Summary

This is an insight into the life of a hunter, about how he fell in love with an angel. And how that angel loved him in return, unconditionally. There is no grand shebang of a climax, no life-altering plot twist, no feel-good fluffy falling action, none of those typical standards expected in “good writing” exist here. Real life does not fit neatly between a prologue and an epilogue, full of surprising parallels, confusing metaphors, and grand self-realizations; real life is gritty, disjointed, and beautiful, held together with hope and determination. Dean and Cas fall in love, it’s unremarkable. Dean and Cas fall in love, it’s spectacular.
The first time I kissed him we were watching bones burn somewhere outside of Lincoln late at night. He was squatting down a couple feet away from the flaming grave, zipping the bag we brought the remains in; he wasn’t paying attention, he was focused on the flames, (later he told me) remembering the pain of the mother’s cry as we explained the situation. I bent slowly, still nervous and unsure if I was even going to follow through with a kiss I had not planned, and placed a hand on his shoulder, quickly pressing my lips to the back of his neck.

And like that it was over, I stood back up and walked to the Impala, not daring to look back. My mouth was dry and my hands were almost shaking.

I got in the front seat, gripping the steering wheel, allowing myself to be vulnerable until he got back in the car. Chancing a look up, I saw he was still next to the fire, though standing now. His shoulders showed signs of deflation; this case had hit him hard, the child was once a vessel to Camael and Cas respects those who are chosen by such angels because of their unwavering belief. Making up for the loss of his.

Then he turned around and as he looked at the car, he raised his hand to touch his neck but dropped it before he started to walk. It was too dark near the Impala for me to see his face as he approached, thankfully. I’m even more grateful that it was too dark for him to see my face. I still allowed myself this moment of weakness, hoping it was all I needed to get past this.

He slid into the passenger side, effectively forcing my vulnerability out of the car, holding the bag closely as if it still had valuables in it. He didn’t look at me, his eyes intense in the direction of the low flames licking at the edges of the hole still.

As I was reaching for the keys, ready to leave, Cas halted my arm. “Can we stay until the flames succumb?” he asked, making it not sound like a question.

I placed my hands back on the wheel. I supposed we could pay our respects.

Cas told me one night, years later, as we drove away from another burning grave, that he wanted to stay, not to pay his respects, but to map out the very anatomy of the landscape where I first kissed him. To this day, he can tell me the age of each of the hundreds of trees surrounding that clearing, how many ants were scattered and blades of grass were dug up to make room for the grave, the
ratio of wildflowers to wild berries surrounding the Impala.

Chapter End Notes

I'm in architecture school, so posts will be sporadic, I apologize! Also, beta'd by my awesome friend, Erin.
Another Type of Beginning

Sam sits opposite Dean in the diner as he reads another news article about the deaths happening in a town north. Dean flips through the pages of John’s journal, not really intent on finding anything because they already know it’s a rogue reaper, he just wants to remember his dad.

The waitress sets down their lunches with a smile and the normal, “Here you go, boys, anything else I can get y’all?”

Dean shakes his head and thanks her, closing the journal. As he picks up the burger, Sam’s still reading the article. Knocking on the newspaper like a door, it crumbles a bit under his force and Sam’s face appears. “Dude, we already know it’s a reaper, you don’t have to read anymore.”

He folds the paper up, placing it on top of his jacket. “I know we do but it doesn’t hurt to know what the town is thinking when we go in.” Finally, he eats, spearing his salad with a fork.

“ Aren’t you even going to put ranch on that?” Dean teases, looking at the mass of vegetables.

He sighs, tired of his brother's remarks about his ‘rabbit food.’ “It has cheese on it already, besides there’s bacon on it too,” he notes, jokingly offering his brother one of the so-small-barely-passes-as-bacon bacon bits.

“I’ve got enough bacon right here.” A slice almost falls out as he takes a bite of the burger.

“ Aren’t you a little confused about why a demon would make a deal with a reaper?” Sam is referring to the crossroads demon they exorcised last night that admitted it was the reaper’s idea for him to offer loophole deals to the locals who came forward. “There couldn’t have been that many people in that town who all made deals at the same crossroads and just happened to have expired deals around the same time.”

Dean clears his throat. Yeah, it’s been bothering him, but as long as they find the sucker, he doesn’t care. “Once we get the reaper, it won’t matter much, will it? The deaths will stop.”

“ They already stopped,” Same notes, “We exorcised the demon with the contracts already.”

“You know what I mean. This reaper is just going to move on to some other town and some other crossroads demon if we don’t stop it. So hurry up, we gotta go before it realizes its friend is missing.”

They’re back in the Impala and Sam’s resumed reading the paper again. Dean turns on my stereo and stamps the beat out on the wheel as they start driving to their destination.

I’ve been distracted this entire case, Dean thinks, and if I’m being honest I don’t even care about it. I’m just doing it because it’s ‘the right thing to do’ not because I actually care about stopping another damned monster. No matter how many we hunt and kill and destroy, no matter how many wards, sigils, or traps we mark down, no matter how much research we do. The hunt never fucking ends. Yeah, I find meaning in the job almost every other time we go out because it means we’re helping people, but this time I don’t care. I don’t care about the people or their denial of anything supernatural in this world; I don’t care about the monsters and their destructive ways.

I’m so exhausted.

The brothers find out, once they have the reaper in a trap, that a gang of demons controlled him. Working to build an army of souls, these demons planned to rebel against Crowley and rule Hell themselves. “Yeah, right,” Dean mutters at the nonsense, “as if that would actually happen.”
“You’d be surprised what strength helplessness can give to some souls,” the reaper counters from inside the trap. Sam is looking up ways to banish a reaper right now, but they’ll probably just kill him. They still have an extra angel blade in the trunk.

“Let’s just leave him here until we find the rest of the demons.” Sam looks up from his quick researching. “Then maybe we’ll come back for him.” Dean closes the door to the cellar and they leave the abandoned building.

They never go back for him.

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Sam knows how much Dean appreciates the bunker but he doesn’t think he’ll ever know the extent. The domestic of the whole environment remind Dean of Mom or Lisa and Ben, part of him still holding on to those slices of normality he had for such a short time. Having a fully stocked kitchen or his own room, luxuries he never before had as a hunter, make him ache for a boring life that he never considered.

It’s still strange taking as much time in the bathroom as he needs, not worried about having to share one with Sammy anymore. Being able to fully look at himself, or not look at himself, in the mirror. His eyes trace over his body, still riddled with scars no matter how many times Cas heals him. The burn of his handprint is still stark against his skin after all these years. He stares at it, wondering where Cas has been the past couple months. *Been calling him but he hasn’t picked up; finally resorted to prayer one night but not even that worked. He’s probably in heaven ignoring me. Not that we need him right now, there are no cases, but it’d be nice to at least no he’d answer if we needed him.* He reaches to touch the handprint but ends up grabbing the towel from the hook. He suddenly realizes he doesn’t need the towel and puts it back, walking out of the bathroom.

* Might as well catch some sleep before Sam finds another case for us to solve. He slips out of his clothes and into his bed, not even bothering to turn the lights on.

As he’s closing his eyes he hears a rustle and instinctively knows. He doesn’t know how he knows.

“Hello, Dean.”

He’s too angry and definitely too damned tired to deal with Cas dropping in whenever he feels like it. He doesn’t care how busy he is or what the hell he does when he’s not with them, but he should at least call Dean back. “What the hell, Cas?” he mutters into the pillow, not even bothering to turn over to face him.

“I heard you.” He pulls the chair out from the desk but Dean doesn’t know if he sits down yet.

“You’re late.” He still doesn’t turn over. “We’ve been wondering where you were for months but you just disappeared on us again. I’m tired, Cas, I don’t want to talk right now.” Suddenly he’s too warm but refuses to take the covers off, trying to shield Cas from his ever-fueling anger. “We can talk about this in the morning.”

He rolls away from the sound of his voice when he speaks again, “I was looking for my grace again.”

Dean softens slightly but not enough to not be angry with Cas. “Cas, dude, we’ve been looking for that for a long time, isn’t it time to give up?” It’s heartless, he knows, but he’s so exhausted with hunting that it doesn’t even matter that Cas’s grace isn’t a monster to be hunted.
“You don’t understand.” Cas harshly punctures the darkness with his words. “You’ve never had the power of the universe coursing through you all to be taken away in an instant.” He’s angry but Dean’s pushing out the sympathy in him; he’s pushing it out so he doesn’t have to deal with the thought of wanting to get up and hug Cas. “You will resurrect Sam however many times you need to but the moment I want help finding my grace you lose motivation.”

Dean sighs loudly, almost growling with the anger laced through him in that moment. “Your grace is lost Castiel, this is different than Sam and you know it.”

“No, it’s not.” It sounds like he’s shouting Dean knows he’s not. “Fine, I’ll just leave again until I find it.” The thought of Cas leaving again scares Dean, and he can’t pinpoint why.

“Cas,” he states, so plainly and so quietly but with such conviction he can hear the angel stop moving. He still hasn’t sat up to face him.

“What, Dean?” Something inside Dean jerks.

“We’ll find your grace.” And he means it. Because if he doesn’t then Cas would know and that would mean he would leave again. “You don’t have to go.”

He can sense the angel’s shoulders begin to fall as he collapses on the corner of my bed. “You’ve never felt the brokenness that I am experiencing, Dean.”

He doesn’t reply because no matter if he says he has or he hasn’t it won’t be the answer Cas wants. He needs his grace, not Dean’s sympathy.

Cas is still sitting on the end of Dean’s bed when he wakes up. Knowing this oddly comforts him. He sits up, finally seeing what has happened to him. He’s never seen a body more fitting of the word ‘broken.’

“Cas, dude, what the hell happened to you?” he forces out of his clenched jaw, angry that he’s injured and didn’t tell him, didn’t try to mend himself even.

“The other angels,” he breathes, sounding as if he woke up, but Dean knows he didn’t sleep. “I went higher in heaven, looking for angels who might have knowledge of how to translate Metatron’s tablets. I thought, maybe the older angels of realms before my own would know what to do. They attacked me viciously, not welcoming of outside angels. Michael once told me how the elder angels do not take kindly to us children in their realms.” Cas finally looks his friend in the eyes and Dean feel himself attempting to continue the eye contact despite seeing him continue to shatter.

“Cas, we need to get you mended up,” Dean tells him, pushing the sheets off and throwing on his clothes from yesterday. “C’mon, I’ve got a kit somewhere, I can put you back together in a second.”

“I am not a car, Dean.” He thinks it was an attempt at a joke, but his body isn’t able to respond to humor while looking at the battered vessel of Castiel sagging in front of him. He lets Dean guide him to the kitchen to start patching him up.

“How did you even get your body messed up while in heaven?” he asks, measuring a length of string for sutures. “I thought you didn’t need vessels up there.”

He is slow to respond. “I thought maybe the elders would take more pity on me if they thought I wasn’t able to sustain myself without a vessel, and see how badly I do need my grace returned.” He doesn’t wince or gasp the entire time Dean stitches up his wounds.
“Doesn’t any of this hurt?” he asks, finally finishing when he put a bandage on Cas’s neck.

He looks up at Dean as he gathers the bloodied supplies from the table top. “Not as much as when they were tearing me apart.” His eyes are incredibly distant and Dean has to look away, almost overcome with the pain in them.

*What’s wrong, I’ve seen worse than this before.*

He washes his hands and grabs a bottle of whiskey from the fridge. “C’mon, Cas, you need a drink.”

There’s one room in the Bunker that Dean spends most of his spare time in because it’s the only empty room. It lets his mind go blank. He leads Cas there, knowing that’s what he needs right now too. Alone on the ceiling, a barred up window is cut out, sigils covering the glass the iron protects. Dean don’t know what this room is for, and he hasn’t asked Sam because he doesn’t want him to think more about this room than he has to, which is never if Dean can help it.

He helps Cas sit against the wall and then goes to lie in the middle of the floor himself, staring up at the window. The only window in the entire Bunker. He forces himself not to look at Cas, but that only works until he hears him pick up the bottle and take a long swallow from it. It’s empty when he pulls it away from his lips. His lips shine with the remnants of the liquor before he licks it away.

*Why am I focusing at his lips like that?*

Dean look away again so he stops thinking about those lips.

“Dean.” He forces himself to stay still. “I need more of that.”

“You know where it is, Cas,” Dean replies, it’s almost a whisper as it leaves his mouth.

He sees his shadow move as it stands up and leaves, back to the kitchen to get more alcohol. The door shutting behind him is Dean’s queue to sigh loudly.

*Stop this, you’re reminiscing about a past life, a domestic life, which was never really yours anyways. You can’t project this desire onto the nearest human. Cas isn’t even a fucking human, he’s an angel for god sake, grace or not. You call him when you need angel mojo not when you need a reminder of humanity. He’s a friend, he’s an angel, that’s it. He’s only thinking about his grace now anyways, Cas doesn’t want anything to do with your pathetic human longings. Unwarranted longings.*

*God, you just need a fucking drink, that’s it. You’re too sober right now, that’s the problem. Just take some of whatever—*

The door opens as Cas slides back in the room, clutching two bottles of bourbon in the less injured of his arms. Dean sits up, extending his hand, and Cas knows to give him a bottle. Dean closes his eyes as he takes more than a couple swigs from the bottle before his throat tightens too much to continue. Cas has almost finished his bottle in the same time.

“Woah, dude, don’t you think you better slow down?”

He looks at Dean, with his squinting eyes, and answers, “This is what you do to numb yourself, if I am not mistaken.”

Dean swallows hard, not knowing how to reply. So he doesn’t. He rolls his bottle in Cas’s direction and hears him pick it up as he lies back down. It’s almost worse when Dean can’t see the angel because then he starts to think about how his throat would jump when swallowing such continuous amounts of alcohol.
“How do you continue every day knowing you are so weak?” Cas asks, pulling the bottle away from his mouth and flinging it against the far wall. It shatters, a cascade of ringing glass echoing in the small room.

Dean sits up properly. “I just get another bottle,” he sighs, trying to pass it off as a joke.

“No, not you, Dean. Humans. How do humans live knowing they are so powerless in this world? I can feel myself seeping out, breaking down, I can feel my powers dulling every second.”

Dean struggles for words, barely able to grasp enough to form a thought. “Cas, dude, you will make it through this. Just wait until we get your grace back. Besides, don’t you still have ol’ what’s-his-name’s grace?” he asks, trying to comfort Cas but knows he’s not.

“Dean.” It’s a harsh and soothing sound coming from his mouth at the same time. “I have dissipated four different angels’ graces so far, much faster than I intended. Graces are not meant to sustain angels not their own. I need mine back.” Dean knew this but it still comes as disbelief to him.

“Well, whose do you have right now?” There’s a tone of shock in his voice that he can’t suppress.

“None. I used the last of Domiel’s to get myself here.”

He swallows hard, not knowing what else to do.

“I need more alcohol.”

Cas doesn’t get up as quickly as Dean does, so he’s the one heading to the kitchen for their drinks.

*It should not be this hard to be around Cas? How long have you known this dude? Five years? Six? He’s a fucking angel; can they even feel emotions like that? Cas is the closest you’ve seen to an angel showing any semblance of humanity, and he’s still missing the mark by a lot. Just. Stop. Thinking.*

He grabs a twenty-four pack from under the shelves in the kitchen and two more bottles of whiskey that he’d had hidden in the back of the freezer. It’s going to be a long night for the both of them.

And like that, he blocks any wandering thoughts about Castiel with a thick wall of liquor and heavy eyelids.
Secrets

Dean does not realize how much I lie to him.

Castiel can barely get into heaven these days, especially if he doesn’t have the help of some angel he happens across in his wandering, and even then they have to feel great pity for Cas in order to break so many rules to smuggle him through the gates.

I didn’t battle with some elder angels, I’m not even sure if they’re real, I only ever heard Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael talking about them anyways. The archangels have many secrets among them that others are not allowed to know. Including any surpassing knowledge.

No, Castiel found another liquor store and drank it. Then, he came across a trio of hunters, and could tell they desired a monster to hunt. He offered himself up. The angel doesn’t know what he was trying to prove to himself, or disprove. Being without his grace has given him little caution for his wellbeing and no concern for outcomes. These hunters had never come across an angel before, didn’t have a clue what they were doing when they were trying to take him down. Yes, all the blades hurt and the bullets stung as they punctured his weak vessel but he was still laughing when they tried to perform an exorcism on him. Fools, humans are fools. Fascinating and naïve, but fools nonetheless.

It brought Castiel back to when Dean and Bobby shot him a dozen times as he approached them. Then Dean plunged that damned demon blade through his chest, thinking it would have some effect. He had no knowledge of the power Jimmy Novak’s body was trying to confine. Castiel had to constantly think about controlling himself in the vessel at first, had to remember not to let anything overcome him. There was still an echo of human emotion in the vessel at the beginning that he was constantly fighting off, so that he wouldn’t accidentally succumb and show his true form in front of the fragile humans.

Now I’m a fragile human too. Heaven hurts to enter now, it sears my soul when exposed to that much raw energy. Sometimes I want to cry with the desperation I am experiencing, an emotion I did not think I was capable of. These human sentiments have ruined me. I used to gather strength and willpower from the emotions created by humans as they prayed, feeding on the power. Now I’m the one praying and I hear no answers.

Dean is right, Castiel has been human this long. He doesn’t deserve it though, he deserves more than to be discarded once his mission was complete. Dean saw potential in the angel, whole or not. If these damned frail humans can see his potential then why couldn’t the Lord or any of the other angels. Ever since Metatron has been captured the other angels have not so much as whispered his name amongst themselves.

“Cas, Cas— Cas!” Dean shakes him.

“What do you need?”

“Just making sure you were still alive.” He sits back down, farther away than he was earlier.

“I do sleep now Dean, I’ve been sleeping for months.” It sounds so pathetic once admitted. “I had to walk into the Bunker last night, I only was able to get as far as outside of Lebanon before it was snuffed completely.” His soul yearns for the power of another grace; he can feel himself becoming addicted, like those humans and their narcotics.
Dean’s mouth falls open slightly, for some reason he is shocked by this news even though he knew Castiel didn’t have his grace but at least assumed he had a grace.

“So you don’t have any mojo left, not even enough to teleport?”

“I can’t do anything right now.” He hangs his head after Castiel takes another long drink from the bottle between his palms. The angel looks up, and there it is— that look of pity he’d been dreading.

“Cas, we’ll find your grace….” There is no solace in his words.

“You keep saying that but you don’t do anything.” Cas spits out before cracking open another beer.

“Dammit, Cas.” Dean gets up and stomps out of the room.

For months Castiel stays locked in this room, Dean ordering him to stay put so he doesn’t cause any more turmoil. Sam and Dean have been searching for the answer to his missing grace ever since Dean got up and left, months of research, interrogations, and messy visits to Heaven. Sometimes Dean comes by and Castiel can hear him sitting on the other side of the door after he’s passed him food and alcohol. He sits and drinks with his friend but he rarely says anything. It has been Sam who informs Castiel of any headway they make in the hunt for the missing grace. He came by about a week ago to tell Castiel they were close to something, after talking to the elder angels (the archangels weren’t lying after all); they just needed to go back once Metatron gave into his interrogations, he couldn’t hold out forever.

One night he’s lying under the window as Dean did when he first brought him here. Staring up at the stars, looking for the ones he visited so long ago.

Nothing prepared me for earth. Not traveling the universe when I was young, trying to soak up the aura of the galaxies. Not attending the birth and deaths of stars and planets. Not even watching the humans at a safe distance from up in Heaven; I never understood their motivation or reasoning for anything as I watched massacres, plagues, or rebirths of civilizations. And then I finally touched myself to the planet and understood that these humans were far too consumed in their emotions to govern themselves with any dignity.

It makes him think of how raw Dean is, the tenderness of his soul completely overcome with his emotions. He thinks he’s fooling himself when he drinks himself to unconsciousness or finds a lonely girl at a bar to fornicate. Dean thinks he’s better than his emotions but Castiel knows him too well and he know his sentiments are what make him. They give Castiel hope though, something he’s given up on yet still desperately clings to.

He hears the turn of the lock and the scrape of the door as it opens. Assuming it’s Sam letting me out to use the bathroom, he stands up. When he turns around he comes face to face with Dean.

“Cas,” he whispers, and the angel feels the excitement radiating from his body though he gives nothing away physically. “We got it back.”

Castiel’s heart starts racing, and he’s suddenly scared. “Where is it?” he finally chokes out, feeling the tug of his grace, so close.

Dean pulls a glass vial no bigger than his index finger out of his jacket pocket. He starts to open it, but Castiel stops him, “You will not want to be in here when my soul bonds with my grace again.” He takes the vial from the hunter, looking softly at their hands as they brush. He feels warmer than Castiel has ever been. Dean’s eyes meet Castiel’s as he looks up again. His eyes are almost too bright against the dullness of the room, the dullness of me. “I’ll come find you when I’m whole.
again.”

He opens his mouth to speak but doesn’t, and licks his lips before he finally replies, “I’ll wait outside.” That’s not what he was originally going to say but the angel is glad that he will wait.

The door clicks closed and his hands tremble, reaching to open the bottle. Castiel can feel it vibrating between his fingers, its energy slowly seeping into his surroundings, trying to find its way back to his soul.

He uncaps the vial and everything is bathed in his grace’s light as his vessel reabsorbs it and his soul once again bonds with its own. Castiel’s body suddenly feels full and weightless at the same time; the power strengthening him once again. He can hear the Enochian passing his lips as he revels in his revived power. The glass window above him shatters but the shards evade his vessel.

The next thing the angel knows, Dean is kneeling beside him, cupping the back of his neck as a smile stretches his face in a way Cas hasn’t seen in too long.

“He’s back,” he confirms, his smile widening. *Even his soul, his beautiful soul, is happy right now.*
Dean keeps blaming the grace. He continues to tell himself that he’s thinking so much about Cas because he saw the angel’s grace in its true form. That because he was exposed to his life force that he’s bound to care more about him now, like his energy found its way into the hunter’s veins and now he needs to make sure it survives. But his dark eyes and broad shoulders have nothing to do with his grace. The way he curiously tilts his head when Dean exposes him to another human phenomenon doesn’t prove he is healing and yet he notices every time he does.

They have barely spoken since Cas has gotten his mojo back. Ironically, he has spent his entire time as a re-graced angel at the Bunker, helping Sam and Dean with cases. Dean’s brief issue with hunting has been resolved; he is constantly throwing himself into the cases now. It’s hard for him to admit the reason behind his sudden spur of interest in hunting again but neither Sam nor Cas notice any changes. It’s hard enough thinking about it, let alone if he actually had to speak about it to either one of them.

