the smooth leather of the couch cushion, “He had us idolizing you … I didn’t know you like they did but dad was an unstoppable force and back then, Dean could do no wrong,” a wry smile perches on his mouth. “So, yeah, they had me idolizing you too.”

“John was what I had. He was all I had and then there was Dean and I didn’t need John in all the same ways. But I still loved him. I wanted him with me, to be around our son. Having you only doubled my want for that.”

Mary pulls out the Journal from a small stack of books she has piled on the floor by the edge of the couch – she hadn’t known how long she would be here waiting. Sam sees Chuck’s *Woman in White* at the bottom of the pile and shivers. Mary sets the Journal on her knees and stares at it.

“I think he made me into his everything. And maybe he had even before I died … “If that’s what happened,” Mary exhales, “then he would have been scared of it. It would explain some of the ways he acted after Dean was born.” She shifts and the leather creaks. “Like I said, I was more dependent on him than he was on me before Dean. But afterwards, we were equals; in the same boat and at the same level of how much we needed each other.” Sam watches Mary’s eyes go out of focus, “He liked to be needed. That’s what it comes down to. It had something to do with how he always had to be there for his mom since his dad left them. He felt like needing other people wasn’t a luxury he could afford. Needing to be there for them was different but … when it was a balanced sentiment, that wasn’t something he could sit with.” She swipes her thumb over the Journal’s latch and makes herself look up at Sam.

“You can’t make homes inside of other people. That’s not how people work. Feeling at home with them is alright. That’s what family is. But you need to let yourself have somewhere to feel safe that isn’t making someone else into a fort.”

Sam swallows but in a manner that is almost as if he were swallowing a thought or sentence.

Mary sighs and puts the book down. “It’s not something you’re used to. You have to teach yourself that it’s okay to settle down. You’ve found a home, Sam. It’s going to be here waiting for you when you’re ready to have it.”

Sam is too afraid to say that he doesn’t know how much longer he can wait before he runs out of time to let it accept him. Or before he runs out of time. Period. He rubs his throat.

“Oh,” Mary whispers after a moment’s pause, “oh, Sammy,” she pulls his arm to tug him towards her and engulf him in her warmest hug. He squeezes back with all he’s got and he’s leaning heavily on her with his eyes wrenched shut, afraid he might cry because he knows she’s realized –

“You’re afraid you won’t –“ she’s still whispering and can’t bring herself to finish the sentence.

“Sammy, you can’t live like that. Especially not in the Life.”

“I know,” he chokes out.

She draws back so she can look him in the eyes but neither lets go of the other, “If anything, that’s
only more of a reason to give yourself a home.”

He swallows hard around the knot in his throat and he nods.

“You’re asking for something you don’t want. Deep down I know you don’t want it.” She puts a palm to his cheek, “I’ve known you for a handful of weeks and I can see that. And no one wants it for you either.” She strokes her thumb across his cheekbone, “You don’t deserve to die, baby.”

He sobs but it’s dry.

Mary pulls him back in and he sits swaddled in her arms until he loses himself in it.

When it seemed to Mary like Sam might fall asleep, she made him get up and took him to the kitchen to feed him. She cooked enough dinner for three and brought a plate to Kevin, then tucked Sam in.

Mary goes to bed regretting the loss of opportunity. She’d meant to ask about the demon blood and possibly Ruby as well. But today was good, she insists. Today was a day for healing.

In the morning she’ll continue her reading.

She sleeps a dreamless sleep without shaking the feeling of petulance nestled in the pit of her stomach.

This case was supposed to take a week. Instead, it was over within 36 hours of their arrival into town.

They had driven fast enough to get in by midnight, because of course Dean drove them. They spent the night at the motel and headed to the case by 8:30 am to scope everything out. Once they’d called Mary they planned a stake out that lasted into the early hours of the second day – sketching out their plan of attack. The coven’s location of choice was far enough out that it was safe to attack during the morning after the stake out once the witches got back. The fight had been brutal. Dean torked his knee badly and Charlie came home with a beaut of a black eye. Cas had escaped with a scraped and sore shoulder blade and upper thigh. After they’d raided the med kit, they spent the afternoon doing cleanup and victim debrief.

Now that it’s over, Cas doesn’t know what to do with himself. He stands in the middle of the room as Charlie and Dean putter about. Tomorrow, Dean promised, they’re going to get him an anti-possession tattoo. Cas wonders what Jimmy would have thought of that if he still shared a body with him.

Dean stands up, shifting and armload of clothes, “You okay man?”

Cas nods absently and moves to sit on the couch.

“Woah, woah, woah! No sitting on my bed!”
“Am I sitting on your bed?”

“Not with that mess on.”

“Dean, there’s no way you’re going to fit on that tiny couch,” Charlie says as she passes between them. Charlie has to fight and shush her inner shipper, which is positively screaming for her to suggest that Cas and Dean share the other bed. “Too much fanfiction,” she murmurs to herself.

“Sure I am,” Dean insists – unaware of her under-the-breath remark, “I’m not making you or Cas take it. Besides, I’m used to it.”

“Then what should I do?” asks Cas, obviously still on the tangent of thought where he needs permission to sit. His stomach chooses the moment to give voice to its emptiness.

Dean drops his clothes on the nearest bed and sighs, “Jump in the shower; then you can sit wherever you’d like. I’ll go rustle up some grub.”

Charlie wrinkles her nose in a smile as he walks to the door, “Okay, cowboy. Seeya.”

Cas does as Dean suggested and showers. It’s only after he’s dried off that he finds he’s forgotten his pyjamas in his duffle.

He exits the bathroom to find Charlie lying on one of the beds with her legs draped off of the end, typing away on her phone. She glances over and does a double take when she realizes he’s only got a towel on.

“Jesus! The fics write themselves.” She goes back to typing with a shake of her head, “Where the hell is Dean when it’s his cue?”

Cas isn’t sure if she’s vocalizing her thoughts to whatever she’s doing on her phone or talking to him so he doesn’t respond. But he listens to hear if she says anything more or repeats herself. She hasn’t by the time he’s gathered his clothes. So he goes back into the steam-filled bathroom to change.

He’s closed the bathroom door when he hears the room’s main door squeak open. The thin wood allows him to hear the brief conversation that goes on before he re-emerges:

“You missed the strip-tease.”

“The what?”

“Nothing. What’s for dinner?” The springs of the bed creak as Charlie sits up.

Cas finishes tugging on his – well, Dean’s, but now his – sleep shirt and walks out and over to the bag of deep-fried deliciousness he can smell from across the room.

Dean likes seeing Cas in his clothes. Even when it’s an inside-out Guns ‘N’ Roses tee, like tonight. And you know, that’s because it’s another sign that he’s human – that he’s sticking around. But when the angel walks over to him wearing bee-print boxers, all he can think is, those are adorable. And he doesn’t use the word ‘adorable’ lightly. Or at all if he can help it.

“Where in the Hell did you get those?” Dean asks more amused than anything.
“At the store on my first supply run with Charlie.” Cas rifles through the greasy paper looking for a burger.

“… Why?”

Cas shrugs, “Charlie described them as ‘adorable’ and insisted I get them.”

The woman is grinning giddily when Dean spares her a suspicious glare. When he turns back to Cas all he’s met with is guileless doe-eyes and chipmunk cheeks full of burger. Dean offers a strange sort of sigh and hands Cas a napkin for the smear of ketchup on his chin, “Whatever floats your boat, man.”

They eat dinner on the couch in front of the TV and prepare for bed shortly after that. Exhausted, they all fall into a relieving, dreamless sleep.

Dean glances across the seat, “Stop touching it.”

Cas pulls his hand away from the bandage at Dean’s fifth reprimand in the past half hour. He’s sure a charm necklace would be less bothersome, if more troublesome to deal with.

“You’ve got to leave it alone to heal.”

Cas gives a disgruntled sigh.

“I agree,” Charlie says from her horizontal position on the back seat.

“See? Charlie hasn’t been messing with hers.”

“No, not with you.” She rolls onto her stomach and props up so that Dean can see her face in the rearview.

“I was seconding Cas’s sigh. When are we going to stop?” she whines.

“Really?” He glances at her in the mirror, “Fine, we can pull off at the next exit.”

Dean comes back from the bathroom and before he even gets to the door he notices that the backseat is void of any and all gingers. Cas looks like he’s leaning halfway across the front bench.

Dean opens the door, “Charlie still in the bath-? … what’s this?”

A bag of undiscernible items rests where Dean’s ass is supposed to go.

Cas looks uncertain. “It’s – I, before the fall, I tried to apologize to you. I was going to bring you gifts – these or things like them,” he indicates the bag, “but Metatron, he interrupted me.”

As Dean opens the bag, Cas adds, “I suppose it’s best that I waited anyways. The other store didn’t have any pie.”

Dean looks at the assortment and finds himself at a loss. That the angel wanted to take precious time and go buy him porn and booze and junkfood when his powers had been near infinite and now, still wanted to, even when he was constrained by money, … Well Dean was almost a bit
“Let’s get along, little doggies!” Charlie throws herself into the back seat.

“Don’t slam the doors. And since when do you speak cowboy?”

“Since I started hanging out with you, partner.” She gives a dramatic wink.

Dean rolls his eyes and pulls out of the parking lot.

Once they get back on the highway, he glances across the seat at Cas’s profile, “Thanks man.”

Cas doesn’t turn his head from the road in front of them but a soft smile graces his lips.

Sam walks past the room Gabe is in for the tenth time this hour. He keeps finding excuses to march up and down the hall, hoping to hear noise or sense signs of movement.

But nothing.

He worries about what it will be like when the archangel wakes up.

Sam has no idea how he is going to react, much less how Gabriel will.

The thought of Dean’s reaction puts Sam further on edge. Sam hadn’t realized how put off by Gabe, Dean was until far too late in his relationship with the trickster.

*Relationship, huh.*

Will Gabe even acknowledge the … arrangement they’d had? It was, after all, four years ago. Albeit, Gabe has been dead those four years. And he’d seemed keen enough on renewing it.

Sam grimaces.

He hears the garage door creak open and Charlie’s laughter ringing off of the stone of the bunker walls.

Charlie and Cas each carry a bag but are setting them down on the War Room table when Sam walks in. They turn to greet him.

“Well? Let me see it.”

Cas grows a little smile with a touch of pride as he lifts his shirt and the edge of the bandage to reveal the new anti-possession tattoo.

“Nice,” Sam grins, “and what about you Charlie?”

Charlie gives a toss of her hair and thrusts out her hip as she lifts the hem of her shirt and bandage a bit and tugs the waistband down just far enough to reveal a marking identical to Cas’s.

Sam golf-claps for her and she bows. “Thank you, thank you. And for my final trick of the evening, I’m going to make a moose disappear and leave him slack jawed with the wondrous tale
of this case.”

Sam scrunches up his face, “Stop picking up terrible nicknames from those books.”

Mary comes into view from the kitchen, “We ate in the library a little while ago because some people couldn’t put down their books.” She gives a meaningful look to Sam, “I think there’s still some food in there if you all are hungry.”

“Thank you Mary,” Cas offers and he follows Sam up the library’s steps.

Charlie slings her arm around Cas’s shoulder and lets out a whoop, “Matching tatts; we’re officially Winchesters! This calls for drinks with our victory feast!”

The last Dean hears as they saunter into the library is Charlie saying, “I think we need to get Kevin inked.”

Mary looks like she’s following them, so Dean carries his bag and the weapons bag down the hall but delays putting anything away. Instead, he goes back to the kitchen to grab something from the pantry to snack on while he gets ready for bed.

“Kevin went to bed about an hour before you all got home.”

Mouth full of apple, Dean turns to see Mary in the doorway. He swallows the bite, “Good, I was going to ask where he was.”

Just watching him now, Mary can’t stand it anymore and she strides across the kitchen to engulf him in a hug.

Dean sets the apple down on the counter behind him and reciprocates.

“Mom?”

Mary moves a hand up to the base of his skull and pets the back of his head, running her fingers comfortably through his hair.

“I don’t understand how anyone could ever just leave you.”

Dean might throw up.

God, not this, anything but this.

He can’t even handle this by himself. And that’s when he can ignore it, and when it’s not something he’s saying out loud. How can he keep a stiff upper lip for Mary?

“To just up and leave like that. Without you having Sam or anyone. It was beyond unfair.”

Dean knows what she means. It was traumatizing to be left suddenly and totally alone just him and the impala, hunting by himself until John had been away far too long and Dean had taken it upon himself to seek out Sammy. The weight of concern for his dad had been doubled at the envisioned scenarios of how Sam would receive him.
For John to leave so out of the blue and have it turn out the way it did … It was, for Dean, one of the really big nails in the coffin that meant he would live in constant fear of never knowing when someone was just going to walk out of his life. People didn’t stay around for him. Absence was a constant.

“You deserve more than that.”

After spending today reading the Journal and books while waiting for them to return home, Mary is glad she didn’t have to know the person John was after she died.

She hears Dean swallow audibly.

Dean is truly afraid he’s going to collapse or puke any minute now.

Mary draws back, she brings her hand around to the side of his neck. For a moment she just runs her eyes over his face.

“You’ve raised two fine young men, Dean.”

His mouth falls open, waiting for his brain to conjure words of response, “Mom-“

“I’ve read your father’s journal, Dean.” By her analysis, John was a father for the most part until he realized that Dean was able to take care of both boys.

“You practically single-handedly raised yourself and Sam. You absolutely did after he cut you all off from Bobby.” She steps infinitesimally closer, “And I’m telling you that you have done a fantastic job. I am so proud to call you two my sons.”

The words hang for so long in the searching silence.

Dean doesn’t know what to say.

So he deflects.

“You know,” he swallows, “the first time he brushed his teeth, I uh, used that song you taught me with to teach him.”

Mary gives a look of surprise, still tinged with pride.

“Worked like a charm after he nearly choked himself on his toothbrush.”

Mary’s laugh has a tender note to it.

“And-and when he couldn’t fall asleep I’d sing him ‘Hey, Jude.'”

Mary smiles wide, “You have no idea how happy that makes me.”

Happy and also sad, she thinks. That you had to do it and that I wasn’t there to do it myself.

There’s something nice about sharing these minutiae with his mom. It’s something she should have known first hand. But instead, Dean is sharing it with her. And that’s … that’s okay too now.

Mary brings him back into a hug, leaning her head on his chest, “I love you, Dean.”

She can’t see it but Dean lights up at the words. She leans back to see his face again with a small laugh, “I don’t think I’ve said that to you yet.”

There’s a promise somewhere, in that moment, that the words will be said again in the future to each other.

With breathless wonder, Dean replies, “I love you too, mom.” He closes his eyes and lets a content smile drape itself across his face.
Chapter End Notes

I'm headcanoning that "Woman in White" was the title of the first book, since, you know, books don't get titled "Pilot."

If you liked this chapter, you all are going to LOVE the next two chapters. *wink, wink, nudge, nudge*
Also, I'm doing a double chapter update next time.
Fulfill and motivate and inspire me with your comments, people.
You guys
I’m so sorry this update took so long. I got caught up in the three DCBBs I’ve been working on. And then my thoughts ran away with themselves: the chapters were supposed to be very Dean/Cas centric but then BAM! Plot! And I realized I was super dissatisfied with Charlie’s Purgatory talk (not that I’m any more satisfied with what I added in this chapter but I’m just obsessed with Purgatory and it explains one of my top five reasons I came up with for why I love it so much). The Sabriel thing in this update wasn’t even meant to happen until chapter 15.
Oh well, we’re here now. Enjoy & pretty please let me know what you think.

Shit
It’s the first thing he wakes up thinking that … morning? The clock says 4:03 – nope – 4:04 now. He’d forgotten to return to his room after bringing Cas out of his nightmare. That had been at one. The angel’s fluttering eyes and deep inhales – the calm after the storm – were what had lulled him into closing his own eyelids. It had happened before but this was the first time that Dean had stayed more than a few minutes and hadn’t woken himself up right away. Now he’d been here for almost three hours and he had a crick in his neck from sitting up against the headboard.
The palm of his hand rests between both of Cas’s. He can feel soft breaths against his skin where his fingers and wrist aren’t covered completely by the angel’s hands.

He extracts himself, careful not to rustle the sheets more than necessary. Cas’s hands curl around emptiness and his brow furrows for a moment before relaxing back into sleep.

He’s careful to close the door as quietly as possible – only pulling it to and not latching it. The same as he does for Sammy; the same as he does every other night this happens to either of them.

Dean bothers with the post nightmare comforting because now he feels like he needs to. They aren’t in constant motion anymore. They can’t just get up in the mornings and leave the nightmares behind like this is a pay by the hour motel. This is their home and it should mean comfort and safety and Dean can give that to his brother and Cas.

It’s also got something to do with Purgatory, and Hell; grounding each other in reality.

It helps that they can use doors to separate each other before and after. When you share a motel room and ignore one another to make things less awkward (until it's necessary to be jolted from the dream) the mornings tend to be tense with 'not wanting to talk about it.'
Here Dean's settled into a routine with the both of them - thankless and perfect.
Dean’s throat is parched and his tongue feels thick. Has he been drinking? He glances at his room but makes his way to the kitchen for some water.

A faint rumble hits Dean’s ears. That would’ve done the trick; hunter’s instincts rousing him at the unexpected noise. There must be one hell of a storm brewing if they can hear it all the way down here.

As he passes Mary’s door he thinks of what they’d said to each other last night.

He’d told his mom he loved her. It was as monumentally plain as that. It was a fact – the one truth for his whole life, besides that he loved Sammy.

And saying it, feeling it had been so ordinary; second nature, really.

Was it like that when people fell in love? Did it just become fact? Did people always know it when they fell in love?

Is there anyone who knows the exact moment they fell in love? Or do they just pretend?

Because, he thinks, it really could have been any number of moments.

It’s hard to recall when the separate instances of affection stopped subsiding and began running together in a constant stream. It used to just be certain things Cas would say or do that made him feel that warmth welling inside of him. But he’s not sure when it became a steady flow of– (He resists the urge to look around and ensure his solitude) …of Love.

Dean knows it’s Love. (With a capital “L”).

He acknowledges it because it’s not something he’s ever been able to hide from.

Letting himself do something about it, now, that’s the problem. Talking about it, openly showing affection; those are the little splinters that catch on his willingness to express himself.

It’s easier to outwardly pretend he can deny it. It’s easier to play ignorant.

He’s invested far more thought in it than he cares to admit, and even now with “any number of moments” laid out before him, he can’t pinpoint a specific instance where it clicked.

But maybe he’s just been falling more in love.

Maybe those instances – the initial Hell rescue, every time Cas sacrificed himself, a hand on his shoulder in the 70s, making exceptions, being exceptions, a lamp-lit street (“don’t ever change”) – were just intensifiers.

Dean clenches a fist, containing the phantom warmth from Cas’s own hand and breath.

Their beginning was remarkable in and of itself. There was nothing to compare it against for perspective. So the changes had no starting point until after they happened. It always caught Dean by the most natural sort of surprise to find another difference in their dynamic.

One of the earliest shifts he remembers is after his time warp to Zach’s future. He’d seen his future
in all its frailty and been certain that there were few other options for all of it.

No that can’t be right. Memory serves him better than that.

He’s sure he realized … something, when Cas had said, “we’re making it up as we go.” Maybe it was how much saying that, meant to Cas; but at least part of the realizing was how much he meant to Cas.

He thinks that in the few seconds following, before Raphael had shown up, that he’d seen something on Chuck’s face that indicated he’d heard whatever it was, in Cas’s words too. That it wasn’t just … Dean’s imagination.

That he’d become important as an individual to an angel spoke worlds to Dean. He still wasn’t sure how that had happened. Not one hundred percent.

Their business relationship had been tangled up by snarky remarks and standing too close in an effort to find boundaries. Boundaries they pushed with every interaction.

Suddenly it was inside jokes ("didn’t happen to work for the post office, did he?") and imbibing copious amounts of alcohol, and learning references. All installments on paying for a first-class ticket to best-friendship.

There was a cycle of hope and loss that brought them together. Like churning waters, dredging up silt and sand until the suspended particles obstructed transparency.

And though the waters haven’t settled, Dean has found his clarity.

For Dean it had been something about Cas’s death at the lake. And Purgatory. He’d never have gotten this far with himself if it hadn’t been for Purgatory.

Seeing Cas as God had been a scene to behold. But it was a place Dean knew there was no coming back from. He’d known they had to kill Cas. Saying that it was a hard decision would have been a lie. It was too logical for there to be any other option. Painful would be a better word. Their Cas, his Cas was gone and the new one wasn’t going to be able to step off of his throne and survive it.

In a blink – behind closed eyelids, Dean had seen visions of Raphael’s used up vessel and knew it wouldn’t even be that much left of Cas when or rather if the power was drained. And then it was, and the Leviathan had replaced him.

Cas had been fragile and vulnerable in the face of those ancient, primordial beasts and his humanity now made him so once more. Dean was having a first; experiencing fear for Cas’s mortal life. All other occasions of Cas’s death had been so sudden and had left Dean little time to anticipate or fret over it. Death had threatened his friend before but it hadn’t seemed real. Cas had been a force to be reckoned with and had always been resurrected. But now, with his grace stolen from him, Dean is afraid that Cas isn’t on God’s list of favorites anymore. And he doesn’t know what that means for the number of lives and free passes Cas has left.

The chaos of that year hadn’t left Dean with room to make emotionally influenced decisions. Each choice was all-or-nothing; would it break the world or not?

In comparison, Purgatory had been like a week-long camping trip. There was a rhythm and order to each day. No surprises save for Benny’s appearance and when they eventually found Cas. But Dean had never expected to be alone down there, he’d anticipated Cas’s company – that one day the angel would just reappear. So he was more encouraged, than caught off guard by those turns of events.
Dean can see Purgatory as the tipping point – the emotional breaking precipice where he and Cas couldn’t avoid each other. And more importantly, where Dean confronted just how badly he had it for his best friend. Not that he didn’t know he was in love with Cas at the time or before – he’d been aware for a while (that question of how long though, might never have an answer). But it was the place where he learned what lengths he would go to, in order to lift the angel from the mire that Dean seemed to perpetually drag him down into. Dean discovered how desperate he was to save his savior.

And it was a repeat of the apocalypse (“I’m hunted. I’ve rebelled ...” became “I’ve got a price on my head …”) – yet another case of Cas protecting him. Dean swallows in realization: the shield of God chose to become a shield to Dean.

That dead forest was where the affection, the bond, began to mean more than family; more than duty; more than friendship. Well, the seeds of that started with Cas’s rebellion at the apocalypse where Dean began showing him the ropes. But Purgatory, too, caused its definition to change. Dean pursued Cas too long and too hard to mean anything other than he loved him but the manner – the type of love he held was ambiguous (in theory).

Dean knows lust and this ain’t it. It’s not a carnal thing – it doesn’t make Dean hungry or achy in his bones or tingling with an itch he can’t scratch himself.

It isn’t fondness or brotherly affection. Maybe it used to be. To some degree Dean is still dedicated to him as family.

It’s more like belonging. Like what he and Sam have but a different sort of storm. With Sam the ground is solid but footing is slippery. There’s puddles and car oil and wind and hapless plastic bags blowin’ around, but he can always see and feel the road. With Cas, it’s a white blizzard where he’s afraid of falling into a snow bank and he was never sure of the path in the first place. They’re guided by each other’s footsteps – sightlessly leading one another. He’s fairly certain that he’s heading towards a warm fire but that’s all it is, blind faith in his steps and imagination.

He takes a glass from the cabinet and fills it with water then sits at the table to drink it.

Love. Love has been on his mind so frequently of late. And Dean suddenly concludes that it’s Mary. The one entity in his life whom he’d known to love him unconditionally had now re-entered it. To this very minute, she’s done nothing to make Dean question her maternal devotion to him and he grows confident under the shower of her affection.

Confident enough to risk revealing himself and say out loud what he felt.

First Sam, then her, now this obnoxious train of thought too early in the morning. The trial-suicide death scare had definitely been what factored into him telling Sam. The kid needed to know and to hear that he was worth something.
Dean can barely believe he confessed his worst fear to his little brother – that Sam and Cas would take themselves from Dean and end their lives. Letting his guard down in front of the person he trusted the most should be easier than it was.

But they’d agreed to work on that, hadn’t they?

Dean scoffs to the empty kitchen. I doesn’t matter what they’d agreed on. Until they got anywhere with that, what mattered were things that had already happened.

In their fucking crusade to purify themselves they didn’t think of what they’d burn in their fire of holiness – namely Dean.

He’d been left struck full of fear and anxiety and sadness and desire to vomit and cry caused by the two most important people in his life nearly abandoning him in order to find themselves atonement.

It makes him think of Cas reading him so easily, even from the beginning; “You don’t think you deserve to be saved.” And how unfair was it? Huh? That the guy had access to his soul and was able to literally see that, in whatever capacity he was able to read the inner workings of the spiritual essence.

Now, now it was Dean’s turn, Dean’s job to show Cas and Sam they deserve to be saved despite their wrongs. And Christ, how’s he going to do that when he still thinks he shouldn’t be alive himself?
But he wants to be.
Dean wants to live so he can be there for them.

Dean leans in his chair and stretches to refill his glass. His thirst long abated, he sips at the water for something to do.

When he’d talked to Cas on the phone it was a miracle – Cas was alive. But then he’d said the word: “human.” And Dean was reminded that his world was falling apart. Sam was passed out in the back seat and Dean was well beyond the point when he should have pulled over to sleep. Selfish anger and desperate concern for Sammy washed to the back of his mind with every syllable Cas spoke. The overwhelming urge to Fix this. Save Sam. Help Cas. Fix this. Fix this. Fix this was all-encompassing and he couldn’t focus. He barely pulled it together in order to give Cas instructions on what he should do and directions to get to the bunker.

Cas had nothing. But Dean could give him somewhere to be with people who cared about him.

Dean doesn’t know what the angel thinks of to get to sleep at night other than a comforting hand post-nightmare.

When it isn’t liquor he’s using, Dean lies in bed focusing on the sensory aspects of his surroundings. How cool the sheets are, the way the light from his clock filters through his eyelids, what sounds he can hear through the vents and the crack under his door. Sometimes he wonders what the forest looks like outside in the starlight. The few times he’s been out there in the evening
he was a bit startled by how bright it all was. Purgatory had warped his impression of nature to a degree and it’s hard to not get wrapped up in it when he has nothing to distract him but the backs of his eyelids. On the better nights, – when he’s driving or daydreaming and not trying to be productive by say, sleeping – the little hunter has his devotion to his family and a few precious embers of love keeping him warm. Few and far between are the nights he allows himself to stoke the memories that keep him holding tight to his love for Sam, and Cas, and his parents. Only because it hurts to think of where those moments have collectively brought him.

And doesn’t that just leave him more open than a book? If his insecurities lie in when people will leave him, what else would he be expected to hold onto?

It explains a lot really, Dean thinks in annoyance. (It peeves him to be in this sort of state of self-analysis).

Baring himself, opening up and being vulnerable goes against every instinct. If he’s vulnerable he can’t protect Sammy and then he’s leaving them both at risk. For what? the rational part of his mind argues. For emotional harm? Yeah, like that doesn’t happen anyways.

But Dean’s terrified that it’s going to multiply the emotional harm that does happen to them and he doesn’t know how he could stand more internal pain. They come so close to the point of no return with how much further their relationship seems to shatter. Every time it happens, Dean’s at a loss for how they keep going.

Dean needs Cas because there are certain things he’s never going to be able to tell Sammy. No matter how much “honesty” they put on the table, his “protect Sammy” instincts are going to win out. It’s why he doesn’t tell Sammy about what goes on in his nightmares or the emotional conflict he feels when … well, whenever he goddamn pleases.

And yeah, Sam knows from experience what the nightmares are like (and now Cas does too, he thinks grimly), but Dean doesn’t want to commiserate. Dean doesn’t want to wallow. He wants to get around having to deal with them. Cas knows what to say or do after Dean’s had them. The way he catches Dean’s eye the next morning, a millisecond of skin-to-skin contact when he walks past or reaches for something; Dean finds comfort in those things. There’s reassurance. And they’re not something he has to depend on to be able to get through the day – just something to sweeten the pot without acknowledging why it needs sweetening.

That need of course, is beside the obvious underlying emotional attachment.

Aaaaand he’s come full circle in this train of thought.

Reservation for Dean Winchester, pity party of one. Party favors will include lovely emotional-baggies full of guilt, tied off with electric blue ribbons that will fit nicely around the aorta – providing plenty of heart-clenching moments later on.

Huh, guilt about guilt. How utterly, typically Winchester of him.
After a moment’s consideration, though. Dean thinks that obstacles, not guilt, are the primary cockblocks here.

Part of them not getting together has been about guilt, sure. But from the get-go it’s been a massive five-lane pileup of obstacles and situations put in their path. Dean tells himself it is \textit{that} delaying any … thing … happening. At least more so than their own disbelief of the other not returning affections.

Which, ya know, is \textit{there}. Dean pretends it isn’t but is certifiably is a large problem for him. Honestly, why does he even bother? He knows that he’s more afraid of “rejection and what it entails” than any of the individual side effects. He also knows that this is one of the more moot points in his argument. It’s so trivial that it doesn’t even deserve status \textit{as} a point in the argument. So that’s why Dean bothers to pretend it isn’t part of his case.

Wanting to be with Cas entails actively positioning himself in situations where he would be taking reckless risks. That’s unacceptable.

Things are fine the way they are. Now, that’s probably the stupidest reason on Dean’s list. He knows you don’t get anything without taking risks – he’s a pool shark for God’s sake. But things \textit{are} fine as is.

He’s been able to live this long without it. Every end of the world and life-or-death scenario you could imagine and some you’d never dream of and he’s never said a - Well he’s said a word. He’s said quite a few over the years. Now and then he drops a bomb, reveals himself. But every time they all let it slide. So he’s said a thing or two, but never \textbf{the} words, whatever those may be. The fact of the matter is, that Dean has proven time and again his ability to go on without anything more with Cas than what he’s already got. There’s never going to be anything but himself to make him fess up. Dean just isn’t ready for anything to happen.

\textit{And we mustn’t forget that Cas deserves better.}\n
Dean shuts that line of thinking down almost instantly because, \textit{no thank you, we’ll be avoiding that barrel of vicious flying monkeys today.}

Dean drops the half-full glass on the table, hoping it will break so he has something to clean up. It doesn’t.

He doesn’t think it’s fair. It isn’t fair that Dean can know Cas deserves better and still not want to forgive him. Not totally forgive him, at least. Cas hurt him. And yeah, boo hoo, his poor feelings, he needs to get over it. But damn, a habit’s been formed. Cas leaves. Cas breaks his trust.
The guy’s stubborn as hell and likes to do things his own way. He’s always thought he’d known best; Cas is smart, and he hears things – and y’know, as an angel he knew more sensory and situational information than any of them - but it’s fucking hard to try and make him actually listen to what you’re saying.

He’d followed orders; he withheld what he’d known and mindlessly provided for the start of the apocalypse.

He’d known he could ask anything of Dean and the hunter would comply, but instead he made a deal with the devil’s replacement. He’d been God and, well, God complex obviously accounted for it there.

He’d heard Dean’s prayers and known Dean wanted Cas by his side but didn’t respond.

That one probably hurt the most.

Even though, yeah, the Purgatory gateway should probably have been the biggest deal considering what it entailed at a point when Cas knew better.

Damn, the trust issues alone he’d had after the Leviathan got unleashed. It’d been enough for Ellen to track them down in Lily Dale and threaten him if he didn’t get it together and let someone in. Not that he’d really listened. Bobby had given him a pep talk not long after and Dean had thought, ‘good enough.’

Up until the moment where the ignoring thing became apparent Dean thought there wasn’t anything that Cas could have done to hurt him more than what he did: betray him, hurt Sammy, then walk into that lake to die.

Dean sighs at himself.

Because it's not about his multitude of issues. It's about timing and circumstance and how nothing ever lines up within a hundred feet of anything qualifying as acceptable in those areas.

Who's he kidding? This is all because he isn't ready. And he certainly doesn't think Cas should be having to deal with this dilemma right now. Doesn't want to put making this decision on him when their plates are already so full.

His reiterates: this isn't fair that he feels this way. To himself, to either of them, to anyone. Just as it is with Sam, there are dangers this encumbers (has encumbered, will encumber, ...)

Picking at his cuticles seems like a better use of brain-power than following that line of thought again.

When he can, Dean generally focuses on the good stuff about his relationship with Cas. Mostly since the bad stuff isn’t relevant given that nothing is going to happen anyways. It just isn’t necessary.

A little Sam-voice in his head starts mumbling about inevitabilities. Dean scoffs.
What a line: ‘Something's gotta give.’ Yeah, well something can give all it damn well wants, Dean Winchester is keeping this to himself.

The Sam-voice starts up again but Dean can logic it out. It takes a moment of self-doubt but Dean knows he’s right. Nothing will give and nothing will break, either; there are some lines we just don’t cross. No mistakes, no slip-ups, no false hopes ... Well, none that would be realized.

"I love you"

The most unsafe words a person can speak.

With the Love there comes a cause for which to crusade. Or it’s a game with stakes worth playing for.
It can lock you up in gratification and promise.
You can get fixated and bound with hope, with worry, and creating something together.
The point is that it makes people unstable. Willing to kill. Willing to die. Selfish and scary and desperate. They become prepared to do horrible things.
Turning into the George’s and Martha’s of the world, innocently playing out their fantasies.
Building papier-mâché lives in homes that they construct out of each other's bones.

Such domesticity is only worth anything to him as a tool for comparison.

Loving Sam is all he knows, actively speaking. And Dean thinks it’s become that way with Cas. That he’ll never again know what it is to not love the angel in some respect.

Even once he’s gone.

And that’s what gets repeated when his thoughts start to wander into unsafe territory: He leaves, You can’t trust him, He doesn’t listen, He’s going to leave …

Dean lifts his glass once more and sees the ring it’s left behind. He sets the drink down in a different spot and begins to trace designs in the water with his finger.

Some part of Dean thinks Cas might reciprocate. But it’s not enough to mean anything. Dean can excuse it with hope, or worse-slash-more easily, with brotherly affection.

In any case Dean doesn’t know if it makes a difference or not.

He draws a lightning bolt in the water.

Wearing someone else’s heart on your sleeve is much easier than wearing your own.
The lightning bolt becomes a star.

Knowing someone else’s feelings for you is easier than admitting your own.

The star becomes a smear.

Accepting someone else’s gestures of affection is easier than showing your own.

(For some reason, the image pops into and takes root in Dean’s mind, of a knight in shining armor wearing a token (ribbon? kerchief? whatever) from his lady love into a tournament.)

There was a line from some long-forgotten book which he could have quoted to fit those triplet phrases, Dean was sure. Or maybe something obscure about specters.

But the thought was absent at best. He didn’t really care to know whatever it was. It would offer nothing to the situation.

So here Dean sits, at the point where emotions and desires – pure wants, are made simple and nothing but pure wants are accounted for. Where those wants can be laid bare, waiting to be picked up and carried out and yet go ignored or dismissed.

If Dean goes back to defining what kind of love they’ve got it’s one that they both know is there. It’s an inclination. A series of actions they keep letting happen by accident. A pattern. A happenstance that is so damn wholesome and natural – ingrained by each other’s presence.

And yet?

And yet.

He yawns.

Dean is constantly sinking. He feels like he’s moving down but the water is always in the same place. The wrong place he might add. Same level of world terror and personal danger.

Christ almighty what is with him this morning? Is he still drunk?

It’s really much simpler than he’s making it out to be.

They are what each other needs and it's enough.

Dean only realizes it’s been raining when he looks up through the tiny kitchen window at a silent crack of lightning.
He watches the rainfall stop. Storm’s moving out, then. It’s the first in a line that’ll be coming up in the next couple of weeks.

A glowing chest is not something you usually want to wake up to.

A glowing chest is particularly something that Sam does not want to wake up to. It’s dull and orange-red – as if someone were holding a flashlight up to his back and it were shining through. Sam lifts his hand to comb the hair out of his face and realizes the veins in his wrists are glowing faintly as well. When he tries to stand and get out of bed, the floor falls out from under him. He sprawls on the tile breathing deeply, terrified to move. 

What did he do, what did he do? Why is he relapsing? Did he push himself too far? How? He thinks he must sit for five or so minutes before he tries to kneel. That sends him reeling but he’s able to stay on his knees, holding himself up by the side of his bed. Eventually it subsides and Sam thinks that as long as he stays still it shouldn’t be too bad.

And then Sam ponders what this could mean for his day. He’s craving interaction and determines that he doesn’t have to tell anyone right away if this is as bad as it gets. His chest has dimmed and his wrists aren’t glowing anymore (just searing hot), so he figures it won’t be too difficult to hide. After all, he’s been able to keep the other symptoms under wraps lately. He checks the clock – 6:47 am. Good, no one else is likely to be up. All he has to do is get out to one of the central areas and situate himself before anybody else sees him struggling and he gets imprisoned in his room all day.

He’ll tell someone tonight. Maybe.

He plays through the pain, slow and steady, and makes it all the way to the main library. He sits down heavily in the nearest chair with a loud sigh that’s nearly a groan. He turns to his right and is grateful for his laziness yesterday, picking up one of newer books that he’d left out.

One by one his housemates make their way out of their rooms. Sam stays in his chair, afraid of how his legs might shake if he shifts or stands. Mary brings him some toast and a mug of tea which he’s very grateful for. He hadn’t thought about struggling to make it the fridge when he eventually got hungry.

Mary goes back into the kitchen to eat breakfast with Kevin and Charlie but Dean comes traipsing into the library setting his breakfast of black coffee on the large table in passing, and heading straight for the stacks.

Sam had selected a seat facing the long table so he’d be able to feel involved with everyone while keeping his distance in case the glowing or shaking started up again. At the moment, however, he is distracted by Dean’s back and forth motion across his line of vision. Sam definitely notes his brother carrying books they’ve already eliminated from their research but resists asking him why.

He gets his answer when Cas walks in eating a bowl of cereal.

The angel ambles over to the table, careful to hold his bowl away from the books. He runs a hand curiously across one of the covers.
“Dean?”

“Yeah?” Dean pops his head out from behind one of the shelves.

“Why are you bringing out books we’ve already searched?”

“One sec,” Dean ducks back into the shelves, there’s the dull sound of books pressing together and shifting against each other and Dean withdraws from the stacks bearing an armload of texts.

“These are ones I figured were going to help you find Metatron.”

Wait did he say Metatron?

“Tracking spells, summoning spells, retrieval spells, you name it. Whatever I remember coming across when we were using them before that could help you.”

“Oh.” Cas keeps looking at the cover his hand traces lightly over.

Dean shifts his weight back and forth a little, “There are a couple of more still on the shelves, but I’ll grab ’em. I remember putting them away. You can go ahead and get started on those.” He points to exaggerate his emphasis.

Better than flowers; Sam thinks. More often than not, his inner monologue has its snark level dialed all the way up to eleven around these two.

Dean doesn’t see the way Cas’s gaze lingers on him as he walks off to the shelves. Cas reaches for a book across the table as he pulls out a chair to sit. He runs a hand carefully over the front (Sam wonders if that’s a comfort thing or if he’s trying to gauge the book before diving in) then opens it and quickly becomes absorbed.

Dean re-emerges and sets two more books at the end of the table, swapping them for his coffee mug. He walks towards the archway but, as if he can’t help imitating Cas, Dean lets his hand fall lightly to the angel’s shoulder and run across his back as he walks past. Cas barely but visibly straightens at the contact and again can’t seem to keep his focus from Dean’s retreating form.

Ah, yes.
The Things You Can Ignore
Dean’s practically an Olympic medalist at it.

Or at least he has been. Lately, though, he’s seemed to let his nurturing become more than physical things (typically food and making sure Sam gets to bed on time). And Sam isn’t sure where that leaves him.

Sam can’t believe the way he opened up to Mary the other day. Thinking on it now is like looking at someone else’s memories. He’s glad that whatever part of him had felt urged to let her in was also a part of him stable enough to realize there were some things he wasn’t going to discuss in that conversation.

It was, and it is so much easier to ignore and hide himself inside of wanting to help other people than it is to confront his own issues.
He feels much safer trying to help other people.

Dean projects; Sam displaces. They both internalize. And he ends his list there because if he doesn’t he’ll be going all day and probably well into next week.

Sam should feel weirder than he does around Mary. He knows her through vicarious memory and hallucination; not from anything real to him. Maybe that speaks to how desperate he is. How much he just wants the chance to have a mom.

But Mary is also comforting and wonderful and physically present as part of their current reality. She’s what Sam craves and she’s a luxury in that she’s so much more than what Sam needs. Now, it would seem, he’s begun to idolize her in his own right.

He’d gone to bed last night still considering what she’d said. He really would have preferred it if something else had occupied his mind – counting how many werewolves he’s killed over the years, jerking off, life’s great mysteries – anything. But the talk had seemed to awaken an emotional hunger with Sam. Maybe it was his mind’s last ditch effort at giving his body a reason to go on. If he fed himself whatever it was that would satisfy that emotional need there would be a reason to keep trying.

Sam, and now Mary, knew that the something he wanted was a home.

Someone in the dining room laughs. Sam looks up and catches the tail end of Cas’s smile at the sound. He looks back down at the book in his own lap. Cas flips a page. The AC turns on. There’s a clattering and more laughter – this time Sam thinks he might even hear Kevin. That lifts a corner of Sam’s mouth. It’s hard to remember the last time he saw Kevin genuinely smile because he was happy.

Sam doesn’t even have the chance to wonder what they were laughing about before he’s cognizant that these are sounds he loves.

With the thought comes the same sort of feeling he gets when people refer to the library as ‘his.’ He likes having a place to belong. He likes that it’s a place that other people think of as his.

Sam startles out of his reflection when a voice is cut off mid-shout and is followed by the clatter of metal and porcelain. He leans forward in his seat – knowing he won’t be able to make it all the way to the kitchen to see what’s wrong. Cas jerks up and his chair is shoved back by the motion.

“Dean?” Sam calls.

Dean stands in the kitchen doorway with a hyper-aware Charlie and Kevin at the table in the room behind him.

“‘S fine, Sammy.” He clears his throat to shout again, “Mom just popped out.” Like she’s making a run to the supermarket and not vanishing from existence. “Her plates fell in the sink.” He walks over to the metal basin and finds nothing broken so he sets his own down with them and begins to wash.
He can sense that Charlie and Kevin are warily standing mid-motion still. He calls over his shoulder, “Nothing’s broken guys, chill out.” As if that’s what they’re all concerned with.

As he washes, Dean is incredibly aware of individual soap bubbles popping on the backs of his hands and wrists.

Mary’s return was nothing he’d ever hoped for. He'd missed her - still does when his memory ensnares him in thoughts of nostalgia. But he’d been reconciled. He'd been reconciled with her death since he destroyed Azazel and he'd accepted it as part of what Was and Is and Must Be.

But she'd come back, and now all he wants to do is be held by her and never let go - never have to say goodbye.

Her return has only multiplied his intense abandonment issues tenfold. Now it’s a mantra of “will she be here tomorrow?”, “Is she going to stay with us through the day?” on top of his usual “Will Sam relapse?”, “Is Cas going to up and leave? Or decide we’re not good enough and that he can do better?”, and “I’d never forgive myself if something happened to Charlie or Kevin. How much more can they take before they quit?”

This recurring self-examination is killing him and it’s popping up at every damn turn.

Mary wants their story? Time to relive and evaluate his life’s actions. He wants to help Sam recover? Make that a couple’s therapy session.

But, again, Mary’s presence has turned his world upside down. He’s found himself digging up all his crap like it’s buried treasure.

And now Sam and Charlie are trying to convince him that it is. One man’s trash and all.

Except Dean’s afraid it might be working.

He’s just waiting for Mary to try and jump in on the action. God forbid Cas give it a go. Dean’s not sure he can take it if Cas tries to sit down with him.

But Cas knows that those are treacherous waters. Dean’s sure of it.

Besides the angel is working through his own stuff. Dean feels a twinge of remorse at that being the reason Cas wouldn’t approach him.

Dean scrubs harder at the oily butter on the plate in his hand.

One way or another they’re working through this stuff.

Dean knows this is healthy. He read it in the relief he could see washing over Mary every time they let her further into their lives.

He thinks maybe he could be glad for it once he can feel the change; once the grime had cleared
and he wasn't swamped in reticent guilt.

Perhaps after the nasty monsters inside him who’ve reared their heads quit flailing and retire back to their caves.
Dean didn’t dare hope for them to be eradicated.
(Except he did.)
Hey, his mom had been a hunter too; maybe she knew a way to tame those beasts. Maybe he won’t have to ask for the trick. (He won’t be able to).

Dean dries his hands and decides that now would be a good time to do something. He needs a break from research but he wants to keep his hands busy.
Off to the garage, it is.

Charlie is, in fact, looking for Cas when she comes into the small library and finds him on a step-stool, sorting through the books on the top tier of one of the shelves.
He glances to the doorway upon her entrance but doesn’t say anything.

She meanders over to one of the shelves close to him but only pretends to be seeking something to read. After a few moments of silence, she clears her throat.
“So, how’re you handling the whole ‘big brother back from the dead’ thing?”

Cas shrugs and continues scanning the titles, “The same way I’ve handled my own revivals I suppose.”

“Oh, right.”
She attempts to think of something else to say, possibly along the lines of ‘it’s okay to feel weird about it’ or ‘you should talk about it if you need to’ but he beats her to the punch.

“It will take adjusting to say the least. I’m hoping he wants to help solve the problem of the angels having fallen. I don’t believe I’ll want to be around him much if he doesn’t. I feel it would be painful.” He turns his body away from her and goes back to the titles before him, but continues, “I had also hoped to get the chance to renew our relationship. Before he left, we were closer to each other than many other angels.”

Charlie takes a breath and opens her mouth to respond, but Cas has moved on:

“Do you know where the Men of Letters kept their nature manuals? I’m taking a break from research and I believe editing another book will help clear my head. I want to be able to re-approach my work with a fresh mind. I’ve only found one other manual besides the book on melittology.”

Charlie exhales, “You need some pleasure reading. Not work.”

“I find myself bored if I sit doing nothing.”

“Pleasure reading, Cas. I’m talking about something you’d enjoy. And, for the record, there isn’t anyone who thinks doing nothing is fun. C’mon, I’ve probably got something in my room.”
She shuts the door soundly by leaning bodily against it while eyeing him carefully. Charlie sweeps over to the tall, thin display shelf she’s dragged in here. Her hand floats before the titles without much intent and she shoots a glance to the angel.

“Hey Cas, can I ask you something?”

He takes her question rhetorically and silently waits for her to continue.

“Cas?” She asks after receiving no response.

“Go ahead.”

She tugs a title from the shelf and faces him, “What was Purgatory like?”

He’s been lured here, he realizes.
She holds the book, outstretched as if offering a barter for the information she’s requested.

Charlie watches Cas face tense and stiffen.

“It was a dim forest, there were monsters, the monsters pursued both me and Dean.”

“Separately. They pursued you both separately.”

“Yes, at first.” He shifts his weight nervously.

Charlie lets the silence become awkward, waiting for him to offer more.

“C’mon Cas, give it a little personal flair. I’m looking for juicy details. I mean the Leviathan were targeting you specifically.” She glances to the book in her hands before flashing Cas a smile and then peering over her collection again. “If it were me, I would’ve peed myself.”

She’s getting zero reaction from the angel.

“How did you keep going by yourself for all that time? At least Dean had a partner. Even then …”

Adding eye contact to the equation does nothing.

She shrugs, “I’ve heard what it was like for him. It sounded like it kinda sucked and he really missed you. That is, he was glad when you showed back up.”

The slip was intentional. She means for Cas to know that Dean came off like he’d been miserable without the angel.

“I’m not … this is an uncomfortable topic for me.” Cas is grimacing with memories of cognitive dissonance and reignited guilt.

Charlie can see every line of culpability etch itself into his features. *Yikes,* that was not the point of this. Charlie tucks the first book back and pulls out a newer-looking one. She holds it out. “I was going to ask you why you stayed in Purgatory but … I’ll let it drop if that’s what you really want.”

Cas can’t believe he was lucky enough to escape before she asked that of him. He reaches for the novel, “Yes, that’s what I really want.”

She yanks the book back to her chest, “Can you at least tell me what happened in the crypt?” The question flits out of her mouth. “I can’t understand it and I asked but Dean doesn’t know anything
about what was really going on. Only the surface stuff.”

Good, Cas thinks.
But what he says is: “I was trying to take the tablet from him, and I injured him horrifically and almost killed him.”
His bluntness has the intended effect. Charlie’s jaw falls slack and Cas thinks he’ll be allowed to leave.

“Have you talked about it?”

Cas wants to crack his knuckles just to hear the popping sound they’ll make. “We’ve moved past it.” His words sound believable enough, though there’s little meaning in them. “Can I have the book now?”

Charlie takes a moment of analysis but nods, “Yeah.” She swallows and finds a smile, “First I have to set it up for you, though.”

She promptly spends fifteen minutes explaining its merits and the author’s background information before she sends him off to his own room to read it.

Castiel gives into her suggestion and curls up to read it almost right away. He’s halfway into chapter three when he starts cramping up and gets the urge to move. His thoughts are in fact more settled now, despite Charlie throwing her own stones in the waters of his mind.
As he makes his way downstairs to rejoin the research, Cas decides that he is glad to have a friend in Charlie, even if her efforts can be overzealous at times.

Kevin detests his Enochian dictionary.
It’s barely usable but it’s better than most of the other dictionaries out there. (Probably better than all of them since an actual angel edited it). But that doesn’t mean it’s a good dictionary by any standards. It’s handwritten in chicken-scratch by someone long dead who probably couldn’t pass the modern third grade. Most of it is covered in Kevin’s own notes (which he can barely decipher most of the time) or corrections courtesy of Castiel. It’s more frustrating than a solid color 10,000 piece puzzle, and it’s fucking ugly.
If he didn’t need it so badly, he’d burn it.

As has been happening frequently of late, Kevin, in his translation, has stumbled upon a word that is not in the dictionary at all. Kevin could hazard a guess but with the kind of stuff he’s reading about, it’s far better to be certain.
Which brings him to where he is currently, downstairs, headed to the archives to find Castiel.

He rounds a corner and begins to hear the faint sound of singing. He can’t name the tune but it’s slow and just shy of being haunting, like a somber lullaby:

“The big ship sails on the alley, alley, oh;
the alley, alley, oh;
the alley, alley, oh;
the big ship sails on the alley, alley, oh;
On the last day of September.”

He takes another turn and the vocals gets louder. It’s distinctly Crowley’s voice.

“The captain says it’ll never, never, do;
never, never, do;
never, never do;
the captain says it’ll never, never, do;
On the last day of September.”

Kevin didn’t really expect it to be anyone else. He slows his pace so his steps fall softer. Perhaps he can go unnoticed.

“The big ship sank to the bottom of the sea;
The bottom of the sea;
The bottom of the sea;
The big ship sank to the bottom of the sea;
On the last day of –”

He stumbles and his shoes squeal on the polished floor.

The singing stops.

Kevin halts in his tracks, waiting for something else to happen. There’s the squeak of the chair, a throat clearing and then:

“What do we do with an orphan prophet,
what do we do with an orphan prophet,
what do we do with an orphan prophet,
when he cannot translate?”

Kevin reaches the dungeon’s outer doorway. Crowley is still obscured by the closed bookshelf covering the disguised entrance.

“Tell him little lies and drive him crazy,
tell him little lies and drive him crazy,
tell him little lies and drive him crazy,
’til he cannot translate.”

Kevin pulls back the bookcase to find Crowley sitting at his table, as smug as ever. He speaks with a smirk; ”It’s an Irish song but it serves its purpose.”

“Which is…”?

“Your mother likes to ask that question, too. Does she ask it of you a lot?”

Kevin grits his teeth, and spits out, “Not since you killed her.” It’s easier to be angry and crass than to let any tears well in his eyes.

Crowley scoffs, “Gave up rather easily on that one, didn’t we? Didn’t even question it.”

Kevin’s mouth goes desert dry.

“You’re the one who told me you’d killed her.”

“Yes, I told you.” Crowley gives him a look. “Honestly, with all your ‘I’m in advanced placement’
Kevin swallows but can’t think to say anything.

“You’re worse than the Winchesters. At least they can carry a proper conversation. Look, I’ll make this simple. How much do you trust me?”

“I don’t.”

“There we go. Now we’re getting somewhere. Why did you believe me when I told you she’d died?” The question is rhetorical but Kevin doesn’t have an answer anyways. “By the same principle then, shouldn’t you believe that I’m telling the truth now, too? Really, I have far more to gain here than I did before.”

“Why would you keep her alive?”

“Leverage, of course.”

“Then why – ”

“Bloody hell,” he mutters, “I lied to you before because it suited my needs! You were no good to anyone if you were too distraught to function. Now it suits me to tell you the truth.” His fervent hand gestures make the chains click almost continuously.