At least Cas is out of the windowed room now and the hunter can seclude himself again. Sometimes it looks like Cas is about to follow him into the room but he takes a turn down another hallway right before he opens the door. And then Dean is alone. I wish he would follow me….

I’d probably yell at him, to be honest, so he doesn’t see that I want him in here, in the one room that was mine alone up until a few months ago.

“Alright, boys, we’re going to Louisiana,” Dean announces, walking into the kitchen as Sam eats lunch and Cas stirs his coffee. “Been some hushed news about zombies. Local reports keep playing it off as overzealous Evil Dead fans but my gut tells me otherwise.”

Cas looks up, and Dean convinces himself that the smile Cas gives comes from his gratefulness to stop fiddling with his coffee. “I can take us,” he offers willingly.

Dean snorts. “I’m not letting you drive Baby.”

He squints his eyes. “I meant, I can zap us there, as you say.”

“Oh, no, buddy, I told you last time I didn’t like that.” His face contorts with queasiness as he thinks back.

“It would be more beneficial and time saving.”

“I say Cas takes the wheel on this one, figuratively, of course,” Sam pipes in, putting his dishes in the sink. “It’s quicker for him to get us there and back, so we could be done with this entire case by tomorrow if we’re lucky.”

Dean’s annoyed Sam isn’t on his side. “Fine,” he grumbles, “I’ll go get supplies from my car.” He turns on his heel and walks to the tunnel where Baby is parked.

The supplies in the trunk have been moved around, so Dean bends over closer looking for the spell books in the back.

“Why are you so opposed to doing things the angel way?” Cas asks over his shoulder, startling Dean, who almost hits his head on the hood.
He groans quietly, hoping Cas takes that as an answer. He’s staring at the hunter intently as Dean finally looks up from the spine of the book he’s trying to translate. “I told you, I don’t like when I get ‘zapped,’ it just isn’t my favorite way to travel, feels too much like flying.

“I do have wings,” Cas says naively, not understanding.

“No, I meant it reminds me of planes, the jerkiness and speed of your ‘zapping.’ I just don’t like it, okay.”

“Dean, I don’t understand why you would get my grace back then not take advantage of all the powers I once again possess. You were always eager before to call upon me when convenient.” His eyes bore into the other’s, as if drilling for the answers.

Trying to avoid an argument, trying to avoid feeling any overly strong emotions towards Cas, Dean gives in, “Fine, I will try your means of spontaneous travel without a fight.” He shuts the trunk and walks back inside before Cas has a chance at responding.

Once Sam dresses in his FBI outfit, they all gather next to the table; Dean feels anxious at the thought of traveling through time and space, Sam seems glad to leave the Bunker for the first time in a week, and Cas looks almost excited to have control over this bit of the hunt. He puts a hand on each Winchester’s shoulder without saying a word— and the contents of Dean’s stomach are still sloshing around as they appear in an alley. *We’re not in Kansas any more,* rings in his ears, stomach continuing to gurgle.

He takes a deep breath to gather himself, about to speak.

“Alright, I’ll go to the police station, once I drop our bags off at the motel,” Sam interrupts his brother before he has a chance to start, “you two can head to the crime scenes. There’s a couple, so try and get to them all today.”

They all walk to the mouth of the alleyway to take our separate ways but are blocked by a screaming crowd. Dean almost panics, automatically thinking danger. Then notices the dancing and the laughing and the huge stage a block away. A festival. *Like we didn’t have enough problems, now we have to deal with an overpopulated city. When there are zombies around.*

He looks over the crowd, trying to find their way out, but there’s another stage set up in front of a restaurant a block the other way, and the crowd of people already seems to have grown denser in the time it’s taken to scan it. “I’m going to go ask for directions,” Sam shouts over the noise as he fights his way through the crowd, looking out of place in a suit.

“This way,” Cas directs, leading Dean along the back sidewalk. He turns down another alley, walks through a store, and they exit near another stage, but this one is empty so there’s far less people around. They walk along the street for ten more minutes, a pregnant silence shared between the two. Dean doesn’t mind it though, for some reason it’s almost comfortable.

“Here,” Cas notes, turning left abruptly and ducking under a line of caution tape,

“Oh.” He didn’t even realize the angel knew where they were going.

“Don’t act so surprised, Dean.” He looks over his shoulder. “I have been avidly hunting for several months now. I know a thing or two.”

A cop walks out of the apartment building as they approach. “Can I help you?” she asks fiercely.

“I’m Special Agent Watts and this is my partner Special Agent Wood.” Dean stops the shock from
showing on his face at Cas’s calm introduction by looking down at his badge as he pulls it out.

“We don’t need the feds here, we’ve got this under control.” She spins around to walk away.

“With all do respect, ma’am,” Dean counters, finally finding his voice, “We’re just going where the boss says. Now can you show us to the crime scene?”

She swings around to face his, mad. “You can address me as Detective Labeaux,” she huffs. “And the whole damned building is a crime scene. I don’t have to babysit you two, do I?”

“No, Detective Labeaux, we can handle it ourselves,” Cas answers, seeing Dean’s stance change as he prepares to return Detective Labeaux’s respect. “Thank you.” She turns on her heel and reenters the apartments through a different door.

“C’mon, lets see what she was talking about.” They step inside the building, the entrance looks normal enough. “I wonder what she meant by ‘whole damned building.’”

“This,” Cas’s voice comes out deeper than usual. He’s in the doorframe of what looks to be the laundry room.

Dean stands behind him and look in the room, disgust clouding his face. There are at least a dozen various body parts strew across the room, and he’s not entirely sure they’re all human. I hope they’re not all human. Then he notices the centerpiece of the bloody Pollock scene, an alligator carcass spread on a table.

“What the hell?” he coughs, as the smell hits him.

“The alligator was killed for a ritual. As were the rest of those whose limbs are still here,” Cas notes, walking over to the floor where there’s a makeshift fire pit’s remains and bowls of blood and other ingredients.

“It was definitely voodoo.” Dean’s looking more carefully at the marks of blood surrounding the alligator now, he recognizes them from the spell books.

“You said before coming that there were zombies though.”

“Yeah, it must be the voodoo that’s making the zombies then.” He’s switched into his work mode, and it’s the only way he’s able to stay focused, by completely blocking out everything that isn’t information to progress this case, and that includes the way Cas tilts his head.

Cas and Dean walk out of the room and decide to go upstairs, where there seems to be an awful lot of noise. The hallway on the second floor is lined with body bags; it looks like a scene from some fucked up hospital corridor in a movie.

“They’re not all human remains,” Cas reassures Dean when his face contorts.

“Then what the hell is in all these?”

“More alligators and other fauna of the state. There’s at least one black bear, a couple river rats, and —”

“Okay, man, I get it.” The hunter can’t suppress another gag as the two pass the bags of bloody viscera. A man’s mangled face looms in a bag the medics didn’t zip all the way. “Can you not smell that shit?” Dean asks Cas, noticing his face is too soft for the smells in this hallway. Two EMTs carry out another body bag and lay it down in line.
“It’s not much worse than you humans usually smell.” Dean stares in disbelief. This guy can smell bladder infections but decaying bodies in the Louisiana humidity smell as good as a Hershey’s Factory. “I am joking, Dean,” Cas finally admits. “It is quite a foul smell. Nothing compared to what Jupiter’s atmosphere smells like though.” Dean forces his jaw to lock so it doesn’t drop open. “Jupiter is composed entirely of gases found in this universe, and trust me, it looks more beautiful that it smells,” Cas explains as he walks through the rooms, while Dean hangs out at the doorways.

He jots a couple notes down and they head up to the third and final floor, where there’s less commotion. Must mean there’s less of a crime scene up here.

There’s nothing up here. All the rooms are untouched, no blood or guts to be seen. Both men double-check each room to make sure, but not one thing is out of place. It doesn’t look like anyone packed in a hurry or that doors were broken down, it’s like the entire floor of tenants just disappeared.

“The people who lived on this floor must have been the ones who were turned to zombies, whereas the ones on the floors below us we either tests, sacrifices, or I guess some could be zombies too.”

“Yes, that is what I was thinking as well,” Cas agrees, confirming Dean’s suspicion about the zombies that lead them here in the first place.

“Alright, lets go see what Sam has found.” Dean takes the quickest route possible out of the building, relishing in the fresh but humid air outside.

“Do you think any of it has to do with the festival that is happening right now?”

It’s a good thought, Dean thinks. “You know,” he says, half turning to Cas as they walk back onto the busy street, “it probably does.”

Sam looks anxious when they find him; he’s sitting outside a restaurant with a table full of manila envelopes. He’s quickly flipping through each one before deciding which pile to put it in. “Hey, guys.” He looks up as we approach. “How many scenes did you get to? Did you know there’s actually six different crime scenes, that’s three more than we thought.”

“Uhh, Sammy, we only got to the one.” He turns towards his brother. “It’s a lot worse than I thought, man, there’s bodies and blood everywhere.”

“Also,” Cas pipes in, sitting down across from Sam, “voodoo is clearly involved, but there were no clues left at the crime scene. Maybe at the rest there will be.”

“We should split up and at least visit the rest of the crime scenes, see if there’s any information there.”

“I’m gonna go get myself some lunch,” Dean interrupts. At the counter he orders two po’boys and a beer, and waits while watching the muted television. The journalist looks like she’s interviewing one of the band members who came to perform this week. “Where’s Cas?” he asks, sitting down back at Sam’s table with food.

“He went to check the rest of the crime scenes. He said it’d be faster if he did it his way, since he won’t have to navigate the crowds.”

Dean finishes chewing on the bite he took. “He didn’t wait for me?” He puts as little emotion into that sentence as possible. It shouldn’t bother me that Cas is doing this himself, it’s not like he’s left, he’ll only be gone for a couple hours.
“He said he knows you don’t like ‘zapping.’ Besides, you can help me leaf through these files. There’s at least eighty I haven’t gone through yet.” The piles Sam’s already separated look to have twice as many envelopes as the ones he hasn’t.

Dean sighs. *I hate paperwork.* “Oh, yeah, and what are all these?” he asks, drinking half his beer in one swallow.

“These are all the confirmed persons somehow involved in this case. People living in the buildings, people’s DNA found at the crime scenes, people’s body parts found at crime scenes, and those who are dead at the crime scenes. Oh, and those suspected missing from the scenes.” He indicates to the largest pile he has so far. That means at least more people are either alive or zombies than unsuccessful transformations or sacrifices.

It takes them at least another two hours to sort through all the files, the sun is starting to set now and it’s definitely cooled down.

Dean leans back to sigh, stretching his back, and see Cas approaching them.

“There is a total of seventeen different human’s bodily remains found at the various crime scenes. One of the detectives said at least thirty-nine different people have been confirmed missing, with another eleven possibly missing. Nine total, but deceased, bodies accounted for.” He riddles off these facts with minimal emotion, his face just as monotonous as his voice.

*Holy shit.* “Holy shit. Are they sure?” the older Winchester asks, sitting forward.

“Yes.”

“That does match pretty closely to our numbers here, Dean,” Sam notes, flicking through his notes on the files. “We’ve seen worse, unfortunately.”

“That doesn’t make this any better, Sammy. Pie wouldn’t make this any better.” Dean’s switched to water, which he gulps down quickly. “Suppose that’s the job though.”

“There are two suspects, in particular, that the police suspect so far,” Cas informs.

“Well, we can start there then, see what they know,” Dean concedes.

“One is the neighbor of the first couple that went missing, Henry Bolton, and the other is the owner of three of the six properties that are now crime scenes, Joshua James-Patterson.”

“I’ll go look into the neighbor, you two can go check on the property owner,” Sam suggests, gathering the files and organizing them into his bag. “I’ll go drop these back off at the police station before though.”

“You ready to go?” Dean wipes his mouth.

Cas nods and leads the way to Joshua’s. Not surprisingly, it’s just around the corner from the apartments they visited earlier.

An hour later, they walk out of his house and Dean immediately calls Sam, “Well, it wasn’t him, Sam. He’s dead.”

“What?” he asks, sounding like his brother just said the most impossible thing.

“Cas and I went to his place, but when we got there the door was open. We walked inside and it
looked like another fucking blood ritual.”

“Dammit, I would have thought it was him, considering the connection.” He sighs. “I’m almost done here. I’m going to head to the coroner’s office after this, she said I could stop by to grab copies of her files and go over them with her.”

“See you then.” Dean hangs up. “Looks like we can go to the motel, not much else we can do tonight, Sam is going to the coroner’s then he’ll meet us,” he relays to Cas as they head towards the main street and the bustling crowd.

“Dean,” Cas asks as they cross the street.

“Yeah, Cas?”

“Do you want to go see one of the bands?” He stops in front of a store. “I saw a pamphlet earlier that had the lists of performers, there is a cover band I heard playing some Led Zeppelin songs earlier that is to play again soon.”

Dean’s mouth goes dry and he doesn’t know exactly why. *It’s too damned humid for anything to be dry here.* “Uh, yeah, sure Cas, that’d be cool— yeah, let’s go.”

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The music gets louder as the song continues, Dean can’t hear anything but the singer’s voice from the stereos and he’s grateful. It means he doesn’t have to try and have a conversation with Cas. The song switches to something with a heavier drum. Finally, Dean gathers enough courage, or maybe the bourbon finally kicked in, and turns to Cas, his hips and shoulders still in time with the song. Cas’s awkwardly standing next to him still, bobbing his head slightly, off from the beat of the music. Dean sighs. Cas notices the staring and turns to him. Dean grabs his tie and pulls him closer; Cas stumbles against him, catching himself on the hunter’s shoulder. Once Dean’s undone his tie, he shoves it into his back pocket. He undoes the top couple buttons of Cas’s shirt, spreading it to reveal his collarbones.

“Live a little,” Dean shouts into his ear, pulling him close so he can hear him. Cas pulls away, squinting at him, and Dean’s heart stutters out an uneven beat. “C’mon, man, loosen up, it’s a concert!” Again Dean’s shouting into his ear, their faces brush and he pulls away instinctually. The angel’s still squinting at Dean but his hips have a slight sway in them now.

The rest of the night begins blurring together. Their hips turned towards each other but barely touching, Cas’s movements still delicate compared to Dean’s. His leg slips between Cas’s thighs every now and again, before he steps back, indicating he’s going to get a drink. He finishes off three more glasses of bourbon, and his hips are in control now. Cas is closer to Dean this time, their bodies finally moving in sync, but Dean’s too nervous to look into his eyes. *Keep looking up at the night sky overhead so you don’t look down at your torsos. Pull away, asshole, go back to the motel, turn away, do something else. And I do, I look back up at the stars and forget those thoughts.*

“Dean?” Cas says what feels like hours later.

“Yeah?” Dean wills himself to look at his face. He’s not even sweating. Dean’s drenched, not sure if it was the dancing or his own nerves that did it, probably both.

“We should go now. It’s late.” He nods towards the stage, the band is still playing but there are clearly less people here then when they started.
Dean nods and starts walking to the motel.

“Dean. This way.” Cas is looking at him funny.

“Oh, yeah,” he slurs, now fully realizing how drunk he is.

Cas leads the way back to the motel, and in Dean’s stupor he swears he’s taking the long way there. The angel will stop sometimes and look up at the sky, to let the hunter catch up to him or catch his breath. Navigating the roads and sidewalks from the motel was hard enough with the crowds, but now that it’s later and there are less people, a drunken Dean finds it just as difficult.

He trips over cables connecting to a stage, barely registering the sidewalk coming closer to his face. He never hits it. Cas has his arm around his waist and slings Dean’s over his own shoulders.

“I did not think Dean Winchester would be a lightweight,” Cas laughs, his voice full of carbonation.

“I’m not.” He leans heavier into the angel, knowing he can carry the weight.

“You had five drinks, you are hopeless.”

“’M’not,” he mutters, laughing at his own slurred defense.

“I can drink at least ten fold what you did and not feel a thing, you are a lightweight.” He laughs again, Dean’s ears full of his sound despite blood rushing to his head.

“Be careful—” Dean burps, and stumbles in the process, “— or next time I’ll make sure you’re the drunk one.”

They reach the door to their motel room.

“Dean, do you have the key?”

He closes his eyes and leans against the wall, it’s cool against his burning skin, his arm still draped over Cas’s shoulder. “Back pocket.” Some random front porch kissing scene runs through Dean’s muddled mind.

Cas reaches into Dean’s pocket, pulling out the key and his tie, forgotten in the midst of dancing. Cas drapes it over his shoulders as he unlocks the door. Sam is sleeping in the closer bed, and Dean curses him for taking that one because now it means he has to stumble even further. Cas helps drunk-Dean make his way to the bed without running into something or knocking anything over. He pulls the sheets back then tries to help ease him down but he shifts his weight and falls like a mess into the bed. He rolls over onto his stomach, not even bothering to kick his boots off. He brings his hands up to grab the pillow and realizes Cas’s tie is gripped in his hand. He forgets about the pillow and quickly falls asleep.

In the middle of the night Dean wakes up, and it’s too dark to see anything but Cas sitting at the foot of the bed, the desk pulled up to him with the laptop on its surface. Dean’s covered now and his shoes are off. Slowly, he moves his foot until it’s pressing against Cas’s thigh; Cas looks at the shape of the leg under the sheet but not up at Dean’s face, then he goes back to work on the laptop. Dean falls back asleep, still clutching Cas’s tie.

Dean’s internal clock wakes him up at eight, which is actually seven back at the Bunker. Cas isn’t in the room but he’s not worried about it. Sammy, on the other hand, is staring at him when he sits up. “What?” he grumbles, rubbing his face. He immediately notices Cas’s tie still in his other hand, and shoves it under the pillow.
“We’re in New Orleans and you get drunk at a jazz festival, how predictable,” he scoffs, buttoning his shirt.

“Hey, man, what can I say, I go where the music takes me.” Dean laughs lightly and walks to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

“That’s not what Cas said.”

Dean realizes he’s been holding his brush under the running water for entirely too long before he turns the tap off and answers, “Oh, yeah, what did Cas say?” The brush is in his mouth now, so at least he doesn’t have to speak.

“He said it wasn’t the music making you drink.” He accidentally swallows some toothpaste and tries to hide his coughing. “Something about the scene of the crimes being too much for you. Are you getting a weak stomach, Dean?” Sam teases, joining his brother in the bathroom.

Dean bends to spit in the sink, hiding his relief from Sam. “Bite me, Sammy.” He claps him on the shoulder as he passes.

He doesn’t know about the dancing. *That dancing is between me and Cas. Cas and me. When did that start sounding so weird?*

Dean gets dressed in today’s clothes; he grabs Cas’s tie from under the pillow when Sam isn’t looking and rolls it up in his dirty shirt, shoving it to the bottom of the duffle bag.

“Where is the little man, by the way?”

Sam’s adjusting his tie in the mirror, getting ready to go back to the police station, Dean assumes. “He said he was getting breakfast to celebrate.”

He nudges Sam out of the way, to fix my own tie. Dean quirks my eyebrow at him, a silent question he understands.

“He didn’t say. You know how weird the guy is.”

Dean chuckles, thinking about how weird it was to see Cas dancing in the beginning last night, his uncoordinated feet and untimed hips. “Yeah, dude is weird.”

Just as he turns around, Cas opens the door to the room, holding a box of what can only be donuts and a carrier of coffees. “I got you two breakfast. We can leave when you’re done.”

The older brother’s eyes go wide as he opens the box Cas’s still holding. He grabs for the one covered in sugar before taking the coffee Cas is offering.

“Do you not like human food anymore, dude?” Dean asks, as the angel passes the box to Sam without taking one. Sometimes he would sporadically eat with them these last few months, mostly burgers and desserts though.

He only hums in response, taking a sip of a coffee he bought for himself though. He notices the confusion on Dean’s face. “The coffee is warm.”

“You can say that again,” Sam chimes in.

The Winchesters finish the box and stand, ready to brace themselves against the New Orleans crowds once again.
“I have a confession.” Cas is still sitting at the table, suddenly interested in the pattern on the paper cup.

Sam and Dean trade a worried glance. “What the hell did you do?” Dean says, the words tumbling out of his mouth much too quickly. He’s worried. The coffee and donuts were only meant to butter them up, not to celebrate god-knows-what.

Cas now looks out the window, despite the blinds blocking it. “You know how we suspected it was the owner of the properties, Joshua James-Patterson?” Sam and Dean wait for an answer, and Cas continues when they don’t reply, “Well, that body we found in his house last night, was actually not his. It was another victim’s, this time a decoy though, to throw us off. Early this morning, before you woke, I found the real Joshua, who was indeed the one committing the sacrifices and practicing voodoo. I took care of him. Thus, now all his spells are reversed and there will be no more zombies or sacrificial murders.” He gets up from the table, still not looking at either one of them.

“So you mean to tell me you solved this case all by yourself?” Dean asks, still skeptical.

“I told you, Dean, I have been hunting for months now, I know a thing or two.” Cas moves forward, tossing the brothers’ bags to them.

“And you didn’t think to tell us before you went out?” Sam asks, catching his bag. “What if something had happened, Cas?”

Dean catches his bag too, trying not to think of Cas’s tie in it or that his shirt has one more button open than usual. “Dude, how were we supposed to know if something went wrong?”

He sets his jaw, walking towards them. “I am not as helpless as you two keep thinking.” His hands rise, to grab their shoulders, to ‘zap’ them back to the Bunker.

“No, Cas, we’re going to talk—” Zap. “— about this here,” Dean finishes weakly.

“Stop treating me like I’m a child,” he snaps. “I have done more than you could even begin to imagine. Remember that bit where I am a warrior of God—”

“We know that,” Sam interjects. “But you can’t just keep doing stuff on your own because you think we think you’re weak or whatever— by the way, we don’t think you are— because eventually you’re going to do something too big for just yourself and we won’t be there. Dean and I have been a team for a long time, that’s the only way we were able to make it this far.”

Dean catch Cas’s eye, he’s still angry. “You have to be a part of the team, Cas, you can’t be a lone wolf anymore and expect to always win your battles. You have to let us in on your plans.”

“I’m not fragile, I don’t need you to always be looking over my shoulder.”

*Why is he not letting go of this anger?* Dean thinks. *Does he not understand? Does he not know about what happened to him before he got his grace back? Does he not remember why we— why I— had to lock him in that room?*

“We didn’t say you were, Cas.” Sam is exasperated, already tired of this conversation because he’s had it with his brother so many times. “We just need you to understand, in this line of work, this life, it works out much better if you are on a team.”

“I want to be equal then.”

“Fine, man, you’re equal. Cas, you’re equal, okay?” Dean reassures him cautiously. He has to talk
to Cas later. He needs Cas to understand why they’re so careful with him.

They all stare at one another in a tense and electric silence for a long moment.

“I found two more cases in my research last night,” Cas admits finally.