Kevin feels a panic set in. His recently deconstructed reality is beginning to spontaneously reassemble itself.

“Just because you say she’s alive doesn’t mean she’s safe. You could be torturing her.”

“And what a waste of effort that would be. She told us where you were, or rather, her phone did. That was all we were looking for.” He leans back heavily and the chains clack as his arms fall slack, “Besides,” a sarcastic smile is plastered on his face, “she’s of no consequence if she doesn’t know anything.”

Kevin can’t make sense of what that last remark means.

Crowley sighs and rolls his eyes, “As we speak, mummy is flourishing like an oriental orchid in my own personal brand of greenhouse.”

The boy stares calculatingly but his expression is hurt and wary. “Why would you tell me this?”

“All the better to tempt you with.” He gives a wolfish grin. Kevin does not want to be Red Riding Hood in this scenario. “How else can I get anything at all? A favor from a prophet is nothing to snub one’s nose at. Especially not when I’m in solitary on lockdown.”

“You just want me to free you. That is not-“

“Although-“

“-going to happen,” Kevin continues, speaking over him.

Crowley clears his throat, obviously peeved, “Although fair in asking price, such an exchange is never going to happen. You hate me too much and the Winchesters would prevent it. I just want you on retainer when I ask for something you can give me.”

Kevin longs to break eye contact, to search the room for answers that aren’t there. “Why should I
trust you now?”

“Because, hope, as they say, springs eternal.”

Kevin swallows audibly. Crowley refuses to acknowledge the noise with the smile he’s bursting to deliver.

“You want mummy alive just as much as she wants to get back to you, which she does, by the way. Used to ask about you every time I visited.” Crowley can tell that Kevin still isn’t convinced. “No need to make up your mind today. The two of you are fine as you are for now.” He decides to put just a little pressure on the boy; “Though I can’t say how long that’s going to stand. Demons get restless without a leader, you know. And slaughter is much more interesting than keeping a human pet fed and watered.”

Kevin takes a step backwards at the subtle threat.

“Go on now. Go find whoever it is you were looking for, and think about the offer.”

Kevin backs away until he’s out of the cell and can close the bookcase-door. It feels like Crowley has too much control over this situation for Kevin to be comfortable turning his back.

As soon as the prophet crosses the threshold of the outer doorway, Crowley picks up the singing again.
He drags out the vowels and takes too long on pauses and consonants. The effect is eerie and only heightens Kevin’s unsettled feelings.

“The big ship sails on the alley, alley, oh; the alley, alley, oh; the alley, alley, oh; The big. Ship. Sails. On the alley, alley, ohhh; On the last day of Sep-tem-ber.”

His feet feel too heavy to carry him away fast enough to avoid hearing these last verses.

“Alley, alley, oh, alley, alley, oh, the big ship sails away…”

Kevin shivers as the lyrics drift off and leave an emptiness in the air.

It’s the pinesol that hits her first.
Then motor oil, and that “unused” smell of old but spacious places.

The bright white of the hanging lights gleams off of hoods and doors and chrome detailing. She scans the room for one in particular out of habit. And out of habit, her eyes are drawn almost instantly to the impala.

A hand snakes out from beneath it and pats around on the floor, likely seeking the wrench two inches outside of the search radius.
Dean was only intending to clean all the crap off of Baby’s undercarriage when he initially came out here. Then he started wishing he could go out to a bar – just for a bit of variety. And so to keep himself preoccupied here, at home, he began a full tune-up. He wants to stay nearby. There’s this paranoid itch at the back of his brain that if he leaves he’ll miss Mary’s return. He’s also picked up the notion that if he stays within walking distance of the study materials it will spark an idea, make him think of or realize something he hadn’t before. Or at least that he’ll get inspired to go back to the library and pick up where he left off.

Her steps are quieter than she expects them to be as she approaches the vehicle. She bends to pick up the tool and give it to the figure under the car. Upon having the wrench presented to him, the figure starts.

Dean, as the figure would appear to be, wheels out from under the impala on a mechanic’s creeper. “Mom!” he says in warranted surprise.

She’s smiling down at him like a summer day. Dean wonders if it will ever not make him feel like a child. He hopes it always does.

“Mind if I join you?” she jerks her head in the direction of a stool in the corner.

“Huh, didn’t even know that was in here. Be my guest.” He points under the car, “’M just gonna-“ She waves him off and he wheels backwards.

“Makes me think of when I’d keep your father company while he was working on her,” she calls over her shoulder. Under the car, Dean smiles.

Mary fetches the stool, giving it a once-over as she carts it closer to where Dean’s working. It’s beautifully carved but scratches and the serrated bites of a saw run up and down the legs. “It looks handmade. Think there’s a workshop it came from, around here?”

“If it did, I have yet to find it. Not that I’ve done much looking around.” Dean tends to keep to the central spaces and the archives but he is curious about the hallways they have yet to venture into.

“Kevin might know. I’ve seen him and Charlie exploring together.”

“Charlie might know too, you know,” a voice calls from the garage doorway. Mary looks over to see the ginger in question approaching.

“Well the next thing I was going to suggest getting someone to map everything out, which didn’t strike me as an activity you’d be very interested in. At least not as much as Kevin.”

Charlie pulls a cartoonish ‘thinking face’ and shrugs, “Maybe not by myself but I’m all for going with a buddy to investigate the secrets this place has locked up.”

“Fair enough,” Mary smiles. “What brings you out here?”

“Cas wanted to know if Dean knew where you put what you pulled from the archives. But I’m
willing to bet that you could show him more easily than Dean could guess.”

Mary sighs and stands, “Alright.” She pats Dean’s knee as she walks past, “I’ll see you later, baby.”

Dean rolls out to watch her walk away. The endearment slips so easily off her tongue and settles pleasantly inside of him.

Charlie takes Mary’s stool and Dean goes back to work.

“Do you think Dante was a prophet?”


“Yeah.”

Dean wonders how their research led them to that guy. Hey if it’s a new lead, it’s a new lead. “Um, I dunno. Why?”

“Well I mean, it sounds like he was mostly off base with the location descriptions, and the entire thing is essentially just an author-insert fanfiction. But he was so on the nose with the base plotline of your adventure.”

He rolls out to give her a scathing glare. “My ‘adventure’?”

“Yeah, your adventure. Your trip to Purgatory.”

“What.” The question is more accusation than anything.

“Man seeks lost soul, gains help from inhabitant of the afterlife, man finds lost soul, man returns to earth without lost soul.”

Dean swallows hard.

“You faced trials – I’m counting monster fighting as trials – and dude, you even got to use a mystical portal.”

Dean clenches his fist but Charlie doesn’t see.

“Why’re you so fixated on this?” he grumbles, scooting back under the car.

Charlie lets him stew for a minute. “I think Cas still feels guilty.”

Dean doesn’t say anything but it sounds like he slows down on whatever he’s working on.

“Like about leaving you in Purgatory. Both times … He definitely does about what happened in Lucifer’s crypt.”

The clinking sounds of tools against car parts stop for too long but resume suddenly, “Well he shouldn’t.” He sounds angry, even to his own ears.

“Are you gonna tell him that?”

Dean doesn’t say anything. The metallic clacking sounds unnecessary and grating. If her latest conversation with the angel and Cas’s vague remarks in their car ride together hadn’t
been enough to convince her that this conversation needs to be had, Dean’s response is.

“Are you even working down there? Or are you just hiding?”

“Yes, I’m working!” he cries indignantly.
He did not come out here to be pestered about this shit.

“Dean, you talked with me about this the other day and I wasn’t even down there!”

“This is different,” Dean insists rather convincingly.

‘This is different,’ Charlie silently mimics.

“Now can you stop bothering me?”

“You’ll need to talk with him about it at some point.”

“Who made you –? Who decided you got a say in this?”

“You were going to say ‘queen’, weren’t you?” Charlie asks with a smirk.

“Drop it, Char.”

She sighs and the stool squeals along the floor as she stands up. “Should I set the table for dinner anytime soon?”

“Give me an hour and I’ll be in to cook it.”
The relaxation in his voice is what stands out to Charlie.

The door clacks shut behind her and in a wake of momentary silence, a slipstream of thought forms.

If there was one thing Dean had realized during Purgatory it was that the afterlife was shit no matter where you ended up. And if you wanted to get anything out of your existence you had to make the most of what you had and take the hurt with the happiness. Even if it put you at risk for loss. Because that loss was going to come in one form or another. And if you didn’t have the good stuff to counter balance it; that was only going to make it that much worse.
So Dean had let himself start having things, in the year since he got out. They were baby steps – there was, after all, a limit as to how far he was willing to go with what he allowed himself.

Gestures of affection, physical contact, expressions of emotional attachment, self-honesty, things to hope for.
Sure, he’d had to compartmentalize and restructure some walls so he still felt safe and sane in his own skin, but it was progress nonetheless. And Dean thinks he might’ve been happier. If … if the past year hadn’t gone the way it had. As it was; with Cas and Sam on their ledges and Dean practically helpless in both cases, he was pretty much par for the course.

Dean thinks it’s too soon to look for possibility on the horizon. But the winds have changed, and they’re all going to have to go with it until they can find a foothold for control.
moi·e·ty
/'moiətē/
noun - formal technical
each of two parts into which a thing is or can be divided.
a part or portion, especially a lesser share

A Steady Rain by Keith Huff

The Big Ship Sails – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0NWezNIraI
The Drunken Sailor – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGyPuey-1Jw
A completely unnecessary sneeze;

And then –

He feels his body light up with grace from a point in his core. He comes to with a shocked, deep breath. The dust motes floating in front of his face dart away at his sharp exhale.

This won’t do.

He rolls his shoulders and stretches his neck – more out of dramatic ritual than anything. He closes his eyes, sniffs a breath, extends his grace.

It’s a rush – angelic senses tingling as they expand and explore. Retrieving for him information and answers after going unused for so long.

Where is he?

Still the bunker. Good.

What time is it?

Very early morning.

Who else is here?

Six bodies in the vicinity. Nope, seven: six human, one demonic.

He’s having difficulty reading their souls. Identities are assigned based on body size and memories of who he met when he arrived.

Wait – there’s an eighth body; demonic but … separated? Odd. Together it would be stronger than-?

… As strong as Crowley? He can’t tell.

Well that’s not unnerving.

… Why can’t he sense the boundaries?

Why won’t his grace extend any further than partially into the forest?

He feels walled in by the bunker which isn’t a good sign either.

He tests himself. He’s definitely underground. Rooms are hard to identify – which they shouldn’t be – but he finds the garage and the rooms he’s seen so far. The impala’s cold; they’ve been home for a while. All the bodies within the house are sleeping.

And, he’s proud to note, there are thirty spoons in the kitchen.
About to be twenty nine, he thinks. Gabriel is hungry for ice cream.

He walks to the kitchen, still uncertain about using his grace.

They’ve got mint chocolate chip, rocky road, and coffee. He pulls out the rocky road and makes a mental note to buy them moose tracks at some point.

Sam would find it funny, he’s sure. He’d act annoyed but there would be amusement below the surface; it would lay openly in hazel eyes in spite of whatever glorious expression of disgust the hunter pulled.

Gabriel swallows a bubble of doubt with a large spoonful of ice cream.

The cold isn’t distracting enough to divert his mind from the rapidly forming train of thought.

Sam is smart; of this Gabriel is well aware. He knows Sam hadn’t ever taken what Gabe showed of himself at face value. Gabe was okay with that though. Sam hadn’t demanded explanations, or anything really, of Gabe, and the kid kept a damper on any suspicions he had. Gabe appreciated the façade of belief that Sam upheld. Sam had let him pretend.

Gabe had known Sam was naturally a one-act lover after only a few times with him. But Sam knew a one night stand when he had one and Gabe had been explicit with the openness of their relationship.

The angel was in fact shocked to find himself jealous of the demon – Ruby? Yeah, Ruby – when Sam got together with her after losing Dean. That she was the one Sam turned to for comfort. To be fair, he’d kept away during the last few weeks before Dean’s death. Not to mention the stressful association between Dean’s death and the Trickster; something he and Sam had managed to skirt around while Dean lived, so as to continue their trysts. Once Ruby was in the picture, Gabe didn’t want to make Sam have to choose (which worked for all of a handful of months before the archangel caved). Nor did he want to get so deeply involved that he’d have to face inevitably telling Sam “no” when the kid asked for Gabe’s help with finding Lilith or bringing Dean back.

But that whole shitstorm was something Gabe had already sworn to keep his hands off of.

Mystery Spot was as far as he could bring himself to be involved. He told himself that it was just doing his part as the Messenger one more time. It was how Gabe thought he could help Sam.

He knows what it is to lose a brother.

Which, Gabe thinks, is another huge part of ways he’s fucked up in terms of his relationship with Sam.

He hadn't realized Sam was The Vessel. Lucifer' Vessel.
He'd found out just before Mystery Spot, when he'd gotten the message that Dean was the Righteous Man. And recognized what many - most - angels had not.

One morning, the way it always seemed to happen, a cosmic button had just been pressed and he’d known.

As the Messenger he announces everything. Or, he’s supposed to. They didn’t need him to tell what Heaven was dead set on doing one way or another. Be that as it may, it’s his job to know this stuff.

And he had known that Dean had to go to hell.

There were Things that had to go in place. Armageddon was approaching and it could not wait. This was what Gabriel had been anticipating for millennia - confrontation, resolution.

But not like this. It was never supposed to be like this; involved, invested, more conflicted than it already was. His dad had such an awful sense of humor.

So Mystery Spot it was.
Better to be frigid and toying than to fall in love with his brother’s doomed vessel.

Except he already had.

Gabe sighs and sucks another bite of ice cream down.

This is going to take some effort and kid gloves.

Castiel has long since given up trying to define his relationship with the elder Winchester.

How he feels though, has been an evolution similar to watching the sun rise. It’s been golden and breathtaking and instilled within him a glowing warmth; Enlightening and piercing in more ways than one; striking in color – variety; And overwhelming. So overwhelming. It’s been gradual and if he didn’t have hindsight he might not have been able to confirm its progress at all.

It is, as he once said, profound. That’s the best he can define it.

He was infected with emotions at the start of the apocalypse when his interactions with humanity became firsthand and invested rather than observational. So they are not foreign to him. Only slightly more visceral without the filter of his grace.

It was the dimness of an ever-brightening star at nightfall with which Castiel learned to love of his own volition. No longer was he limited to the unconditional love between the angels and God, nor the automatic and programmed love for God’s creations. (Though Castiel could now, with perspective see that the second sentiment it was more accurately denoted as “regard”). For his infinitude, Castiel’s existence was narrowed by the perspective that these loves – these bounds – allowed.
And then there was Dean.

Dean, who bore into Castiel’s consciousness and dragged in with him all a manner of debris: Awe at the pillar of light in the recesses of hell. Castiel knew awe, had experienced it before. How could he not? He’d lived in heaven for the entirety of his existence. Intrigue at the diversity of the man’s thoughts, especially in his reaction to Castiel’s grand entrance at the barn. Empathy that lured the angel further into investment in the hunter. Consternation at his reckless, self-sacrificing habits. At how little he valued himself. Agitation at Castiel’s own fractured, tectonic loyalties. Unbridled anger, true wrath, that made him want to hurt Dean. Horror at heaven and so many of his own actions (and the subsequent fear that he’d be helpless to control either next time). Exhilaration at exerting true freedom. Because Cas rebelled for him. True helplessness. In moments where Dean asked something of him but he had no answers; when he just could not comply. Unmasked nakedness whenever Dean would unwittingly strip away the metaphorical layers. He felt truly bare in those moments that the hunter saw his mental state and intentions. In them, he was never certain whether or not Dean was wearing one of his masks either. He wonders if Dean knew what he was doing. Confliction whenever he’d been compelled to withhold something from the hunter. Heartbreak when he read Dean once the hunter found him in Purgatory. Peace when they were together – at the greatest, existing as a base note, a heartbeat thrumming through his grace; when at its most unnoticeable, minute as the smallest sense of emotion can be. A peace that transitioned from what he had once known in heaven. Belonging every time Dean and eventually Sam, prayed to him or called him family.

He was a veritable pithos, and Dean was his Pandora; unlatching the heaven-made lid on the angel and lifting the cover to free what was not supposed to belong to Castiel’s race, then standing back to ride out the waves as emotions flooded out.

Whether the humans around him knew it or not, he was affected. The stoic exterior they saw was apparently a point of annoyance. By empty threats and drinking games they goaded him, milking for a reaction of some sort that would humanize him. Dean especially: “just eat it man”, “Drink.”, “you should hit that”. He was voracious but Castiel maintained status as a fortress even as the human he saved pushed and pulled and gnawed hungrily at him. Emotional transparency was not a natural inclination for him. (He was disinterested in making it one of his strong points.) Emotions were not one of the gifts endowed to the inhabitants of the celestial sphere. They were not something he was meant to possess.

How long, then, must it have been since Castiel was truly an angel? Had he been contaminated by Hell? by Earth? By Purgatory? Or merely in one of those places? By Humanity? Or by certain humans? By a single human.

Years have worn away a portion of that original, distant air in tandem with the growth of his emotional connections.
The feelings are overwhelming, all consuming, omnipresent. They soak him up like a sponge and leave him saturated with pathos but parched for more. It’s a constant ringing. Or perhaps more of a constant wringing. But either way it drones on …

Well into their relationship, Castiel had noted an underlying flavor that stained each emotion. The angel had let it be and lo and behold it had grown of its own accord into its very own brand of love.

How lacking, how empty the phrase was. Cas struggled to give it more meaning:
"Love"
What was more than that?
There had to be something, didn’t there?

His efforts to contemplate that are fumbling and feel simply worded:

*Powerful; miracle?*

*Med-or-graph-veh-van-or-un --- elevated;* Enchantingly unchained; *Drux-un-ceph-un-dongis-gna --- pillars of gladness.*

Euphoria; Castiel’s personal ichor; paralysis; a feather-light-nudge?

A *roar --- Med-un-drux-gon-med*

Immeasurable by depth or breadth or imagination.
Polarization; uncontained save for self-reservation; …

Mighty? Or *Tal-gon-veh-un-ur-ceph-med --- mighty?*

To his own frustration, the angel ends up reducing it to “inexplicable” and “profound” for the umpteenth time.

He finds himself unable to translate something so spiritual and internal, something Cas is familiar with reading as color-oriented, into a form as base as spoken language.

It had just been something that Was.

The magnitude of what he and Dean share is insurmountable.

It had terrified and appalled and daunted Castiel to realize that the weight of his relationship and the emotions it entailed had paralleled that of his Father.

And the weight is heavy.

Their wrongs against one another are colossal.

Castiel could not bring their relationship to scale with it. Quite possibly because the wrongs are all part of their relationship.

Castiel names the constellations of different cultures as he stands here contemplating.
Loving Dean Winchester is a study in apology.
Or is it Apollogy?
*How like the sun is my love …*

Dean is arguably Cas’s everything.
There are other effects, for both of them, but these are what count right now: Castiel has his love for Dean and his compassion for his father’s creations, and Dean’s got his devout commitment to his family.
Cas is more than pleased to be included in that family.

The first bird of the morning calls out.
Cas regrets not being able to benefit nature and his Father’s lower order creatures now without his grace. He wishes he’d done more to stop deforestation, or decrease animal testing, or stop colony death for bees, or help preserve endangered animals.
It had never been his place to do much. He doesn’t know if he could do all of it alone or what damage his interference might have caused before. If there’s one thing he learned from his father’s provision for evolution, it’s that everything has a course and that course must be run one way or another.
If fish decide to grow legs? Let ‘em.
Conifers want to mutate until there are over 600 species? So be it.
An angel rebels against all he knows for two boys?
For the love of one man … ?

Well …

It’s not like they’re romantically attached soulmates.
They’ve beaten the odds; Heaven be damned.
If Sam weren’t already Dean’s soulmates (which, granted, seems more cosmically than Heavenly dictated), Cas is fairly sure that particular honor would’ve gone to Michael just because of Heaven’s need to designate a more meaningful purpose to everything.

But that’s just it. It would be heaven’s decision. Not God’s, not theirs; just something made up for a Greater Purpose. And that’s never been the path that Dean and Castiel have walked.

Moments of lightning – *a dark barn full of sparks* – and fire – *rings of oil ‘round archangels* – and titles – *Righteous Man, Angel of the Lord*; are now moments long gone.

Another star winks out.

Cas sees the transgressions he bears against Dean. But he can’t entirely foist liability on that for their lack of confrontation. The situations that now supply the blame are more at fault for the things that haven’t happened – could have but didn’t.
Slowly they are drawing towards each other at infinitesimal increments. Are and have been. Like planets preparing to collide; always preparing but missing by fractions.

And like a planet, or perhaps more accurately a whole galaxy, Castiel burns bright and distantly for this man.

Sometimes he wonders if he missed all the points where he should have said something to Dean. If no more will come and if this is the furthest plateau their relationship will extend to. Cas, of course, has more sense than that and knows that many more opportunities will come and he will ignore them still.

It is not what Dean wants.

And what Dean wants – what he needs – comes first when Cas can let it.

If he’s truly honest, … it is not what Castiel wants either. Not … now at least.

Because if they ever are forced to eventually have that conversation, a lot of bad memories are going to surface. And the resulting confrontation will be messy to say the least.

Cas likes being Dean’s friend. Dean’s at a point of healing right now. Cas can let him have that while he hopes for his own – for one they can share. Cas wants to keep Dean happy and he wants to be happy with Dean, and most importantly, be allowed to live with this family he’s found in the bunker.

Platonic, he thinks, /pləˈtænɪk/ ; adjective; (of love or friendship) intimate and affectionate but not sexual. exempla gratia: "their relationship is purely platonic".

It isn’t as though Castiel needs sex. He’s never really felt it was necessary. Though, he doesn’t think he’d mind trying it with Dean.

… If they were more than platonic.

But.

Platonic.

This is how things are, and this is how they will remain, and Castiel finds himself satisfied.

But no, satisfied implies that he’d be complacent in never having more with Dean. And that isn’t the case.

( Dean makes him crave )

It is more so that he bides his time.

For all his calm airs, Cas is a training blade slicing through air; dangerous, not attempting any real damage, waiting for the most fruitful moment to strike.

Patient, as usual.

Here at least, in this aspect, if nowhere else.
Cas doesn’t want to impose. Especially when he is now so wholly dependent upon this family. A lot of the time Cas feels a little bit used. Irreverent prayers and ill-gratitude without regards to the value of his time have nicked away at him over the years. He wonders if Dean will again promise him amnesty and forgiveness, insisting that friendship still stands as a valid reason for inessentiality. He’d like to believe it still does. It feels like it might.

But all comes back to giving Dean what he wants, and Cas himself not feeling like he is ready for anything.

Cas enjoys how much time they are spending together now. The last time he remembers feeling this close to Dean for such an extended period of time was … in hell? That can’t possibly be correct. But as Cas mulls it over, it rather makes sense.

The moments it took for hell to eject them had stretched on for Cas - as endless as the descent into its depths. But in it the angel had begun to know Dean. And Cas had grown enamoured with the idea of him. He’d contemplated what sort of person could bear such an attractive soul - a soul he would later see so easily through windows of bright green eyes.

He didn't fall in love before he knew Dean. But it sure felt like that was when the descent began.

It wasn’t as though his burst of extra grace were an ethereal umbilical cord that linked them. It wasn’t a magical knot that obligated Dean to seek out Castiel’s presence and company, nor vice versa for Castiel’s proclivity towards Dean.

When Castiel had used that extra power it had been an exposition. The barriers that contained Castiel within himself as an individual had broken in the spot where he was enveloping Dean’s soul. That part had been intentional – without the barrier, Castiel’s grace had a more direct influence over Dean.

But.

It had been an exposition in that, Castiel’s self had been revealed to Dean. Revealed in the way that humans are when their souls are on display and their minds are readable, but more so. There was no hiding when Castiel let that barrier leak. It wasn’t a sharing of whatever surface ideas floated across his mind. It a broadcast of all his innermost sentiments, every aspect of what it meant to be him, Castiel. Dean could see him for all that he was - (Castiel wonders if that included his brokenness: the few and minute lines of fragility in his stalwart faith, the weak points through which he could be shown a new ideal, the cracks that would lead to his rebellion.)

Castiel’s internal self was surfaced in a way that had never been brought to light outside of his own consciousness.

Dean’s soul had known what it meant to be Castiel.

And Castiel knew most of what it meant to be Dean Winchester.

It had come close to that the other times he’d done this. But this time, it was as if Dean’s soul had sought him out; had asked to know who he was. And Castiel more than complied.

He had found a way to hold himself back. He wasn’t familiar with most human-recognized boundaries – not when, in heaven, grace mingled and flowed like water particles – but he knew
he’d be crossing an unacceptable line by invading Dean in the same manner he’d allowed Dean to see himself.

Similarly, he’d cloaked the most visceral parts of his interaction with Dean from the hunter’s own perspective.

Otherwise, it felt like cheating.

Like he knew a secret he shouldn’t.

It balanced out anyways. Apparently, Castiel had gotten the intensity and some details of the interaction wiped from his own mind as well. If not by Naomi, then by someone who very much had authority over him. He’d only regained them upon breaking out of Naomi’s control over him.

Cas had suspected that there was something … something more, or something missing. But with the memories enhanced he was at a loss.

Or, so he’d told himself.

Their interaction – it shouldn’t have been anything special. It certainly wasn’t obligated to be. Over the aeons, Castiel had revealed himself in this manner a handful of times before.

But the interaction felt welcome, and simultaneously, it had felt welcoming. To Castiel, back then, it had held the potential for more.

They had Seen each other. Well and truly experienced who the other was. It had been more potent than Castiel’s previous experiences with such dealings.

Castiel has decided that the only way he can comprehend its uniqueness was that he and Dean liked each other. Soul and grace had fit together easily when, after the reveal, a moment of analysis followed by acceptance had passed between them.

When they met physically, Dean’s soul recognized Castiel’s grace. Their beings called out to each other on the cosmic plane and Castiel had determinedly settled himself. Dean was consciously awed but nothing deeper than that. And so Castiel approached him directly, and did his job.

And now they are here.

And Castiel is staying indefinitely.

For once he stays.

As a human Cas isn't trapped between worlds and callings. He’s been given parameters to operate under and it has made demands of him. But they are absolutist demands, and he is the one who decides what the right answer is. It’s freeing, in a way. It gives him a new sense of duty. It's a duty of circumstance, but it's Castiel’s choice whether or not he takes up the mantle of Hunter. Or maybe even Man of Letters. Or whatever he wants, really. But Cas doesn’t think he can envision himself without the Winchesters in his life.

Cas always left for Dean and Sam. Cas imagines that he can see, now, how it must have appeared to the brothers that he was leaving and forgetting about them. Deserting them. Especially when he’d been gone for extended periods of time. To Castiel, Sam and Dean were just elsewhere as he did what he had to in order to take care of them. Never once were they out of his mind when he was away.
Tethered.
He’s tethered to the two boys beyond all recall.
Castiel wonders if he should be disgusted by it.
He knows that no part of him can be.

Castiel wiggles his fingers and toes to maintain bloodflow.

All puzzle pieces considered (albeit with the box’s example image tossed aside and ignored), some
of the parts still fit together in the same way:
Cas views everything with the maximum amount of significance, never one to undervalue. It
weighs on him.
Dean carries stains of self-loathing, echoes of the boy who thought in no way did he deserve to be
saved.

Yet Cas’s purity hadn’t been able to lift the stains even when he was an angel.
That part of Cas which read Dean so easily still exists – still strives to save the man from himself
and show him how worthy he is.
Did he dare hope there were still things he could do to relieve the thoughts from Dean’s shoulders
now?

Yes.
Yes – because Cas remains the one thing who was never obligated nor pre-disposed, nor ever even
remotely supposed to love Dean.
But he does.
And he has. And he knows that some part of him always will, until his dying breath and beyond,
love Dean.

When neither of them can bring themselves to act, and nothing but deeper friendship comes of their
relationship, Cas will live with it. And he will still love Dean.

They are what each other needs and it’s enough.

Castiel waits for the mornings where the dew will become frost upon the grass. It happened on a
particularly frigid night as he trudged onward towards the bunker. He’d found solace in the
satisfying crunch of grassblades as opposed to the usual swish-swish of wet, sparse brush. He
doesn’t mind it now, as he stands in the pre-dawn forest. But back then it had been a comforting
change.
The smell of the dew is lovely. The loam’s earthy fragrance reaches up to him in the dampness and
he welcomes it. It’s grounding. He’d almost begun to float away on memories of flying incited
from the fresh, moisture of the morning air and wet grass.

He had meant to walk, but here he stands, reveling in sensation and watching the stars flicker in the
early light.

When the door creaks behind him, the sky has brightened considerably since he’d first stepped out.
The first blue-white tendrils are eking through spots in the clouds blooming on the horizon, and they reflect off of the blonde streak that enters the corner of his sight.

“Do you often find yourself coming out here this early?”

Castiel shakes his head.

“What makes today special?”

“I had hoped to take a walk. The bunker has felt … confining these past few days.”

By the dew accumulated on his coat and the pale blue tint to his extremities from the chill, Mary can tell he’s just been fixated and not walking for some time.

He turns to her, “Would you like to join me?”

The blue-white shoots of light are gradually cut off as blossoming clouds block the developing warm colors of sunrise. Dim grey pastes itself to the sky and Castiel is glad to have escaped the bunker before the rain prohibited it, as it likely will later in the afternoon.

“I love Autumn. Especially in forests. Especially in Kansas.”

Cas smiles softly, head tilted towards the forest floor as they walk the overgrown path. He looks up at the mostly obscured sky, “The leafy woods are rich in brown and russet, / With golden glints that shimmer here and there, / And deep and fragrant odors from each farm place / Are lending added sweetness to the air.”

He glances at Mary who’s watching him, “That’s beautiful.”

“‘Autumn’ by Katherine Edelman, contemporary Kansas poet.”

“Is there more?”

He turns back to the path ahead of them, “The flaming sumac nods from every hedgerow, / A purple mist unites the land and sky, / The hills are robed in radiant hues of splendor, / And golden leaves in luscious grasses lie …”

He quotes the whole poem to her from memory.

A small, content sigh escapes Mary when he finishes. Likely she is reminiscing on her own life, perhaps childhood remembrances of places that fit the described images.

The silence of companionship is refreshing and not something he’s had any decent opportunities to experience. It contrasts sharply with memories of trudging along highways and byways with the roar of passing cars on one side and the hissing of small animals on the other.

Cas shivers.

When he’d reached out to use his power to quell the creatures, there had been nothing. That was when he’d really felt the loss. His mind floundered to grasp at grace that wasn’t there. He’d searched for any remnants of the cosmic plane within himself, knowing it was futile even as he did
Self-blame eclipsed all thoughts as he realized that the other angels were going through this as well. True, they had their grace and angel blades, and a few of them had vessels. But they had no forewarning, no backstory, no reasoning, or clue as to why they’d been ripped from their home and deprived of their wings, left to fend for themselves.

Watching them fall, he hadn’t even had the presence of mind to cry. He’d stood silently, mouth agape as droplets of fire pierced the sky. His eyes flicked back and forth and even without any way of knowing he wanted to name each of them. Cas stayed in that field until the last speck plummeted out of the atmosphere.

In the comparative absence, the stars seemed far, far dimmer and a panic flooded Castiel’s mind. He was alone and he didn’t know what to do and his senses were all narrowed and he couldn’t fly – he couldn’t fly or hear prayers and he was alone and – human. He touched his throat. God, he was human.

The panic had died in a cold shower of fear.

He needed to move.

A numbness settled over him as he walked. He had to orient himself, find a road-sign, or a gas station. Find Dean.

The idea of sleeping had been terrifying given that he had no shelter and was guarded only by starlight. His angel blade didn’t do him any good if he was passed out, unable to use it. So that first night, he’d walked until morning, a delirium and Angel Radio chasing him when the signal was strong enough.

It had gotten intolerably loud and disturbing when he’d finally broken past the edge of the woods and stumbled onto a paved road. He’d nearly been run over and was forced to dive out of the truck’s way. Thusly, he incurred his inaugural human injury: two bloodied hands, scraped by rocks and covered in limestone dust.

The driver had made him miss Bobby. He’d gotten out of the vehicle and after a brief conversation, offered to take him into town. Thankfully, this man (like the majority of modern Americans) had a cell phone which he’d let Cas use to call Dean. He’d gotten strange looks from the driver during the conversation but rest of the drive had been pleasant enough. He’d let Cas out when they’d stopped at a gas station on the outskirts of town.

Per Dean’s instructions he asked the gas station attendant where the nearest bus station was and then Cas had stolen a map and pickpocketed another customer for bus fare. From there it had been surrounding himself with drifters and truckers until trooping to the bunker …

Cas refocuses his attention. This, with Mary, is pleasant.

He looks up at the sky. At the trees stretching high, above and around him. At the horizon that limits how far he can see.

“I had no idea anything could seem so big in comparison to myself.” Mary watches him speak. “In my mind I’m still larger than stars. Near infinite.”
Mary doesn’t feign to understand. But she listens, and that seems to be what matters most.

Circling back to the house is surprising to Cas. He wants to do at least another lap; prolong this simple time together. But he heard Mary’s stomach growl a while back and his own is bound to start any time now. They both gravitate towards the entrance and Cas holds the door for her as they step inside and head to the kitchen.

When Cas hears muted sounds, he assumes breakfast is in the works. Yet upon entering, he and Mary are met not with the sight of Dean at the stove or Sam fixing coffee. Rather, they are graced with the image of an archangel tilting precariously backwards in a rickety kitchen chair, finishing off a carton of ice cream.

At the sight of the newcomers, Gabriel swings his legs off the table and lets the chair fall with a slam so it sits flat on four legs, because holy shit, he’s not going to focus on balancing it right now.

“Vehunfam gon-gisg?”

“Med-gon-gisg Mary Winchester.” After he speaks, Cas looks startled at the impromptu conversation in his native tongue. “How long have you been up?”

“Ip solomian.”

Cas rolls his eyes, “We have a guest, Gabriel, who is in fact an actual person and not an audience in need of a performance. Stop showing off and just speak English.” He walks to the cabinet and pulls out two mugs but Mary hovers near the entryway.

Gabriel is unnerved that he hadn’t noticed they weren’t exactly inside the house when he did the body count.

“Y’know, sometimes I think you all forget that I’m an archangel.”

Cas almost retorts ‘Then act like it,’ but given the attitudes of the other archangels towards himself and Sam and Dean, he much prefers Gabriel’s typically childish behavior. Instead he ignores the remark and asks, “Is Dean up?”

“Yes he is,” Dean’s disembodied voice says from outside the doorway. Mary moves so she won’t be in his path and the movement prompts her to sit. But then Dean enters and catches sight of Gabriel. “He’s awake.”

“So it would seem,” Gabriel says.

Dean squints and the carton in his hands, “And he ate all the ice cream.”

Gabe oozes condescension and gives a patronizing little shake of his head, “Not all of it. You know good and well that there are two more containers in there. Jeez, such a drama queen.” He gives a final lick of his spoon and then tosses it backwards. Somehow the clatter of the perfectly aimed silver into the sink annoys Dean more than if it had fallen to the tile.

Cas ignores both of them and hands Mary one of the full mugs of coffee as he takes a seat beside her.
A yawned, “Morning,” breaks the air. Charlie rubs her eye with a fist as she stumbles in. She brushes her hair from her face looks at the other occupants. She double takes when she gets to Gabriel, “Oh! You’re awake!”

Gabriel smiles at Charlie then Dean patronizingly. “Yes, I think that’s been established with a fair degree of certainty now.”

Sam feels miserable.
He has a runny nose, his chest feels tight, his forehead and fingers, oddly enough, are throbbing, and his wrists are glowing again. It’s somewhere close to 7 in the morning, far too early for getting up. And while he wants to stay in bed until noon, he’s ninety percent certain that he isn’t having auditory hallucinations of Gabe’s voice down the hall. Sam has to get up to check on him.

He stumbles down the hall, coughing violently and manages to get about halfway before he has to stop and brace himself. His head is throbbing too much for him to see straight. Footsteps sound at the end of the corridor and he tugs at his long sleeves to ensure his glowing veins aren’t exposed.

The muttered, “Dammit,” he hears tells him it’s Dean. Sam’s breathing heavily and even to his own ears it sounds strained and sickly. He blinks but his eyes stay shut. A warm hand finds a place on his spine, “Whaddya need Sammy?”

He swallows and looks up at his big brother and wow, that’s an unusual angle. “Take me to the library. I just want to sit.”

Dean huffs but he reaches around Sam and situates them both to trundle towards the other room. Dean is patient and they take slow steps. As they pass the kitchen Sam happens to look up and catch Gabriel’s eye. Oh yeah, that’s why he came out here. He quickly ducks his head and lets his brother lead him up the steps and set him in a plush chair.

Based on both the blanket and glare Dean tosses at him, Sam must look like complete shit. But Dean has stopped arguing for constant bedroom confinement. Sam suspects Mary and Cas had words with him about it. As Dean leaves to get his coffee from the kitchen, Mary enters bearing two mugs, one which she gives to Sam. The first sip of his favorite tea is a distracting comfort, but only momentarily.

“Is Sam alright?” he hears Charlie ask, her voice softened by distance.

Dean keeps shuffling around the kitchen and says, “I’ll let you know when he tells me how he’s really doing.” Which of course prompts Charlie to get up and check on him. Kevin must be done eating because he follows her in and sits at the long table.

“Hey, Sam.” Charlie plops down across from him with a book.

“Don’t patronize him,” Dean grumbles as he ascends the library steps.

“Where’s Gabriel?” Sam demands from him. It totally isn’t out of annoyance.

“Where is Gabriel?” Dean looks around the room. Sam considers that his curiosity might’ve been questioned and he’s glad Dean didn’t ask –

“Wait, how’d you know he was up?”
“Um, I heard him, when I was in the hallway.”

Cas sighs in mild exasperation, “He’ll show up again eventually.”

Dean eyes Sam, but turns and sits next to Cas with a book from the “Mary research” pile.

After a half hour of staring at the same page, Sam looks up. “What if something’s keeping her in the veil?”

Dean and Charlie look at each other then turn their attention to Sam along with everyone else.

“What do you mean?” Dean asks.

“What if it isn’t something wrong with how she came back and it isn’t about who brought her back, but like, there’s something actively keeping her in the veil?”

“What could that be, though?” Kevin sounds genuinely curious.

Sam shrugs.

“Well,” Dean says, soundly shutting his book, “I don’t know about you guys but that sounds way better to me than what we’ve been looking at.”

“Your opinion wouldn’t have anything to do with a lingering boredom concerning the books you’ve selected?” Cas sasses, eyes trained on the text before him as he flips a page.

Dean kicks him under the table but it’s more of a nudge, in Cas’s opinion. “You all can keep going with what we’ve been looking at. *I’m* just going to put out feelers on a new lead. It’s how a good investigation is done.” He scoots his chair back and stands up, “Want me to find you a book, Sammy?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you get me one too, Dean?” Mary asks.

“Sure,” Dean says, the accompanying nod delayed at being startled by the request. He disappears into the stacks and they all go back to their research.

Hours later, Sam is left alone in the library with Kevin who happens to be sitting completely across the room. Charlie and Dean had gone out to get something for an early dinner when they realized they’d all skipped lunch. Cas and Mary went down to the archives a little after them to follow up on a note Cas had found in the text he was reading.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Kevin petulantly slams his book shut. He stands and walks out, quietly muttering about going to his room to translate the tablet.

Alone at last. So much for being out here to socialize.

That is, he thinks, unless the creak he just heard from the back of the room behind the shelves is someone else who’s here.
“Cas?” he calls. The fallen angel remained stealthy as a human and it was likely enough he’d come
back upstairs for something and Sam simply hadn’t noticed.

“Wrong celestial being,” he hears faintly.

“Gabe?” Sam asks in confusion. Apparently he had, on some level, seriously doubted that Gabriel
was going to stick around.

“Indubitably.” It’s called back to him as faint as before.

“… Are you going to come out?” Sam asks after there aren’t any more sounds.

“Did you know that there’s a stairwell behind one of the shelves back here?”

“Gabe, come out.”

“A secret passageway, Sam!” he saunters into view from between the rows of shelves, “Who the
fuck even makes those?”

“It’s a secret society’s headquarters. I think if anyone’s entitled to have a thing like that, they are.”
Gabe shrugs one shoulder in assent. He bounces up and down on the balls of his feet, rocking back
and forth. Sam shifts in his seat, “Sit down, you’re making me nervous.” Gabe seems to hesitate
but acquiesces.

“Where have you been all day? Just exploring the bunker unsupervised?”

“That, and I didn’t want to invade literally the only place you can be.” He stretches and seems to
stifle a yawn, “Kinda hard to avoid doing that if I’d stuck around and gotten roped into your
investigation.”

“Thanks.”

Gabe’s watching him. Sam considers that the standing may have been better than putting the
archangel in position for direct eye contact.

He takes a breath to say something but it catches in the back of his throat and throws him into a full
body series of coughs. With eyes squinted in pain he reaches one arm for the side table where
tissues and a glass of water sit. Warm fingers put a tissue into his hand and then press themselves to
his forehead. His next breath stretches into a gasp as it makes its way easily into his lungs.

“I healed what I could but you’re going to get sick again.”

He looks up at Gabe, “So now I’ve got a bandaid?”

“Not at all. I wouldn’t even call it a tourniquet. It’s like I’ve washed off a gaping wound with a
little rainwater. It won’t be as bad for a while but it’s all going to come back and it’ll keep coming
back until you get cured.”

Another coughing fit hits. It’s much less painful this time but it prevents him from responding to
Gabe’s diagnosis. When it’s over Sam sighs in frustration, crossing his arms and sinking further
into the seat. His hair gets brushed from his forehead.

“You’re breaking my heart, kiddeo.”

The touch is so familiar. Too familiar? Sam glances up and sees the sympathy in the archangel’s
eyes. Gabe withdraws his hand and moves back to sit down, curling up on himself. Sam watches
him for a moment.
“You’ve been gone for four years.” He says it to himself as much as to the archangel.

“What?”

“It’s been four years since you died – since you sacrificed yourself for us –“ a rockslide has been set in motion within the hunter, “And you come back, without explaining yourself or offering anything about why my mom’s alive, or talking at all, and what do you do? You want to fuck.” Sam still isn’t over the immediacy and unprecedence of the come-on.

“Is this a cosmic booty call? Are you gonna up and leave just as soon as you get healed and stop passing out? Because that’s really what it’s looking like.”

“No, Sam, that’s not-“

“We’ve never talked. Ever. Not about anything serious when my brother wasn’t around. Not about ‘us.’ It-it was complimenting a-and fucking. And that was great, really. But doing this with you, being in this relationship with you - whatever it may be - it’s an emotional rollercoaster.” Sam’s on a roll and his tongue just won’t stop now that it’s started.

“You know, I almost had a successful, committed relationship while you were gone, actually. It was stable. And I’ve been with girls and guys since then. And I realize that even if I only have one night stands from now until the day I die, I’m not willing to get back into whatever the hell I was doing with you before. I won’t be able to take it.”

No matter how much he wants Gabe to be part of his life.

“Sam –“

“Relationships can’t be one-sided Gabe. I know that I cared more about you romantically than you did about me.”

“No. Sam, no. I –“ There’s too much finality in his voice.

“I felt like shit when you pulled the Mystery Spot crap on me. I didn’t suspect it was you until the last possible second because I couldn’t even fathom that you would ever go so far as to do something like that to me.”

Confrontation and seriousness can drive him away.

“I didn’t want you to get hurt,” Gabriel practically whispers, in reference to Dean’s deal.

Sam barks a bitter laugh, “I’m not even going to pretend you don’t know how much that whole ordeal messed me up … It fucking broke me, Gabe.” His voice cracks appropriately on that last part.

Gabriel doesn’t dare say anything to fill the silence that statement leaves in its wake. Sam’s eyes flick left and right looking into Gabe’s, searching for something in the archangel’s features.

“But it wasn’t even Mystery Spot – it was TV Land that makes me think this is never going to work.” Sam sniffs. Crap, he’s probably getting a nosebleed.

“I thought whatever we had would have been enough for you to want to give us a hand. I believed it so much that I suggested to Dean that asking you about it would be a good idea,” he grimaces, “Granted, I had no clue who you actually were but instead of coming right out and telling me, you decided that screwing around with us was a fun plan. And you absolutely could have told me – you had time to prepare a trap. So don’t argue that you helped us eventually because at the time, you never meant to do so. At least at Mystery Spot you had some pretense of terrible, misguided, good intentions.”
This outburst isn’t opening up. It should be, but instead it’s the opposite. It’s Sam protecting himself from Gabe getting any closer. He wants more than what the archangel is going to offer and there isn’t enough left of Sam’s self to offer anything less. This isn’t how he wanted his last days to peter out; pining over a once lost paramour; a could-be savior, who gives him hope of life and love when he can’t have either.

“I hope to God I’m over all of that – everything I’ve just brought up … Because if I’m not now I don’t know that I ever will be. I’m going to believe that I’ve forgiven you for all of it now that that’s off of my chest.”

Gabe swallows. He wants to thank Sam for the forgiveness, but he’s afraid it will cheapen its offering. It hadn’t been something he’d sought before the moment it had been given.

“Good,” he barely manages to not stutter around the word, “It’d be kind of awkward to try and heal you if we weren’t on friendly terms.”

Sam takes the serious topic of his healing as a good sign. He shakes his head, like it’s an etch-a-sketch and he can erase the anger and any subsequent outbursts. “I don’t know,” he shrugs, a forced smile playing at his lips, “A tap to the forehead as you walk past, when no one’s looking …” The smile dies a sudden and tragic death of its own accord.

“No, Sam, I mean finding a cure for you.” Gabe leans forward a little and there’s eagerness in his eyes. “You know: fire, some herbs, a little Latin, all ‘second chance.’ The whole shebang.” Sam’s face pinches a little so Gabe goes for a joke, “Besides, I thought it could be like a couples therapy thing. Something to bring us closer together,” he grins for good measure.

“…Why?” Sam asks in what would seem to be genuine confusion.

“Um, you’re incredibly gorgeous, your tongue could win an Olympic medal, your ginormous hands don’t hurt,” with a stolen glance he can see he’s getting nowhere so he changes tactics, “and besides that your stunning intellect actually – “

“No, I mean why do you think it’ll work this time.” It doesn’t even come out like a question.

“Why wouldn’t it work? You know me, of course I’m going to try to get back with you.”

“Gabe you don’t have to lie about this. If you want someone to fuck, tell me.” The anger is regaining momentum with the frustration of having to explain himself again. “I don’t want to do that but I’m not going to put up with you lying to me about it. Just be honest.”

Gabe actually looks bewildered. Sam grits his teeth.

“Fine. Here, I’ll start: I know that I cared more,” I still care more, “And that doesn’t matter now because you need to stop acting the way you believe I want you to act. How many ways do I have to say it? I don’t need you to pretend you want a romantic relationship with me.”

Sam hates that he sniffs again. He wipes the drip of blood from his nose.

“Is that really what you think?” There’s a softness and genuine hurt to his expression.

“What else would you have me believe? You never gave me any real sign that we could be anything but a good fuck for each other. I won’t go into that again.”

“Like … at all?” Gabe flounders, “You don’t want a romantic relationship at all?”

“I think that would be a little much to ask, don’t you?” Sam asks, sarcasm evident in his voice.

“You could never ask too much of me.” The words pour out so naturally, they’re somehow
befitting of the puzzled expression he wears. Sam’s desperately tempted to believe them.

Gabe practically crawls across the coffee table to sit on its edge in front of Sam. “So I guess the real question is,” he tucks one leg up beside him, “why don’t you think this is going to work?”

The new perspective is almost intimidating.
“Did you not hear everything I said before? I’ve forgiven you but all of it adds up to why we couldn’t have anything.” I’m going to get hurt.

“Yeah, Sam. Those are reasons why we didn’t work. As in past tense. And I’d like the record to show that even though all of that was happening we managed to have something together anyways.” It’s Gabriel’s turn to search Sam’s face. “I’ve told you I’ve changed, and sure, that’s not a lot to put your money on, but we’re under completely different circumstances.” He huffs in amusement. “The apocalypse is over! The biggest problem of my entire life doesn't matter anymore!” his laugh is one of relief. The borderline manic look in his eyes when they make contact, brings Sam to the thought that, oh yeah, that kind of was the main problem that happened to taint every part of our relationship.

“You said you forgave me. I don’t really see anything else standing in our way. But you do. Now just tell me what it is so we can fix it.”

“Do you really think the circumstances were that important?” He lets it hang. Of course they were, “I’m at the end of my rope here, Gabe.” I care about you and it would be easier if I didn’t. “The point is, that instead of confronting anything, you tried to weasel your way out of it and get everything you wanted without actually doing anything you didn’t want to do yourself. And that isn’t going to work for me. I want effort-“

“I’ll give it to you.”

“- I want give when there’s take, I-“

“I can make that happen too.”

“…You’ll … you-“

“I want this, Sam. With you.”

Sam sits in silence, slightly stunned, waiting for more.

“You’ve got a great setup here. I’d love to be a part of it.” Gabe smiles a little but it disappears as he swallows and avoids Sam’s gaze.

“This isn’t anything new.” He glances up at Sam and the corner of his mouth twitches, “The look on your face tells me that you really didn’t know that. Fuck.” He kicks his legs out and intentionally scuffs them along the floor. The motion makes him scooch down in the seat a little and he ends up slouching and mostly reclined.

“Do you have any idea how hard it was to not give myself over to you?”

Oh, Sam thinks, the petulant, unserious body language is supposed to counterbalance the transparency.

“You kept getting to me. No matter what I did. Everything about you so-so-,” his hand flutters midair, “readily caught my focus. Do you know how distracting you are on the cosmic plane?”

Gabe shakes his head a little and averts his eyes. “It was like whatever I did didn’t even matter to try and control the situation. And it wasn’t as if I, the ultimate hedonist, was going to cut myself off from you.”
Sam’s hands are shaking again.
Gabriel keeps talking as if he doesn’t notice.

“You’re right, I probably never would have told you who I really was. But then … you all cornered me in holy oil and confronted me, … and I stood up to Lucifer, and now you’re telling me all of these thoughts you’re having, all these feelings, and you’re stacking the score … and I’m in a place where I’m seeing things differently. I- … I want to be different. To make things different. Especially between us.

“I was changing before I died. Maybe I can still change. Not the good stuff obviously, like my charm or my humor or the candy … but … I don’t want to be the asshole you resent and sorta hate.”

Sam can see the frustration build and watches it break:

“Ugh, what am I saying? I could promise you the moon and it wouldn’t mean anything until I tied a bow on and let you rename it,” Gabe laments. “How can I prove that I’m falling for you? What’s it going to take?” He throws his head back in exasperation, “I want to hold your goddamn hand for fuck’s sake! I want to watch you fix the world!”

Gabriel the faithless.
Gabriel the runaway.
Gabriel the cynic.
Wanted to see him fix the world.
Wanted to hold his fucking hand.

“That’s all it takes,” Sam whispers.

He leans forward and Gabriel’s eyes widen, flutter, close.
Sam feels quick, hot breath on his lips before they’re kissing. It’s a merging of memories; new ones acquainting–assimilating themselves with old. Sam reaches up to hold his jaw. Gabe searchingly fumbles and his hand lands tight on Sam’s wrist. Sam is balancing focus between the contact and catching his breath.
The kiss breaks.
Sam pulls away and turns his hand over to meet Gabriel’s palm. The archangel laces their fingers.

*Thud*

That’ll be his brother and Charlie back from the store. But Sam can’t look away. Not when Gabe’s about to decide between taking off and revealing himself. The archangel’s eyes flick frantically up towards the stairwell, but he quickly adjusts his face into a smile, “Bye, Sammy.” A squeeze of their linked hands and he’s gone.

“Sammy?”
“Yeah … Yeah, in here, Dean.”

Dean pauses at the foot of the stairs, “Need anything?”

“I’m good.”

“Where is everyone?” Charlie asks.

“Cas and Mom are in the archives. Kevin went up to his room a while ago.” He figures that Gabriel doesn’t bear mentioning, since he isn’t here now.

Charlie heads into the kitchen and Dean follows, saying, “Alright, dinner’ll be ready in 30.”

Charlie knocks on Kevin’s door. When she isn’t met with abrupt rejection, she chances poking her head in. Kevin sits in his swivel chair, facing away from his desk and tapping a pencil mindlessly against his slack lips.

“Hey, nerd,” she steps into the room and he turns to her. She holds out a plate of food, “You missed dinner.”

Kevin bites down on the eraser. Charlie doesn’t continue to stand in the doorway, she walks over and sets the dish on the desk.

“I think my mom’s alive.”

“What?!” Charlie’s glad she set the plate down. “That’s great! What makes you think that? Is it a prophet thing? Did you have a vision?”