Sam shakes his shoulders, loosening up some; Dean still feels a charge running through him. “And?” he asks.

“There is a string of suicides in Denver and unexplainable miracles—if you can even call them that—happening in a town outside of Lincoln.” He almost looks proud at knowing about these cases before they do.

“Alright, I’ll take Denver,” Sam says. That leaves Dean with Lincoln. “Where you going, Cas?”

Cas straightens up, holding his head higher. “I suspect there’s angel involvement with the Lincoln case. I feel it is only right that I go there.”

That’s settled then.

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Dean grabs the angel's shoulder to catch his attention. “We’re driving to Lincoln,” he says, once he finds Cas sifting through some shelves in the library a while later.

“Okay.”

*What, no fight this time?*

“No, Dean, no arguing. You listened to me this time, the least I can do is travel with you how you want.” Cas’s eyes light up. “Though it is archaic.”

Dean laughs. “You don’t know the second thing about slow traveling, man.” Dean thinks of when Sammy was four and wanted a piggy back ride down the street to the corner store. He kept asking Dean to stop so they could look at everything. It took an hour. “You’ve always been popping in and out.”

Cas finds the book he was looking for and the two head out to the tunnel where the Impala’s parked. Dean sees the title as he slides into his seat, *A Brief History of Time*. The angel immediately takes out Post-Its and starts writing a note that he places on the cover. *The Briefest History of Only Some of Human-Known Time*, it reads. Dean laughs as he pulls out onto the road and they’re off, headed to Nebraska.

AC/DC is on the radio, the air is cool as it rushes past Dean’s window, and the clouds are keeping the sun out of his eyes. But not his thoughts about the man next to him.

*Could Cas actually not remember what happened to him? Could he be blocking it out, could he have built a wall in his head to save himself from the horror? I have to tell him, he has to understand why Sam and I are so scared for him. He has to know; he has to be careful.*

They’re about half way to Lincoln when Dean has finished wrestling with himself. “Hey, Cas.”

He looks up from his reading and editing, he’s almost done anyways. “Yes?”

“Do you, uh, do you remember why you had to stay locked in that room while Sam and I looked for your grace?”
Cas closes the book, resting it on the seat between them. He clears his throat. “So that I didn’t interfere with your hunting— your pursuit— of my grace.” How does he not know, how does he not remember?

Dean wants to look Cas in the eye but he can’t seem to take his eyes off the road. He coughs. “That’s part of it, yeah.”

“I had come to you the night before severely injured because I’d been reckless in heaven. you didn’t want to have to monitor me while hunting, it’s understandable.”

Dean coughs again, the truth seeming to erode his throat in its efforts to escape his lips. “Uh, Cas. Cas, Sam and I were scared.” He doesn’t want to say why but he has to. “Scared of you.” Not for you.

Dean can feel Cas’s squinted eyes boring through him. “What aren’t you telling me, Dean?” he asks, his voice rough like gravel.

The hunter has to ask, he has to make sure. “Do you seriously not remember, Cas?”

“Remember what, Dean?” Now Cas is almost angry.

Dean takes a deep breath, making sure not to look Cas’s direction. “You exploded, Cas. You had a complete break— it’s like— it was like you were going through— through withdrawal or something. I’d never seen anything like that.” Dean feels ashamed but he can’t pinpoint why.

He doesn’t want to remember the days when Cas was locked up, for his own good, but he has to for Cas’s sake. He has to know why we’re being so careful with him.

And Dean explains to Cas, “I think, I think the alcohol prompted something in you, and so did finally using up the last of that borrowed grace… You were fine right after I left you, nursing your hangover by getting drunk. I thought you were going to be fine; I was just going to leave you to get drunk, pass out, sleep it off. Repeat it maybe. But then—” Dean stops and looks out his window, forcing himself to remember the truth. “Then, after Sam and I came back from a trip upstairs…you had destroyed the Bunker. There were tables overturned and walls were smashed to pieces, one of the tunnels had caved in…” Breathe, you can do this. “We thought someone had broken in— stole stuff from The Men of Letters— but then Sam heard you in that room, Cas.” Dean finally looks at Cas. Stoic.

“Cas, man, you were a mess— a fucking mess. There were sigils and wards and god knows what else carved into the walls— or drawn on with you blood. Dozens of bowls littered the hallways, each full of different concoctions for spells and summonings and, and, and— Cas, you don’t remember any of this?” Dean asks, desperate for Cas to speak.

Cas is looking down at the book, shame radiating from his body, his shoulders carrying the brunt of that pain. “No, I don’t remember.”

Dean swallows hard. “I’m sorry, man. Cas, I thought you knew. I thought you fucking knew why I had to keep you in there— I had to keep you safe.” I have to keep you safe, I have to keep you safe. I have to make sure you’re safe now.

“I am safe now.” Cas looks up at Dean and Dean grips the steering wheel harder. “I did not realize I did that. I destroyed your home. I am sorry.”

Dean’s hands loosen minutely. “Look, Cas, listen, I don’t give two shits about the fucking Bunker. I’m just glad you’re back.” And safe.
“What else did I do?” Cas has not been this solemn since his grace was restored.

“C’mon, Cas, we don’t have to talk about this now.” Dean’s not sure he did the right thing telling Cas now.

“You have to tell me,” he intones, yet anger and desperation fills the car. The angel turns the music down and Dean’s startled by this almost-terroristic act.

“Look, Cas, it wasn’t your fault, Sam and I both know that. You have to understand that too.” He realizes how angry Cas is with himself before even knowing the whole story.

“Dean.”

Dean heaves a heavy sigh and sits up straighter in his seat, and he explains the rest to Cas.

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Sam found Cas in the windowed room but still didn’t want to startle him. Dean came up behind his brother, alert with a gun still in his hands. He saw Cas and immediately lowered it, not paying attention, and it banged against the wall. Cas instantly turned on the brothers, from whatever useless spell he was currently working on. He launched at them, screaming in Enochian, his angel blade at the ready. Sam shoved Dean out of the way and slammed the door on Cas. Dean pleaded that they had to help Cas; Sam was trying to be practical. He was armed and not himself, there’s no telling what Cas would do to them if he thought they were interfering with his spells. So they waited it out; Dean paced back and forth in front of the door and Sam tried to clean up the mess in the corridors. Hours later, Dean looked in when he heard a strangled gasp and saw just in time that Cas was crumbling to the ground. Dean wrenched open the door, flinging himself down next to Cas, prepared to perform CPR or mouth to mouth or whatever in order to save the angel. Sam checked, his pulse was still even, probably more even than when he was awake. He just passed out.

It gave Sam and Dean the opportunity to clear out the room, of all the dangers and mask all the carvings and drawing on the walls. It gave them time to clean Cas up and set up a makeshift bedroom in that room. Cas would have to stay locked up if they were to keep him safe. He wasn’t going to be allowed to have any ingredients for spells or summonings, he wouldn’t be allowed to know the finer details about their ongoing hunt for his grace. He was too fragile.

When Dean went to check on him the next morning, Cas was facing the wall, yelling, pulling at his hair. Dean tried to open the door to get in, but the moment he did, Cas whipped around and started hurling Enochian swears at the hunter, from what he could guess. And so Dean didn’t try to open the door again. He hung around outside, passing food and alcohol through the hatch to his friend, every day feeling more desperately that he should be in the room saving Cas. But he wasn’t, he was outside hunting for a grace that might not even still exist. But he couldn’t think about that. Instead he watched over Cas from a distance, a twisted thought of himself as a guardian angel ran through his mind.

Sam was the one who had to transfer Cas from room to shower to room to toilet to room. Every time Dean got too close, Cas would throw himself and his obscenities (sometimes English curses slipping in between the Enochian ones) at the hunter. He did the same to Sam, but at least the younger brother could handle the rage. Whereas Dean, would crumple under the anger even though he knew it was not personal. So Dean sat outside the door, trying his best to protect Cas the only way he could.

Eventually, Cas started showing signs of leveling out. Once, when Dean slid his lunch into the room, Cas grabbed his wrist and started whispering nonsense. Dean tried his best to comfort him
with hushed noises in response. The next time Cas ran his fingers over Dean’s palm as alcohol was passed under the door. Then he stroked the hairs on Dean’s forearm as breakfast was served. And like that, the touches and the compassion started to come back to Cas as the weeks wore on. In between all the misleading searches and dead ends when hunting for his grace, Dean could still find hope in the fact that Cas was improving. He started speaking again, English that now made sense, that Dean could understand even if he didn’t know the source. Cas was quoting books and documents, *Don Quixote*, *Crime and Punishment*, *the Magna Carta*, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, *Dante’s Inferno*, *the Rosetta Stone*, *The Republic*; the list went on and on. Dean would listen for hours as Cas rattled off Shakespearean soliloquies between dry lips. He didn’t know their importance and he’s sure Cas didn’t either. But to Dean, those quiet words meant improvement and hope.

And the last couple days before Dean and Sam left on their final trip—the one that would end in finding Cas’s grace—Dean would listen to Cas speaking coherently. He seemed to be thinking aloud but not knowing it. Just quiet whispers about his grace and heaven and Dean and Sam. Hushed prayers thanking Dean…

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After Dean finishes telling the story he tries and fails to get Cas to talk to him. Eventually he just gives up and turns the music back up, Def Leppard rolling out the windows. Yet he only seems to hear the shame and desperation radiating off of Cas.

Half an hour of no speaking, of Cas soaking himself in his shame, and Dean can’t take it anymore. He punches the stereo off again and grabs Cas’s hand, pulling it onto his thigh. This capture’s the angel’s attention instantly.

“Cas. Cas, dude, I told you, neither Sam or I cares what you did. It’s behind us now, you moping about it isn’t going to change the fact that it happened.” It’s then that Dean actually realizes he grabbed Cas’s hand. And is still holding it. *It’s warm, it’s really warm. Softer than mine.*

The angel is staring at their connection, still resting on Dean’s thigh. “I will make it up to you, Dean.” It’s a whisper. A promise.

Dean shakes his head in response. “No, Cas, there’s nothing to apologize for. And helping with cases has been more than enough repayment.”

The hunter can tell he is being stared at intently. “I remember you distinctly telling me, not but a few hours ago, that I still had a lot to learn in the way of hunting Winchester-style.”

Was that a joke?

“Yes, that was a joke.” Both men laugh.

Dean catches his friend’s expression and sees the pain still echoing behind those navy eyes.

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The case was pretty open and close, the men were able to gather enough information from the locals and talk to the mother of the suspected “miracle maker.” After they located the bones, they found a clearing in the woods to salt and burn them. Dean suggested the bar down the street from the motel so they could both unwind, and Dean could perhaps pretend he was *just fine and everything was normal*. Drinking wasn’t always the answer but tonight Dean wanted it to be.

Now Dean sits in a back table explaining the finer points of hustling pool to Cas, who seems to
“Don’t speak much, okay, you can be the quiet-drunk. You just follow my lead, okay? We’ll leave them high and dry once they match my two hundred deal, got it?” Cas nods in affirmation, his prop beer in his hands. Dean downs the rest of his whiskey in one gulp. He claps Cas on the shoulder as he stands, aiming a wink at him.

“Hey, man.” Cas stares too intently as Dean approaches the group of college kids. “I heard you and your buddy were scrounging for a game,” he slurs, his voice too loud. “My friend and I—” Dean tilts his head in the angel’s direction, “we just, just got paid and we’re looking to kick some ass.” He smiles crookedly, and Cas wishes they were closer, touching…

“Is that...so?” asks the kid Dean approached.

“Yeah, dude, what’s a little friendly competition over a game?”

“Thirty dollar deal?” The kid asks, and Dean pulls out his wad of cash, making sure the kid sees that it’s value.

“Fuck, man,” Dean sighs, “all I got are fifties. You got change?” He sways and catches himself on the stool, throwing a glance at Cas.

“Nah, fifty sounds good,” says the shorter student standing beside the first.

“Cas,” Dean yells excitedly across the room, “we got a game. C’mere, man.”

Cas stands awkwardly, trying to remember how Dean’s shoulders were more relaxed when walking as he pretended to be drunk.

The games goes as well as Dean could expect, considering Cas’s skills being equal to that of a child’s. Gratefully the kids don’t suspect anything; they keep making smart remarks about Cas’s skills though.

Dean’s frustration with these kids finally gets the better of him, and when they saunter off to buy another round of beers, Dean makes a decision. “Cas, buddy, let me show you how to hold the stick right.” He’d been gripping almost the end of the stick the entire game, and he hadn’t been leaning over nearly enough to properly align his sight with the shot.

Dean moves Cas’s left hand to the proper place on the shaft of the stick, his fingers lingering too long on the angel’s wrists and his gaze too long on blue eyes when they make eye contact. Next, Dean places a hand on Cas’s back and they lean over the table together, Dean on the other side of the pool stick, until they’re at the best height for maximum playing performance.

“Okay, so,” Dean says, the two still leaning over the table, faces a scant six inches from each other, “you’ve been hitting the balls pretty spot on and all, act as if you were actually drunk.”

“But I’m not.” Cas’s eyes are studying Dean’s face. Dean focuses on not blushing.

“I know, I know, but we’re supposed to be, so it’s okay. Now though, now I need you to sink balls, not just get them next to the pocket for me to shoot in. And you gotta shoot like this—” Dean rubs his hand on Cas’s back. “You gotta line up your stick with the ball and the pocket, but you know that— but it’s easier to do it when you’re almost eye level with the back of the stick.”

The kids approach the table again, beers in hand. Dean and Cas both immediately stand, Dean now effectively blushing behind the glass of whiskey he’s drinking.
“One more round?” Cas asks, now standing a gracious four feet from Dean.

Dean wishes the kids hadn’t come back.

“Double or nothin’?” he asks, swallowing the rest of his alcohol.

The kids confer for a minute, a couple of them turning out pockets. “Okay.” The best player of the group stands forward, laying the two hundred on the table Dean’s leaning against. “But just me and him.” He nods at Cas.

Cas looks actually shocked. Dean feels the expression echoed on his own face.

“Dude, c’mon, we’ve been playin’ pairs this entire time, no rule switchin’ now.”

“We didn’t state rules in the beginning, who says we can’t change them now?”

“We can always just call it quits now,” another kid chides in, smirking at Dean.

“No,” Cas steps in, “I’ll play against this jerk.”

Dean laughs but the other kids trade glances.

“Alright,” the kids steps forward, grabbing his stick from his friend. “Get ready to lose, old man. I’m stripes.”

The kid gets the initial strike but he doesn’t sink any balls. Cas takes a long time to study the table before settling on an aim for three in the corner. He hesitates a second, leaning down slightly more before his quick hit to the cue ball. It sinks but so does the cue ball. The college kids laugh, but Dean pats Cas on the back when he comes to stand by him. The kid then lines the cue ball up, aims for the nine, and it teeters before dropping into the side pocket. He sinks the fourteen as well before missing when he tries to put the twelve in the corner pocket. Cas takes aim at two and it sinks. Cas aims at seven and it sinks. Cas aims at four and it sinks. Cas aims at one, five, six and they sink. He indicates to the corner pocket for the eight ball. Dean holds his breath. The eights rolls gracefully into the corner pocket and Dean grabs Cas to pull him into a hug.

Cas hugs back. Dean can hear the kids booing and the one kid Cas played against is almost shouting as he spits profanities. But Dean doesn’t care, he’s too excited that Cas won for much else to matter.

How the hell did you pull that one off, angel?

Cas steps back, looking abashed as he rubs the back of his neck. Dean takes a guess.

“How the hell did you pull that one off, angel?”

Cas, you did not.” His smile automatically widens.

“One more round, assholes!” the kid interjects. ‘Double or fuckin’ nothing’ and we play pairs again, dammit.” He’s the most drunk of his friends.

“We have to talk!” Dean yells back. He takes Cas around the corner so it’s quiet. “Where the hell did you learn to play like that?”

Cas laughs, looking down at their feet, his hand coming up to his neck again, rubbing it before his hands fall almost dramatically. “I might have used a little trick Gabriel taught me a long time ago.”

“What?” Dean guffaws at this, his hand coming up to cup Cas’s neck. “Man, oh man, buddy, you are full of tricks.”
It’s then that Dean realizes their faces are about six inches apart. He swallows. Cas’s lips are turned in a slight smile, his teeth exposed, and his navy eyes bright with mischievous excitement.

“Dean,” Cas says just above a whisper and Dean fights down the shiver that starts in his chest. He rubs his fingers lightly over the part of Cas’s neck he kissed back at the gravesite.

“Yeah?” Even to Dean his voice sounds airy. *Fuck, stop this.* He stands up straighter, waiting until the last moment to pull his hand away from Cas, his fingers dragging.

“We should go back and kick some ass.” He smiles again.

But Dean doesn’t like the idea of having to go back out and interact with those idiots. He just wants to stand back here in the hall to the exit, talking to Cas. He wants his hands on Cas again. *Maybe unbutton his shirt again, see when his collarbones look like in the light. Or he could just—* Dean stops himself.

“You know what, I’m going to go the bathroom, you tell them I’ll be out in a minute.”

Cas squints his eyes so Dean forces himself to look down as his fumbles with his hands. “Okay?” He sounds skeptical but Dean ignores that and turns away.

Dean enters the bathroom and splashes water on his face. *What are you so hot and bothered for?* The dirty mirror distorts his reflection, which is actually for the better, he doesn’t want to see the craziness of his eyes right now, the flush on his cheeks.

He hears the door open and turns around to leave, return to the game.

But it’s Cas, shutting the door behind him with a wicked glint in his eye.

“Wh-what?” Dean sputters out, wiping a hand over his face.

Cas smile falters slightly. “Oh, I thought this is the part when we left the losers at the table and took the winnings and ran?” His eyes squint, reading Dean’s expression and realizing. “But it is not.”

Cas is too close in the tiny restroom, which suddenly heated a few degrees when he entered. Dean can’t take it anymore. He grabs the lapels of the angel’s jacket and brings their bodies together, brings their faces together. He knows he looks angry. Cas’s breath hitches but his expression remains unchanged. Hopefully Cas interprets this as a drunk and angry Dean that doesn’t want another guy in the bathroom with him and they can leave the bar all together.

*God, you’re so hot.* He thinks it before he can stop himself. *I’m so hot. Fuck. Fuck your body feels likes it’s fucking vibrating. Oh hell. God, don’t lick your lips. Don’t look in my eyes. Son of a bitch.*

Dean lets go of the jacket and takes step back, hopelessly trying to calm himself.

Almost instantaneously though, Cas grabs Dean and turns, pinning him against the door. “I thought these emotions would be subdued once my grace was restored.”

Dean’s stomach isn’t done doing backflips from hearing that before Cas’s lips are on his.

Suddenly every insecurity Dean has ever felt melts away from his very being, everything inside of him seems to turn to mush, and it’s all replaced with the light Cas’s lips radiate. It fills Dean.

Cas pulls back and Dean’s lips follow his. “But they wouldn’t go away.”

And their lips are pressed together again with a heat that would rival Hell. Hands are everywhere as
both men try to pull each other closer. Dean settles with wrapping his arms around Cas’s neck, angling Cas’s head so he can press his tongue deeper into his mouth. He’s delirious with the thought of having some part of him in the angel. In return, Cas’s hands are around Dean’s waist, his fingers running up and down his spine, sometimes clawing at the muscles there. Eventually those fingers find their way under Dean’s t-shirt as he’s nibbling along Cas’ bottom lip.

“Cas,” he grunts out between kisses, “Cas, get us back to the motel.” It’s as much a plea as a demand.

Cas pulls back again, Dean immediately feels dull without Cas’s light filling him. “You said you didn’t want me ‘zapping’ us anywhere.”

The hunter huffs, wrapping his arms tighter around the angel. His lips lead a trail from Cas’s mouth to his ear. “Motel. Now,” he growls lowly before burying his nose in Cas’s hair. You smell like air before a storm.

Dean opens his eyes and they’re back in the motel room, Cas’s hands roaming his back.

Suddenly a ton of bricks crushes the hunter’s chest.

He untangles himself as fast as possible from the being he is holding. “Alright, Cas.” He tries very hard to ignore both his ragged breathing and the tilt Cas’s head is taking on. “It’s— we should really hit the hay— we need to go talk to that mom again, in the…” Dean trails off as Cas steps closer to him, mouth parted in an obscene shape. God, your lips are beautiful.

The hunter cringes away from Cas’s outstretched hand and makes a beeline for the bathroom. His hands shake as he fumbles with the lock. There’s no room to pace in there so he resorts to sitting on the toilet, focusing on calming his breathing. It doesn’t work.

Dammit, Dean. He’s a fucking angel— he’s older than the fucking Earth. He’s literally got the Light of God shining in him. There’s no reason for him to want to be with you. You’re human for christ’s sake, he talks about how simple humans are all the time. He was fucking taxed with studying the human race since the dawn of time, there’s no way you could possibly stand out to him when he’s witnessed every other human being to ever exist.

You give him more grief than just about anyone— not even Sam deals with the bullshit you make Cas put up with. He was right, for so long you did only call for him because of his mojo. He shouldn’t even be responding to your prayers anyways— Apocalypse over, asshole. You made sure of that. And so that means Cas has no use for you. Why the hell is he even here still? He served his penance for all the Leviathan shit and locking up heaven— and now he’s got his grace again... He’s back in good graces. Or so he says.

Fuck. Calm down. Fuck.

He said he felt something for you… Maybe he’s just reflecting whatever emotions I’m expressing. Maybe I need to try harder to fucking stop thinking about him that way.

Why the fuck would I want to be with an angel anyways? They’re dicks.

But Cas isn’t. Cas is your friend, Cas is more—

Dean’s pocket rings.

He pulls out his phone, Sam’s number lighting the screen. “What’s up, Sammy?” he asks, instantly noticing his voice is an octave higher than usual.
“What’s wrong with you?”

“I taught Cas how to hustle pool, we got a little plastered in the process.” It wasn’t a lie; it just wasn’t the truth.

“Cas, hustling pool?” Sam sounds skeptically amused.

Dean laughs, trying to remember what it’s like to act normal. “Yeah, man. Well, maybe not hustling as much as actually losing until I taught him how to strike correctly.”

“Did you figure out the case?” Getting back to business.

*Oh, yeah, the case.* “Some girl’s lingering spirit was performing miracles— I use that term loosely. She was once the vessel to an angel, so when she died, some part of her clung onto that idea. She was doing more harm than good though— with her miracles.” Dean thinks about Cas and the burning grave. “So, so— what’s up with the Denver case?” A sweat breaks out on the back of his neck and chest. *Can Sam tell, will Sam find out?*

“Ah, well, about that.” Sam coughs on the other end of the line. “At first they did just seem like normal suicides— you know what I mean, no unnatural interferences. But I’ve been talking to the coroner, and the weird thing is, each case, the victim strangled themselves the exact same way.”