“I talked with Crowley.”

Charlie sighs, taking a seat on the floor in front of him. “Kev, you gotta stop going down there.”

“His argument makes sense. Not-not in a ‘demonic chaos’ way like last time. But in a hard logic sort of way.” He twirls the pencil in his hand. “I believe him.”

“What did he say?”

“Just that she was alive.” Kevin frowns, “He said it in the way he talks when he’s trying to be mysterious.” Charlie snorts. “And then he started going on about where she was with obscure, descriptive crap like ‘restless demons’ and ‘his own personal brand of greenhouse.’

“What did he say? Tell me exact words.”

“’She’s of no consequence if she doesn’t know anything.’ That was the weirdest, and like, the most direct one.”

Charlie’s face twists in distaste and consternation, “You think it’s like a Hermione slash Mr. and Mrs. Granger thing?”

Kevin thinks for a minute, “I … Maybe? But … brainwashing, though?”

“Yeah, and now he’s trying to guilt you into doing stuff for him because you’re the reason he ‘had’
Kevin shakes his head, “No, he told me explicitly that he wanted a deal. He wants me on retainer -
his words - for whenever he decides he needs my help. He made sure to say he didn’t believe I’d
release him.”

“And all he’s offering for this blank check is information that you can’t totally trust?”

Kevin grimaces and nods.

“Well that’s total bullshit.” The crestfallen look on Kevin’s face tells her that was the wrong thing
to say. “But, I mean, once we get our angels sorted out, at least we can go look for her. And they
can probably get her back to normal.”

Kevin’s eyes dart back and forth between his hands and her face multiple times before he sighs.

“I think my mom used to be a writer.” Kevin sniffs dryly. “When I was younger I’d always find
journals and notebooks lying around.”

Charlie lets him talk.

“It feels like there were less after my dad … But I don’t think she ever stopped.”

This is better. Talking about good memories. Telling Charlie about his mom as sort of a distraction
from the disparity of the “what if’s” that her last statement proffers.

“I know she used to play an instrument, but she never told me which one. I never heard her listen to
anything other than talk radio or smooth jazz but once I found a bunch of records in her closet. Half
of them were punk-rock and the rest were either crazy jazz or classic rock and roll.”

Charlie will cut him off at some point, he thinks. Stop the madness when it gets to be too much.
Maybe she’ll tell Kevin about her own mom.

Sam is sure that he’s seen Gabe twice in the past half hour since dinner, but every time he went
after the archangel, he’d disappeared around a corner.

This is going to be one of those nights where sleep is going to be just out of reach, he thinks to
himself. Sam’s on his way back to his room from his shower. Never will he admit it to Dean but
researching all day wore him out. He thinks he can change into pajamas and then get some time to
himself. Maybe find a distraction to eat up the hours in which he will not be sleeping or letting
thoughts of this afternoon’s events occupy his mind.

And what could possibly distract him better from Gabe, than running into Gabe?
The logic is flawless.
This time apparently, Sam gets to be the one to round a corner and startle the archangel, because
there he stands, three feet past Sam’s usual room. Sam is inches away when Gabriel has the
presence of mind to turn around. The hunter has time to register the shock on Gabe’s face in the
seconds it takes him to slam Gabe into the wall and bring their mouths together.
Gabe moans and skims his fingers up Sam’s shower-slick chest in search of purchase. His hands fit on either side of Sam’s neck as Sam winds his arms around Gabe’s lower back and press the two of them together. He tongues at the seam of the shorter man’s mouth.

“Please,” Gabe pants, “please tell me your room is nearby.” Sam smiles and leans back in for a searing open-mouth kiss, while reaching out one arm to find the doorknob of his bedroom.

Gabe groans in realization of what’s about to happen. He wraps his arms and legs around Sam’s neck and waist when the hunter picks him up. They back into the room and Sam kicks the door closed. With fluidity, he drops Gabe onto the bed and shucks his shirt before helping the archangel to do the same. He runs a hand up Gabriel’s chest and settles between his thighs.

Sam leans down, “I haven’t forgotten how loud you can be,” and shit, it sounds like he’s growling. Sam kisses and mumbles against the skin of Gabriel’s neck. “So be thankful that these walls are thick,” he moves up to whisper into Gabriel’s ear, “because I want to hear every sound you make.”

Gabriel shudders and groans softly.

“You can do better than that,” Sam laughs quietly against the shell of his ear.

It only serves to earn him a sharp roll of the hips and a breath-sucking kiss.

Cas goes back out later that evening.

The storm clouds he’d watched develop on his walk with Mary had proven to be as formidable as they’d appeared and had begun to release a downpour just after dinner.

Being in the archives all afternoon left him feeling trapped. Their lead proving fruitless didn’t help anything.

So even though it’s raining, Cas needs to be outside. He’d taken a plastic stool from the infirmary and a large umbrella he’d found in a closet. And all he’s been doing is sitting watching the landscape.

To be suddenly and heavily defined by gender, space, and time – as humans are wont to do – was proving to be a great deal of slow acclimation. And Castiel knows he hasn’t even begun to see the half of it yet.

Gusts of wind blow bursts of water onto him but he is untroubled by it. It’s like sitting in a cloud, almost, to have the mist waft over him.

Seeing this family reunion, watching its progress, has made Cas feel even more like this is where he belongs.
And on a few occasions it has made him think of the Novak’s. Is Amelia still in Pontiac? How is Claire doing in school? Have they reunited with Jimmy’s somewhat distant mother?

Cas turns his face into the rain like it's warm sunshine.

Despite what Castiel told Mary about personalizing the room giving a sense of belonging, his own remains rather bare save the few books on his shelf and the notepad on his desk. Cas finds that he rarely has the urge to possess something. Spending millennia without the ability to or even the consideration of owning objects leaves most things without much value.

Castiel supposes that this only serves to heighten how much he attaches himself to what little he does have claim over. It’s part of how he maintains a sense of identity. The trench coat and tie are a safety net of familiarity. And though the urge to possess may not overtake him, accepting gifts given freely is what metaphorically “does it” for him: He finds his sense of belonging in the clothes he shares with Dean. He finds it in the mug – his mug – that Sam gave him to use every morning. He finds it in the fact that his room was set up for him before he even arrived at the bunker.

He sits until the clouds vanish and leave a purple sunset in their wake. Cas fixates on the seemingly endless indigo that is painted above the orange trees. The few green leaves left in this part of the woods defy the end of summer and sparkle in contrast to the surrounding warm tones.

Cas faithfully waits for the sunset violets to forfeit to the indigo that prefaces night’s blue canvas. He leaves before the first stars appear and goes in to wipe down his chair and umbrella.

Dean is waiting with a towel because Cas does weird shit all the time and Dean’s a be-prepared kind of guy. It also may be that Dean caught him when he peeked out the front door earlier to watch the rain.

He ended up watched Cas for a minute as well.

“Cabin fever getting to ya?” Dean still wasn’t used to Cas being around, here, for him to talk to … whenever.

“I suppose, yes.” He descends the last steps and takes the towel from Dean with a nod. “I’d hoped to ward it off earlier this morning. Mary and I were coming in from a walk when we found Gabriel in the kitchen.”

“Oh?” Dean asks. With his foot, he pushes out another chair at the map table and Cas takes a seat.

“Yes, it didn’t seem to help alleviate my urge to change my environment.”

“Sometimes you just gotta walk it out until you’re too tired to walk anymore.”
Cas nods and runs his knuckles over northeastern Siberia.

“So where’d you all walk to?”

Cas shakes his head the slightest bit as if he finds Dean unbelievable. He sighs thoughtfully, “I need you to make me a promise.”

That is not an answer.

“Anything.” Shit.

“Firstly, ask me for things. Secondly, ask me directly.”

Dean swallows, “Alright,” he looks up from the table, “it’s a deal. On one condition.” Cas waits with keenness. “Be honest?”

Cas nods as if he’s relinquishing something more than a compulsion that’s been asked of him. Shit, maybe he is.

“Would you like to ask me what you really want to know?”

Dean shrugs.

Cas can play this game, he has enough patience tonight and Dean’s satisfaction is worth it. “Are you interested in hearing what happened?”

Dean looks up at him and holds eye contact.

“Using your words would be helpful here.”

He doesn’t mention that he’s just specifically asked Dean to do so but the hunter gets the hint.

“Will you tell me about it?”

Cas nods equably, “She found me stargazing. I’d been meaning to wander and invited her with me.”

“What’d you talk about?”

“I recited a poem,” he says matter-of-factly and Dean can’t tell if he’s joking or not. “It was nice. Being with someone without having to say or do anything but walk.”

Dean wants to do that with him.

Cas looks at him, waiting for a reaction.

Dean considers what could happen if he brought up what he and Charlie had discussed. Then he brushes it aside.

So he sniffs a breath and stands, “You’d better go get a hot shower before you catch cold.” He ruffles Cas’s hair and the angel holds back a smile so that it only peeks through in the corners of his mouth.

Dean ambles towards the library. Upon seeing the room empty, he wonders aloud, “Where the hell’d Sammy get off too?”

Cas tries to recall where he’d seen Sam last then frowns, realizing that Gabriel never showed back up.

But he tells Dean, “It’s late, Sam’s probably gone up to bed.”
Cas will have to explore after dinner and see if he can’t find the archangel.

Chapter End Notes

I’m working on the sabriel thing …

Audience participation is appreciated
If you don’t know what to say, I’d love to hear what your favorite line was. What was your favorite character interaction? What do you want to see more of?
I’ll do my best to acquiesce.

‘Autumn’ by Katherine Edelman can be found at
http://www.kotn.org/poetry/hoopes/autumn.html

The Violet Hour by Richard Greenberg

Enochian translations:
Med-or-graph-veh-van-or-un – elevated
Drux-un-ceph-un-don-gisg-na – pillars of gladness
Med-un-drux-gon-med – roar
Tal-gon-veh-un-ur-ceph-med – mighty
Vehunfam gon-gisg? – Who is this?
Med-gon-gisg – This is
Ip solomain – not long

The dictionaries I used/will use are:
http://www.gclvx.org/The%20Whole%20Enochian%20Dictionary.pdf
http://www.angelfire.com/empire/serpentis666/Letters.html

I am well aware of multiple meta POVs debunking the brothers as soulmates, but I am brothers trash and it suits my needs thank you very much. Besides I feel like your heaven changes depending on the point in your life at which you die.

^edit 2/19/16: Thank you JaxCon16 and J2 for validating me. Chuck bless.
And now after a lengthy and upsetting bout of writer's block, we return you to your regularly scheduled programming.

Castiel is warm and sleepy, and with his curiosity sated he’s prepared to go to bed. When he puts his book down, he isn’t expecting to be met with the sight of Gabriel leaning casually against a bookcase.

“I was wondering when you were gonna pull your nose out of that book and notice me.”

“You could have said something.” Cas sets the novel on the table beside him.

Gabriel shrugs. He pushes off the bookcase and crosses over to the fireplace, scuffing his feet as he goes.

Castiel had said that he would go looking for Gabriel but while waiting and giving Gabriel time to appear on his own, he’d become engrossed in the book Charlie had lent him, and frankly, he’d lost track of time. Another one of the more annoying aspects of his humanity.

If it were somehow possible, Cas would say that Gabriel looks even more smug and satisfied than usual. Cas wonders what the archangel has discovered or decided in the hours it’s been since they’ve seen each other that would have put that look there.
“Where have you been today?”

Gabriel shrugs again and puts his hand on the mantelpiece, walking along its length. Cas leaves room for his brother to speak but it only lets the sound of the fire crackling fill the silence.

“If you aren’t going to talk to me I’ll go back to my reading. You can let me know when you’re ready.”

Cas doesn’t bother reaching for the book – it’s a pretense anyways.

“I’ve had a lot to think about and sort through.” Gabriel looks at his hand and rubs his fingers together as if to rid them of dust picked up from the mantelpiece.

“You’ve been thinking all day?”

Castiel knows that Gabriel is patient when he wants to be, but it seems out of character for him to neglect social interaction on this sort of occasion. Especially given that it’s the Winchesters he’s found himself with.

“Can you blame me? Look, I’ve been dead for a while-“ he cuts himself off and stuffs his hands into his pockets. “Way more stuff has gone down than I could have expected.”

“So then someone’s explained everything which has happened since your death?”

Gabriel had meant to ask Sam but the both of them had been rather distracted by the other’s … everything.

“No, I haven’t really talked about any of that with anyone. I’ve been alone most of the day.”

Castiel is almost tempted to ask who he’s interacted with outside of that first instance. “I just wanted time to think about things,” Gabriel adds.

“Things?”

Gabriel eyes him, “Yeah, things.”

“Such as … ?” Castiel prompts. He knows he’s pushing the archangel but if they’re going to skirt topics, he’d at least like to know what those topics are. Gabriel hems and haws for a moment. Cas looks on blankly.

“Go on.”

Gabriel glares at Cas, “D’ya mind if we switch languages? I’ve got a couple of choice words and even as vulgar as they are they sound better in Enochian.”

Cas expression sets in to one of intolerance.

Gabriel just squints harder at him, “You’re really living up to the human idea of the annoying little brother. Talk about nosy.” Gabriel looks into the fire as he says the last part.

“Tell me,” his tone is gentle but his face is still stern.

“What do I start with?”

Cas can tell the question is rhetorical. It sits between them. Gabe turns and his eyes lock with Castiel, “The apocalypse not happening is kind of a big deal for me,” he echoes his earlier sentiments to Sam.

“Do you know?” Castiel asks. “What happened?”

“I mean, I’m guessing you guys used my plan, but no, not the particulars.”
Cas settles into his chair. “After Elysian Fields, Crowley approached Sam and Dean with the promise of helping them find Pestilence and Death.” The details of the search flit through Cas’s awareness. “He led them to Pestilence’s handler and then after they got the location—“

“Woah, woah, what’s this about Sam’s classmate?”

“Are- … are you reading my mind?” Cas asks with narrowed eyes and an affronted expression. Gabriel shrugs at him. This sort of privacy invasion is startlingly different from the intermingling of grace. Not just because he can hardly feel it, but because it’s no longer a two-way street.

“No offence Cassie, but you’re kind of screaming at me. It’s like your mind is trying to get back to grace-levels of connectivity.”

Castiel frowns.

“But that’s small potatoes – gimme the good stuff; what’s the deal with Sam’s friend Brady?”

“He was the handler for Pestilence. From what I understand, when Crowley arranged for Dean and Sam to confront him, Brady revealed that that he’d involved himself with Sam specifically in order to set Azazel’s plans in motion by introducing him to Jessica Moore.”

Gabriel’s heart clenches.

“When he’d given up the location of Pestilence, Dean agreed to let Sam finish him off.” Cas pauses a moment, but getting no acknowledgement from Gabriel, he continues. “After that, Crowley approached Bobby – I believe you met him at one point?”

Gabriel scoffs and nods. He might’ve played with the boys for months had their surrogate father not paid a visit to them at Carlton Hall.

“Crowley approached him, promising to reveal Death’s location in exchange for his soul.”

“Did he actually go through with that?!” Gabriel asks, incredulous and picturing the sealing of that demon deal in all its awkward and presumably sexually tense glory. He tucks away the tidbit about Brady for further contemplation later on.

“Would you like to read my mind and see or am I going to be allowed to finish telling you without further interruption?”

Gabriel tsks, “So sassy. Finish your story.”

“Yes, he made a deal and sold his soul. But before we found out, I became mortal and managed to kill Pestilence and acquire his ring.”

“Wait, after you became mortal?” he whistles. “Damn, Cassie, aren’t you just the little badass.”

Castiel rolls his eyes but privately wonders what his reaction would be should he discover the full details of Stull Cemetery.

“That was when we headed back to Bobby’s and discovered his deal. So with the information from the deal, Dean and Crowley went looking for Death, and I discussed with Sam his plan to accept Lucifer then jump into the Cage.”

Though clearly events have taken a different course since that plan was established, Gabriel is still on the edge of his seat.

“At this point, Michael was using Adam Milligan as a vessel. Dean acquired the ring and agreed to let Sam carry out his plan to host Lucifer. They found him in Detroit and Sam prepared himself with demon blood. Sam confronted him with Dean at his side and consented to possession. Lucifer admitted to being aware of our intentions – your plan – and he still took possession of Sam. Dean activated the key but Sam couldn’t get control and Lucifer took the key and went to Stull Cemetery.
where Michael met him, possessing Adam. Before they could start anything, Dean, Bobby, and myself arrived and provided a distraction. Bobby and I were killed when we managed to temporarily banish Michael. Dean wasn’t killed immediately. It seems Lucifer wanted to make his death intimate. But that only served to give Dean time to appeal to Sam and for Sam to fight for and gain control. Which he did. Not only did he overpower Lucifer, he opened the Cage just before Michael reappeared, and was able to pull Michael into the Cage with him.”

“…Holy shit.”

Cas nods.

They both look into the fire like morose sons of bitches. Gabriel taking a moment to solidify his suspicions and allow himself a single moment of mourning. Cas, letting him.

“So, after?”

“I was resurrected, and I revived Bobby-“

“No, I mean-. Between then and …” he gestures to the room around them. He drops his arm but waves his hand vaguely, “Just gimme the highlights.”

A pause.

“… If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather you got the story from the Winchester gospels.”

The guilt is rolling off of Cas in waves. He nods at his younger brother - Gabriel can let him have this.

Cas feels some emotion leak into his features, and Gabriel seems to trace its path. Cas looks down at his hands, opening them from where they’re clasped. He squints up at Gabriel, “I never got to say goodbye.”

Gabe’s body language is open as he listens, but Cas can’t find anything to read in it. “I wish I could have been there for you. At the end.”

Gabriel shakes his head and looks back into the fire, “I wouldn't have wanted you to be. Not with the way it went down.”

Castiel doesn’t nod, doesn’t react in the slightest or even change his expression. He just keeps watching Gabe.

“Do you regret what you did?”

This time Gabriel believes the innocence. Castiel looks like he did when he was new to the world and learning what it was to exist. It makes Gabriel feel younger.

“Kind of hard to since I've got back exactly what I gave up.”

Castiel looks dissatisfied, “In your last moments-

“I'd do it again in a heartbeat.” His voice doesn’t waver. “Especially since it led to what needed to happen.” He taps his fingers on the marble one last time as he steps away from the mantel and seats himself across from Cas.
Castiel wonders where his earlier inner-warmth has dissipated to. He wants to stoke the fire. It isn’t crackling as loudly as before and he misses the comfort of the sound.

“I know bravery and choosing to act against Lucifer—picking a side at all in the matter which was one of the only things you’ve ever feared—”

“Let it go Cas.” Gabriel cuts him off before there could be anything more said. Even with closure the way it turned out, it still hurts to think of his brother as he was at the end.

Lucifer did everything full throttle. He was always the most passionate. It couldn’t have just applied to rebellion and terror, he couldn’t have partitioned himself like that, no. There was more.

Lucifer had loved fiercely.
And Gabriel had once been a recipient of that love.

Castiel will respect Gabriel’s request. He’d tried- wanted to get somewhere with that but it wasn’t going to do either of them any good. There was no call for both of them to be miserable.
He nods and there isn’t much more to be said, at least for the moment. He stands and drops another log on the fire. The log being eaten, slowly engulfed in orange is all Cas can focus on when he sits back down.
He isn’t sure that anything in particular draws him to Gabe, but when Cas looks over, Gabe’s got both of his eyes closed and his head resting on the back of the chair. He looks drowsy.

“Gabriel?”

“Hmmm?”

“What’s the matter with your grace?”

Gabriel’s eyes open slowly but he’s looking directly at Cas. “It’s like it’s numb.”

“Is it just since you’ve been resurrected?”

Gabriel nods.

“Do you know why?”

“Maybe Daddy’s putting me in timeout,” he shrugs, “maybe, more likely, it’s got something to do with the bullshit about being cut off from heaven.”
Castiel thinks back to when he’d returned from Purgatory. How it had been hard for him to access his powers or maintain use of them, as he reconnected with Heaven. Gabriel seems to be faring better which Cas attributes to his inherently more powerful status as an archangel.

But now, with that in the open, Cas hesitates to put anything more on Gabriel’s plate. He thinks that he should reserve asking about his own grace or Metatron until Gabriel is at full capacity.

“Are you going to ask me anything else? I can tell you’ve got something on your mind.”

Gabe has always read him so well. But Cas means to skip his personal matters for the time being.

“What about Mary?”

“What about her?”

Cas gives a meaningful look and inclines his head accusingly.
Gabriel sighs, “I’m having trouble getting a read on her. At all. There’s just nothing to go on. So I’m not going to be of much help with her at the moment. Ask me again when my grace isn’t acting freaky.”

The grandfather clock at the end of the room chimes, and Cas realizes just how obscenely late it is.

Gabriel looks at the old timepiece and stands, “I think I’m gonna hit the hay. See if some rest will help me recover more.” He jerks a thumb over his shoulder, taking a few steps backwards before turning to cross the threshold.

Cas sits a moment longer, dragging his gaze from the doorway to the grandfather clock. He stands to gather his things, and sighs, then suddenly laments that he was unable to ask Gabe about healing Sam. He tugs the lamp cord and shadows the room to firelight alone, making a mental note to ask Gabe about it in the morning.

Dean nearly dies of a heart attack the morning he walks into the kitchen and sees the jar of cherry preserves on the counter.

“Mornin’,” he manages, after shaking himself out of his wonderment.

“Hey, sweetie,” Mary responds.

He starts towards her, “Anyone else up yet?”

“Yeah, Sam was talking to someone and they’re in that small library now I think.”

Dean nods, “So what’re you up to?” Sometimes he’s good at sounding casual and oblivious.

“What does it look like?” she teases.

”Like you’re overtaking my kitchen.”

“Good guess,” she says with a honeyed smile and nothing more.

He reaches for the jar of cherries, “Got a plan for these?” He asks with a wiggle of the container. And now he’s sure that she can tell he’s fishing but she responds just as vaguely as before.

“A few ideas …” she drifts off airily. “Why, do you have something in mind?”

She sounds genuine so he responds, “Well the first thing my mind went to was pie, but Sam would tell you that’s normal for me.”

Mary smiles – another tidbit she can tuck away.

“Well then that settles it,” she turns to him with an expectant expression. “Go on,” she nods her head towards the ingredients, “Make me a pie.”

Dean flounders, “You’ve already had my pie.”
Mary shrugs, “You’ve already had mine.”

Dean scoffs, “Yeah, three decades ago.”

Mary squints at him appraisingly, “Tell you what, I’ll compromise. We’ll make it together.”

Dean blinks. But he licks his lips and breathes out a “Yeah.” A smile opens up on his face, “Yeah, okay.” He looks at the counter and clears his throat. “Do you have everything we need?”

“I think we do.”

“Alright, let’s get to it.”

Though lacking in windows, the bunker somehow still seems cozier and a bit darker during thunderstorms.

A roll of thunder sounds just before Gabe enters the smaller library and flops down on the sofa. “Man, sometimes I really miss bowling night,” he says, despite it being hours from sunset. Sam sits on the other end looking incredulous, “You’re not serious.” Gabe pulls an expression that says ‘ya never know,’ and wiggles his eyebrows.

Cas keeps his nose tucked into his book but calls from across the room, “It wasn’t a particular favorite pastime of the angels, and we certainly never arranged group activities, bowling or otherwise, specifically during thunderstorms.”

Gabe throws a pillow at him which Cas manages to dodge without looking up, “You’re no fun.” Behind the book covers, Cas smirks.

Gabriel crosses his arms childishly, and turns his attention to Sam. Catlike, he slinks closer to the other man. Sam doesn’t pay any mind when the archangel stretches obscenely and makes himself horizontal. Castiel, however, glances up and locks onto the two of them. He watches the silent interaction from behind the shield of his novel. Sam rolls his shoulders back at the same time that Gabriel shifts to rest his head on Sam’s thighs. Sam keeps reading. Castiel takes the casual nature of the interaction at face value and after a moment, draws his gaze away, back to his novel.

Charlie comes in to sit by the fire, with a steaming mug, presumably having just woken up. Her eyes don’t register specifically who the rest of the room’s occupants are, much less what they’re doing. She curls up into a chair across from Cas on the other side of the fireplace.

Gabriel sighs, closing his eyes when one of Sam’s hands drops to comb through the angel’s hair. The sound is what gleans the attention of Charlie who does a mute double-take. She shoots a look at Cas who merely catches her eye contact before turning back to his book and offers no comment or context on the couple. In his periphery he notes Charlie fidgeting with curiosity but she says nothing. Privately, he digests the absurdity of an archangel be treated like a lapdog.
Dean chooses mere minutes later to enter the room. He’s opening his mouth to say something, just as Gabriel exhales another contented sigh. Upon catching sight of Sam and Gabe, Dean closes then re-opens his mouth – his thoughts now taking a completely new direction.

“What am I looking at?” The question is directed to no one in particular but his gaze glances between Cas and Charlie – who stare back wide-eyed – before they all turn to the couple on the sofa.

At Dean’s words, Gabe’s eyes flick open to lock onto the awkward view he has of Sam’s neck and part of his face but the hunter keeps reading the book he’s got propped on the arm of the couch. And more importantly, he keeps combing through Gabe’s hair.

“I don’t know, Dean. What does it look like?” he says to his brother.

Sam briefly wonders if Gabe is okay with other people knowing about them – whatever they may be – but Gabe was the one who laid down in his lap in the first place. Sam is also pretty sure he’d made his “done-with-the-hiding-us” attitude fairly clear.

Dean nods thoughtfully to himself, “Okay.” He seems to space out for a moment, “Uh- you, uh.” He clears his throat, “You know where the pie pan got to?”

Dean isn’t even sure if Sam’s actually reading at the moment, but his eyes still don’t leave the page as he answers, “You put it in the drawer below the oven.”

“Awesome,” he says quickly, turning to actually leave. “Thanks,” he calls back over his shoulder. No one sees his eyes widen comically in complete shock as he walks away mouthing silently to himself, “What the fuck!?”

Dean’s swiping a hand over his face as he re-enters the kitchen. Mary turns to him.

“Found it,” she says brightly holding the dish in front of her. She turns to the counter and starts separating what they need now from the supplies for later.

Dean shakes his head and goes to stand beside her, “Awesome.”

“Is there a stand mixer we could use or …?”

Dean turns and crouches down to get at one of the low cabinets. He pulls out the old machine and sets it on the counter, tugging off the white and navy, quilted cover to reveal an antiquated Kitchenaid stand mixer. Dean parts some of the countertop clutter to plug it in.

Mary taps on the mint green atrocity with her forefinger, “My mom used to have one like this,” she lets her finger sit on the last tap before it slides down the side of the machine and she turns back to the pile of supplies. “She hardly ever used it. Wasn’t much for domestic activities.”

“You taught yourself to cook?” Dean asks. He doesn’t know why he’d assumed her mother had taught her. It seemed like a natural assumption for the time she’d lived in, but the Campbell’s had been hunters. There was hardly any semblance of comparison to normal for the 1950’s and 60’s.

“I had plenty of time for a lot of things when I became a stay-at-home wife.”
Dean scoffs, “After meeting young you it’s hard to picture you as a stay at home anything.” Mary’s mouth quirks downwards. She doesn’t like not being able to remember their visit.

“No, it’s– it’s not a bad thing.” Dean mistakes her expression for discomfort. “I’m – you got what you wanted.” He’s not sure how he should judge her domestic foray, or if he has any place to judge it at all. Not when he’s reveling in his own version of one.

She wrinkles her nose thoughtfully but bluntness is all she needs, “I just wish I could remember it, is all. When you and Sam visited,” she adds at Dean’s questioning expression. She redirects conversation once more, “Cutting board?”

Dean opens one of the cabinets and sweeps his hand at the selection of cutting boards, cookie sheets, and baking pans, “Take your pick.”

Mary raises her eyebrows and pouts her lips the slightest bit, in an expression distinctly reminiscent of the one Sam makes when he’s mildly amused or surprised at something. She reaches for a dark wood one, “This kitchen is remarkably well-equipped for a place that’s supposed to be a secret society headquarters.”

“You should see their Christmas decorations. These guys were serious homebodies.”

Once the pie is in the oven, Mary goes back to the library to while away the next half hour. Gabriel is perusing the shelves but no one else seems to have changed positions at all. Mary picks up one of the books off of the end of the long table, figuring she can at least get a little bit of useful information before she goes to check on Dean and the pie.

She’s really getting her teeth into the language and message of the book when Sam sighs and closes what he’s reading. He leans over and picks up the pile of books on the end table before standing and going into the stacks, presumably to reshelve all of them. Gabriel seems to trail after him, and Mary registers some murmuring, but it isn’t enough to pull her concentration.

“If you aren’t going to help me, then at least don’t distract me,” Sam mutters to the archangel as he goes to the long table where many more books await his perusal.

“Couldn’t you at least sit somewhere that I could be in your lap while you work?”

“No, I need to write some stuff down. And reading all of this is a lot easier when I can take notes on it.”

When Gabriel drops down into the chair beside him, Sam hopes that’s going to be the end of it. But of course Gabriel doesn’t shut up. He keeps quietly asking questions or trying to touch Sam, or commenting on document length and style.

He appropriates a notepad and flips to a blank page and starts doodling. He makes huffy noises as he draws, and after a few minutes he realizes that he’s actually gotten Sam’s attention.

“What?” He asks, because Sam isn’t saying anything. He’s just watching Gabe with squinty,
thoughtful expression.

“You remind me …”

“Oh…?” Gabe prompts, after a beat.

Sam shakes his head as if recalling something, “Just a man.”

Gabriel seems to bristle – either at the idea that someone’s infringing on his unique, divinely crafted, and self-molded personality or that after all his efforts, Sam still isn’t totally focused on him.

“What man?” he responds indignantly.

Sam waves his hand in a dismissive gesture. “He’s a man with power,” he says with vague nonchalance.

“What- what power? When- ?”

“The power of hoodoo.”

“Wait, hoodoo-?!”

“You do,” Sam says with a shit-eating grin.

“Oh, very funny, Sam.” Gabriel crosses his arms and slumps back in his chair dejectedly.

Sam releases a burst of laughter, “I can’t believe you didn’t catch on sooner!”

“You changed the original dialogue! And your delivery was way off!”

“Yeah, I added like, three words,” Sam’s still chuckling.

Gabriel turns away from him, pouting obviously. “I invented that joke,” he mumbles.

“Mmmm,” Sam hums dismissively, already turning back to his work.

Finding himself once again ignored, Gabriel stands and starts to snoop around the room. He wanders down to the other end of the long table and rifles through the documents and tomes. Amongst the more academic pieces he happens upon a thick but flimsy paperback. Turning it over reveals it to be part of the Supernatural series. Gabriel snorts and begins leafing through it. He’d been aware of their existence but none had crossed his path and he hadn’t gone looking for them. Skimming the pages, he walks back down to sit across from Sam. As he makes his way swiftly through the first few chapters, his amusement gradually grows before it builds then breaks out in a laugh.

“This guy’s funny!” he says. “I can’t believe I’ve never read these before. I like his style. Sort of makes me think of …” he drifts off and when Sam glances up, Gabe looks like he’s lost in an old, old memory.

“Gabe?”

The archangel shakes his head and gives a crooked smile that seems oddly less than natural. Sam doesn’t think anything else of it though when Gabe looks down at the book again and suggestively remarks, “I can totally see where people get off thinking that you and Dean are hooking up.”
Sam’s face contorts in revulsion at the double entendre. “You’re disgusting,” he says, lifting his book and burying his face in it again. Gabriel snickers and returns to halfheartedly scanning the novel.

Neither of them are aware of Mary observing the interaction.

The day passes quickly, but monotonously in yet another pattern of less-than-productive researching. They go about rooms searching for notes and casefiles and books and objects until the cycle is broken by the smell of dinner.

Sam is a little surprised when Gabriel follows him into the dining room. But it seems Dean expected it; the correct number of plates sit out on the table and there’s an extra one beside the place where Sam typically sits.

Charlie is an endless pit of questions for the archangel. There’s room enough for everyone to chip in commentary but it’s a long string of inquiries that lead to more questions and Gabriel truly puts up with it well.

Kevin is mostly quiet. He seems like he’s ignoring everyone but it’s just the outward manifestation of his introspection. Sam and Gabe seem ... close. Not Sam and Dean close, or Dean and Cas close (though when he sees the likes of either relationship replicated it’ll be a cold day in hell). But … still close. Like they’ve got a secret. Together.

At the end of dinner, Charlie and Gabriel are in a heated discussion about the evolution of nerd culture. Charlie seems equal parts fascinated at the facts Gabriel is providing, and indignant at his commentary on them. Still talking to him, she begins to collect the dishes and he starts to help, following her into the kitchen to keep the discussion going.

As the others leave the table, Sam makes eye contact with Dean and signals to him. His face pinches questioningly but he nonetheless trails after Sam down the hall and into one of the lesser used storage rooms that they haven’t quite bothered with yet.

He follows Sam in then clicks the door closed behind them. Sam doesn’t let himself take a steadying breath before he turns around to face his brother. Dean stands akimbo, relaxed but wearing an expression that’s fighting back mild concern.

Sam had felt Dean’s eyes on him all through dinner, the intensity varying but consistently increasing whenever Gabriel said anything. Which, of course, was rather frequent. So this is Sam taking initiative. This is Sam taking that first step towards them being upfront with each other. Because the ball is more or less in his court, and he thinks Dean might need him to be the one to go first.

“Remember how we said we were going to be more honest with each other?”
"Oh this, Dean thinks. Has Sam brought him here to voluntarily tell him something? Are they actually going to make good on what they promised?"

"Is this about earlier? The thing with Gabriel?" Dean asks him.

Sam nods, even as he tries to keep his face from twisting. "So," he clears his throat, "did you ever watch all of that porno Gabe left us?"

Dean eyes him warily.

Sam sighs, "I’m not going to make fun of you. I’m just- did you or didn’t you?"

"…yeah," Dean responds slowly, still suspicious.

"Did you-" Sam falters, "is there-" he screws his face up, bracing for awkwardness, "Does he give me … a shoutout? At the end?"

Dean purses his mouth then closes his eyes as is face clenches in an expression that says he should’ve expected this. He gives a stilted but amused laugh, "Uh, yeah. Yeah, he does. I always thought it was a joke. One last way to fuck with us. Well, you, really. … You always did seem to be his favorite."

"Yeah."

"So, ‘s there a reason for that?"

Obviously, Dean knows that Gabriel’s prime objective was apocalypse preparation. So, obviously, he’s asking for more than that.

"Um, yeah. We were … we were involved."

"Involved?" Dean prompts, fishing for more detail.

"Yeah."

Dean sighs. Like pulling teeth, he thinks. "What was the nature of your relationship?" he asks more directly. His tone is forced and strained.

"Oh. We …" Sam stalls then scoffs, knowing how lame this is going to sound even before he says it, "Fuckbuddies. We were fuckbuddies."

Dean only nods.

"How long?"

Sam clears his throat, "Since Carlton Hall. The- the first case with him."

Dean’s jaw falls open. "That long and you never told me? Christ, Sam!"

"He was my fuckbuddy!" Sam throws his arms out wide and helplessly, "What was I supposed to say? ‘Hey I’m using sex with a trickster to blow off steam but I don’t know when he’s going to show up or why we’ve decided to keep going for this long.’" Sam’s holding his arms out, palms facing upward as if to outwardly show his lack of explanation. "I mean, it was an accident at first, and then it just kept happening. It wasn’t something either of us … planned. I mean, maybe Gabe planned when to show up but I was winging it based on that."

"Hold up, can we backtrack for a minute here to the part where you thought it was okay to sleep
“Okay the first time I didn’t know,” Sam excuses.

“And the second time?”

“… I didn’t actually think it was real.”

“Christ, you’re makin’ my point for me here, Sammy.”

“And what point is that?”

“That it’s fucking dangerous to be messing around like that!”

“Dean, I’ve literally been doing this for years, I think I can handle myself.”

“It’s not just-“

“I’m old enough to make my own bad decisions,” he insists.

“Sam-“

“Besides, you’re around, and now you’re aware so you can look out for me.” Sam keeps to himself the thought that he doesn’t need Dean to look out for him about this. He knows it will comfort Dean to keep that token of protection. It’s something he’s starting to pick up on and even cater to. Another way to patch the cracks between them.

“Do you have a reason for letting him live after you realized he wasn’t dead?”

“Other than sex?” Sam tries to joke. Dean levels him with a glare and Sam rolls his eyes. Somehow he thinks the logic he’d used to justify letting Gabe live to both himself and the trickster wasn’t going to work for Dean. Especially considering his circumstances with Ruby. And maybe that’s why he hasn’t brought up the ‘supernatural being’ argument.

But in the interest of honesty …

“It wasn’t as if I could think of another way to off him, since the first method failed. And before you ask, I didn’t come to you or Bobby … because I didn’t think he was a threat.”

“Sam-!”

“No, Dean, I’d been watching anything that I thought might have been him and he’d stopped harming people.” Sam fumbles for something else to tack on to that, “And yeah, I’d gotten a sort of soft spot for him. I’d been getting laid, plus he seemed to genuinely like me.” He shrugs, “I figured having someone like him on our side couldn’t hurt, either. That I might be able to get help from him in the future.”

Dean’s gaze has dropped to the floor by now and he looks like he’s considering what Sam’s said. He nods a little and crosses his arms. “Okay, so,” he puts out a hand placatingly, “monster factor aside. How could you not have told me?”

“When would have been a good time?” Sam asks without accusation. He tries to make it sound like something simple and unavoidable. Dean makes no such efforts;

“Hm,” his thoughtful pout is suddenly sarcastic, “I don’t know. Maybe whenever you were thinking about having him over. Or any of the mornings after.”
Unbelievable.
“You expecting me to have notified you whenever we hooked up,” Sam tries to keep his voice from rising, “would be like me demanding that you tell me about who you were with every time you came home from a late night. And I know that you like to overshare about these things, but you can’t tell me that you want your little brother knowing about every single one of your sexcapades.”

Dean’s hands itch to make accusing gestures and he doesn’t hold back, “You can’t compare kinky sex to fucking a trickster or an archangel.”

“Yes I can. Because mornings when you weren’t broadcasting your late night adventures equate to what it was like for me on mornings after Gabriel.” He pauses for thought, but is quick to add, “Sometimes there are things you want to keep to yourself; something just for you, for whatever reason.”

Dean watches him silently. Sam can see his jaw working, but he doesn’t comment. That’s okay. Sam hasn’t run out of fuel yet.

“It’s not perfect,” he concedes, “I’m –“

“Not perfect? Sam, I’m not worried about perfect, I’m worried about healthy.”

“We were just blowing off steam back then.”

“And now?!“

“Now he isn’t. We aren’t.”

“Demoted to cuddlebuddies then?”

“Something like that,” Sam snarks. “No-“ he shakes his head and corrects himself, because this is supposed to be about transparency, “no, we’re ah, we’re together.”

Dean’s expression blanks, “Like in a relationship?”

Sam clenches his teeth but huffs out a “Yeah.”

“A romantic relationship?”

“Yes, Dean.”

Dean looks at him and Sam can read his expression but he doesn’t know what it means here. He sighs.

“Just … say something.”

Dean still looks hesitant. Wary.

“Did you know he was an archangel?”

Sam wants to shout. To hurry and remove any false suspicion that Dean might find lying behind the answer to the question.

“No, I found out at the same time you did. The apocalypse– I wouldn’t have put you in danger like that.” He licks his lips. Hopes he sounds reassuring and not defensive.
“The only thing I didn’t tell you about was the sex.”

“And that you had feelings for him,” Dean amends.

Sam feels a blush rising. “Yeah. That.”

Dean nods, slow and accepting.

“Did you see him at all after TV Land? Before Elysian fields?”

Sam nods, swallows as best he can.

“Up till then, I’d been working up my courage to tell you – cash in on that favor. But then– TV Land happened. I thought maybe, even after that, he could be one thing I held on to. Just for me. And then it didn’t matter if I told you or not.”

Dean’s eyes fall closed. He takes a deep breath before he looks up to make eye contact with Sam. Maybe if things were different, they might talk longer. Might tell each other stories about Amelia, Lisa, Jess, Benny; all the people they didn’t share. But they don’t, and it isn’t going to come up, because they’re content to leave those things be, and that ground between them untouched.

As it is, the hour is late. And Dean really doesn’t want to get into anything else.

“Was there … anything else?” he tries to ask kindly.

Sam shakes his head.

He licks his lips nervously, “Are you planning on telling mom?”

Sam honestly hadn’t thought about it. And now he’s a little concerned.

“I’ve gotta figure out a way, but yeah.” His palms feel itchy.

“Okay,” Dean nods. “Okay, thanks. For telling me.”

Sam offers a smile.

Dean turns to the door and exits, holding the door open behind him, for Sam to follow. Ready for the awkwardness to kick in at any moment, they head back towards the main rooms. But just before Sam breaks off to go upstairs, Dean claps him on the back and promises pancakes for breakfast.

Mary has to put her book down well before she’s ready to sleep. She maintains enough self-control to set it on her nightstand rather than throwing it across the room. It’s frustrating – having so many questions and their answers only just out of reach; pushing aside criticisms or judgement of actions; trying to reconcile the story characters with the real people she’s starting to know. That’s what she gets for trying to use a secondhand account of a third person viewpoint to understand them.

The wall is a good place to stare at as she contemplates her aggravation. It doesn’t have answers, but it fits the card of blank slate.
Mary has never liked having anyone tell her what to do. Being asked to listen and just accept things doesn’t sit well with her. She understands why they wouldn’t be comfortable explaining themselves to her, but she also wants to insist that she deserves to know. It certainly feels essential.

What was Sam thinking when he knowingly got into the demon blood mess? Why do the boys act so skittish about John’s death? Dean especially. Can there really be more that they aren’t telling her? Is it really as sensitive as their avoidance makes it seem? Why does Hell seem so mythically distant when it’s so tangibly accessible? Are they glossing over it? How are Dean and Sam even coping with surviving it? Is their reaction to trauma anything like John’s CSR was when he got back from Vietnam? Aren’t they lonely? Hasn’t there ever been anything more? Anyone to help them? How come they let their lives stay on this hunters’ path? Was Yellow Eyes that important? Why didn’t they drop it after the apocalypse? How did things get this far?

She can guess, but it doesn’t feel like enough. And she knows. A lot of this is incredibly personal, and not everything’s concrete. She’s sure that some of the questions would be impossible to get satisfying answers about (from one or both of the boys).

She’s asked a few. She’s found times to approach – but they always see her coming. Their answers are evasive at best, but escape happens more often than not. She can’t get anything more than a sentence or two before they bring the conversation to a close. It’s getting so she feels like she’s trapping them if she asks.

Shame is nothing she’s unfamiliar with, but-

She just wants to understand.

Mary wonders if it’s her. If they aren’t comfortable, if they don’t trust her.

That’s ridiculous.

Of course not. They don’t actually know her. Sam met her twice. Dean knows her as a mother, faintly. And there concludes the extent of their knowledge of her; someone she was at singular points in time. At least they’re making something of the time they have together now. But there’s still that distance. There’s not enough between them for the trust to cement. That much would have been evident even if it hadn’t taken Dean so long to be able to tell her their story.

Granted, it’s a fair response. Even if it’s contradictory to the many other ways in which they interact with her. The main issue she has with it, is that she doesn’t know how to get around the unfamiliarity, or earn their trust.

It isn’t fair.

On top of that, she worries about how easily she’s accepted their identities. She thinks it might be because of how badly she wants this. Mary is almost certain that if she didn't remember so clearly - how undeniably sure she was about their identities - the night they visited their home in Lawrence and cleared it of the poltergeist, that she wouldn't believe their story at all. It's nice to be an all knowing spirit when you're doing what comes naturally. Maybe shadows of memory about their visit to the past still lurk somewhere in her brain to verify this truth. Having people around to corroborate their story does make it easier to believe ...

Part of her can’t help but wonder if it’s a djinn’s trick. But djinn dreams go uninterrupted and are either paradise or hell – never this mix of happiness and fears being realized. Even if her sons being hunters– well. That’s just anything she’s trying not to think too much about. So maybe it’s her mind creating something in desperation for a reality of any kind when she hasn’t had one in so long – only strung along the grey.

She takes a deep breath and rolls onto her back. There’s something in the pit of her stomach, but
she isn’t able to put her finger on it. And it takes her over in her sleep.

Dean has arrived at the point where he doesn’t even bother sorting his laundry from Cas’s anymore, because there is essentially no line dividing the two. He just takes half of it to his room and dumps the other half on Cas’s bed. And that’s another thing, how does he always get stuck doing their laundry? Yeah, they’re his clothes, but the dude should start to take care of them at some point since he is wearing them too.

But the point still stands that they’re sharing and Dean hasn’t shared clothes with anyone since Sam outgrew him. It’s not exactly anything he pays that much attention to.

So really, Dean almost isn’t surprised to be greeted at breakfast one morning with Charlie and Gabe erupting into fits of giggles, only to look at himself and find that he’s wearing a pair of Cas’s bee boxers.

Dean had halted in the doorway at their first reaction, and there he stands his ground even as a flush overtakes him. God, of all the days he had come downstairs without tying his robe.

He gets a wolf-whistle from Gabe, “Well aren’t you just the bee’s knees.”

Dean’s face sets into a stern frown.

Charlie giggles, “I know back at the motel you were admiring them but I didn’t really think you’d stoop so low as to steal them from Cas.”

“They’re Cas’s? Oh, how precious.”

It is too goddam early for this.

“I gotta say,” Charlie adds, “you pull them off well. They match your shirt and everything.”

Dean tugs at the hem of the plain blue tee he’d slept in.

“That is quite the little outfit.” Gabe’s smirk is loud, “You gonna give us breakfast and a show?”

Dean is rethinking all the ground Gabe had earned in his mind during last night’s discussion with Sam. And he still hasn’t quit:

“Man, I’ve heard of flaming sabers, but bees? That’s a new level of protection for your Michael Sword.” He coughs a laugh at his own bad joke, “Not that you’re not already flaming …”

The sternness turns to something akin to disgust. Possibly tinged with self-righteous anger.

“Screw you! Make your own damn breakfast!” He turns to leave, followed by semi-apologetic whining at what their amusement has cost them. He’s blushing furiously and stalks back up the stairs to his room where he bumps into Sam at the top.

“Woah, woah, what’s the matter?”

Apparently my kitchen’s been turned into the America’s Next Top Model runway.”

Sam squints in total bewilderment, “What?” He gives Dean a once over, then realizes-
“Go ask our resident comedians, I’m doing laundry.”

“Wait a minute, Dean,” he grabs his brother’s arm, “Is this about … those?” He inclines his head towards the offending boxers. Dean looks away from him, at the wall. So Sam takes it as a yes but waits for Dean to respond.

“Yeah,” he caves, after a moment. “Punch and Judy thought it was hi-fucking-larious that I ended up accidentally with a pair of Cas’s bee boxers in my laundry and wore them to breakfast without realizing.”

“Okay,” Sam tries to placate, “Okay. How’s it different from him wearing your stuff like he’s been doing since he got here?” Sam can see Dean’s face twisting slowly into a sneer. He jumps in, “Come on, man, you’re the one making it weird. Can’t we just go back down and have a nice meal? You were really looking forward to making those pancakes,” Sam’s stomach growls on cue, “And I was definitely looking forward to eating them,” he kicks up the puppy face he’s got going a notch, “I’ll help you cook.”

Dean side-eyes him, “… I’m making breakfast. You can keep your germy paws off of my stove.” Sam smiles once Dean’s turned and begun to pout his way back towards the kitchen. But a violent coughing fit brings his brother back to help him descend the stairs.

Dean settles Sam into a chair next to Gabe without looking at the archangel. He walks into the kitchen but returns with steaming mugs for himself and Sam, “Heckle can poof up food for himself and Jekyll if they want to eat anything.”

“Oh come on, Dean.”

“But that’s so much effort!”

“So’s making fun of the hand that feeds you.” Dean begins opening cabinets and gathering groceries.

“Fine, I’ll just eat some of Samshine’s,” he leans into Sam’s body space to steal a sip of the coffee that Dean set in front of his brother (one of the few ways that Sam doesn’t mind Dean babying him).

“No fair!” Charlie whines, “I don’t have a boyfriend to steal food from.” Sam gives a furtive glance to Gabe at the loosely dropped term but the archangel seems unfazed.

“I’d be surprised if you did,” Dean comments coldly without sparing her a glance through the doorway.

“Come on, Dean. You know how much I love your pancakes. They’re legendary! I’ve been dying for a fix. I swear I’m sorry.” Dean gives her a sizzling glare that she’s tempted to wilt under, but he pulls out more supplies and she takes that as a victory even if her tail’s between her legs.

With Dean sufficiently distracted, Gabriel leans over to Sam to murmur, “You can’t honestly tell me that this isn’t amusing you endlessly on some level.”

“Are you kidding?” Sam whispers with the sliest of smiles, “It’s priceless. But one, his pancakes are delicious, and two, it gets funnier the longer he wears them.”

Gabe throws his head back to laugh but Sam clamps a hand over Gabe’s mouth before any sound escapes. He gives Sam a confused and offended glare but Sam just jerks his head towards the kitchen, “Don’t give me away.”
The corners of Gabe’s eyes crinkle in a grin of conspiracy covered by Sam’s hand.

Castiel stays in the shower for a very long time this morning.

He sags forward against the cream colored tiles. The weight of the falling water presses into the back of his neck. Steam gathers and clings to his eyelashes. He focuses heavily on the clatter of droplets.

He could choke on his frustration this morning.

His nightmares were exceptionally bad last night. He can’t remember whether or not Dean came in and tried to settle him at any point. Somehow that’s the most unnerving part. He should remember; Dean drags him out of the bad dreams like a fisherman pulling his catch from the sea. But Cas had woken up without a hand on his chest or green-gold eyes above him, apparently quiet enough for once to disturb no one, while managing to maintain all night the horrible visions that had him waking up panting in a cold sweat and set guilt roiling in his gut.

He’s mostly grateful to have not been a bother.

So he stays poised that way until he’s been standing there, sweating it out for nearly a half hour. When he turns off the water, Cas feels raw but not clean. He feels downright unclean.

His damp feet make kissing sounds along the floor when he emerges from the stall. Cas prefers the large towels after showering. ‘Bath sheets’ Sam had called them. They were soft and almost too big. They swaddled him nicely.

He wraps this morning’s pink one around his shoulders and stands staring at his clothing, not trying to do anything in particular. He drip-dries mostly but towels himself off any ways. The terrycloth runs nicely over his skin without the added friction of water. His elbows stick tacky with humidity where they were pressed to his ribs. He runs a dry palm over the clean skin and wipes away the missed moisture.

He puts his pajamas back on. They’re soft and still warm. The steam from the shower didn’t allow for them to cool off. They smell like detergent and make him think of doing laundry with Dean last week. They’d just gotten around to showing him how to use the machines. Sam isn’t as good at laundry as Dean. It’s because he puts in too much fabric softener, Dean says.

The long, horizontal mirror over the row of sinks is fogged and Castiel doesn’t bother wiping it off to check his appearance.

Cas doesn’t want to think about what it feels like he’s missing.

Because he does. He’s very aware, today, that something isn’t there but should be.

He hangs the damp bath sheet over one of the metal bars of the towel rack near the door on his way out.

Castiel doesn't want to research this morning. He doesn't want to comb through book after book and be met repeatedly with disappointment. He doesn’t want to talk to Gabriel about it or have Dean help him make a plan.

His feet shush over the stone. Cas yawns and wishes he’d brushed his teeth while he was in the bathroom but he’s going to eat breakfast anyways so it doesn’t much matter.
The voices in the kitchen aren’t nearly as muffled as Cas would like them to be. He knows that if he goes in there he’ll dampen the air. It sounds jovial and Cas doesn’t want to impose his sullen mood on them. He doesn’t want breakfast either, nor does he want to talk to anyone. But he doesn’t want to be alone and he knows they won’t bother him if they see him like this. He just hopes that Gabe will be distracted enough to leave him alone as well.

The room doesn’t quieten as he enters and he’s grateful when conversation continues and all he gets in terms of greeting is a few smiles. He pulls out a chair next to Charlie, who is busy laughing at a story Gabe is telling. Cas can’t focus on the subject and doesn’t recognize whether or not he’s heard it before.

As he serves himself, his arm feels numb still, from sleeping on it funny. The pancakes are still steaming. Cas takes three. He looks at them blankly and is subsequently startled when Sam pushes a bowl of banana slices in his direction. Cas nods a thank you and spoons out a few pieces.

His shoulders ache in hunger of a memory. Cas’s stomach goes cold and he can barely swallow the lump of food that now feels enormous in his throat. He stares at the food left on his plate. He needs to eat so he should finish it. Why can’t he finish it?

He wants to go back to sleep. Except sleeping means losing time and the threat of nightmares, even if Cas knows they don’t come as easy during the day. Cas hates losing time and control of his mind and he’s angry, so angry, at Metatron and at Naomi for forcing him here and their schemes that he fell for, but mostly he’s feeling lost and lonely and helpless.