“How?” Dean asks, knowing Sam would have explained anyways. He needed to see if he voice had normalized. It hadn’t.

“With their bare hands.” He pauses. “So, yeah… I began looking into self sacrificing stuff. Turns out there’s a local legend about a witch who killed her victims by having them commit suicide while she watched.”

“Dirty fucking witches,” Dean mutters.

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna keep looking into that tomorrow, see what I can find.”

“Yeah.” Dean’s heart finally hits a steady rhythm. “Let me know if you need any help, Cas and I are almost done here. We could be there by tomorrow evening if you need us.”

“I’ve got this, Dean.” Sam sounds like a teenage who wants to get off the phone with their parent. “It’s simple really. If it is this witch, then I’ve got her cleaned up in no time. I’ll be back before dinner.”

“Call,” Dean insists, “if you need anything, hear me?”

“Dean,” Sam laughs, “go fucking finish your game of pool, if you’re not too drunk. You sound like an asshole right now.”

“Excuse you?” Dean’s voice is still high. “I’m not too drunk to kick ass, ever.”

“You’re buying the beer when we’re back at the Bunker then.”

“You wanna play, Sammy, see who the better player is? Or how about darts? I always beat your ass at darts.” Dean appreciates the easiness of the banter between him and his brother.

“Because you always cheat, dude! Next time we play with the same darts— so you can’t fucking unbalance mine.” They both laugh.

“Loser buys. Deal.”
“Deal. Night, Dean.”

“See ya, Sammy.”

Dean figures it’s safe to walk back out now, it’s been long enough for each of them to calm down. He’ll go directly to bed.

He was wrong.

Cas is standing rights there, his expression chiseled by determination. “Dean—”

Whatever speech Cas has written in his head is lost when Dean surges forward and kisses him roughly, mouths not quite aligned.

Dean’s trying not to overthink it. *He tastes like electricity and raw energy. Powerful.* And like in New Orleans, the hunter lets his body take control.

Everything is happening forcefully. Coat shoved off of Cas’s shoulders and forgotten on the ground, hair pulled to expose necks, nails dragged down backs, hips rutting into each other. Dean has a hard time pushing Cas onto the bed, Cas’s statuesque resistance unwavering, balanced, as his hands search for purchase on Dean’s body.

“Cas...bed,” Dean murmurs as he licks a stripe across his exposed neck.

The angel detaches and sits on the edge of the bed— taking the effort and time to unbutton his shirt. Dean watches in heated curiosity; numbly follows his lead and pulls off his t-shirt, feeling shy. Cas drapes his shirt over the desk chair. Dean’s fingers stall as they curl around Cas’s neck.

Dean knew, he obviously knew, but still it startled him to see Cas’s half-naked body. He wasn’t expecting the usual, the small shoulders, round breasts, narrow waist. *Obviously.* And yet, it shocked him to see Cas’s broad shoulders, hard chest, and the subtlety of his muscular build under that almost-tan skin. Dean had thought about this plenty, thought about seeing Cas’s body (no matter how vehemently he would deny it if ever asked), but now that it’s right in front of him— Dean actually needs a moment to compose himself.

Cas hooks his fingers around Dean’s waist, pulling him closer. Dean cards his fingers through Cas’s hair, loving the expression that comes over his face as his eyes flutter shut and his face turns upwards.

“I want— you,” he stutters outs, his voice lower than usual. Dean almost bluses at the angel’s confession.

Another pull on his hips and Dean climbs on top of him, their skin finally touching. More of that light Cas is emitting leaks into Dean through their chests. It takes every bit of strength Dean has not to give over completely and fall to pieces on top of Cas. He instead tries to focus on the constant undulation of Cas’s hips in response to his, the delicious pressure and friction.

*Damn, maybe this angel can move,* Dean thinks as his right hand reaches between their torsos.

He’s not exactly sure what he and the man under him are going to do, what acts will be completed, but he does know one thing: he wants Cas. He needs his hot hands, his wet kisses, his low whimpers, his vibrating body. Dean wants all of it.

And so Dean takes.
He forces Cas’s pants down but before he can remove the underwear, Cas moans hotly into his neck. A visible shake renders Dean’s body immobile as he hovers above Cas, waiting for the overwhelming sensation to pass. Using this temporary pause to his advantage, the angel flips them both and gets to work on Dean’s pants. His nails drag down Dean’s thighs as he does so, snapping him back to reality.

_Fuck—fuck! I want to feel his whole body not just his hands._ “Woah…,” he breathlessly whispers. Cas uses the pads of his fingers to draw trails back up Dean’s legs, feeling every movement, and the twitches that become too obvious once he reaches the line where boxer briefs cover skin. Fingers itch underneath the hem, searching.

Dean’s painfully aware how hard he is now, and foolishly thinks, _Hope you don’t notice that, Cas…_ 

Cas smirks and looks Dean directly in the eyes.

Sweating hands and strong arms gather Cas back into Dean, shoulders colliding awkwardly as they fight to get closer. And the hunter loses all sense of self when his tongue explores Cas’s mouth again. _Air before a storm, static._

Without any sense of shame, Cas somehow manages to get his underwear off while never once stopping the steady grind of his hips. _Fucking angel mojo._ But Dean doesn’t voice his complaints because he’s too concerned with his hands grabbing Cas’s ass, making his hips move exactly how he wants.

Cas sits up, planting his hands on either side of Dean’s head, grinding harder at this angle. Dean lifts his head to look down at their torsos.

_Fuck._ He’s not sure if he can remember how to breathe. Cas’s cock slides easily over his, which is still protesting against the strain of his briefs while a wet spot spreads.

“Cas,” he moans, unable to tear his eyes off the man’s cock. “Cas, _please._”

The angel knows exactly what Dean wants; his briefs are gone when he blinks. A long and low hiss leaves his mouth through gritted teeth. Cock on cock stills his hips as he focuses solely on Cas’s sliding back and forth over his, the heads catching briefly with each thrust. Then a hand glides across the bend of Cas’s hip, and Dean has both cocks in his fist, jerking at the overwhelming sensation. It’s so much hotter than he thought it’d be. He squeezes harder when he reaches the heads, and Cas’s arms buckle with the pleasure of it. Still supported on his elbows, he keeps thrusting though, urging Dean on with bites on his shoulder that will leave marks later. Dean raises his other hand to spit on it but instead Cas grabs his wrist, pulling it around his back.

“Scra— scratch my shoulder blade,” he huffs out, before biting slowly into Dean’s neck. It’s an odd request to say the least but Dean complies, dragging his nails over the structure.

Cas’s head immediately whips back as Dean does this. He tries to gasp and moan at the same time but instead a strangled cry leaves his lips, his cock growing harder now that Dean’s other hand continues it’s scratching. His head drops back to the hunter’s shoulder, rolling, as he plants kisses where bruises are beginning to form. Dean drags his nails across both of Cas’s shoulders, wanting to see what reaction he’ll receive. He’s not disappointed. The angel rips Dean’s head back, forcing their mouths together, his light filling Dean once again. And his other hand joins Dean’s at their cocks, the grip becoming almost too tight. Dean’s hips buck on their own accord, a sweat breaking out on his chest.

“Fuck, Cas— I need— need to get _closer,_” he whispers, his voice raspy with desperation.
With that said, Dean strains to turn them over. Cas on his back now, arches into Dean’s hand as he again grips his cock. The hunter’s other arm wraps under the angel, still stretching to claw at his back. He has an idea why Cas enjoys it but he’ll ask about that later. Now, in this exact moment, Dean turns his rapt attention to Castiel’s cock, a mere foot from his face. He wraps just his index and thumb around the base and starts a slow pull to the top. The reaction is immediate, Cas’s legs shake and his hips come off the bed. *Fuck— dammit, Castiel, fucking sexy.* Dean repeats the motion, this time swiping his thumb over the head as precum drips out. The angel’s entire body spasms at that touch. Dean wants to take Cas in his mouth, feel the weight of the cock against his tongue but something holds him back.

_Fear, embarrassment, shame?_

He finds himself grinding into Castiel’s thigh, the hair there an unusual feeling but also arousing. Still focused on Cas’s cock, dripping with precum now that Dean is pumping it as hard as his limited movement will allow him. The fluid trickles down over Cas’s stomach, and Dean finds enough courage to follow the trail with his tongue before sucking a bruise into Cas’s lower stomach right there. His eyes never leave the hardening member.

“Cas,” Dean murmurs between kisses to the angel’s tightened stomach, “come for me.” *Castiel, come, babe, come. Come for me, I wanna see you unravel, angel, I wanna hear you screamin’ my name. Castiel, come…*

Cas grabs Dean’s hair again, pulling his head back so their eyes meet. Dean swears Cas’s eyes are glowing. His thumb swipes hard one more time over the tip— and Castiel is coming.

“Dean— oh, oh— *ahh, Dean,*” he hisses. And he lets out a low scream. Dean jacks his fist harder, wanting every bit of Cas, for him to completely lose his mind. “*Fuck, fuck, Dean, yeahyeahyeah—"* and then Enochian slips into Castiel’s screams as he finishes, Dean continuing to grip his still hard cock.

He passes his thumb over the head again, this time listening to Cas groan as he jerks away from the sensation. Dean repeats, with a smirk on his lips, wondering how long he can keep Cas on this edge.

Cas’s hands then bat away Dean’s and he tugs him up. Hungrily, the angel kisses him, trying to slow his heart. Dean’s hard cock presses against Castiel’s hip, but he ignores it in favor of the angel’s hands cupping his face. He didn’t realize how much he missed the tenderness of it, of someone close like this. Fingers find every curve and line of Dean’s face, sliding over his jawbone and tracing cheek structures, pushing back his hair and tugging on his ear. His lips follow the many paths of his fingers, peppering Dean with almost-kisses. Dean feels like crying but— *stop being a little bitch.*

Castiel laughs.

Their lips are connected again, the kiss languorous as both men smile into it.

Dean wipes his hand off on the blanket behind him— briefly noting he’ll toss it off the bed before he falls asleep— then cups Castiel’s neck. Dean slowly traces his fingers over his shoulder, counts every rib as his fingers travel downwards, squeezes his hip briefly; then his hand reverses the journey. This continues a few more times before Cas grabs his wrist. He brings it above Dean’s head, gently rolling them until he’s now lying half on top of Dean, his left leg hooked over Dean’s right.

Cas deepens the kiss, trying to bring Dean into him— or the other way around?— Dean can’t really tell. There’s a slow hand moving over Dean’s body, taking its time tracing his collarbone and weaving between his ribs, it stops to press flat against his lower abdomen, and then it gently wraps
around Dean’s cock. The hunter wraps his arms around Cas’s head, trying to pull him closer. *I just need him closer, closer, closer…* Cas’s hand is steady and warm on him, pumping just enough to drive Dean wild with the need for more.

“Please, Castiel…,” Dean murmurs into the space between their lips, his voice quavering.

Foregoing words, the angel responds with a more forceful kiss (it’s almost a bite) and his hand moving faster with every pump. He then releases both Dean’s lips and his cock, shifting his body so he’s kneeling between the hunters legs. Lips and tongue move across Dean’s lower abdomen and hips, as if scanning for the place to stop. It’s hard for Dean not to force it, to not shove his cock into Cas’s throat and fuck him with abandon; it’s hard for him to only drag his fingers through the man’s hair and not grab a fistful. Soon Dean is mewling—*what the fuck is that sound? Fuck, it’s me*—and Cas locks eyes with him as he stretches his lips around his cock, swallowing him whole in one slow, fluid motion.

Dean gasps and then he’s coming.
Castiel licks at Dean’s cock until the hunter is almost whimpering because it’s so sensitive. Castiel slowly crawls back up, Dean’s fingers ghosting over his body as their lips meet again.

It’s a strange feeling, this exhaustion, this strain on the human senses Castiel still hasn’t gotten used to. He can feel his grace flaring deep within him, wanting to break free and do it’s duty, heal his vessel, stop the consumption of his energy and revitalize him. But he forces it down, still marveling at all the physical sensations he misses when it’s at full force.

His body drapes itself over Dean’s, filling all the nooks and crannies Dean so carefully leaves empty. Dean’s hands are soft on his skin despite their calluses and cuts (Castiel reminds himself to heal the cuts later but not the calluses because who would Dean Winchester be without his roughness?). Castiel can actually feel real sweat dripping down his neck. He mentally traces the drop’s path until it drips onto Dean’s chest.

Suddenly his heartbeat distracts him. It’s still pounding too fast. His heart rarely deviates from the standard seventy beats per minute. It’s going at least one hundred beats per minute now, and though he knows that’s still average, it’s fascinating to see how his vessel’s body changes when his grace isn’t a barrier between it and its humanity.

He hears Dean’s heart then, going much faster than his. From his orgasm, yes. And his breathing is finally not only gasping. Dean’s body is fascinating as well. The blush occurs sometimes, like right now his chest and neck are flushed the color of sunsets from the Hadean eon, pink and blue and orange and magenta and gold and beige all at once. The freckles that Castiel counted once but hadn’t told Dean because he knew the reaction would not be the one he was hoping for. The stubble growing on his cheeks, a welcome scratch as Castiel’s mouth lazily licks across his jaw. All these marks that make Dean the man he is even though other humans have them too. But, Castiel thinks, they don’t come together in this combination. These landmarks across his skin, as if he were a new world waiting to be explored.

Dean’s voice is raw when he speaks. “You wanna clean up?”

Castiel smirks again, drawing a quirked eyebrow from Dean. “I did that before I laid down.”

“What?” Dean sounds scandalized. “Let me see.” Cas rolls off, but keeps his arm draped over Dean’s stomach.

Dean surveys their bodies. Castiel feels no shame, no embarrassment, as Dean’s eyes hungrily take in his naked form. “How the hell did you get it out of the sheets, man?”

Castiel laughs, Deans sounds like a kids asking for the answers to a magic trick. “I might have learned a couple more tricks from Gabriel,” he jokes.

Dean laughs with Cas now.

“Damn, I needed you around growing up.”

Castiel hasn’t told Dean how long he’s actually been tasked with the mission of watching him. Doesn’t tell him he’s been paying extra attention to this man born on January 24th, 1979 as opposed to all the others born that day. As opposed to any others born throughout the history of the human race. He would never be able to explain to Dean how he had to only watch as his family was ripped apart, initially and every time after, and knowing that it was going to happen before it did. Half of
him is too coward to admit it and the other half unwilling to reveal that information because of the pain it would cause.

That was when Castiel was a soldier though, when he was a good son. He has since changed. Both Winchesters played such a huge role in shaping not only humanity but the angel. Sam taught him to never give up. Dean taught him it was okay to not be a the son his father expected him to be. Castiel knows he is no longer an Angel of the Lord, and that he is now a rebel. And he’d choose being a rebel any day.

Castiel turns his attention back to the man in his arms. His eyes meet Dean’s and he’s happy to find that Hadean-sunset blush spreading across his cheeks.

*He was looking at my body again.*

“I should go to bed,” Dean whispers. Castiel nods.

The hunter untangles himself and gets up to turn the lights off before crawling under the covers.

He turns over and faces the wall, his back to Castiel.

Castiel is instantly angry. His stomach burns with emotions he can’t put names to.

*He does this all the time. He pulls back from me everytime we get close. He’s so fucking stuck in his own head that he can’t see me. I’m positive he cannot see me most of the time. He doesn’t see anything. Does he only want to take-take-take from me and not return anything?*

*Can he not feel the rawness of my desire for him? It is ripping me apart and he can’t feel it. He can’t feel my grace edging its way to the surface to heal my despair and discontent everytime he rebuffs me. He can’t feel my grace rejecting these human emotions that it mistakes as threats.*

*He does not understand the energy I expend just to feel as strongly for him as I do.*

Angrily, the angel flips on to his back, cursing the ceiling and heavens above him. His grace slowly finds its way to his surface, licking at the edges of his vessel searching to heal.

*Might as well let my vessel heal itself of this exhaustion, the sting of the rejection should also fade. What I would give to not feel it in the first place…*

Movement from the corner of his eye.

Dean’s hand is outstretched behind him, his fingers grasping quickly. Castiel is too stunned or too uncertain to move— until Dean starts to retract. The angel pushes his grace back down and wraps his fingers around Dean’s. The hunter’s shoulders instantly relax as he draws their hands back to perch on his hip.

Castiel rolls to face Dean again, about a foot of space and a blanket separating their bodies.

He finds himself content, sated, with this small act of physical contact coming from Dean.

*Emotions should still not be this hard to navigate,* Cas thinks, as he lays perfectly still watching Dean’s shoulder rise and fall with his breath.

Halfway through the night, when rain starts to slowly fall outside, and Dean’s hand moved to clutch his pillow, Castiel grabs a sleep shirt and his boxers from the corner of the room where they reappeared. He pulls the laptop from Dean’s bag and bunched the pillows so he could lean against
the headboard to continue his research.

More cases, he keeps thinking. *If I find more cases for us, if they can see how much I can accomplish, maybe they’ll forget about the...about the breakdown, as Dean called it.*

*I will be an asset to them again. I’ll be better than I was, I know more now, I know how to be both angel and hunter.*

The laptop screen goes dark as Castiel’s mind folds in on itself as he ruminates over the breakdown he had months back. There were complete days of darkness, he remembers that much, but he just assumed it was the alcohol. Faint hollows of emotions echo through him as the memories flutter back. Not everything, more like shadows. He remembers the encompassing feelings of dread, shame, anger, and desperation as he was made to wait. Knowing secondhand what he did to Dean and Sam’s home is completely different from remembering it. Secondhand was almost worse, he imagined well beyond what Dean told him, simply assuming Dean would water it down, easing the story into Castiel’s thoughts. He didn’t though, he was completely truthful when telling Castiel. And, Castiel realizes then, *That is worse.* Dean was completely honest when divulging, he didn’t skirt around the matter.

Dean trusted him; he told Castiel and trusted Castiel not to let that happen again.

Castiel deflates at this understanding.

Everything in the last few months hits him at once.

Why when he so eagerly wanted to start hunting as soon as he got his grace back but the brothers said no. They all stayed in the Bunker for days, idly sitting, waiting. The two would jump behind corners when Castiel noticed them watching him. They would unnecessarily follow him from room to room, playing it off like they too had to do whatever he was doing: research, eat, relax on the couch, go sit in that windowed room. Castiel should have known something has wrong from the get go, but he brushed it off.

When they finally did start hunting again, it wasn’t even really hunting. It was training.

First it was the research. Sam and him would pour for hours over texts, manuscripts, news articles, and the internet. Sam would teach him exactly what details to look for, how to sort through the fake supernatural cases and narrow in on the real ones.

Then it the physical aspect. He already knew how to fight in hand-to-hand combat, albeit, his style was definitely more influenced by his confidence as angel rather than skill alone. But, Dean taught him human hand-to-hand combat anyways. Then he would set up a shooting range outside, and Castiel would practice shooting with handguns and shotguns, learning how to offset the kickback properly.

They didn’t let him near the salt rounds though. Dean would play it off whenever he asked, “Cas, man, you don’t need to learn these. The salt only hurts them because it’s a purifier— your grace is purifier enough.” But Sam wouldn’t let him participate in any spells either, they wouldn’t even let him gather the ingredients if they were half way around the world. They just did without or called upon Crowley. Even Crowley seemed wary of him, which he should have automatically assumed meant something was wrong.

But Castiel wanted so badly for everything to go back to normal that he swept all the worried glances and quieted conversations when he walked in the room under the rug. He convinced himself the sooner he got back to hunting full time, the sooner everything would be okay again.
That didn’t stop him from fighting back every now and again as he was learning though.

One time in particular, while Sam was out picking up dinner, and he was finishing up his fighting training with Dean, Castiel had had enough. Dean had been going easy on him the entire time, worry behind his eyes ever since Castiel had mentioned something about a sigil he noticed carved into the hallway. As they were finishing up— on Dean’s command because Castiel didn’t feel done yet— Castiel pushed Dean against the edge of one of the workout machines. Dean’s back pressed against the steel frame while Castiel pushed against his chest.

“Why won’t you teach me?” Castiel practically yelled into Dean’s chest, feeling like a child both because of the Winchesters’ treatment of him and his outbreak. “Why can’t I hunt with you again? Why aren’t you hunting? I’m ready, Dean, I’ve been ready!” Enochian pushed through his lips, a curse aimed at the heavens for not making this easier on him.

He finally looked up at Dean. Immediately pulling back and stepping away. Dean slumped to the floor, eyes wide as he gawked at Castiel. He wasn’t even angry. He was terrified. The fear Castiel saw behind his eyes, that made him let go, would be a sight he would never forget. He never thought he’d be one to strike fear into Dean’s heart, not after everything they’d already been through.

And so Castiel raised his hands in front of him, a silent surrender, as he backed out of the room. He didn’t eat dinner that night.

Neither him or Dean mentioned the situation again, they continued their routine and Castiel didn’t argue, even if it was boring or repetitive. Because he did not want to see that expression on Dean’s face again.

Castiel pushes the laptop onto the tiny side table and lays back down, putting as much space between him and Dean as he can. The other man’s chest rises and falls slowly, becoming a point of focus for Castiel as he remembers,

*I can’t sleep but I can’t be awake right now.*

Right after the sun comes up, a soft light streaming through the windows as it slants across the floor, Dean stirs. It’s not much movement, no conscious thought behind it, but his hands slip across the bed, grabbing at whatever. Castiel tries to silently maneuver away without moving but Dean is relentless. He balls his fists into the shirt Castiel is wearing and pulls him closer. He’s obviously awake enough to know what he’s doing but he doesn’t say anything, he just pushes and pulls at Castiel until Castiel’s back is pressed firmly to his chest. He falls back asleep like that. The angel lets him because he knows they’ve all but finished the case, just loose ends to tie up.

*I need to apologize to Dean and Sam. They need to know, they need to understand—I’m not a threat. Not anymore.*

“Cas, shut up,” Dean mumbles into Castiel’s neck.

“I didn’t say anything,” he replies, confused.

“You’re thinking too loud.”

The angel purses his lips at this. “You cannot hear my thoughts.”

Castiel knows Dean well enough that he can feel his eyes rolling as he sighs.
To Tell The Truth

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long! I started working at this firm in Austin and now I have a bunch of time to write again! Yay~ Anywho, this hasn’t been beta’d yet, so it’s not perfect, but I will repost it once it is beta’d. Enjoy!

Edit 10/6/15: has been beta’d!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He ignores the way the angel’s warm body slots into his. He can’t think about it. The weight of Cas’s frame pulled against his is not the physical contact he’s been craving. It’s not satisfying. Listening to Cas’s breathing doesn’t calm his anxieties. It doesn’t relax him.

He makes it happen, wants it to happen. But he does not like it. No.

This denial only works for as long as Dean keeps his eyes shut. If he opens them, then everything will be real, and he’ll have to think about it. Right now, since his eyes are closed, he can ignore the feeling bubbling in his gut telling him this is wrong. He can enjoy the feeling of Cas’s body against his, the way his arms are circling him, his hands fisting in his shirt, the electric smell of Cas’s skin that overwhelms him because he’s so close.

The buzz of his cell yanks him from his momentary bliss. Dean pulls Cas closer as he hugs his chest and places a chaste kiss on his neck. He hopes his apology soaks into Cas and that he’ll understand. He rolls over and grabs his phone.

“Good morning, Agent Ashley…” Dean sits through the boring details of the information the officer gives him, about the “miracles” reverting and people coming into the station in a fit, demanding answers. Dean just wants to talk to the mom one last time, tell her what happened and comfort her the best they know how, then hit the road.

He keeps his distance from Cas while getting ready, averting his gaze anytime he feels himself searching for those navy eyes. With his bag packed and roomkey returned, Dean decides to wait in the car while Cas finishes dressing.

Dean catches his reflection in the rearview mirror, the confusion and desperation all too obvious in his eyes. He immediately recalls last night’s activities, the hairs on his neck automatically standing on end. Fuck. The sun visor’s mirror doesn’t lie—there’s the bruise of a hickey peeking out from the collar of his shirt. Shitshitshit. I don’t have time for this.

Cas comes out of the room, bag in hand, face as strong as ever. The front seat receives a rush of warm morning air as he slides into his seat next to Dean. He doesn’t know what else to do. “Cas, fix this,” Dean mutters, not meeting Cas’s eyes as he pulls at the collar of his shirt.

Dean definitely does not close his eyes and stop breathing when Cas’s thumb rubs over the bruise.

Looking in the mirror again confirms both that the hickey is gone and that Dean’s pupils are certainly not dilated at all.
Quickly, Dean explains what he wants to do before they go home.

Cas asks if he wants to stop for coffee, so they do. Standing in line should not be as hard for Dean as it is. He’s twitchy with uneven breathing, which he chalks up to not sleeping well. It’s not a complete lie. Cas stands as calm as usual next to Dean, surveying the display of donuts next to the counter. He doesn’t seem any different from yesterday, like nothing happened last night. Like it wasn’t a big deal. Maybe angels don’t put as much emphasis on sex as humans— fuck, it is not that big of a deal to me— maybe it’s not a big deal to angels. But, what he said, at the start...fuck.

The two walk out of the coffee shop, two coffees and half a dozen donuts to split between them. The hunter is thankful that Cas remains quiet the rest of the ride, slowly chewing his donuts, taking time to wipe his fingers clean before grabbing the next.

The long ride to the bunker is much the same. Cas rereads the book he brought with him, still marking anything wrong he missed the first time around. He only puts it down when Dean starts humming along with the Aerosmith coming from the radio. Then it’s back to not interacting. Dean knows he should do something, say something. Anything for christ’s sake. Every word or action gets trapped behind the layers of pride and fear that have always done this to him.

Once they pass the Kansas-Nebraska state line, with only twenty minutes remaining until they reach their destination, Dean starts getting antsy again. The need to say something boiling hot behind his lips.

He settles on neutrality. “Did you want to eat dinner tonight?”

Cas hums, looking up from his book.

Dean’s lips are burning. “I was thinking we could fire up the grill, figuratively, kinda have a cookout, there’s a game on tonight.” Sometimes Dean doesn’t realize how desperately he craves domesticity.

Cas tilts his head. “What game?”

“There’s a baseball game on tonight— Sam’s team is playing— it’s not a big game, but it’s a reason to drink beer and eat burgers none the less.”

A pause, a heartbeat. “I’ll join you two in your festivities tonight.”

Okay, okay.

And just like that, the rest of the day progresses in unexpected normalcy. Cas heads directly to the library when they get back to the bunker, muttering something about new cases. That leaves Dean to get stuff ready for tonight. They left Lincoln later than he expected, having to track the mother down at her job. So now there’s only an hour left before the game starts and Sam should be arriving around that time, with the beer Dean requested.

Avoiding thinking about last night gets harder and harder the busier Dean tries to make himself.

Cas would have brought it up— he would have said something— if he cared about last night. If he wanted it to happen again he would have said so. Right? Fuck. Cas doesn’t get nervous about this kind of shit, does he? He would just say what he’s thinking, right?

The smoke wafting out from under the lid of the pan brings Dean back to reality. He turns the burgers over before replacing the top.
Fuck. What if this has something to do with telling him about his breakdown? Of course this has something to do with that. He was so ashamed when I told him, he can’t be thinking straight right now. He is trying to forget about what I told him—he doesn’t want to be reminded of something his own mind so clearly tried to forget.

That means...

That means he wasn’t doing what he was doing last night because he wanted to. He was doing everything he could to drown out his thoughts. In true Winchester spirit. Honestly, I wouldn’t expect any less from him, not after how much time he’s spent with me and Sam.

Dean pulls the fries out of the oven right as Sam walks into the kitchen with a case each of their favorite beer.

“I swear, you only drink that light shit to piss me off,” Dean laughs. Trying to forget about everything that’s been making his stomach somersault the past hour. And beer and football will most certainly help with that.

“Yeah, that’s why I eat the salads too,” Same teases. “Not because they taste good or are healthy for me, but purely to watch your raging carnivorous blood boil.”

“Well, Sammy, you’re making an exception tonight.” Dean pulls the burgers off the stove. “I daresay these are the best burgers even I could ask for.” He dips his head in a shallow bow.

As much as Sam likes to say he’s healthy (“No, no, see, I can add avocado because it’s a fruit, same with tomatoes and pickles. And mayonnaise doesn’t have any trans fat, so it can’t be that bad for you. Three cheeses just means more calcium. And, look, I’m adding lettuce, so it’s almost a salad.”), he’s still a hunter and a Winchester. That means burgers cannot be avoided forever.

Cas joins them in the kitchen while they’re tossing the fries in a bowl, so they don’t have to come back in the kitchen to get seconds. He tops his burger with the typical BLT toppings.

“Good to see you know how to attend a baseball cookout, but you don’t need to use the same toppings as Dean.” Dean’s jaw clenches. “Look, see, try the jalapenos, okay, I swear you’ll like them.” Sam’s eyes glint with mischief.

Cas bites into the pepper without a second thought, too trusting that Sam wouldn’t play a prank on him. He grabs a handful of the peppers and tosses them on his plate before popping three more in his mouth. Sam’s gawking. Cas smirks in reply. “You really think I didn’t know what jalapenos tasted like, or that they were even remotely hot compared to the spices they use South America or East Asia?”

Sam rolls his eyes. “Yeah, well, a guy can dream.”

Cas seems okay for now, which Dean supposes is good.

Dean hauls his whole case of beer into the living room, finishing two off before the game has even officially started. Sam side eyes him. “I worked up an appetite while cooking this bountiful meal,” he retorts, spreading his arms to the fries and burgers sitting on the coffee table in front of the three of them.

Three beers later for Dean, two for Sam, and none for Cas, all three men are yelling at the screen as the ref doesn’t call another foul seconds before the opposing team makes a home run.

“That is bullshit and you know it—!” Sam yells.
“Are you even watching the same game, ref—?”

“You couldn’t call a foul if you were Alexander Graham Bell—!”

Both brothers turn to stare at Cas, amazed at his trash talk. Then they bust out laughing. Dean opens up two more beers, handing one to Cas with a loose smile on his face.

*Stop that, you asshole.*

But he doesn’t stop, the smile stays on his face the rest of the quarter because Cas keeps smirking into the lip of his beer. Laughing silently at his own joke. And Dean can’t help but find joy in that.

The game ends, Sam’s team wins, and he’s clapping and *yipping* and just this side of too happy compared to the hunters’ normal persona.

“I’m gonna go rub this in Garth’s fucking face— that idiot thought his team could beat mine. As if.” With that said, Sam saunters to his room, already practicing his “winning song” that poor Garth will soon be subject to.

Dean continues to sit, pretending to be engrossed in the after-game coach interviews. The corner of the screen becomes his point of focus, reading every word that runs along the bottom. Not even taking them in, not processing them, just filling his attention. A distraction from Cas, who’s still nursing his beer in the opposite chair.

After the third commercial break starts, Dean decides he should stand and clean the dishes, or at least take them to the kitchen. Once Cas understands what the hunter is doing, he tries to help, but Dean shoos him away, stating, “It’s not a lot, Cas, I’ll get in done in no time. Don’t worry.”

The water flowing from the tap helps Dean focus, the steady rhythm and splashing remind him of a hunt his dad had from a long time ago. John had a case near Cincinnati one summer, so he let Dean take Sammy to the waterpark there. They got there a couple hours before the park even opened, that excited. So they sat outside on the curb, in nothing but their swim trunks, planning their route of attack for the slides with an discarded map they found on a bench. Once the park finally opened, dozens of families lined up behind them, they rushed to the top of the tallest slide, almost forgetting to leave their towels on some chairs near the lazy river. Neither one of them had been to a water park before, but they’d been to a couple Six Flags, and thought it wouldn’t be much different from the roller coasters. They hadn’t been warned of the water slide wedgie tendency; they quickly learned.

Dean laughs at the memory of Sam trying to dislodge a particularly brutal one.

“What’s so humorous?”

Dean’s hands ball into fist, mimicking how tight his chest feels.

He looks over to see a pair of hands with long fingers drying off the dishes. Following the line of his arm, Dean finds Cas’s dark eyes staring into his intently.

Dean swallows his nerves, soaking them in the alcohol sitting in his stomach. “I was remembering a time Sam got a wedgie when we went to a water park,” he answers truthfully.

Cas hums, grabbing the plate from Dean’s hands to dry. “Tell me about it.”

Dean smiles. “Okay, so…”
Somewhere in between Dean explaining their race around the lazy river and teaching Sam how to properly dive that day, speaking gets easier. His chest doesn’t feel locked. Cas’s presence next to him, his warmth, makes his stomach knot, but not uncomfortably. While watching the sink drain the last of the suds, there are navy eyes watching Dean, he can feel them. He barely looks up before feels the hand in the middle of his back, turning him. His eyes fall closed, either from the heavy buzz of the alcohol or feeling the heat radiating from the hand. Dean votes the former.

The expected lips don’t expectedly fall on his own but rather on the bolt of his jaw, soft as they graze down his neck. No, he thinks, not my neck. The overwhelming feeling of closer consumes Dean again, having only ever felt it for the first time last night. Closer, closer, please, Castiel, closer, closer. I don’t beg, but please, Cas, closer.

++

He’d never really had to address his sexuality before. He always just defaulted to being attracted to women. Easy, simple, normal. And it’s not like he’s had the time or emotional availability to think about it.

Dean has only ever known life on the road. Going to shoddy bars, and the occasional club when he was younger, sated his needs as well as he thought his needs could be sated. Being young and curious was something he figured was normal, he’d known other kids to experiment when he got the chance to befriend some for long enough. He just thought maybe he hadn’t gotten it out of his system yet. Small town bars and college clubs weren’t exactly the best places to test the waters.

Constantly travelling with John Winchester wasn’t exactly the most apt situation either. It seemed John didn’t care about Dean’s emotional needs. Was Dean fed? Was he healthy? Was he safe? Could he hunt? That’s what mattered to John, that’s as far as his paternal instincts went.

It’s not like Dean could ever completely forget the hunter life when making up a backstory for some girl in a bar. Behind his tales of detailing expensive cars or being a stuntman for movies, the current case was not forgotten. No matter how far he tried to separate himself those nights, he couldn’t, not fully. A hunter to the bone, as John would say. Dean knew that he’d forget that poor girl’s name by the next morning, deserting her bed while his heart was still pounding and his legs were still soft. He couldn’t actually like the girl, not when he knew in a few hours he’d leave and reenter the world of hunting. The demons never really left, literally or figuratively.

Lisa. Lisa and Ben. That was a curveball that no one could have accounted for. The more he lets himself think about it, the worse he feels. He loved Lisa, but he was never in love with her. Dean fooled himself into thinking that he wasn’t cut out for falling in love, maybe it just wasn’t in his blood. Lisa offered him that domesticity and family life that he’d been craving since he was four. He couldn’t pass that up, not when he thought Sam was gone forever. He needed to ground himself in something, not throw himself into the wind and keep hunting.

He loved her, undoubtedly. Her and Ben were two of the greatest things to ever happen to him, he would never be able to deny that. She knew who he was, she saw him for who he truly was, and loved him anyways. Dean couldn’t let that go. He couldn’t not try to give her everything she had given him. He let himself feel, for the first time in a long time, when he fell apart in her arms every night for the first few weeks. He let her see how vulnerable and absolutely broken he was. Sure, she would never be able to bring Sam back or empathize with Dean, but she was compassionate and determined to take care of him.

In return, Dean tried his damnest to make the best life for Lisa and Ben. Yeah, he didn’t have a lot to give, but he could work and pretend and try for them. He found a stable job working construction, normal hours that let him be home for dinner. Interacting with the neighbors was simple enough;
going out for beers with the other guys on the block was actually nice; maybe cookouts, tailgates, and block parties weren’t that terrible. The hardest part though, was learning not to listen. He had to change the channel when strange news stories came on, he had to flip to the sports section when he caught a bit of an uneasy “unexplainable” in the paper, he had to ignore the news articles online as he browsed the internet. He made himself a home, even if it was a new him, with someone he could count on. Lisa was safe, she was predictable.

Cas isn’t predictable though. *Not that we’re together. We’re just… I don’t know what we’re doing.*

_Honestly, I never thought about guys like that. Maybe I didn’t let myself, but I didn’t feel like I was missing out, closing myself off, just because I didn’t follow through pursuing any guys. It was just a thought, a flicker across my mind, when I saw certain guys. It might have left an imprint, some lingering confusion and frustration but I tried not to think about it. It was quick and in the moment._

*I just don’t know where Cas came from, how he did this to me.*

++

Dean’s eyes are shut, either trying to fall asleep or trying to stay in his bubble of “don’t acknowledge this and it will be okay;” he isn’t sure. All he knows for sure is that whenever Cas has blinked the past half hour, he marvels at the angel’s eyelashes against his shoulder. It makes everything real but not feel like a part of reality. He can’t really explain it…

_What are we doing?_ The question rests on his tongue, straining against his lips. If he asks the question, then it will be real. If this becomes real then it can be lost. Dean doesn’t want to lose this, so he doesn’t acknowledge it.

Cas presses his face into the crook of Dean’s neck and takes a deep breath, before he slides out of Dean’s loose hold, only one hand absentmindedly touching his shoulder. He bends to pull his pants back on, then throws a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes over his shoulder before slipping out of the room.

If Dean thinks the sigh he just released doesn’t sound close to a sob, then he’s lying to himself. He screws his eyes shut, hoping that will be enough to keep the emotions he’s feeling— _whatever the fuck emotions these are_— at bay. Just because Cas initiated what happened tonight...doesn’t mean he actually enjoys what they’re doing. *He could just be doing this to blow off steam, to make himself forget or some shit.*

Dean turns over, clinging to the side of the bed because the center is still warm. Uncomfortable while it’s empty. He doesn’t even bother with the covers, he wants to fall asleep as soon as possible.

Later that night, neither of the brothers hears Cas slam his fists on his desk.

++

Hungover and empty. Two things Dean Winchester isn’t unaccustomed to feeling in the morning. The straight back of Sam leaning against the counter drinking his coffee tells Dean he’s in this boat alone.

“Morning, sunshine,” Sam laughs over the brim of his cup, not taking his eyes off the newspaper article he’s reading.

Dean grumbles in his general direction, rubbing his temples as he beelines for the coffeepot. At least his brother is decent enough to make a coffee for both of them. His head hurts too much to think about bending down to retrieve the sugar from under the counter, so he takes his coffee black and
slumps over the cup once he sits at the table. He counts his breaths, trying to slow them.

Around five hundred thirty the hunter hears a bowl scrape across the table right before it clinks against his mug. There’s a bowl of cereal and a retreating angel as he looks up. Cas comes back with his own mug and the milk jug for Dean. He doesn’t look at Dean— which doesn’t bother him— he’s focused on the laptop he pulled up in front of him. A few more minutes of deep breathing, and Dean thinks he can take on this bowl of cereal.

After a slow breakfast, Dean decides today he’ll finish chores around the house; his head hurting too much to focus on researching a new case. Laundry needs to be done, the kitchen needs cleaned, his room needs organized. He can keep his mind busy this way; domestic life, he learned while at Lisa’s, can sometimes be mind numbingly dull.

While throwing his clothes in the washer, the tie at the bottom of his duffel stirs something in Dean’s chest that feels like what he felt the first time he and Lisa cooked dinner together. Something light lifting him, chasing the chill that settled in him last night when Cas left. He rolls up the slip of cloth, tucking it in his back pocket, making a decision.

And so like that, life in the Bunker and on the road continues.

On a hunt outside of Memphis, Sam and Dean spend the majority of the time staking out a nest of vampires. They’re trying to teach Cas the value of patience when it comes to the vermin, that waiting for more information on other vampires is worth it. Cas sits in the back of the Impala, twirling a blade out of boredom. Dean decides to go on a food run, and Cas tags along, leaving Sam to keep watch from the apartments adjacent to the vampires’ nest. After pulling into the diner’s dark parking lot, he feels Cas’s hand press into his thigh. Instantly, Dean’s sliding across the bench, wanting this more than worrying about his nerves. The angel straddles his lap, and despite their cramped quarters (thanks to Cas willing away their pants), they are able to reach orgasm within minutes, days of pent up frustration spilling over their intertwined fingers. Sam either doesn’t notice the smell of the car or it’s masked by the greasy diner food scent. Dean makes a mental note to try not to hook up in Sammy’s seat anymore, it kinda ruins the memory (but really, it doesn’t).

A tip off from one of Bobby’s old friends leads them to a wendigo close to the Canadian border in Minnesota. They’re practically going into this blind it feels like. The last wendigo they hunted was almost a decade ago and they have to keep referencing John’s journal, which stirs up loads of nostalgia. It feels like they’re on a mini vacation because out in the middle of nowhere they found some family’s fully-stocked cabin and have been using it as a base while they hunt for this damned monster. While Sam’s outside trying to find cell reception one morning, Cas corners Dean in the bathroom. They make out for longer than it takes Dean to do the rest of his morning routine. That night, he tries not to think about it because his stomach still twists in uncomfortable ways when he imagines Cas’s lips trailing over his chest. Turns out, the cabin wasn’t a seasonal getaway for some family, it was their home. The wendigo was actually the matriarch of the family and had long since eaten the rest of them, coming back to the cabin sometimes in hopes of finding more people who stumbled across it. Unfortunately, it met the Winchesters and Cas instead.

Sam finds a case in upstate New York worth checking out and Dean decides it’s okay if Cas zaps them there. After running around the town all day collecting retellings of the story, it sounds like they have a rougarou on their hands. While Sam’s outside trying to find more information from the coroner’s office, Dean flicks through the channels on the surprisingly flat screen television in their motel room. He doesn’t find anything as interesting as watching Cas edit On the Origin of Species though. In the middle of the night, Sam fast asleep in the next bed, while Cas is online researching on the edge of Dean’s bed, the hunter shoves his cold toes under the angel’s thigh. Cas tells them about the cases he found the previous night, but Sam notes they should stay focused on this case and
Dean has to agree. Cas gives Dean a perturbed glare as he walks out of the motel room. The rougarou is camped in an abandoned barn next to a chicken farm and he’s easy enough to corner and burn. Cas throws Dean another glance as they’re walking away from the smoke, and the hunter gives in, asking if Sam wants to take a look at those cases now.

Cas found several cases, so that leads to the Winchesters splitting after they go back to the bunker to regroup. Sam heads towards Nashville for a case that sounds like an angry spirit and Dean drives down to New Mexico to see about a demon, with Cas saying he’ll stay at the bunker to hold down the fort. This new dynamic that Cas has created through all his extensive research throws Dean through a loop. Sure, the demon was easy enough to track, capture, and question—it was reckless enough in its cause—before exorcising it. But coming back to the empty motel room for the second night in a row feels wrong, knowing him and Sam are on good terms yet not together resonates weird in his gut. Cas made an excellent argument that even Sam couldn’t object to at least trying. The angel would stay at the bunker, as their source of research and to answer the phones, while the brothers took on separate but not too difficult of cases, where they would be only a call or a zap away if anything happened.

The brothers work a couple more cases together (they even manage to make it to a Van Halen concert in Texas one weekend) before Cas finds a pair of cases, luckily both in Maine. On the way back from the case—werewolf packs wreaking havoc—Sam asks if Dean wants to drive through Canada. They end up in Toronto for a couple nights, spending an afternoon as generic tourists at Niagara Falls. They hit up a local concert; Sam bribes Dean into trying poutine—and later Dean ends up ordering another two plates. They even stand on the lakeshore for a while but not going in (it’s too cold and they want their first time at the beach to be a real beach, none of this lake crap). Cas hadn’t joined them originally but he shows up at their motel room while they’re bickering about whether to see a hockey game or not because Sam would rather go to the museum. Eventually, Cas ends up accompanying Dean to the hockey game while Sam goes to the museum. After the game, Cas and Dean forgo food until Sam comes back and end up at the hotel soon after. Before Dean knows it, he’s pressed against the back of the door and Cas is down on his knees. The hunter slides down the door when his knees give out after he cums; he pulls Cas into his lap, vigorously repaying the favor with hand and mouth. Sam comes back later to find them both sitting on the closer bed watching Dr. Sexy.

It feels good to come home to the bunker—on the way back from Canada they stopped in Indiana to see about a ghost—Dean was beginning to forget what his bed felt like because of how busy Cas was keeping them with cases. Sam finally put his foot down, saying they needed to stick around the bunker for a few days to rejuvenate and relax. He was getting really tired of salads being the only healthy alternative on diner menus (and craving Dean’s home cooking, though he would never admit it). While Sam’s in the shower, the older Winchester starts making some soup for dinner. The kitchen fills with the slap of Dean’s knife chopping the various vegetables and he barely notices the movement out of the corner of his eye before hearing Cas ask what is for dinner.

“Soup. Lisa used to make it when Bed had a big exam at school.” Dean looks up at Cas but he can’t read the expression in his eyes.

The angel perches himself on a stool, opting to watch Dean finish cooking instead of responding.