He misses his wings.

He pushes his plate away.

Again, he wonders if talking would help. Again, he can’t say that he wants to try.

He floats in this state all through breakfast; melancholy, a bit forlorn. And he knows the others can tell a little, but he can barely bring himself to be thankful that no one comments on it and that they all continue their conversations as they usually do whenever this sort of morning happens for one of the bunker’s residents.

Cas looks up as Dean stands to go take his dishes to the kitchen.

The bee boxers take him by surprise.

He’s momentarily stunned. His eyes must be wide but he thinks he manages to school his features out of a gawping expression before anyone notices. It startles him enough to shift his mood.

He looks down at his food and feels the lump in his throat begin to wane as his stomach rolls a little, in demand. It takes some time, but he makes himself finish the rest of his food.

The hungry-longing sits with him all day. But so does the image of Dean’s ass covered in bumblebees.
It only takes an hour after breakfast for things to get unsettled.

Sam is, of course, the first one to notice the harsh line that begins to crease his brother’s forehead. Then it’s the hunch of his shoulders over what he’s reading. And the way he looks up at every sound that makes its way through the archway of the library from the War Room. Sam doesn’t strain himself trying to connect the dots.

“Where’s mom?” he asks the room at large.

Dean tenses up so fast it looks like a full-body shiver. But his response is a dry, “Haven’t seen her since last night.” He keeps his head down.

Sam makes brief eye-contact with Cas, and from the corner of his eye he can see Charlie look up as well. Without prompting, she gets up and goes to confirm what they all became sure of once the question was asked.

As expected, she returns alone.

Dean remains steadfastly wound, tighter than a coiled spring and hyper-focused on the page in front of him.

Sam doesn’t know where Kevin and Gabe are. But a half hour later, it’s just him and Dean left in the big library. Cas had slunk off to the archives. He had a mood about him this morning that signaled he’d be better left to his own devices, and Sam suspects that he feels more comfortable around all those other ancient things. Charlie probably left to escape the tense atmosphere.

Dean goes in an out at intervals. He brings food and snacks, and when Sam starts coughing, he fetches tea and tissues. But his sullen mood hangs around for the duration. Sam doesn’t call him out on it, and they don’t have much in the way of conversations, so he really has nothing to complain about. But when Dean skips out on cooking dinner for anyone, Sam figures he might need to say something.

Sam doesn’t mind. The cramping would keep him from eating anything, and with the way his hands are shaking he doesn’t think he could keep anything on a fork or spoon, but the fact that Dean doesn’t even offer is cause for concern.

It’s only the two of them left in the library, and Dean’s just looked at the clock for the tenth time in the past forty-five minutes.

Dean’s always been so obvious; maybe Sam’s just had trouble paying attention to it because he hadn’t wanted to. (God, it hurts to think that.)

This is a way he can take care of Dean – by listening even when he isn’t saying enough. By making good on promises and fulfilling wants that they both know are there.

“Hey, Dean?”

His brother’s eyes dart from the clock to Sam, the look of consternation going unchanged. Sam rolls his forearms to hide the glowing veins and pulls a stack of books closer to block Dean’s view of his chest.

“I just read something that reminded me-“ he points blindly at the imaginary, inspiring portion of
the page in front of him, “-I, uh, I don’t think I told you, but there was a time- I was in the other, the small library when mom showed up. It was after she’d met Crowley. She told me she thought she sometimes had a say in when she disappeared. Under the right circumstances she could force herself to.”

Sam watches Dean in silence.

“You think- … You saying you think she wanted to leave?”

“No,” Sam corrects factually, “in fact she told me she didn’t. Said she didn’t like that she had no control over when she got to come back.” Dean’s brow tightens.

“What I’m saying is that it might help us. When we’re researching.”

Dean swallows visibly then nods. “That’s all well and good, Sammy. But I’m mostly worried about getting info on why your lungs are collapsing.”

Shit, he’d hoped Dean hadn’t noticed his difficulty breathing. There’s not anything Dean can do at this point and Sam hates the look he gets every time Sam says or does something to make him more concerned.

“So, keep trying to find something on that,” Dean adds. “… I’ve got a feeling that looking into mom’s stuff will keep.”

Sam’s surprised by that, but he doesn’t say anything. He’s too curious to ask the right questions and he’d rather not do any more damage tonight. He rubs his wrists and tries to ignore the soreness in his calves and ankles. Dean seems to refocus on the work in front of him. The same line of tension sits in his forehead and jaw, though. Sam feels like he needs to add something more.

“Hey.” Dean looks up. “Speaking of stuff that’ll keep; would you help me put all the books in my room onto the shelf? I feel bad about having left them on the floor for so long.” He shrugs and looks back at the paper in front of him, “It’s not like they’re going anywhere.” He’s trying to give a sign that he wants to stick around. Personalizing his room isn’t something Sam’s had a lot of practice at but he thinks it’ll mean something to Dean.

Dean gives a small smile, “Sure thing, Sammy.”

Sam can let things settle now. He thinks Dean might be a little more okay than he’s been for the majority of the day, and maybe he just needed to talk a little about nothing in particular.

Not long after, Kevin wanders in with a stack of notes and a plate of leftovers. Sam keeps his fingers crossed that the kid won’t accidentally spoil the mood. Then he remembers to hope Kevin is too exhausted to notice any of Sam’s many, obvious health issues. Or at the very least, refrain from commenting on them.

But the atmosphere remains undisturbed, and the three of them carry on for a half hour before Dean gets up and with a stretch, claims to be done for the night. He puts his book on a pile with a sticky note on it and mumbles something about going to check on Cas.

Sam is completely unaware that Dean leaves the library because he can’t stop thinking that the lack of expiration on Mary’s condition is not just terrifying, but freeing as well.
Dean finds Cas listening to old records and digging through the archives. The sound quality is off because he’s using a phonograph instead of one of the newer record players that are definitely around here somewhere. A semblance of what might be Ella Fitzgerald’s voice chokes out of the machine. Dean’s come down here partway to leave the conversation with Sam where it rested, but mostly to check in with Cas. He’d seen him pop up and into the kitchen and bathroom a few times before returning down here, but as far as Dean knew, he hadn’t spoken to anyone. He feels a little weird about approaching him out of the blue, though. Usually it’s best to leave him alone.

Dean doesn’t actually want to leave him alone right now.

The song ends but Cas just continues on his path, lifting the needle and dropping it back at the start as he passes it. Dean realizes he’s just been standing in the doorway, trying to get a read on Cas (he wonders if the other man noticed?) when he could just talk to him and find out.

Dean steps out of the shadowed doorway and crosses over to where Cas sits against the foot of a bookcase staring sightlessly at a blank back page of a book.

“Lost in thought?” Dean asks.

“Consumed.” Cas deadpans without looking up. Dean waits on him for a beat.

“What’d you eat earlier?” Dean nods at the empty plate sitting on the floor beside Cas’s hip. Not that the other man sees.

“Bagel,” Cas mumbles. It does distract him from whatever he was thinking about; he reaches for the plate and drags his fingers through the crumbs. He peers analytically at them when they come away with what Dean thinks are poppy seeds. He has a thoughtful expression on when he finally looks to make eye contact with Dean. For a moment he seems to analyze the way Dean’s fetched up against the old metal table. Then he asks, “Have you ever thought about how strange it is for an oil to have so much more flavor than a solid?” He rolls the poppy seeds between his finger and thumb.

“Can’t say that I have,” Dean answers with a small shake of his head.

Cas grunts softly then brushes his hand off against itself. He looks back down at the leather-bound tome.

“You- … You doin’ okay, man?”

The question, after so much prelude, indicates to Cas that Dean feels something is wrong, and he wants to do something about it. Cas doesn’t know what to tell him, so he nods instead.

“Alright.”

Dean doesn’t sound like he’s done.

“If there’s anything you need, I’m here for you. You know?”

Cas cant’s his head to the side.

He knows that Dean is doing this for him because he's family, he's accepted that and it's easier to
do so after his grocery run with Charlie. And because now, he's looking for it and comparing himself to how Dean treats Charlie and Kevin and God, Mary, even. It’s all love in different forms whether they have labels or not.

Cas hates to think what it would have been like for him to try and see it had only Sam been in the picture. Holding Dean's care for himself up in comparison to Dean's weighty concern and love for a deathly sick Sam would be like holding a candle up to a forest fire.

But part of him still feels like it's selfish to approach Dean. Not just because he knows how Dean feels - that reason is probably never going to change. But because it would be another obligation he heaps on Dean's shoulders: the burden of knowledge. And it would be asking him for something yet again, and Castiel has already asked him for so much.

Don't you see? the needy part of himself will sometimes ask, It isn't asking for love, it's sharing your love with him. He's not giving anything to you, you're giving that information to him.

There it is again, the burden of knowledge.

Doesn’t he deserve to know?

And that’s a low blow, because yes, enough secrets have been kept between the two of them.

But this is not the time.

“I wouldn’t say no to some company.”

He can allow himself to enjoy Dean in this way. This is healthy.

“Alright,” Dean says, even as he debates between joining Cas on the floor and flipping the chair around to sit in it backwards. The decision is made for him as Cas moves the plate to the far side of himself, clearly inviting Dean to take its place.

Dean’s joints creak quietly as he crouches down on the hard floor. Books dig into his shoulders as he leans back but he withholds a wince and turns to pull open the thick cover of the book Cas had been reading.

Cas starts to talk about what he’s reading and a few theories he has going. This isn’t what Dean had been going for, but if this is what Cas needs, he’s happy to help. Ready to give him more as soon as he asks.

There’s an intimacy here that comes from ... just being together. Just existing in the same place.

He points out a few paragraphs to Dean, indicates some textual basis for what he’s spouting. Dean reaches out to trace over some illustration, finger following the careful etchings down to the detailed border. Cas’s hand flirts above his; hovering, only pretending it’s about to touch or guide his own.

Cas keeps talking, but tonight is mostly going to be about what isn’t said.

Kevin needs a drink.

A snack, at the very least.
He’s glad for the darkness and quiet of the halls right now. It feels like he’s being afforded the space to think. He fists and unclenches his hands methodically – they feel empty, tight and dry without the smooth stone or a paper and pen in them.

It’s hard to know so many secrets. Knowing about the universe and God’s intentions or whatever is fine because they’re larger than life in a way that almost can’t be rationalized. Like knowing the sun has a diameter of nearly 900 thousand miles and that there probably isn’t any end to the edge of the galaxy. So Kevin doesn’t try to rationalize, and then avoids thinking about it in ways that will overwhelm him. The tough part is when the secrets get personal.

Kevin also doesn’t like thinking about the amount of time it’s been since his life was on a fast-track to normal standards of excellence. Some days it bums him out, other days he’s relieved. A lot of the time, when he’s engrossed with work, it doesn’t seem like very much has changed at all.

At the moment, Kevin is going over the first day of prophethood, in his head. When Dean and Sam and Meg and Cas had found him, he had literally just emerged from being in an altered state for the past twenty-four hours. In retrospect, being in the trance had felt like watching a TV show. He knew he had a goal and there was a logical-feeling, intrinsic force driving him to his actions. But there was a sense of separation from it. He wasn’t concerned with what his actions were going to entail; everything made sense as it was happening.

Once Kevin had gotten a hold of the tablet, he’d been scared shitless. He’d never stolen a thing in his life, and now he’d just up and decided to break into a mental asylum to run off with three chunks of a knock-off Rosetta Stone? The logical force’s hold had faded and he’d been left without anything rationalizing what he’d just done. Not to mention the death-grip he had on the stolen goods. Kevin would have been more than happy to return them to the six-foot-plus angry white guys but uncontrollable instincts and the death grip wouldn’t let him. Despite how frantically apologetic he’d been, he doesn’t think Sam and Dean realized how much more upset he’d been about that than them. Loss of autonomy was a new one for him (oh, how naïve he’d been…). And then the instincts had kicked in and he’d been very upset that they’d wanted the stone back. It was for him.

Part of Kevin wonders if his relationship to the stone is anything like being in a soured marriage; so sure of closeness and belonging at the start, dead set on staying together, dedicating part of your life, but eventually devolving from an honor to an obligation.

And it had been an honor. Kevin was scared, but having the power to reassemble the stone with touch alone was exhilarating. Sometimes Kevin fantasizes about what it would be like to get another chance at feeling the sort of high he’d gotten from those few seconds. He thinks that initial high is what contributed to his ability to translate the tablet more easily, and passively laments that it ever faded.

But being a prophet entailed more than that, even Kevin in all his hard-facts-and-logic mentality understood it was going to bring a lot of unwanted elements into his life. He steadfastly believes that Dean and Sam should have coddled him more about it. The honesty had just made it all seem more absurd.

Absurd and scary. The reports of kidnapping were unsurprising. At the time, he’d recognized that Sam and Dean understood more about what was going on than him and that they could help him handle the situation, but Kevin doesn’t know that it would have felt all that different if they’d taken him against his will. Having Meg along for the ride doubled the scary factor. He didn’t really know the demon that well, but he’s wondering about her now. How important had she truly been? Cas had had such a visceral reaction upon learning of her death.

Cas.

His view of the angel has changed drastically since he’d called Kevin a hot potato and bopped him on the nose. For the most part, he still resents Cas. But seeing him as a human has … humanized
him. Talking with Charlie about his celestially-centric issues has helped Kevin let go of some of the resentment, too. Kevin’s stopped wanting to make Cas feel unwelcome since he knows the guy doesn’t have anywhere else he can go. And he secretly appreciates how unorthodox and upfront the dude seems to be.

The metal staircase rings with quiet vibrations as his feet jostle the steps on his way down. He likes the bunker when it’s this static. The hum of the lights hold an illusion of being louder when there aren’t as many on. It’s odd to think that this stillness is what results when angels are asleep. Maybe he’ll try making himself tea. He rounds the corner.

Speak of the … yeah.

Castiel stands in front of the open refrigerator, glaring in harsh consideration at its contents. The angel doesn’t spare him a glance so he goes about filling the kettle. But this is the first time Kevin’s seen him since his most recent discovery in decoding the tablet. And who is Kevin to bypass a moment of opportunity? He was planning to approach him at some point.

“Cas?”

After a moment, the angel glances up at him. Kevin sets the kettle on the stove.

“I know why it had to be your grace. For the rituals.” He’s proud of himself for not stuttering. “It’s about gathering and breaking the intangible barriers that separate angels and humans.”

Cas wordlessly turns back to the fridge.

“The spell calls for three things.” Cas’s face remains blankly directed at the cold food, so Kevin keeps talking.

“The sacrificial death of the product from a past love between an angel and a human. The bow of the heavenly being who gifts humans with love.” He hesitates without much reason. Possibly for dramatic effect, possibly to see if Cas will fill the blank for him. "And the grace of an angel in love with a human.”

Cas takes out a beer and closes the refrigerator door. Kevin hasn’t really ever seen him drink, and never alone before. He turns to walk away and Kevin’s sure he’s going to leave without a word.

“I would greatly appreciate if you neglected to mention this to anyone.”

He lurches forward, halfway through a step when Kevin’s words stop him;

“It’s Dean isn’t it. You’re in love with Dean.”

Cas swallows and turns his head just so and Kevin’s view is of his shadowed profile.

Flatly, he says, “Goodnight, Kevin.” And leaves.

Chapter End Notes
Somebody call Thor, my thunder's been stolen.
I've been screaming non stop since 11x23 aired.

I am so so sorry for the absence, guys. Real life hit me real hard and this chapter has absolutely plagued me for the past nine months. I'm trying to be better about publishing order and updates but my muse likes to fuck with me and also I keep getting new ideas that try to take up my time. It means so much to me that anyone is still showing interest in this story because this is by far my favorite work, it's just taking an unreasonable amount of time to finish.

I don't have an explanation for why this chapter was so difficult. There were a lot of notes I had to weed through and I just kept editing and editing instead of writing. And then not writing.
But I'm very excited for the next chapter; get ready for pining, a little confrontation, and the boys having moments with their mom. Also some actual plot happens (thank you, Jesus I couldn't stand having to write another chapter without some conflict resolution).

In other news, certain canon events have caused me to realize that Mary Winchester might actually be my favorite character. Shocker, I know.
I've always been one of those people who was all "I don't have a favorite character on the show" and "I can't pick a favorite brother" so, I mean, something about that should have been obvious. Like, I wrote this whole story and I have two more huge, Mary-centric story ideas I'm planning but I didn't realize this 'till The Thing happened.

Anyways, I love you all and I'm working on about five different things right now and I have school and work but writing is what takes up my free time and my breaks so even though it doesn't seem like it, if I said I was going to write it, it's still going to happen. It's just going to take a while ...

The end scene was inspired by this [iconic gifset](https://www.example.com/iconic-gifset)
Crowley isn’t one for dabbling in necromancy. That’s a lie. Crowley doesn’t take necromancy lightly. 

Crowley’s relationship with necromancy is complicated – No. His relationship with it is and has always been selfish. It’s just this particular instance which is complicated. He’s turned it into a battle with himself. Because suddenly, he’s concerned with a much larger playing field than what he normally cares to focus on.

He’s been puzzling for weeks over why Mary would be back; why now? And it took him far too long to begin considering how he should react.

This is, of course, on top of his intents to escape. Now, he’s trying to factor them together, but it isn’t proving to help his perspective on the situation - only complicating it. Perhaps if Mary were to come down here again, he could use her somehow. He doesn’t feel confident enough in her curiosity that he expects to see her soon. And he can’t wait around for anything. He needs to make the opportunity himself.

oOo

Fuck sleep. Sleep can suck his dick and try learning to play the cello.

It’s like a breath of fresh air and a belly full of a hot meal when at six in the morning on his third all-nighter in a row, Kevin finds the first useful piece of information since Gabriel arrived.

He kicks his chair over in trying to stand up, but manages to stay upright long enough to scramble down the hall. He skids to a stop in front of Sam’s door. His toes curl in his socks as he thumps
rapid-fire. There isn’t an immediate response so he raps noisily and frantically again. “Sam?” he calls out as he knocks. He hears a faintly grumbled, “Yeah,” which he takes to mean ‘come in,’ so he opens the door. Apparently that ‘yeah’ was more along the lines of ‘what do you want,’ because he’s met with the sight of Sam on his back, propped up by his elbows, obviously shirtless, and squinting in the unexpected light coming in from the hall. Kevin tries and fails to not notice the presence of another shirtless, slightly smaller, human-shaped lump curled up on the far side of the bed.

“Uhh…”

“Did you need something?” Sam asks and wow, he sounds like he gargled gravel. Kevin pretends it’s probably because he just woke up.

“Um, yeah. Yeah! I found a way to cure you.”

“Oh. Oh, great.” Gee, what an appropriate amount of enthusiasm. It’s not like Kevin’s labored for weeks and weeks to get to this moment.

“Why don’t you go, uh…” Sam waves his hand vaguely, still squinting, “get everyone else up. We’ll meet you in the library.”

“Says you,” the lump mumbles in a voice belonging to Gabriel. And thank God, because Kevin would have walked right out the front door and into the wilderness if it had been Dean. There’s only so much that a kid can be asked to deal with. Kevin, blushing, closes the door, but he’s sure he hears Sam respond, “Get up. You don’t even need sleep.”

Kevin drops a stack of papers onto the long table. “You want my notes? There’s my notes.”

He’s gotten everybody up and now they’re gathered in the big library. Charlie sits at the end of the table with one knee tucked up to her chest – wearing blue sleep pants and an oversized shirt. Kevin doesn’t think he’s ever seen her so tired. She yawns. Sam, splayed in a chair next to her, beside Kevin, starts to catch the yawn and Kevin has to look away if he doesn’t want it too.

Mary enters, carrying a steaming mug and wearing a pale pink bathrobe. Kevin honestly doesn’t know if it’s new or not. Apparently, she’d reappeared sometime in the early morning.

Cas trails behind her cradling a larger mug and looking nearly dead on his feet. Kevin thinks he might be starting to become dependent on the dark roast blend that Sam buys.

But none of that really matters, because his remark was directed at Gabriel and Dean who were the ones to drive him upstairs to go get more notes and proof than what he’d initially brought down with him.

Gabriel, across the table from him, bends over the pages and traces the lettering with his finger, “You know Enochian?”

“Okay, at this point, English looks like garbage to me,” he points to the papers, “so that’s my shorthand and if it’s in Enochian, or Sumerian, or Egyptian Hieroglyphs I don’t care and I probably can’t read it at the moment. But I can tell you what it says.”

Gabriel pulls the notes closer and starts to flip through them. Dean comes up behind him to peer
critically over his shoulder. A few minutes pass and yawns are exchanged and Kevin loses patience – he wants to try and get some goddam sleep, and soon.

“Nothing I’ve done for the past three weeks has even mattered,” he announces. He’s glad that they hadn’t sent him off to the desert to learn the Word, but he’s curious to know if it actually would have helped this process at all. “I figured all of this out sometime between when everyone went to bed and five seconds before I woke Sam up. And basically the deal is this,” he points at a random page and looks around at his audience.

“So the trials are meant to purify the martyr- the person performing them. Okay? So, so Sam’s got all this purifying energy running around his body with nowhere to go. Finishing the third trial was supposed to release the energy which would have destroyed him. And since he got so close to completing it, he almost … opened the escape hatch or whatever. The energy- it almost got out. But it didn’t and now it’s revving to escape and keeping him on like, the threshold of death because he was supposed to die at the end of the third trial.”

“Jesus, Kev-“

“He needs to be drained,” Kevin continues loudly, ignoring Dean. “The excess purified energy has to be siphoned off.” Dean opens his mouth – probably to ask a dumb question – but Kevin takes a breath and keeps going, “What we need to do that, is a supernatural creature who can lock into Sam and soak it all up. It’s not really that hard, considering the amount of creatures who can just tap into anybody’s conscious or subconscious whenever they want. We’d just have to involve a ritual so the purified energy didn’t escape the channel that the supernatural creature created by connecting with Sam, and go everywhere or out into the world, or kill one or both of them in the process.” Kevin inhales and exhales deeply, finished with his explanation.

Sam hears Kevin finish and then he can hear Gabe and Dean arguing. The exchange of semi-witty repartee and jabbing insults is like a childish ping pong game and it’s one that Sam expected, given the serious nature of the conversation and the fact that he’s the center of it. Part of him wonders what Mary must be making of all this. But his silence is drawn from within. From what Kevin said. The excess needs to be drained.

Maybe the reason his veins burn is because there’s still something impure to waste away. There’s something in him that the energy from the trials is still trying to get rid of, but it can’t. Because he’s always going to have that dark, unclean part of him. And if the trials didn’t get rid of it - if this aftermath hasn’t erased it yet - then nothing can. There’s always going to be something wrong with him.

“Oh my God, you all are idiots!” Kevin interrupts, hands flying up to his temples. Sam startles out of his reverie. “I’m talking about Gabriel. He’s the supernatural creature. And I have the ritual right here, it was basically just a handful of puzzle pieces that needed to be put together.”

“No possession,” Sam interjects, without looking up.

“What?” Dean’s voice is hardened and Sam’s head pops up, giving Dean a view of wide, plaintive eyes.

“I’m not doing anything that involves possession,” Sam says to the tabletop. “M-me being possessed.”

“We’re not turning down any options,” Dean says firmly, finger jabbing the tabletop. “We’re not in a position, to turn down any options.”
“Hey!” Kevin shouts, startling everyone into silence. “It’s not possession. It’s totally different. Were you not listening to me?!”

“Kev, chill,” Charlie pipes up. “It kind of sounds just like possession …”

“Well, it isn’t,” he says insolently. “It’s not possession; it’s a whole different principle, and some of Gabriel’s grace has to stay in his own vessel.”

“And that’s the part I’m worried about,” Cas says, looking over the notes. “The way that this works, it means that Gabriel’s grace is bordering on being divided. Everything is much more volatile.” He looks around the faces of the group, “I’m sure I don’t need to mention the incredible power a soul is capable of producing …”

“So as someone with billions of years of celestial and cosmic experience,” Dean says, only the barest touch of sarcasm in his words, “what’s your professional opinion?”

“It’s … It’s good this way. Both of you get fixed-“ Cas looks between Sam and Gabe.

“But it’s also really dangerous,” the ‘e’ in ‘really’ sounds long but tight in whatever tone of combined frustration, derision, and foreboding that Gabe’s trying to convey.

“How dangerous?” Dean asks with a hard edge to his voice.

“Does it look like there are any other options?” Sam asks Gabe quietly.

Gabe pulls a chair out so they can sit and be at mostly eye-level, “We could probably keep trying to find one …” his eyes rove across Sam’s profile. “But your soul is essentially leaking out of you. And this method isn’t one that involves possession,” he lowers his voice, “- you aren’t giving up control. No one’s taking over your body, or your mind, or stealing your autonomy. This isn’t your final stand.”

Sam shuts his eyes tight and holds his forehead in his hands because fuck, if it isn’t par for the course; to have Gabe cut through the bullshit and know exactly what Sam actively isn’t saying or thinking about.

“It’s more like a Master Cleanse for your soul,” Gabe adds loud enough for their audience to hear.

“How. Dangerous.” Dean practically carves the question into the air, and earns a glare for his tone from Gabe and Kevin.

Gabe stands again, “Dangerous enough that I wouldn’t consider using it if our combined, current situations weren’t so vulnerable and in need of immediate fixing.” He lets his hand bump into Sam’s shoulder and the touch lingers.

Kevin can read this room like the back cover of a Magic Treehouse novel, and it’s quite obvious that further debate is only going to result in them deciding to use this method of healing anyways, so he stands up and declares, “I’m going down to the storage closet next to the infirmary – the one that looks like Snape’s potions cabinet. Someone should probably come with me to make sure I don’t break or misread anything. Cas, I assume you know the symbols we’ll need, but if not, then good fucking luck finding them.”

And then he’s out of the room with Charlie still yawning as she trails after him.
Mary remains seated. She watches Cas stand, still gulping from his mug before setting it back on the tabletop and stretching obscenely. He wanders into the stacks, presumably for the reference images Kevin mentioned. Gabriel pats Sam’s back with strange subtlety before stepping towards Dean and talking with him in hushed voices at the far end of the table. She untucks her feet from beneath herself and rises, giving a glance to Sam as she follows Cas into the stacks. He’s already got a book open and is reading intently when she finds him.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” she asks, sidling up to peer at the text.

He keeps looking over the page but answers, “When I find the reference images, you can help me sketch them out.”