An hour later, Sam and Dean are ladling soup into bowls and grabbing fistfuls of bread, all while trying to balance their beers too; they head to the living room to watch a game. Cas sits with them, quiet, sipping one of Dean’s beers. He didn’t want to eat tonight. This football game isn’t as exciting as the baseball game they watched a couple months back, and so it’s not enough to keep Dean’s mind occupied from thoughts of Cas.
Is he upset we didn’t want to take any cases right now? Hell, Sam and I are beat, we need a couples days— meaning he should too. I don’t get why he’s pushing case after case onto us, even if they are important. It’s shitty being on the road every day now, now that we have the bunker. I can only sleep in so many hotel beds before my back starts complaining.

The game tapers to an end, Sam passed out on the couch since the beginning of the fourth quarter and Cas focused on rolling the empty beer bottle between his palms. Dean hasn’t even been watching, he didn’t even notice when his team scored with a hail Mary pass. He cleans the dishes alone tonight. He comes back into the television room, throwing a blanket over Sam (It covers most of him.) and aims a pointed glare at Cas until he sees navy staring back. It looks painful for Cas to rise from the sofa, his shoulders heavy as he leads Dean out of the room.

“Do you remember in Purgatory...how we couldn’t build a fire? So we wouldn’t be hunted any faster,” Cas asks, when Dean follows him into his room.

Dean tries his hardest to not think about Purgatory. It still makes his shoulders twitch in fear every time he does. He nods, even though Cas can’t see it.

“Sometimes at night, you’d press yourself into me. You thought I was asleep—and I used to think you were too. Some reflex to finding warmth on those cold nights. But you’d keep doing it, even when it got hot, on those sweltering nights. Still, I’d stir awake to find your back pressed to my chest or your chest against my shoulder.”

Dean wants to leave the room and throw up. But he’s rooted to the spot and his throat feels swollen shut. He just nods again. His hands have dug themselves into his sweatshirt pockets— nails cutting into his palms.

What the fuck? I don’t— I can’t— why is he bringing this up?

“I just thought, while we were there, I mean that—” Cas takes a deep breath; Dean can almost physically feel the sigh. “Honestly, before everything happened, I thought I’d be able to talk to you about it.” Cas finally turns around, pulling at his tie angrily. “But then I made you leave without me and then fucking Naomi and—”

“Cas, stop,” Dean breathes, his throat raw like he’s been screaming. “Stop.” He can’t look Cas in the eye, instead focusing on the spot he knows the Enochian is tattooed on his ribs.

"That doesn't even matter.” Cas looks weary well beyond this conversation. "I tried to understand, Dean, this thing we are doing," Dean's stomach twists at the use of we, but in a good way and he tries not to think about it. "I have been trying to understand since before Purgatory. Since...I rescued you from heaven, from Zachariah."

Dean has no words for what he’s feeling and wouldn’t begin to have enough to tell Cas what he should.

He thinks back to when Zachariah had trapped him in Heaven. He was alone, both Cas and Sam had deserted him at that point. He wasn’t even sure if he was going to get out of Heaven— alive that is. The apocalypse was about to be in full swing, the angels were going to force him to be Michael’s sword; he didn’t really have a lot going for him.

I can’t give him what he’s looking for—I’m not even sure what he’s looking for—but I don’t have it.

“I want to know how long...how long you’ve been— when you realized.” Cas scrubs his hands over his face. “I don’t know what I’m trying to say. Never mind.” He collapses onto his bed.
Dean wants to—he’s not sure—comfort Cas, wrap him up until he feels better, until everything is alright. But nothing is ever going to be alright and Dean is the one upsetting Cas. Cas, I’m sorry. The angel looks up at Dean and he sits down on the bed next to him. You know I don’t know what I’m doing, you know I’m not... You know how hard this is for me. Cas sighs, leaning into Dean; Dean presses his forehead to Cas’s shoulder. It’s not your fault, you know that too. Cas, I’m no good at this, I never have been, anything I say will come out wrong, anything I do will end badly.

“Would you shut up?” Cas retorts, the words resonating in Dean’s head.

Dean’s head shoots up. “What the hell?” he asks. “How the hell did you do that?”

Cas dips his head, massaging his temples. “Thought projection, same concept as dreamwalking, technically.” He rests his head on Dean’s shoulder. “I figured, it’d be easier than talking right now.”

You can hear everything I’m thinking. Dean has to force himself not to panic. You know how fucking scared I am—you know I’ll fuck this up one way or another, I can’t—nothing good ever comes from me—I fuck everything up—

“Dean, I told you to shut up.” Cas laughs, though it doesn’t sound joyous. “Sometimes I think you forget that I pieced your body and soul back together—sometimes I forget too. But Dean, I already know you.” Cas perches his chin on Dean’s shoulder. “I know you.”

Dean looks up, he meets Cas’s soft gaze. His hand cups Cas’s jaw, his thumb stroking across his cheek. His breath sounds too loud in his own ears.

I’m scared, Cas, Dean admits, to himself it feels like the first time. I fuck up everything I touch… This is no new confession. He drops his hand and shifts his eyes, ashamed to even look at Cas right now.

“Stop being scared of this—of us. Dean…” He looks up, Cas’s eyes are so dark Dean sees himself reflected back; irresponsibly, he wants to get closer.

If it were that easy, if it were that simple, Dean would have stopped being scared long ago. But the ever-growing knot of doubt and terror only twists itself tighter in his chest. He can’t rid his mind of the idea that at some point, it doesn’t matter when because it’ll happen no matter what, that he will screw this up. Or it’ll screw itself up. Because nothing good ever happens to the Winchesters, nothing lasting at least. He won’t allow himself happiness because he’s so sure he would break under the pain to follow when everything comes crashing down.

He has already lost Cas more times that he’s willing to think about. How many nights did he drink himself to sleep trying to drown out the loss then? And that was before any of this. What is he supposed to do if he loses Cas after everything now?

It hits Dean all at once, like a fucking brick wall. Everything he’s been not thinking about and refusing to let himself feel for the past months (let's be honest, years) comes bursting to the surface.

The last six years suddenly make sense to Dean. Every look they shared, holding more emotion than just eye contact. Even the first time his eyes met Cas’s, he knew in that barn, no matter what was coming, he’d never be the same afterwards. Every touch; hugs that were just this side of too tight, hands brushing more and more, touching shoulders as they pass in the hallway. One of the first things Cas told Dean: I grabbed you tight and raised you from Perdition; he never let go after, not really. Every "I need you" meaning something slightly more than the words could hold. He’s been so careful these last few years, fooling himself into thinking if he didn't actually say the words then there's no way it could be true. How wrong he was.
He’s ruined. Cas has ruined him for anyone else; he wouldn’t be able to keep going if something were to happen. The realization cuts through him like a knife.

“Dean,” Cas soothes, “it’s okay, it’s going to be okay.” The angel’s fingers brush the tears from his face, the hair from his forehead. He gasps around his clenched jaw, trying to hold it all it. “Dean, everything is okay, it’s okay,” he keeps repeating.

Fuck it all. Fuck. Dean didn’t know he was still able to feel fear like this, after everything he’s been through. Some sick part of him actually enjoys it, reminds him he is still human, after all. Fuck, Cas, fuck—I’m a goddamned mess—“You know exactly how many mistakes I’ve made,” Dean bursts. He takes a ragged breath to steady himself; it doesn’t work. “You fucking know how much I’ve hurt you. I can’t fucking do that to you again, not after everything.”

Cas grabs his face and kisses him, rough and strong. Dean can feel the anger leaking into the kiss, but he grabs Cas’s wrists and holds on anyways.

“You don’t think I don’t know that?” The edge in his voice sounds lethal. “You think don’t I realize how much you’ve hurt me! I know you have, and yet, here I am. Time and time again, I always come back to you.” His hands are warm on Dean’s jaw, his thumb stroking now, acting as a balm to his harsh tone. “But, Dean, we’ve both hurt each other...and for that I apologize,” he says, almost a whisper, but somehow stronger, the words resonating in Dean’s chest. “It boils down to this.” They both take deep breaths. “The moment my grace touched your soul, I was lost; I know that now.” He gives a small smile. “And even though it might have taken me years to realize that, and years more to act on it, I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Dean opens his mouth to reply but stops when Castiel’s eyes sharpen. “Listen to me, Dean. For once, listen to me, and stop assuming you know what’s best for me.” He takes a deep breath. “I’m not going anywhere. You’re not alone anymore.”

Something clicks into place.

Dean feels his chest compress itself, his heart swelling, his stomach churning. Being scared may have saved him from a lot of other situations in life, but right now he doesn’t think it will. He has Cas; whether this is Cas giving himself over or Dean finally being brought up to speed on everything, Cas is with him. And having Cas is worth pushing past the leagues of fear inside the sea of his mind.

For months they’ve been not saying a damn thing to each other, always ignoring what was blatantly in front of them. Or maybe Dean was just ignoring it and Cas had been feeling just as alone as he had. Dean realizes, finally, after months, that he can’t think of Cas from his point of view, but has to see things from Cas’s side. In trying not to think about someone besides himself, he ended up being selfish.

Cas, I’m—I don’t—I can’t begin—what I did—

And then they’re kissing. Dean doesn’t know who started it or when, but all he can think about is the taste of Cas’s mouth.

They haven’t kissed like this before, Dean thinks, feeling guilty. Cas deserves these kinds of kisses all the time. It’s a slow slide of lips, almost too soft, only enough pressure to promise more to follow. Cas’s breath starts to hitch in uneven intervals and Dean takes that to mean more. He presses his tongue to Cas’s tentatively, as if this were his first time doing so, and feels a thrill shoot through him when Cas sucks it into his mouth. Feeling light headed and heart beating insistently against his ribs, because he’s so overwhelmed, Dean turns away, his lips trailing along Cas’s cheek, catching on the stubble there. He concentrates on sucking a bruise onto Cas’s throat right under the hinge of his jaw.
Maybe not everything between them was going to be perfect, god knows it won’t be, but if it means Dean gets to kiss Cas like this whenever he wants, then he’s not going to fight it. He can’t, he doesn’t have the strength or the will anymore.

Cas’s hands are fisted in Dean’s shirt, right between his shoulder blades, not really pulling him closer, but making sure he doesn’t move. Shifting his hips, Dean turns more towards the angel, bringing his hands up to cup his jaw. He takes a deep breath, then another, their lips ghosting across each other’s. Opening his eyes, Dean sees Cas’s staring right back.

*How come,* Dean swallows, licking his lips as his nose brushes Cas’s, *how come you never projected your thoughts until now?* Asking the question grounds him and subdues his panicked thoughts before they start to manifest. He thinks he knows the answer but he wants to know for sure.

“*This is usually only used for communication between angels… But also because I didn’t know before now how you’d react…*” Cas’s eyes fall closed as he leans their foreheads together. “I need to be touching you as well. So I assumed you would take it as some breach of privacy— which it is. Also, it takes a lot of focus…and leaves us both very vulnerable to each other.” He finally pulls Dean closer, their mouths meeting again.

Cas slowly lies down, Dean following him, throwing a leg over his waist to straddle the angel’s hips. He feels the hardness of Cas’s erection below his but ignores it in favor of the lips pressing to his. Fingers dance along the hem of Dean’s shirt, finally pulling it up enough to slide around his back, nails tracing the dip of his spine, over and over. He’s breathless, gasping into Cas’s mouth now. Castiel sighs in return.

*It’s okay,* Dean thinks, cradling Cas’s jaw, *I’m okay and he’s okay and that’s what matters.* Something akin to hope settles in his chest. He definitely feels awed by this moment. The angel cups his jaw in return, an understanding look comes over his features.

Strong arms pull Dean down until his whole body’s pressed to Cas’s, legs tangled. Dean closes his eyes and just breathes in Cas’s scent, *ozone, snow, and lightning,* for once content to be present in both mind and body. *It’s okay,* they both think, *the thought bouncing between them, each time it becomes more believable.* Feeling Cas’s solid presence right there under him, a reminder that the angel is a— if not the— point of reference in his life. Dean pulls Cas impossibly closer, gathering him in his arms, breathing his name in his ear, knowing it’s not enough but hoping that it’s a good start to a long overdue apology. Hushed with a hug in return, Dean simply continues to hold on.

Some time later, it just happens, their clothes falling away. Not in the angel-mojo kind of way, but in the way where every movement feels more natural than the last when Dean pulls at another piece of clothing separating him from Castiel. He doesn’t realize how hot he is until the angel’s thighs press against his grinding hips, their contact literally feeling like fire. Cas cradles Dean’s head as the hunter nips and licks at his shoulder. The fingers brushing in his hair send shocks of pleasure through Dean, making sure his hips don’t stop.

Dean needs *something,* his whole body craving; *closer, closer, closer.*

“*Cas, baby,*” Dean moans, Cas crashing their lips together, his tongue unrelenting.

*God, Dean needs something,* anything. *His whole body screams with the need,* making his hands twitch as they brush over Cas’s body. *Closer, closer, closer.*

That light Dean sees in Cas burns white hot as Dean gasps out his name.
“Dean, please— Dean, please…” Cas all but shouts when Dean finds his rhythm, grinding his hips in circles so his cock repeatedly catches on Cas’s.

“Anything, angel,” Dean says, pulling at Cas’s hair to better expose the hollow of his throat. *Anything you want.* His lips start a path down Cas’s chest, stopping to press his tongue into the dip of his collar bone then over each nipple; he scrapes his teeth over every rib. Hands rub at Cas’s thighs, gingerly pushing them apart, giving Dean access. Dean noses at the jut of Cas’s hip, fingers barely tracing the base of his cock. The angel groans, thrusting up into the contact, pining for more. He turns and comes face to face with the head of Cas’s throbbing cock.

*God,* Dean groans, feeling his own cock stiffen in the sheets, *so fucking hot right now.* “So hard for me, so ready for me,” he whispers, watching Cas’s mouth go slack as his licks a stripe on the underside of his erection. He sucks the head in between his lips, and feels more than hears Cas moan at the heat around his cock.

Several thoughts run through Dean’s mind at once. He’s surprisingly smug about how good he’s become at sucking cock—*well, one cock in particular*—in less than six months. He is determined to make Cas cum like he’s never cum before. Then there’s the tug of Cas’s hands in his hair, igniting something low in his belly he hasn’t felt before, and he kind of likes it. That slow heat gradually builds into something he can almost put a name to. Finally, there’s the echo of both Cas’s thoughts inside his head and the low vibrations of his moans in his ears.

“Fuck me, oh god—fuck—Dean. Fuck—me!” repeats in Dean’s head almost three times before it finally makes sense. Cas then grips his hair, hard, demanding him to continue, pulling Dean out of his stupor.

Dean tries not to think about it, because he doesn’t want Cas to hear his hesitation. *Did he mean that?* It both excites and terrifies Dean. But with Cas thrusting his cock deeper into his mouth, as Dean grips his hips, Dean can’t actually think of why he’s scared. All he can think is *closer.*

He pulls off slowly, not wanting to shock Cas. His lips drag along the damp skin, tightening momentarily when they reach the head, so they pull off with a pop. Dean goes back in for one more lick, from base to tip, lingering near the slit.

“Turn over, on your stomach, Cas?” Dean asks, looking up.

Cas blinks fast, his hands stopping where they are clutched in Dean’s hair. “I want to see your face.” Dean almost laughs; Cas’s eyes have been squeezed shut for how much of this?

Dean blushing but pushes past the nerves. “Castiel, I promise I’ll make it good for you, baby.” Dean allows himself to think about it. “God, *so good,* baby,” he moans, his hands never leaving Cas’s body as he helps him turn over, Cas still skeptical.

Dean leans back, sitting on his haunches to reach for a pillow and hand it to Cas. “Hold that, I’ll be right back.” The angel clutches the pillow to his chest as he settles on his stomach. Dean kisses the dip of Cas’s lower back before he stands up.

Cas *whines,* actually *whines,* a high noise in the back of his throat. Dean wants to laugh but too much lust runs through him for it to be funny, instead his cock jumping at the sound. “I’ll be right back, Cas.”

His brain skips town once he steps out the door, the fresh air wiping his mind blank. *What the hell was I getting?* But he finds himself in front of his bedside table opening the drawer before he knows it, pulling out lube that is God knows how old. He flicks the cap open and turns it over, squeezing
some into the trash can. *What the fuck is that consistency?* He catches a wiff of the rancid liquid. *Hell no.* Dropping the bottle in the trash, he runs a quick list through his head. *Not soap, not lotion, not Sam’s fucking conditioner, and we don’t have baby oil—but we have to have cooking oil somewhere.* Dean dashes to the kitchen, praying to find some oil. In his haste he forgets both the fact that he uses canola oil to cook all the time (*It should be in the kitchen somewhere…*) and that Sam might still be on the couch.

Despite the darkness of the kitchen, Dean finds a bottle of olive oil next to the fridge that Sam will just have to do without on his salads for now.

“Dude, do we have any tylenol in here?” comes Sam’s voice from the direction of the television room.

Dean freezes like a deer in headlights. He barely grabs a dish towel to cover himself before Sam comes bumbling in, a yawn stretching his mouth wide, not even attempting to turn the light on. Sam stops, eyes still half shut as he opens a cabinet, hands reaching into the darkness searching for the pills.

“Dean, I asked if we had any tylenol in here?”

Dean finally finds his voice. “No, Sam, it’s in the damn bathroom, where it always is.” He inches out of the kitchen slowly, not sure if Sam saw he was buck naked or not.

“What crawled up your ass and died?” Sam mumbles around another yawn as Dean hurries back to Cas’s room.

The door was still cracked open, so Cas doesn’t hear Dean enter as he pushes the rest of the way.

*Ahh, jeez.*

Cas is just barely grinding his hips into the bed, a slight thrust as he mouths silently at the pleasure. Dean has a sneaking suspicion that Cas’s hand is fisted around his cock. The air thickens with desire the moment Cas realizes Dean is in the room. He only noticed because Dean couldn’t hold back the moan bursting in his chest. Cas’s head rolls on his shoulders, his breath quickening when he doesn’t stop touching himself.

“Stop,” Dean demands quietly, kneeling on the side of the bed. Cas throws him an irritated glance before extracting his hand and fisting it in the pillowcase. His legs spread automatically when Dean crawls closer.

Now that he’s here, about to—well, hopefully—fuck Castiel open, nice and slow, he’s not nearly as nervous or unsure about it as he thought he’d be. Dean’s flat out excited, and not just because it’s been almost a year since he’s properly fucked anyone. He’s so fucking thrilled to do this with Cas.

“You good?” he murmurs, dripping some of the oil on his fingers and placing the bottle near Cas’s hip. Cas makes an affirmative sound, pushing his ass back just a little bit. “Here, put the pillow under your hips,” Dean says, helping Cas do so. “And don’t fucking move.” Cas snorts.

Both hearts beat harder than they have all night, and Dean’s pretty sure this is the hardest his heart ever has. He coats his fingers one more time in the extra oil pooled in his other palm.

“Cas, I’m—” Dean’s words get cut off as the angel’s thighs spread further and his ass presses back. “Fuck, Cas, fuck, fuck, *damn,*” he mutters under his breath, pressing his first two fingers bluntly against Cas’s hole.
Dean can only think about how tight and hot and consuming Cas is once two fingers are buried to the knuckle. Right now he really can’t imagine his cock fitting in Cas, but—fuck, when it does fit he knows he won’t be able to control himself. Cas impatiently fucks back, making the most debauched sound yet as he starts a steady grind on Dean’s fingers. Dean, on the other hand, is in shock, gripping tight to Cas’s thigh as he’s watching his other hand move in time with Cas’s ass.

More and more moans fill the air as the pair finds their rhythm. Occasionally Dean will crook his fingers, finding Cas’s prostate, and stroking that bundle of nerves extra hard for a few thrusts. Once three fingers are sliding in and out with ease, when Cas is barely able to speak, huffing out low moans muffled in the sheets, does Dean think he’s prepped enough.

He pulls his fingers out and grabs his cock, instant relief flooding him as he forces himself not to stroke along its length. “Cas, babe, I think—”

“Yes, Dean, please!”

How is Dean supposed to refuse that? Why would he refuse that strangled plea dripping from Cas’s raw throat?

“Oh, hell did I ever think my fingers would be enough?”

Dean pulls his hand away, grabs his cock, and presses it firmly against Cas.

Fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck. He can already tell this is going to be un-fucking-believable.

Cas presses back steadily, slowly swallowing Dean’s cock. His head hangs between his shoulders again and his breathing is harsh as he gets accustomed to Dean’s girth.

Oh, hell—fuck, oh god, yes, yes, god—Dean tries to stay calm as his entire body ignites. He is entirely consumed. Between his legs, his dick throbs so much it aches as he lets Cas set the pace. He has to lean his forehead between Cas’s shoulder blades and close his eyes, so he doesn’t completely lose it right now. Pleasepleaseplease. Muscles straining, his body is begging for this, to bury himself inside Cas fully.

Dean’s one hand is still on Cas’s belly, fingers scratching at the hair trailing downwards, and his other hand grips Cas’s shoulder for leverage. He opens his eyes and looks down, their bodies moving towards each other bit by unbearable bit, fucking connecting. And that’s it, that’s what this
is about and it doesn’t scare Dean. He’s giving himself over to Cas completely in this moment and in return Cas is opening up for him. Just him. *For me.*

The back of Cas’s thighs press to Dean’s, surprising him. He’d been so lost in the thought of *fucking connecting* with Cas that he didn’t realize Cas was still pressing back. He looks down again, his dick now buried to the hilt inside of Cas. Dean loses it at that. He pulls himself closer to Cas, his lips attached to his neck as he sucks a bruise there. He trails his hand from the angel’s shoulder, down his side, across his stomach, and grabs his cock. Cas all but shouts, the gasp falling from his mouth sounds painful. He thrusts forward into Dean’s hand, pulling at Dean’s cock in him. Dean has to bite down on Cas’s neck to stop himself from screaming from the pull on his cock. Cas gasps again, pushing back into Dean now.

Dean stops Cas’s hips, letting his forehead rest between the angel’s shoulder blades. “No, angel, lemme,” he slurs, his mouth dry.

He fucks Castiel slowly, wanting to feel every single atom the angel is made of. Feeling Cas clench around his cock every time he hits that bundle of nerves. Dean scrapes his teeth across Cas’s shoulder just like he knows Cas likes it. His tongue traces across Cas’s back, dipping in his spine, then kisses Cas’s other shoulder blade before scraping his teeth across that one as well. The angel shakes under Dean’s touch. *I’m fucking doing that—fuck, oh god, Castiel.*

“Dean, *ple-please,*” Cas huffs, pushing himself up against Dean’s chest.

Dean wraps an arm around Cas’s chest, holding him close. “Anything you want, angel.” He readjusts his hips, fucking up into Cas now.

Cas’s head lolls on Dean’s shoulder, trying to catch his breath.

“Please…,” his voice trails off, sounding distant.

Dean twists his wrist as he pulls on Cas’s cock, feeling the muscles in his stomach contract. His thrusting picks up as he listens to Cas’s moans, right in his ear, unable to hold himself back from the pleasure that comes with them. *I’m inside Cas, I’m gonna make him cum from the inside out.* Cas reaches back and grabs Dean’s hips, pulling him in tighter, harder.

Dean’s delirious with the thought of being *inside Castiel, being so close* that his hand stalls. Cas’s rough moans remind him to keep jacking him; he slowly pulls up Cas’s cock, knowing he’s going to be rewarded with more precum flowing over his fingers as he *fucking touches Cas.*

*I’m fucking Cas,* Dean thinks for the millionth time that night. Familiar feelings stir in his gut, his toes curling, his knees spreading wider for balance as he thrusts harder. “So fucking, good, angel,” he bursts, “So good for me, I’m gonna cum, you’re so good, Castiel.”

“Yesss…,” Cas moans, grinding his hips in circles on Dean’s cock. A hand reaches up behind Dean’s head, gripping his neck.

“You’re so beautiful—” *Where the hell did that come from?* “—this way, all open for me. I’m gonna make you cum so good, Castiel.” Cas pulls his head forward, locking their mouths in an awkward but filthy-hot kiss.

“Dean, please, your face— your face—” He can’t continue, not with the way Dean’s pulling on his cock.

“Anything, angel, anything…” He grabs Cas’s wrist, placing his hand back on the headboard. Pulling out his cock of Cas was the very bottom thing on the list of what Dean wanted to do, but
watching as it slides out of Cas… I, wow. He slides out and knows without a doubt that he’d do anything to fuck Cas again. Lucky for him, Cas is turning around before he even knows what’s happening. Suddenly, he’s laid flat on his back, Cas scrambling to straddle his hips and realign himself.

Dean’s dying. His heart stops, he can’t breath, his eyes squeeze shut.

*Cas is sitting on my fucking dick—fuck.*

Once Cas sinks all the way down, he braces himself, hands framing Dean’s head. He rolls his hips again. Dean’s positive he feels his stomach drop out. Hips roll again. Dean moans, pulling at Cas, lips searching. Hips just keep grinding down, steadier than his own heartbeat. He grabs Cas’s ass to help facilitate the thrusts. Precum leaks onto Dean’s stomach as Cas’s cock rubs between their bellies. *I’m doing that to him.* Cas thrusts hard a few more times, biting Dean’s neck.

Then Cas moans, the sound so low in the back of his throat, sounding as broken and disheveled as he looks. He pulls hard on Dean’s hair, forcing their mouths back together. Then Dean can feel it, the warmth of Cas’s cum as it coats his stomach, and the resulting clenching of his ass.

“Oh, oh, oh-oh-oh,” Cas repeats into Dean’s mouth as he continues tiny thrusts, as if he can’t seem to make his hips stop. “C’mon, Dean.”

Dean had stopped, now his only movement being the hands rubbing Cas’s back, letting Cas enjoy his orgasm. He grabs the angel’s hips but doesn’t try to move them. Cas huffs in his ear. He wants this to be good for Cas. *This was all about being good for Cas.* Cas huffs again. Then he’s sitting up, hands braced on Dean’s chest, and he slams his hips down.

*JesusMaryandJoseph.* Cas swallows him entirely in those powerful thrusts. His body consumed by the light Dean *swears* he can see glowing under Cas’s skin, in his eyes.

“C’mon, Dean.” That’s all it takes.

Dean thrusts his hips up, slamming into Cas with more force than he thought possible. The angel can take it. Cas is strong enough that Dean won’t bruise his hips with how hard he’s gripping them, forcing them to move at the pace he wants.

“Yeah, angel, yeah, like that. Beautiful. Like that, c’mon, so good for me, baby, so good on my cock.”

Cas pitches forward, again locking his mouth with Dean’s. Dean’s mouth spills dozens of more filthy words out as he just continues fucking Cas. *Fucking Cas, fucking Castiel.*

At that final realization, everything comes to a head, and Dean feels it in his hands before anything else. The way they cramp up and his wrists twist, then his toes curl, then his legs thrash, and suddenly everything is too hot to touch. Cas is too hot to touch. He cums, gasping as his hands burn into the angel’s hips and his lips burn across Cas’s mouth.

He shakes his head, trying to clear it, but it only disorients him more. His hips stutter to a stop moments later. He groans one final time. Grabbing Cas’s cheeks, he forces his tongue in his mouth, slow and filthy, trying to convey god knows what emotions he’s feeling right now.

He feels like he’s never breathed before this moment. *Have I really though?*

Dean gathers Cas close, cradling his head to his chest and pushing a leg between his, trying to envelop the angel, protect him. Certainly he is trying to protect that angel from himself as well. He’s
been a complete ass to Cas, especially these last six months. The feelings of guilt and fear are still fighting against the him as he tries to push them away, but he has to keep fighting. He thinks he might actually be able to win…

“I like when you’re here,” Cas whispers. Cas must sense Dean’s confusion because he continues, “You always try not to think about us when we’re together, it scares you too much. But, just so you know, I like having you here, mind, body, and all.”

Another stab of guilt, completely Dean’s own fault.

He’s never even properly held Cas after sex. What the fuck is wrong with me? Dean is utterly shocked with himself at this revelation. Not that Cas needs the reassurance of being held or anything but he has to crave the intimacy of it. Dean knows he himself does. All that fear had been holding Dean back more than he even realized, he didn’t want to realize. He tried for so long to let this continue to unfold without ever stopping to think about it.

It’s fucking real now.

He sighs into the top of Cas’s hair, pressing his cheek to the strands. “I like being here too, Cas.”

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A case involving a hoard of cursed objects draws Sam and Dean to the heart of Denver in the middle of a blizzard. They’ve rounded up all the objects with a little help from the local officer who called them about the case; he called after calling Garth who said he couldn’t take the case and suggested them instead. Now they’re stuck in their motel room, snow painting the windows white as they lock up the objects. Classic Christmas movies play in the background as Sam works on carving the meticulous sigils and symbols into the iron lockboxes and Dean researches the corresponding objects.

Right now It’s a Wonderful Life plays as Dean researches a cursed skull from an ancient Indonesian tribe but he can’t think about anything besides not thinking about Cas. Back in the bunker, by himself, holding down the fort. Doesn’t he know he could pop in here whenever he wanted to?

“Dean, that’s not the right tribe,” Sam notes, looking over his shoulder.

“Shouldn’t you be doing your part, nerd, not trying to do mine?” Dean grumbles.

“If we had two Indonesian skulls it wouldn’t be a problem, but Dean we already locked up that one, we’re on the skull from the Mayans now.” He walks over to the dresser and picks up the remote to turn the channel.

“Nah, don’t turn it, it’s not bothering me.” Dean tries to sound as casual as possible.

“How many times have we seen this, Dean?” He pulls a couple beers out of the fridge before sitting back down. Sam knows what Dean needs before he does.

Dean picks up his, cracking it open and drinking before answering, “It’s my favorite movie, man, let me have this, it’s Christmastime.” He does his best impression of Sam’s puppy dog eyes.

“Dude, you look stupid.”

“How do you think you look when you do it?”

Sam snorts in reply, not dignifying that with a response.
They finish up the remaining objects, planning on taking them back to the storage room at the bunker. Sam suggests a pub across the street, since Dean doesn’t want to drive Baby anywhere right now. Once seated, Dean orders wings and whiskey and Sam settles for chowder. Soon they’re both convinced to try the *Gallagher Family’s Famous Eggnog*. Suddenly (after his third cup) Dean doesn’t think all mixed drinks should be counted out. Sam doesn’t have any trouble giving over to the alcohol and ends up in a heated conversation with another customer about the best hunting knife brands. He’s pulled away when Dean decides it time for that darts rematch; it’s surprising how good both their aims are considering the alcohol in their systems. Dean still wins though, meaning Sam buys their fifth round. Dean starts thinking about calling Cas once he finishes off the round and that’s when he decides it’s time for them to leave. The brothers stumble across the street and both fall into bed fully clothed, *Scrooged* playing on the television covers the sounds of Sam’s snores.

Dean awakes the next morning to the loud Christmas carols from some over-happy-feel-good movie playing *too damn early*. He scrambles to find the remote, turning it to the weather channel and letting that run as he’s forced to start his day. Sam’s already out on his morning run, taking advantage of a break in the snow. *How the fuck is he not hungover?* Dean hopes, in the most brotherly way possible, that a sober Sam will joke about how he’s hungover so he can throttle him.

By the time Dean’s out of the shower and dressed, shoving clothes back into his duffel, Sam walks back in looking too chipper for nine in the morning. He places the coffees he picked up on the table and once he takes off his coat he pulls the pastries out of the pockets.

“Dude, *scones* and *danishes* for breakfast?” Dean scoffs at the selection, eyeing what looks like an apple turnover.

“You’re the one who knows what they are,” Sam shoots back. “Also, you’re welcome.” He bites into a danish and heads for the bathroom.

Dean makes a face at his back as he picks up the turnover. It is apple.

The car is loaded up, all the cursed objects safely nestled in the trunk, when Sam finishes getting ready. Dean’s outside warming up the car as Sam returns their roomkeys and throws his bag in the backseat. He gets in, knocking snow off his boots per Dean’s demand.

“Hey, do you mind stopping at a place downtown?” he asks holding his hands up to the vents.

“Why, gotta go see about a girl?” Dean quotes, putting the car in drive.

“I wanted to get Charlie’s Christmas present while we were somewhere that might actually have it.”

*Oh, fuck, I forgot about that. Shit.*

Dean turns left instead of right and follows the directions Sam gives him until they’re in front of an antique shop.

“I’ll be right back.” He clambers out of the car, turning his collar up against the wind and snow.

Dean’s not sure what makes him do it, but once he spots the stationary shop on the corner, he’s getting out and walking towards it.

He pushes open the door, thankful for the heated interior of the store. As he’s knocking the snow off his boots, he hears someone greet him to his left, and waves his hand in reply. Already unsure of himself for being in here, he’s not about to go asking a bunch of questions to some clerk.

*What the hell?* He walks in between the tables and shelves laden with books and papers and funny
little contraptions he couldn’t begin to figure the use for. There’s an entire section of wall dedicated just to pens, and out of utter shock Dean stops in front of it. *He’d think it’s stupid, really.* A handwritten note next to display informs him that some fountain pens can be custom engraved.

“Are you looking at anything in particular?” a clerk asks. Dean recognizes the voice as the one the greeted him, it belongs to a girl no older than twenty-five with dark hair and all-too-familiar blue eyes. Her name tag reads Paige.

“I was just...,” Dean clears his throat and tries again, “I was looking at this one.” He points to the customizable one.

“That’s a new one. We used to only be able to do names, and we’d have to send them out of town for that. Now Mr. Johnson has his own engraving set and he can pretty much do anything,” she tells him. “What did you have in mind?”

Dean clears his throat again. “Just a symbol or two. And a name, yeah.” He looks down at his feet, scuffing his boot along the hardwood. *Cas doesn’t have anything with his name on it. He doesn’t have much period.*

“If the symbols are small enough, sure we can do that.”

“They’re just like...a different language. Just another word.”

The girl smiles at him, making Dean feel a little less nervous. “Here, let me show you which pens can be engraved.”

*She isn’t wasting any time.* Once at the front counter, she pulls out a shallow box, the inside lined with velvet. About two dozen pens lie in the slots, a little label each of them noting the material they’re made from. One reads *Holly, Silver Plated.* The design is a little ornate for a pen, but holly is perfect.

“This one.”

“Okay, now you can pick a stain for the wood, and whether or not you want the engraving stained, colored, or left plain.” She pulls out two sheets showing the different stains and colors.

*All of this for one friggen pen?*

Dean ends up choosing a dark stain for the wood and leaving the engraving untouched. He draws out the Enochian for Cas’s name, slow and precise so they don’t fuck it up, and then writes *Castiel,* all in the little box reserved for what he wants engraved.

“Did you want to look around some more,” Paige asks, after filling out the form for the pen.

Dean scrubs a hand over his face. *If I’m going all in I better go all in.* He takes a deep breath and asks, “You don’t have anything with beeswax, do you?” He noticed the sets for wax seals at one table.

The little bell above the door signals another customer enter, Paige greets them as well.
Just a simple journal, plain. He doesn’t really do elaborate. I don’t either, so that’s good. Would he want leather? That’s pretty normal for a journal. More handwritten notes detail the making of some of the journals. All the leathers used, the stone or wood insets, the meaning of the embroidered symbols. He looks over a couple different shelves, but comes back to the first one he walked up to. He hesitates picking up the dark leather journal with the silver stitching on the spine. God, this is stupid. Then chooses the matching stationary next to the journal as well. Well, he needs stationary if he has that wax seal set.

He walks back up to the counter, looking anywhere but Paige’s face.

That’s when he spots Sam, looking at the books on the front table.

Dean clutches the journal in his hands so hard his fingers hurt.

Sam looks up, meeting his eyes; his expression changes to confusion. Probably because I look like I’m about to puke. “You okay, Dean?” he asks, meeting Dean at the front counter.

Paige smiles up at them both. “Is that all then?” she asks, completely oblivious that Dean wants to jump out of his skin, run out of the store, fall through the floor.

Dean nods, his throat too tight to speak. She begins to ring up the total, wrapping the wax set, paper, and journal in a pieces of tissue paper before putting them in the bag.

“Wait,” Dean speaks up, his head spinning from how close to puking he feels. “Can you engrave the journal too?”

Sam puts down the display letter opener he picked up from the counter, and looks at Dean again. Paige begins to ramble about how they’ve never done it before but that she is sure Mr. Johnson would be able to. She offers to call him up and ask.

As she’s doing that, Sam turns to Dean. “What’s up?” he asks.

“I’m buying a Christmas present.” Dean’s surprised he’s able to say that without gritting his teeth.

“I figured,” Sam says, picking the letter opener back up. “Who for, Charlie?”

Well, fuck it, just fuck it. “No, for Cas.” Again, Dean doesn’t know how he’s speaking without gritting it through his teeth.

Sam looks a slightly surprised but he doesn’t say anything else.

Paige comes back and informs him Mr. Johnson can engrave the journal for him as well. She pulls out another form for him to fill out, scratching out the title and writing Journal Engraving above it. Sam raises his eyebrows when he watches Dean write out the Enochian then Castiel, but thankfully he doesn’t say anything.

“You should be able to pick them up in three to five day’s time—we’ll call you.” She’s unwrapping the journal from the bag.

“Can you just mail it to me? My brother and I are leaving now, we were just in Denver for business.” Sam’s gone back over to the books, catching on that Dean didn’t want to talk right now.

“Sure, that won’t be a problem.” She pulls out another sheet for him to fill out. Dean puts down the number of the PO box they have in Lebanon. “Will that be all then?” she asks. Dean confirms, handing over his card, then getting that and his receipt back. “Thanks for coming in, happy
holidays!

Dean grabs the bag with the wax set and stationary then heads out the door, not waiting for Sam to catch up. He tosses the bag in the back and turns the car on, gripping the steering wheel too tight as he waits for the engine to warm up again. Sam gets in, stomping his boots off outside the car.

“You bought Cas a journal?” he asks, assuming a conversational tone.

Dean internally groans. “And a stupid fountain pen and paper to go with the damned wax seal set.”

“Hmm,” Sam hums, holding his hands up to the vents again.

After letting the car warm up, Dean starts to drive out of town, hoping they have enough gas to make the whole trip, he really doesn’t want to stop. But the snow might make it so that they have to stop. It’s better than it was the last few days here, but definitely not good driving conditions.

They’re on the road for an hour before Sam speaks up again. “Why’d you get Cas a present? You haven’t gotten him any Christmas presents before.”

Dean bites the inside of his lip, scrubbing his face with one hand. He sighs. *Stop making a big deal out of this. It’s a Christmas present, it’s not like you’re committing yourself to anything.* A feeling in his gut kind of likes the idea of committing himself though. Too bad he feels like puking at the thought.

“Dean?”

“The dude doesn’t have anything with his name on it.” *That wasn’t so hard to say.* “He barely has anything for himself, you know.” *Just stop there, Sam can accept that as an answer.* “I mean, have you ever been in his room? He’s got like three books on his desk that he took from the library. Only one of his dresser drawers has extra clothes—not that he needs them. His walls are completely bare.”

Sam looks at Dean with an expression he’s never seen before. He should stop now before he says too much.

“The guy’s been living with us for how long? Since April? He should have more stuff. Even if it’s just junk. Like liquor bottles or leaves he’s collected from trees. Objects from hunts or something. I mean, Cas has interests, he should show them, shouldn’t he?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Sam agrees. “But, up until this point, he’s been living a nomad’s life, hasn’t he? I don’t think he’s used to keeping stuff, y’know?” His expression is still unreadable.

“But he’s been with us for months now, he should have settled in.”

“I guess,” Sam repeats, “But he can leave whenever he wants, basi—”

“He’s not going to fucking leave,” Dean says, with a ferocity that alarms them both.

Sam gives him a measured look, analyzing the situation. Dean locks his lips, feeling his face grow hot.

Ten minutes or so pass before Sam sighs and says, “Dean, what aren’t you telling me?”

*Sam fucking knows. He knows and I don’t know what he thinks about it. I know him better than anyone, I should know how he’d react to this situation. I should know if he’s going to act like Dad—*
or Mom—or if he’s going to act completely differently—like Sam. God, he’s had to live with us, he’s been there this entire time. Does he realize that? God, how long has he known? Why hasn’t he said anything if he knows? What if he doesn’t know? Of course he knows, I have gotten so sloppy. He fucking knows.

The panic settles itself comfortably in Dean’s chest, relaxing more and more the longer he doesn’t say anything.

“Dean?” Sam repeats, his voice soft even in the silence of the Impala.

“Cas is…” He doesn’t even know where to begin. Cas is everything. The thought scares him so much he pushes it as far down as it will go.

“Cas is…?” Sam waits for an answer.

Dean’s not ashamed of Cas, he’s ashamed of himself.

“Cas and I—” Dean literally has no clue how to say what he needs to say. Sam is willing to talk right now, and so is some part of Dean, so he should just get it over with. If he waits any longer, it’ll only going to get worse. Cas would want me to say something. That thought alone gives Dean that little boost he needs. “We’re doing stuff.” God, I sound like a damn thirteen year old trying to lie to my friends about going to third base. He wants to hide in a cave and never come out.

“Like what? Hunting stuff?” Sam’s staring straight ahead, his expression still unreadable.

Dean struggles to breathe evenly. “Don’t make me say it, Sammy.”

“Say what?” He sounds thoroughly confused.

“We’re fucking.” Why not just say everything, you asshole, just put everything on the table for Sam to see. “And I care about him.” Dean’s definitely going to puke. He pulls Baby over to the shoulder of the road, punching on her hazard lights. Pushing open the door, he hangs his head out the side waiting for the bile to come up. The rush of icy air hits him hard.

I’m not ashamed of Cas, repeats in Dean’s head as his throat burns. I’m the fuck up. He’s done everything right and I’m fucking it all up right now.

Sam’s silent for so long that Dean swallows hard and sits back up, closing the door.

“So he’s your boyfriend?” Sam asks, his face as stoic as it has been.

“He’s not my fucking boyfriend.” Dean gags on the word. “We’re just together, okay, god…” He feels himself about to puke again, his stomach heaving.

“I don’t know what to say…” Dean’s stomach drops, he doesn’t feel like he’s going to puke now. He just feels empty. “Other than— I already fucking knew, jerk.” Sam lets out a laugh that sounds like he’s been holding in entirely too long.

Dean punches his shoulder. It only makes him feel a little better.

Once Sam calms down he explains, “Dean, honestly, I think I knew before you did. When he walked into that water, and we thought he was gone forever, something in you changed. You weren’t like that when Dad died, or later when Bobby died. You were hollow for weeks after Cas was gone, I thought I was going to have to talk to you about it then. But he showed up, like Cas always does, and you were okay again— not back to normal but you were okay.
“Then when you had to deal with coming out of Purgatory without him, how you thought you’d left him. Dean, you thought you’d let him down entirely, and again, something inside you changed. You haven’t drunk like that since, not to the extent you were when you thought, once again, you’d lost Cas.

“And, I mean, c’mon,” Sam says, arching an eyebrow at him, “The way you fought for his grace, the way would wouldn’t give up on him. At one point, even I thought he was a lost cause, he was not in his right mind and we felt nowhere close to finding his grace. But you wouldn’t give up on him, you would never stop fighting for him. And, I mean, really, the way you would sit outside that door pining for him most days.” Sam snorts. “It was pathetic, dude, you were completely lost in him.”

Dean opens his mouth but nothing comes out, so Sam just continues.

“But, I mean, seriously. Just the way you look at him sometimes, like the sun shines out his ass or something.” Sam makes a disgusted face. “Or how sometimes when you think I’m busy or too enthralled with something else, you’ll take him to the side, and you’ll just talk about stuff. Not stuff about the case we’re working or any potential cases, but just...normal conversation. Like if he’d want to help you make dinner when we got back to the bunker or if he’d want to go to a Zeppelin concert with us if we were ever in the right place at the right time.”

Dean can feel his face heating up, but he just stares down at his hands, trying to let everything Sam says soak in.

“You’d fucking laugh as his dumb jokes— which still aren’t funny by the way. And you’d make him a plate of food every night, unless he said otherwise, just because that’s how you care for people. And you have offered to buy him more clothes. You’re the one who offered him the room in the bunker. He always ends up going with you if we have to split up for a case. He doesn’t complain about your music, even when you put Motorhead on repeat.

“And for the love of god, I’m not blind, I see when you two walk out of the room minutes apart after glancing at each other. I know you’re not playing Battleship or counting salt rounds. And you suck at covering up the smell in the car.” Sam’s laughing again, loving the chance to finally have this go at Dean.

“I mean, obviously I had no solid evidence, and it’s not like I could ask you. You’d flat out deny it, don’t even lie. And I shouldn’t have to ask Cas.”

Dean still doesn’t know how to react. He’s pulling at his jacket, it’s suddenly too warm in the car.

“I just, Sammy, I don’t—”

Sam looks over at him, serious now. “Dean, stop, you don’t have to explain. I understand, okay.”

“You do?” Dean’s throat is dry.

Sam pushes his hair back, staring at the ceiling of the car. “You have this idea of who you are in your head. I mean, everyone has this perception of themselves, and you just so happen to like to stay as close to what you think your true self is. You dress a certain way because that’s the only thing you’ve let yourself be comfortable wearing. You listen to certain music because that’s the only thing you were exposed to growing up. You put yourself in this little box and you just kept thinking you had to stay in it.