She almost offers to help him look for those, but decides he would have asked her to unless he wanted to do it alone. Instead she wanders back past Dean and Gabriel and out to the garage where she’d seen a box of chalk next to several cans of spray paint. When she gets back to the library, Gabriel has moved the tables and chairs from the middle of the room and Dean is standing next to where Sam is sitting. Cas comes out of the stacks with his books and lays them all out on the table, looking over them intently. Kevin and Charlie return and nearly run into Mary where she’s stopped in the doorway.

Dean looks around at them, “C’mon people, you’re actin’ like you’ve never performed a ritual before,” he claps his hands once, “Let’s go!”

oOo

Of course, they congregate in the library. Cas had suggested them doing it outside, but Mary had pointed out that they’d be in a controlled environment and closer to resources should they need them in case of an emergency, if they stayed inside. Kevin is not optimistic about their ability to contain any damage, but the others at least seem oblivious to the concerns.

Dean helps Sam up out of his chair as Cas blows away the excess black chalk from the last sigil. Cas steps back as Sam approaches, Dean hovering behind him like the nervous parent of a new toddler. Gabriel waits in the middle of the circle of sigils, so Dean doesn’t break the invisible barrier, trusting the archangel to catch Sam if it’s necessary.

“Ready?” Gabe asks when Sam takes a deep breath and meets his gaze. Sam gives a short nod. Gabriel reaches out to place his left palm on the center of Sam’s chest. He looks over at Kevin, who’s holding out a large notepad, with Gabriel’s rewritten version of the shorthand Kevin had taken on the ritual.

He takes a deep breath and starts reading off the purity spell he’d scripted. He closes his eyes and focuses on his words – the power he’s putting into them, his volume, and intonation.

Dean is terrified and doesn’t care whether he’s doing a good job of hiding it or not. Briefly, he makes eye contact with Cas across the circle. He can see him muttering something under his breath – probably protection spells. It’s reassuring, but his eyes are drawn back to Sam at a quiet, pained hiss. His veins start to glow like they did that night in the church. Dean clenches his fists, wanting to move but knowing there’s nothing he can do. The glow increases and a hum builds, slowly filing
Sam wishes that Gabe would open his eyes again. He could really use the reassurance and is finding it hard to look anywhere else. But he figures it’s probably best that the archangel be able to concentrate fully on the recitation. And he can feel the force of it – the power welling up from their point of contact, the cold heat of grace gathered between Gabe’s palm and his chest.

In his periphery, he can see a soft, white light. He looks down to find that the sigils are lit up. He can feel the low heat of it through his socks. He wonders if the humming in the background is as loud to him as it is to everyone else.

Gabe’s eyes flutter open and lock with Sam’s for a moment, but just as quickly they roll back into his head and he lolls forward, seeming to be braced only by his hand on Sam’s chest. The glow of grace floods out of Gabe’s eye-sockets and mouth. And then Sam is overtaken by it.

The disjointed, quasi-absence from himself is more familiar than he’d like. If he tries hard he can feel all his limbs and could probably open his eyes or move. But his consciousness has recessed into a place of light and there isn’t anything to sense but pressure and another presence. It’s not exactly a train of thought, but the vibe he’s getting is distinctly from Gabriel and it’s almost like he’s telling Sam, “easy, buddy.” Sam does the non-corporeal version of taking a deep breath.

There’s a moment with a promise to make this as painless as possible. That there will be pain, is implied. Something shifts – Gabriel’s grace inside him? – and Sam feels his heartrate pick up. Panic rises like water and suddenly the pervading lack of sensation is contributing to the idea that he’s drowning.

“Just like cleaning out an infected wound,” Gabe communicates, attempting to reassure him.

“I am the wound,” Sam projects, “I’m the infection.”

Sam hates this part – where loss of control to any degree makes him increasingly more distressed. His filter drops because it feels like it doesn’t matter. He feels like an animal – a skittish horse, unwillingly saddled and bridled with someone trying to take the reins. Again.

It takes a moment for Gabe’s placations to come through. Sam’s preoccupied with the rushing in his arteries. The heat that’s been settled so deeply in his bones for these past few weeks is being leached out and he feels so cold without it. But Gabe’s assertions increase in purpose and intent until it’s all Sam can focus on. First, that Sam hasn’t lost any control, he’s just sharing space with Gabe. Next, that he needs to focus on himself or pick a distraction. Which Sam thinks is sort of like trying to calm a bucking bronco with a handful of carrots. But when there’s a moment of stasis – things seem to separate. Sam is able to pick apart everything that’s going on. And he realizes that Gabe’s pressing his own emotions into Sam’s awareness. It’s surreal, and he tries to reject it immediately because Gabe certainly doesn’t feel that way – that would be ridiculous. But it doesn’t abate, and on top of it is Gabe’s reassurances that, “yeah, it’s real; get used to it, bucko.” Sam’s too flummoxed to even panic. And then the cold of Gabe’s grace pours into his bones and organs. Sam distantly hears himself gasp as the last of the painful heat is sapped from his body.

Sam wobbles on his feet as Gabe withdraws and he comes back to himself. The strangest part is that he still feels the residue of Gabe’s emotions so viscerally; the residue of belief backed by aeons of wisdom. Gabe thinks he’s a wonderful – an amazing person. Gabe thinks he’s too hard on himself; that his suspicions about the darkness inside himself aren’t so black and white, that he deserves affection and attention. Gabe loves him. Sam opens his eyes and meets Gabriel’s
instantly. Their breathing has become effortlessly matched. Having Gabe outside of him feels distinctly like a loss, though he’s glad for full control of his faculties once more.

Surprisingly, Dean isn’t the first one to break the silence.

“You okay?” Mary asks warily, eyes widened in careful suspicion.

Sam has to drag his gaze effortfully away from Gabriel’s to look at her. He coughs and blinks hard, “Yeah, yeah, I’m …” his glance falls slowly back to Gabe, “I’m okay.”

Gabe nods approvingly, “Good. I’m fine, too.” He just keeps on staring at Sam.

“What now?” he hears Mary ask after a beat.

“I don’t know about you all,” Kevin closes a book heavily, “but I’m taking a nap.”

“Nope – no, you’re not,” Dean says in his no-nonsense, parenting voice. “We’re all gonna eat a hot meal. Everybody needs some rest but food comes first.”

He herds his mother, Kevin, and Charlie into the kitchen as Sam and Gabe continue to stare at each other. Sam thinks Dean might throw a glance at them over his shoulder. Cas is crouched down and clearing away the lines of the sigil.

Gabe reaches out and clasps Sam’s hand, “You really okay, kiddo?” he whispers.

Sam swallows and nods wordlessly.

Gabe nods back at him again, “Okay.” He squeezes the hand he’s got a grip on, then releases it to reach up and cup Sam’s face in both hands. He draws him down and plants a kiss on Sam’s forehead. Sam only notices he’s stood on his tiptoes to do so when Gabe draws away. He smiles softly at Sam and part of Sam’s brain lights up with a touch of warmth. Gabriel backs up and moves out of the circle to follow everybody else into the kitchen – Sam watches him go.

Cas stands and brushes off his knees. Sam turns to him.

“Is it supposed to feel like I’m closer to him?”

Cas wipes off his hands on each other and shrugs, “It would make sense if you did; his soul touched your grace. You’ve each left a portion of yourself inside of the other.”

Sam can’t help but wonder if the same thing happened when Cas rescued Dean from Hell.

Cas gestures towards the kitchen and they follow after the others.

The stew that Dean serves is perfect – tasty and filling - and Charlie’s certain that they’re all just going to pass out at the table as soon as the last drop is gone.

“You miss being a vegan yet?” Dean asks as he serves Kevin his second bowl. The first had been wolfed down in minutes. Kevin doesn’t respond but keeps full, scathing eye contact with Dean as he shovels a bite into his mouth.

It’s after Dean’s returned with a beer for Sam that Mary asks, “So, you’re angels but you don’t pray before meals?”
There’s a moment of awkward quiet before Cas sets his fork down and clears his throat.

“Prayer is a rather sensitive topic, given … God’s relative absence from our lives.”

“Relative being the operative word,” Kevin says derisively, which earns him a glare from Dean.

“His absence?” Mary prods.

“The guy picks and chooses moments to drop crap on us without warning or explanation, then fucks off and leaves us to our own devices,” Dean takes a pull of his beer.

“Excuse me; ‘crap?’” Cas asks. Dean’s expression is puzzled.

“Yes?”

Cas’s eyes narrow, “Is that how you’d refer to cosmic events like maybe, I don’t know, being rescued from Hell?”

“Cas-“

“I’m gonna go ahead and assume I’m lumped in with that,” Kevin interjects.

“Jesus! Way to get pissy! That’s not what I was talking about,” Dean insists, when Cas is unswayed by the plaintive use of his name.

“Guys-“ Sam uselessly tries to interrupt.

“It seems to fit your generic definition fairly well,” Cas responds.

“I’d like to take a moment to just thank you, because I’ve always wondered how my eulogy was going to sound,” Kevin says, raising his glass in a mock toast.

“Well I wasn’t singling it out,” Dean sets his drink down, “but you’ve gotta admit, it’s part of a larger, persisting problem.”

“‘Crap dumped into our lives by God,’” Kevin tries to continue over Dean. “Not an epithet I would have expected, but it's got a nice ring to it.”

“Look at us,” Gabe pipes up, silverware clattering noisily and cutting off the indignant voices, “What a wonderfully varied and actually qualified group of philosophers. So many different ideas that don’t actually matter at the moment.” His voice gets a seriousness and an edge to it when he adds, “Can we stop harping and eat?”

There’s a beat of silence and then Charlie snorts. All eyes turn to her and she straightens up even as she continues to try and stifle her laughter.

“I’m sorry, but-“ she huffs a laugh, “harping.”

Gabriel barks out a laugh.

Dean groans and puts his forehead to his hand where it’s propped on the table, “Oh my fucking God.”

Mary nudges his foot under the table and he looks up at her as he reaches to take a sip of his drink.

“You curse an awful lot for someone whose best friend is an angel.”
He almost spit-takes at that and Charlie loses control of her laughter. Even Sam chuckles, relieved at the distillation of tension. The subject is dropped and the meal bleeds into the nourishing comfort it was meant to be.

Sam eats his meal slowly. Mary thinks he seems preoccupied so as the others clear their plates and disappear into the depths of the bunker, she lags. She listens to Dean and Cas bickering gently as they wash dishes together. She’s not quite paying attention to what they’re saying, but as they pass through on their way out towards the library, Sam huffs a small breath and shakes his head as if he’s very, very tired of what he sees. He lifts his head and meets Mary’s eyes. Without missing a beat she says, more than asks, “You see it too, don’t you.”

Sam gives a contemplative glance towards the entrance they’ve just gone through, “I’ve been … ‘seeing it’ for the past five years. But I don’t think I knew what it was until …” he drifts off, “well it was after the apocalypse. I know Dean didn’t.”

“And Cas?”

“I think he’s always known. … Either that, or he’s got no clue at all. It’s hard to tell with him sometimes. He’s a genius – literally one of heaven’s best strategists – but he can miss the most obvious things.”

“And you can’t tell if this is one of them.”

Sam nods.

“Does Dean know that you know?”

Sam makes a fleeting but amused face at the phrasing, “I think it’s easier for him not to acknowledge anything. And that probably includes my awareness. I’ve never talked about it with him.”

Mary thinks that there are a lot of things they don’t talk about. That there might be a lot of things they pretend don’t warrant talking about. For as close as the two of them seem, there are some gaping holes in what they think they share.

“Although,” Sam adds, “I, uh- I will say that Dean … Dean seems more affectionate just since you’ve been around. … Like- like maybe he feels that it’s okay.” He swallows hard, “And … and I don’t know where you were going when you brought this up. Your thoughts and feelings on-“ he gestures towards the entryway Dean and Cas disappeared through. “But uh, it’d be great if you didn’t do anything to, to discourage that feeling that it’s okay for him to be that way.”

Mary wets her lips, turning the information over in her mind and hushing her own self-doubts. “And you’re sure that Cas feels the same?”

Sam’s expression twists almost unnoticeably, and he hesitates before answering; “All the signs are there but he’s never- none of us have ever brought it up explicitly. It’s like an open secret but … not. Because I don’t know if either of them realize the way they treat each other, so … so maybe they don’t even think they feel that way.” Sam shrugs and shakes his head, keeping it propped on his hand.

Mary chews on the inside of her cheek and looks down at her empty plate.

“And you’re sure that Cas feels the same?”

“T’ve- I’ve gotta say,” Sam says, increased hesitation lacing his words, “You’re … I mean, you
seem to be handling the uh, the same-sex aspect of this really well. I’m- surprised that this isn’t more of a culture shock.”

“I wouldn’t say ‘really well,’” Mary withholds a wince, “I’ve done my fair share of exploring the internet and … even in such real circumstances,” she shrugs, “I kind of don’t know what to do other than accept it.”

The AIDS crisis is even more awful in retrospect, and the fact that society has been able to move on and begin to recover had left her with a strange sense of relief and loose footing. She’s got enough self-awareness to realize that a change in a lifetime of conditioning doesn’t happen overnight, and that outwardly accepting what she can is a pretty good start.

“Although I will say,” she adds when Sam remains silent, “I’m surprised he’s found this for himself. I can’t imagine Hunter culture has evolved to … to the point where this sort of thing is commonplace. And growing up in that environment – all that he-man, machismo-filled atmosphere couldn’t have helped with- with, I guess, realizing that he might want something other than that.”

Sam looks a bit taken aback – possibly about how much thought she’s put into the matter, but his smile is genuine, “You’d be surprised. We’ve met our fair share of queer hunters. Hunter culture is still really butch, but you don’t meet a lot of outwardly racist, sexist, or homophobic ones. The really good guys? They’re more focused on protecting humanity than persecuting it.” He shrugs, “As for the environment we grew up in? Dad didn’t really like socializing with other hunters. He kept to himself and the set group of people he trusted. Lucky for us they were all the really good guys. And, uh, social issues weren’t really things that got talked about in our circle – at least not when the kids were in earshot. Then when we were old enough to help hunt, there was always something more pressing or we were more focused on relaxing in what small free time we had.”

That’s … at least something.

“What was it like?” she segues, “Those first three years you were hunting together again? Before the apocalypse?”

Sam’s face does something funny and uncomfortable. “ Weird because it was so normal. Rough. Tense …” His expression twists. “Look, you’ve read the books, right?”

She nods.

“Well those cover it pretty well.”

Mary frowns, “It just seems like-“

“That,” he interrupts her, “wasn’t the best time for either of us. We were lost and young and even though we had plenty of experience it was just … every day it felt like we’d landed right back where we’d started.” Hurt settles into the lines on his forehead. “Both of us have- have a lot of open wounds still. From back then.”

Mary waits to see if he’s going to add anything else, “Could you at least- I mean, I’d like to know anything you could share about John’s death.”

“I-“ Sam’s expression collapses. He clears his throat, “That’s not really- that isn’t something- …” he sighs, “You’d think that after all these years we’d have come to terms with it. But … there are some things that, that Dean and I can’t talk about. And that’s one of them. It’s, there’s so much guilt attached,” his voice cracks, and he clears his throat again. “If you’ve got specific questions, I can try to answer them, but don’t, don’t go asking Dean about this. Or his time in Hell. It’ll just send him spiraling, and not to a good place. And in case you were going to, I’m not really
comfortable talking about the Cage, or the demon blood, or Ruby, either. Just so you know.” He shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

Despite the offer to answer questions, Sam’s statement seems final. And Mary doesn’t have anything beyond generalities to ask about at the moment. “Um, alright. I’ll- I’ll get back to you later.”

Sam nods and looks down - scrapes at the last bits of food on his plate until it’s clean, and Mary watches him quietly. He starts to get up but Mary holds out a halting hand and stands, taking her own dishware as she reaches for his.

“Go take a nap,” she suggests as she heads into the kitchen.

“Thanks, mom,” he says as he gets to his feet. It’s good to not watch him struggling to do so.

Mary washes the dishes slowly.

The way everyone treats John’s reaction to her death – the way she reads John’s reaction to her death (both literally and figuratively) – is more than unsettling. The two of them had been so dependent on each other once they’d started building a life together. And neither of them had really wanted to admit that. It never came up when they fought but it had been a cause of underlying tension in their relationship – the fear that the other was or would become independent enough to leave. It wasn’t something she would have ever felt comfortable addressing and working through; John would have felt affronted if she’d tried to silence the fear from his side and she couldn’t bring herself to lay down her pride and admit her own weakness.

Mary supposes that in a lot of ways, John was probably acting out of guilt – in reaction to her death, in contemplation of the ways he felt he’d failed her and their relationship and their sons. That his pursuit of the demon that killed her was a misguided search for closure that wasn’t to be had. Part of her wonders if she should have told John about hunting and the realities of her childhood. The other part is glad for the peace she bought herself with silence.

She pulls the drain plug on the sink. She could spend a year and a day harping over the nuances of their romance and marriage. But the philosophy of whether or not it could have succeeded had it been allowed to continue isn’t the means by which she intends to drive herself mad. She adds the silverware to the drying rack and runs her fingers over the rims of the plates already sitting there.

She leans against the sink and stares up through the small window above it. A large part of her feels disenfranchised. Sam’s response to her trying to ask about their past have set her off keel. Made her feel even more like an outsider than anything else these past few weeks. It’s upsetting and worrying and she doesn’t like being out of the loop this way. Why isn’t she allowed to ask questions? How is she supposed to know them if they won’t let her in?

There is an obvious need for transparency here and she wonders if there’s any catalyst in the world that could bring it about.

She thinks about what Sam said her presence was doing for them.

She wonders if she could be that catalyst.

oOo
Dean has been feeling very conflicted lately. Mary’s presence has caused him to do many things these past few weeks (it’s the part of him that’s still blindly devoted to family and, moreso, the part that’s always idolized her). But her presence hasn’t made it any easier to actually do these things. He’s done them out of the twisted obligation that’s had him asking how high when his father said “jump” and saving the world, in the past. And now he feels antsy and caged and he never really wants to talk to anyone ever again except he feels obligated to. He’s struggling to find a way to expel all of this energy and sentiment without drinking (that didn’t work – only helped fuel his progression to sleep where new twists on old nightmares awaited him).

That objective future he’d always kept at the back of his mind - the one where Charlie and Kevin have been rehabilitated to be Normal Citizens and where Sam and Cas moved on to better things/things they want and deserve and Dean finds himself alone (clinging to whatever fragmented connections they leave him) - it doesn’t seem so close with his mom here.

Which should be a good thing. Dean isn’t exactly looking forward to the day where all of that has happened, but he wants happy fulfilling lives for the people he loves. And he can’t see futures like that for any of them where he’s a part of it. As far as he’s concerned, he’s going to be a hunter for life, which doesn’t exactly invite companionship from people looking for long lives. Dean isn't afraid of commitment (case in point: one Sam Winchester) he's afraid of overcommitment. Of becoming so wholly invested in yet another person that he doesn't know what to do when they leave him and he has to let them go.

Because they will leave him. Inevitably. Sometimes Dean is just able to drag them back (kicking and screaming…). When he can’t do that anymore he doesn’t know what he’ll do with himself. Even Bobby had people he looked out for up through the end.

He doesn’t expect Mary to still be in the kitchen when he goes in looking to fetch himself a beer.

“Mom?” he asks.

She startles and looks over her shoulder, “Oh, sorry,” she says with a placating smile, “Just spaced out for a second there.”

“You okay?” he approaches her slowly.

Mary seems like she’s about to speak an affirmative, but instead, snaps her jaw back shut and looks down into the sink.

“Mom?”

She wants to give him leeway – to preface her curiosity with a measure of comfort and room for escape. But what comes out is; “How much is going on between you and Cas?”

Dean is suddenly, violently taken aback.

“What do you mean?” he asks, firmness glazing over how tentative the question feels inside him.

He knows what she means.
It’s the same thing Sam means when he’s watching Dean and Cas have a conversation.
It’s the same thing Charlie meant when she’d sleepily told him one night that he should say what he means when he talks to Cas.
It’s the same thing Kevin means when he rolls his eyes and mumbles mild insults under his breath about bravado and mating rituals.
It’s the same thing Dean himself had internally expressed in the wee hours of the morning after telling Mary he loved her.

But keeping up appearances is one thing that keeps him protected.

Fleetingly, Mary wonders if she should have approached Cas first, considering how well they got along at first and how open he is compared to her sons. But just as quickly, she realizes that it would be more absurd and inappropriate than what she’s assumed about either him or Dean already.

“For all the strength I see in your relationship with Cas, and for all that I can tell about your relationships with everyone else, I’m not sure what the difference is or what it means.”

“He’s my best friend,” Dean excuses. Honesty but not transparency.

“Do you love him?” Mary asks, not unkindly.

“Of c-”

“Are you *in* love with him?”

The rest of Dean’s sentence dies in his throat.
He wasn’t prepared for this attack and anything he can think of to say sounds like it’ll give him away. Not knowing how Mary is going to react has him frozen with uncertainty. That it matters so much to him makes it all the worse.

His lack of denial speaks volumes. Mary sweeps in for her second strike; “Why haven’t you told him yet?”

Dean tries to think of a refute but his defenses have left him. Mary watches him for an endless moment, and he stares back, trying to make sense of her response and non-commentary. He realizes that maybe it means she’s okay with how he feels about Cas, and is terrified because this is as close as he’s ever gotten to saying anything about it out loud.

“It was never the right time,” he says finally; softly. His heartrate doesn’t slow down with the absent admission but it doesn’t feel like it’s speeding up either. It feels wrong for this to be so easy to say to someone else after he’s been silent about it for so long.

“And now?” Mary prompts.
Dean shakes his head, “I can’t tell him now. He’s only just started getting used to being a human.”

“You don’t give him enough credit,” Mary chides. “Do you really think you’d be taking advantage of him?”

The way she says her question it answers itself. Her voice brokers no argument. Shame burns bright and stark on his cheeks and in his throat.

“I just don’t see the point in it,” he tells her quietly.

She takes a step towards him, “Isn’t happiness enough of a point? Isn’t love?”

There’s sadness and promise – experience behind what she’s saying. She makes it sound so simple.

“I can’t …” he shakes his head and looks away.

“Dean,” she says, gentle and entreating.

Mary is riding a fine line between regret and gladness for broaching the subject. Now that they’ve laid it out so plainly for her and she’s got Sam’s insight, she thinks she can see the overarching story; the build from hell uniting two agents of a Greater Plan to the personal intimacy she’s witnessed since her return. She can read the love in the actions she's witnessed and heard of them performing for one another. But she didn't have to live through it. She wasn't there for every moment and even what she knows is a second-hand account. She doesn't have emotions attached to memories, and so how can she claim to have the right to define their relationship? Who is she to read their fate like tea leaves, out of ten cent novellas and their father’s anecdotes?

“It’s so damn complicated,” he tells her. “There’s so much shit to unbury before I could- before I could try to build anything with him.”

“It is?” Mary asks, and Dean struggles to read into her tone.

“I …”

“You can’t leave it where it is for now and unpack it together as you go?”

Dean can feel her watching the side of his face.

“You’ve let it lie for this long,” she adds quietly.

She refrains from asking what’s holding him back. Maybe to him it really does feel like there’s too much from their past to sort through.

“It’s some heavy shit. I-“ he cuts himself off with a huff of a sigh.

“…You know the situation better than I do,” she concedes gently. “But don’t make things more complicated than they are. Don’t let fear get in the way of your happiness.”

“Hunting until you die and only focusing on that isn’t the path you have to take. I know that the hand you’ve been dealt is far from the best, and I know it’s odd advice coming from me, since I
had a part in the setup of it, but you can still make something of what you’ve got.”

Dean seems to brush her remark aside, “The angels would have had it happen one way or another.”

“Be that as it may,” she struggles not to grit her teeth or show her frustration at how fucking obtuse he’s being, “I want to say … I want to say that I’m proud of you. Of the people you and Sam and Cas have become, and the things you’ve been able to do.”

Dean finally looks up at her.

“And that I wish it didn’t have to be the consequence of such terrible things.”

“Yeah,” Dean says softly, briefly ducking his head again.

She wants to tell him that she can’t find it within her to regret what she did, the future she’s wrought with the choices of her youth. She wants to make him understand. But she’s more than sure that it would be the wrong thing to say. Mary doesn’t know enough of his perspective to know how he’d take or react to her blunt, open confession.

But she has to say something. And she’s been silent and accepting for so long.

“It doesn’t feel like my being here has been all bad,” she starts, “but I’m sorry for showing up when I did. The biggest thing it seems to have done is cause everybody a lot of upset.” She reaches out and takes one of his hands between both of her own. “Dead things should stay dead, and I think I died for a very important reason.”

Dean meets her gaze head on, even as his pained expression pinches, “You have to know it doesn’t make me happy to hear that.”

“I didn’t expect it would,” Mary says, reaching up to cup one of his cheeks. “But I needed you to hear it anyways.”

Dean wants to call foul, but he’s not sure it’s actually unfair of her. He clears his throat.

“It’s just funny. A while back I had to tell someone … well, that feeling guilty wouldn’t bring the people we love back. That all we could do was to live our lives the way we thought would make them proud. Or at least not embarrass her.”

That one grammatical slip up – her – tells a boat load more than Mary is sure Dean means to reveal.

“You were right,” she assures him, her thumb sweeps across his cheek. “And you’ve done a fine job of it. But now it’s time to take something for yourself. Indulge a reality that could come to be.”

She doesn’t know how much more reassurance she can pack into this conversation. Mary hardly knows him at all, but she’s decided he deserves happiness, and wants it badly for him. What more will it take to reel him in and let him have what’s so close to his grasp?

“You’re so good at taking care of everybody that other people forget to take care of you in the ways you really need. And they can’t if they don’t know what to give you and you don’t ask.” She lets her hand fall away back to where she’s still holding his. “So start asking, okay?”
He could tell her that needs can be met by other means; maybe with a joke about substitutes and coping mechanisms. But this is neither the time nor the place for cheapening remarks. And strangely enough, Dean can’t bring himself to want to make any. For now, he can ignore the heartache it would disguise.

“Okay,” he says, and leans forward to pull her into a hug.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your comments, I love reading and responding to them. I know I’m the literal worst but I really am trying to work through real life and a persisting lack of inspiration (despite having the story already fully outlined). Thank you all for your patience, and hopefully I’ll be back soon with the next installment. (We’re only one more away from chapter 18 which is my favorite chapter!!)

End Notes

Exits are to your left, your right, and your rear, restrooms are to the front, Kudos and comments are found below, and as always, very appreciated. Thank you for flying Air fem-castielnovak.

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