“But— and I couldn’t tell you what— something sparked something in you and now I think you’re finally comfortable not always being in your box. And, if I say so myself, I think you’re happier this
way. Everyone needs to push their limits, everyone needs to find themselves. I’m glad you found
yourself.” At that his face breaks into a huge smile and he looks like he wants to hug Dean, so he
does.

Dean breathes again, clutching to the back of Sam’s jacket.

He pulls away, smiling. He rubs the back of his neck and looks out the window, taking in the snow
around them. “Yeah, Sam, I think I’m fucking happy.”

It has been a long time since he’s admitted that and an even longer time since he’s said it.

They get back on the road but it’s slow going with all the snow. Dean’s pissed because they have to
stop for gas twice at the rate they’re going. They make it back to the bunker just in time for Dean to
make dinner by a reasonable hour.

As they’re unpacking the car in the carport, Sam asks from under the trunk of the Impala, “So...can I
ask what you were doing naked in the kitchen a few weeks ago?” So Sam did see him.

Dean pulls out one of the crates of the locked up cursed objects.

“Getting the olive oil.” He smirks at the memory.

“Wait, my olive oil?” Sam notes, heaving the other crate out and following Dean to the door.

Dean kicks open the door. “We ran out of lube.”

Sam groans from behind him but Dean just laughs the whole way down the hall.

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Christmas comes on a happier note than those of past years.

Dean wakes up early, Cas’s lips demanding as they make out, before Dean insists on getting up to
make breakfast.

He throws together some pancakes while Sam watches the coffee percolate. The three of them sit
down, still in their pajamas, and joke around. Sam starts throwing his blueberries on their plates, and
in return, Cas wills his plate to the other end of the table. When Sam walks over to get it, as he’s
reaching for it, Cas wills it back to the original spot. Dean can’t stop laughing as he watches Cas
repeat this childish joke on Sam. Sam sneaks some salt into Cas’s coffee in return; Dean’s cup
receives some as well just for laughing.

They clean up and the three of them end up side by side on the couch. A couple days before they set
up six foot Christmas tree they found discarded on someone’s driveway. Cas and Sam decorated it
with strings of empty shell casings and salt rounds and hung some of the coasters Sam collects from
bars. Cas perched a glass star on top that he specifically went out and bought, it hangs crookedly
now. They sit in front of the tree now, Dean laughing at the ramshackle decorations but liking it none
the less.

“It has spirit, man,” he says, to no one in particular.

Sam rubs his hands together. “Okay, present time!” He leans over the arm of the couch and grabs all
six presents. “Yours and yours,” he says, handing them to the respective receivers.

Dean sits between Cas and Sam, his knee pressing firmly to Cas’s. “Youngest first,” he chides,
definitely not wanting to open his presents first.

Sam wastes no time ripping into the wrappings. Cas got him an old angel’s manuscript, detailing the fighting techniques of angel garrisons, complete with pictures of their armour and diagrams of strategies. He thanks Cas profusely, turning the pages slowly. The he rips into Dean’s; Dean had found an old letter Bobby had written to their dad tucked in the back of his journal months ago. It details the ten months they spent with Bobby when they were young; how good Sam was doing in school, how Dean could rival himself as a mechanic, how Sam would not stop talking at dinner about some girl in his class, how Dean spent most weekends fishing on the lake, and so on. Sam read the whole thing three times before turning to his brother.

“Man, don’t get all sappy on me now.” Dean laughs, nudging Sam with his shoulder.

“Fine.” Sam’s voice shakes a little but he smiles and gestures that it’s his brother’s turn to open gifts.

Tearing away at the newspaper reveals a small wooden box, he slowly opens it. “Dammit, Sam,” Dean whispers, wiping his eyes as he picks up the amulet from inside.

He’d been too ashamed all these years to ever bring up the cast off amulet. A couple hours after he’d tossed it, he went back in a panic to retrieve it, but the cleaning crew had already been through the room. He pulls Sam into a hug now.

“I figured you were just being dramatic, as usual,” Sam says into his shoulder, “You’re always bitching about something. I figured one day you’d want this back.”

Dean sniffs hard, pulling away and stringing the amulet back into place. It’s a good weight to have around his neck again.

Cas sits quietly while Dean unwraps the slender box encasing his present.

Dean doesn’t make a sound but he bites his jaw, overwhelmed. He knows exactly what it is without ever seeing one before.

_A fucking angel’s feather. Fuck, his fucking feather._

(He might have said in passing one night that he wanted to see Cas’s wings, not the shadows, but his wings. Cas kissed him, replying it would be too much for Dean to handle. All of that raw energy exposed at once would be too much grace for a human to witness. Dean sighed, mumbling that he would be able to handle it if it meant seeing them. Cas distracted him from asking more about them by biting his neck.)

Sam senses the intimacy of the gift and engrosses himself in his new book.

Dean traces his fingers over the feather, barely touching it. It’s slightly glowing, a faint silver light emanating from inside it. It can’t be longer than a foot but it looks huge sitting therein the box, capturing all of Dean’s attention. He tries to breathe steadily through his nose as he picks it up, holding it delicately between his fingers. He tears his eyes away from it to look at Cas. The angel looks pleased with himself, a slight smile on his face and his eyes dancing as they look into Dean’s.

Cas bows his head towards Dean and whispers, “I tried to think of something no one else would have.” Dean nods, still too awed to talk.

The feather is still glowing when he looks back down at it. _Of course it’s still glowing, part of his grace is in this._ “Holy shit,” Dean finally breathes.
Cas laughs. Suddenly Dean’s gift doesn’t seem as important. Cas gave Dean part of his friggin wing and all Dean got him was some pen and paper and wax.

He is still looking at his feather when he hears Cas open his present.

The one from Sam first. An iPod. “So you’re not subjected to Dean’s music any more than you have to be,” he jokes.

Cas laughs in return, thanking him, turning the box over in his hands. Sam moves to the chair, reading the manuscript again, trying to give them as much privacy as he can while still staying in the room.

Now Dean’s gift. Thankfully Paige wrapped little information cards up with each item. So he doesn’t have to explain the medieval bees wax seal set, or the pen made from holly, or the details of the embroidery on the journal’s spine. He watches Cas’s face, seeing how his lips move as he reads over the cards, the smile breaking out.

Dean places the feather back in the box, covering it again. He keeps it on his lap, not wanting it too far from him.

“I figured every hunter needs his own journal.” He feels his face heat up.

Cas’s eyes are soft when he finally meets them. “Thank you, Dean, this is all beautiful.” His voice is low with gratitude. Dean looks down at the box holding the motherfucking angel feather. Then Cas grabs the side of his head, pulling them together, and pressing his lips softly to Dean’s temple. “Thank you.”

It’s the first time they’ve done anything remotely romantic in Sam’s presence, thankfully Dean doesn’t puke.

He sits quietly, still thinking about the feather, pressing his knee solidly against Cas’s, trying to think of something to say. Nothing seems right, no words mean enough. Spending Christmas with Cas and Sam, no apocalypse looming over their heads, is more than Dean could have wished for.

“Alright, so I have that recipe for the Gallagher Family’s Famous Eggnog,” Sam chimes in minutes later. “And Cas, you definitely need to try this stuff.”

Chapter End Notes

Can you figure out what Sam could possibly be hiding in that iPod? Hint: it's not just music

PS. Something equally parts exciting and debilitating. (I'm a Dean/Jensen girl [who woulda known, right!]) I work in downtown Austin, south side of the river, literally right across the street from the park where Austin City Limits is being held this weekend (I was listening to concerts all day). Guess which two guys decided to go to ACL today? So I was that fucking close and didn't get to see Jensen Ackles.

Edit: I went to ACL Sunday, guess who else went Sunday, guess who didn't get to see him?

PPS. Cas's chapter will come soon, I promise.
PPPS. How would you guys feel about a Sam POV chapter?
(Not) Alone

Chapter Notes

This hasn't been beta'd yet, but once it has, I will post it again. Enjoy!

Edit 12/26/15: has been beta'd!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is the first Thursday evening in February when Sam breaks the news to his brother; when Dean throws harsh words right back at him.

It is a Tuesday morning when Sam begins packing; when Dean storms out of the bunker in the Impala for three days.

It is a Sunday afternoon when Sam refuses to tell Dean where he’s going; when Dean spits anger and threats in his face.

It is a Thursday morning when Sam leaves the bunker for good; when Dean barely comes out of his room in time to hug goodbye.

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If Castiel ever thought Dean was unpredictable before now, then he was wrong.

The first few weeks after Sam left are the worst he’s seen Dean. Most days consist of Dean locking himself in the room with the window for hours. He won’t even drink most of the time, he’ll just pace, sometimes resorting to yelling on particularly trying days. When he doesn’t think Castiel can hear, he will call Sam, sometimes leaving lengthy messages. Not really begging or pleading, more just asking all the questions he didn’t get to ask before Sam left. Sometimes Castiel thinks some days Dean is just asking the air questions out of desperation, since he left his phone lying in the war room or on his bed.

Frustration tinges the edges of everything Dean tries to do. Rotating the tires on the Impala involves haphazardly tossing tools around the garage. Cleaning the bathroom means scrubbing the tub so hard the paint erodes. Cooking dinner sometimes results in overcooked meats and soggy pastas. Going on supply runs a few towns over comes with the hazard of speeding tickets and taking corners too fast. Conversations are succinct and void of personality; words seeming the harder and harder for Dean to string together the longer the conversation wares on.

Sex still comes easy though. The first time after Sam left, two weeks or so, Dean comes up behind Cas as he is sitting in the library, editing a book on demon physiology, and kneads his shoulders, not the first touch since Sam left but definitely one of the more intimate. He is talking about dinner, a neutral topic, but Castiel isn’t listening, instead focusing on properly adding to the possession habits of South American demons. Then Dean’s hands slide around to Castiel’s chest, tugging at the tie and popping a few buttons open so his hands can roam inside the shirt. Castiel can’t focus on the habits anymore. He leans back into the touch and tilts his head into it when Dean bends to kiss his temple. Soon, Castiel finds himself standing and turning in Dean’s arms, pulling the other man closer. The resulting sex leaves them both bent over the table, panting into the wood, sweating on
the books and papers.

From then on, if Castiel is in the library or a storage room or wherever, Dean will walk up behind him. He’ll kiss his shoulder or squeeze his neck briefly, and Castiel knows. It isn’t an often occurrence but it certainly isn’t rare either, so Castiel goes with it. Every time, he tells himself he’ll finally sum up the courage to mention Sam to Dean, some adrenaline high taking over. But when the time comes, when Dean is spread on top of him on the floor or when they are tracing patterns on each other’s arms next to each other bed, Castiel can’t find his voice.

He’s been present at the birth of hundreds of stars and seen his fair share of star’s lives end as well. Entire ecosystems and civilizations have come in and out of existence under his watch. He has explored ancient planets, with all traces of life long forgotten from its surface, he’s been to planets that are still shaking out the creases in their surface they’re so new, and he’s been with Earth since the dawn of its time, millenias ago. He’s fought otherworldly wars—hell, he has won those wars. He has rebelled against angels, Heaven, and God himself even. Yet this one human seems to be too much for Castiel to handle.

Castiel has to laugh at the humor of that realization.

“What?” Dean asks, looking up at Cas from where he lays on his shoulder.

Cas laughs again. “Don’t ever think you’re insignificant, Dean Winchester.”

There’s confusion in the hunter’s eyes when he looks away but when he looks back it’s been replaced with something close to humor. “Are you talking about my dick, Cas? ‘Cause if you are, trust me, I know there ain’t anything insignificant about it,” he laughs. Dean rolls on his back and shakes his hips, laughing harder now.

I’ve missed that sound, Cas realizes. “No, Dean, I was not referencing your penis,” he deadpans. “I was talking about your height in general, you should know just because you’re short—”

Cas yelps when Dean pinches his nipple and rolls back on top of him, pinning him in place. “Take that back! Take that back, you bastard!” Dean pinches Cas’s nipple, eliciting another surprised sound. “Take it back!” he laughs, out of breath.

“I was referring to your penis!” Cas jokes, gasping for breath as Dean starts tickling his ribs.

“No, you weren’t! You think I’m short!” Dean pins Cas’s shoulder down and crouches so his mouth is next to his ear. “Don’t ever call me short again!” he threatens in mock anger.

“It’s not your fault!”

Dean makes an offended sound. “I am not short! I’m six-fucking-one!”

Cas laughs, Dean’s insistence comes off hilariously as he crouches naked over top Cas. “Yeah, the shortest Winchester I know!”

And before Cas even realizes what might result because of that, Dean is already moving off of him. Dean sits up and throws his legs over the side of the bed so he can pull his jeans back on. Castiel sits up, leaning back on his elbows, experiencing thorough emotional whiplash.

“Dean, I…” But Cas doesn’t know what to say. Again, he has to stop and marvel at how the human continually renders him helpless.

Dean looks over his shoulder at Cas. His eyes are sad and the angel wishes they weren’t. If only I
didn’t open my mouth. He stares back, hoping to find the words he needs.

Dean’s emotions are plain on his face. He wants to apologize to Cas, he wants to say that it’s okay, that he’s being stupid. Cas knows this because he knows the hunter well enough by now. But Dean just sighs as he continues to look at Cas.

“I’m going to go make dinner,” he says, pushing himself off the bed. “I’ll let you know when I’m done.” He closes the door as he leaves.

Castiel falls back on the bed and closes his eyes. Frustration takes over. It seems to be the predominant emotion in the bunker the past few months.

It has been fifty-three days since Sam left the bunker. It’s been fifty-three days since Sam has been mentioned between them by name. It’s been fifty-three days since the bunker has had any semblance of calm. It has been more than that since Castiel has been able to have a normal conversation with Dean.

Dean does not know it, but Castiel and Sam have talked on the phone about once a week since he left. To Sam’s wishes, Castiel hasn’t mentioned it, hasn’t told Dean anything, no matter how wrong it feels.

Castiel still doesn’t know that much though. Sam decided to go back to school. When he was out on a solo hunt, he stopped by the university and asked about enrollment policies. He applied and got accepted. But he’s still hunting, locally though. He says he’s in a big enough—and superstitious enough—town that it’s not dull work. He will call Castiel to ask about a certain spell or some language he can’t decipher, and Castiel will help him as he hides outside on the roof or in Sam’s empty room.

Castiel so desperately wants to call Sam now, ask him how to do this. How do I handle Dean? How do I make him happy again? But Sam already gave him the big grandiose speech about how Dean “will come around” and “once he realizes this is not a bad thing” then “everything will be alright” and “I know you can handle this, Cas” because “you’re Cas and you know Dean just as well as I do.” It was not a comforting or reassuring speech at all. Whenever he brings up Dean to Sam, Sam will indulge him for a short time before stating, “Dean’s a grown man, Cas, he’s going to be okay. He’s got you there for him.” I don’t think Sam realizes that I can’t make everything better.

I knew things wouldn’t be perfect—even with Sam around—but can’t it at least not be this hard.

Even working cases has become something akin to foreign when they leave the Bunker. Castiel learned not to bring cases to Dean after he turned down his first suggestion of checking out a ghost in Iowa. Dean shrugged and said, “Someone else will deal with that.” Dean’s motivation for cases began to stem from his own determination to distract himself; he had to read through headlines every day, he had to find the case, he had to research it before leaving, he had to drive them there, he had to ask all the questions, and he find out all the answers. He either through himself into the case or into Castiel.

The angel knows he should be angrier with Dean, furious that he is being used as some placeholder during his emotional turmoil. But, taking one out of the Winchesters’ book, he ignores the obvious. Meaning he lets himself be happy with the fact that Dean is even still willing to continue whatever it is between them.

One day, soon, we will talk about everything. Not just Sam, but everything…

A knocking on the door rips Castiel from his thoughts.
“Cas...you wanna come sit with me while I eat?” Dean asks from the other side of the door. “Or, you could eat too. If you want.” He hesitates. “I made enough.”

Cas recognizes an apology when he hears one. He unfolds himself from the bed and pulls on a pair of sweats from the floor. He half-expects to open the door and for Dean to be gone.

Thankfully he’s not.

“What did you make?” he asks, trying to read Dean’s expression.

Dean sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “Just some sandwiches. We don’t really have all that much.” He looks down the hall before turning to lead Castiel to the kitchen. “Maybe we could run into town in the next day or two. Or wait until we get back from the hunt?” Another apology.

Another hunt?

“Did you find a case?” Cas asks lightly, trying to play it off like it’s no big deal. He’s been itching to leave the bunker, after being stuck for five days straight, he needs something supernatural to distract him.

They enter the kitchen and Dean hands Cas his sandwich, a replica of the one on Dean’s plate.

Something in Cas’s chest lights up at the fact that Dean made him a meal despite him being an angel and needing no sustenance.

“I’ll tell you after we eat.”

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It was a quick and dirty case in rural Missouri. A few djinn were feeding on the small town population. Unfortunately, it had taken months for the news of the staggering death toll in the one-stop-light-town to gain any sort of media attention and near a dozen people had already been murdered. Dean lets out what seems like every ounce of his frustration and anger on the three djinn hauled up in an abandoned horse barn on the south side of the town. He guts them, rips them to shreds, makes sure not to leave until their blood is cold. Afterwards, once Cas stows his angel blade, he walks up to an exhausted Dean. He takes the man’s face between his hands and pours some grace between their bond to fade the fatigue and heal any physical damage. They stay in their motel room for one more night, Dean curled away from Cas as the angel strokes his back.

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One day Castiel would have to answer to Heaven, he always knew it. He just doesn’t expect it to be so soon.

How long has he actually been ignoring the calls of his brothers and sisters? How many signs and sigils come across his path that he automatically blocks out? How long can he pretend he no longer felt a duty to those up in Heaven?

About five months after Sam left, when things finally began to feel normal between Castiel and Dean again, Heaven calls.

He is doing laundry while Dean showers before they watch a movie. Never mind the fact that they just got back from the movies. Also, never mind the fact that they sat in the back row of the empty theater and made out like a couple of teenagers the whole time. Dean wants to watch another movie and Castiel wouldn’t mind sucking more bruises into Dean’s shoulder before the night is over.
“Castiel, you are needed presently,” reverberates inside his head. He pauses for a moment, shakes his head in an all-too-human impulse, and resumes folding jeans. It’s not the first time he’s heard the call of Heaven, he’s been evading the requests ever since his grace regained full ability and power a few months after he got it back.

Something changed in him when he reconnected with his grace. It didn’t have the same overwhelming desire to function for Heaven as it once did. Granted, the desire had been waning for years, but he had never really been able to shake it completely. His grace still wanted to follow Heaven’s order, even if his will could overcome it. But when he got it back, only an echo of that desire remained, a memory. His grace no longer felt pulled to function for the Greater Purpose. His grace felt his own to control. Castiel cannot explain it and he honestly does want an answer as to why.

“Castiel. You are being summoned immediately,” is his only warning before the distantly familiar feeling behind his navel yanks him off balance.

About three dozen angels are crowded around a table laden with ingredients from the spell used to pull him here, Hannah at the head. All their eyes on on Castiel as he stands on the far end of space from them. The energy in the room surges, everything shifts, and suddenly Castiel is standing next to Hannah. Everyone is looking expectantly at him.

He turns to Hannah. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Castiel, we need your knowledge and guidance about the matter at hand.”

He takes a deep breath. Last time they asked for his guidance they walked away as soon as he couldn’t produce the answers they sought. “And what matter is that?”

There’s a murmur throughout the group as Hannah narrows her eyes at him. “Metatron has escaped and we have been trying to recapture him for years.” This shocks Castiel, but not enough for a response; he figured something only this diabolical would have the angels calling out to him. “Have you not been listening to the cries of our brethren? At all?” she asks, offended. “Have you ignored the onslaught of pleas we’ve been calling to you as we fight this battle— some of us not making it through?”

Castiel’s eyes narrow as he looks around at the crowd, angels he remembers all too well not listening to him when he talked about how beautiful Earth and humanity was. They laughed at him, said he had lost his intent, said those pests were not worth his time and certainly not theirs. “You want me to help fight against the angels on Metatron’s side,” he infers.

“Yes, Castiel,” Hannah says sharply. She shifts positions, readying herself to explain to Castiel. “Though we have regained control of Heaven and our numbers are larger by far, Metatron is fighting dirty. He’s using whatever information he has and lies he can conceive to convince other angels to follow him. He’s attacking those who are still reeling from the fall to Earth. He has even been able to trap some on Earth, make them believe Heaven has not been restored. He’s set up an impenetrable base near a gate to Heaven in Colorado, where he was originally exiled to. Those wishing to find their way back to Heaven through a that gate come across him and he is able to sway them to do his bidding. He’s slowly gaining numbers, but it’s a steady enough gain that we should be worried.” She looks expectantly at Castiel when she finishes.

He takes a deep breath, trying to get a handle on the situation. “So you wish for me to help you attack his base and stop him from furthering his control over angels?”

Hannah pauses a moment before saying, “We want you to lead the attack.” She pauses again to let
what she said sink in. “Some of us here have already led attempted attacks, but those all failed. We need someone more skilled and experienced to lead the next attack if we wish it to be as swift and resolute as we need it, to stop Metatron once and for all.”

Castiel folds his arms over his chest. “And you came to the conclusion that I was the most befitting candidate?”

Hannah shifts her eyes, making eye contact with a few other angels. They have been nearly silent the entire time, not one of them even attempting to speak to Castiel.

“Well, actually, no one is convinced of that, except me,” she assures hurriedly. I have asked the others to vote whether or not they think you’re able to lead once they hear what you say.” She turns to face Castiel directly now, she touches his shoulder briefly. “Please, Castiel, say you will help us. Say you direct us in ending Metatron once and for all.”

An image of Cas and Dean laying on the couch actually watching a damn movie flashes across Castiel’s mind.

“I do not know if I am what you are looking for.” Castiel turns slowly, gauging whether he is able to leave or not.

“Castiel, please,” Hannah asks, grabbing his shoulder now. “I truly believe you are our only hope.”

“And what about the others?” he inquires scathingly. Frustrated and embarrassed that not one of them has spoken yet.

A few open their mouths, as if to speak. One of them even clears their throat. But again, no one talks.

“If I am not wanted here even now then what are the hopes for my inclusion if I become leader?” He has been angry since the moment he was pulled here, the silence just now filling with his outrage. “I have done what I thought was right, time and time again for Heaven.” Some more murmurs at that.

“Yes, I have made mistakes, but haven’t we all? I tried to repay all of those I have wronged. Jehoel — Kushiel— Penemue— I have saved all your lives in battle. Hamon— you remember the debt you owe me from millennia ago? I have not forgotten. And yet, even after the Fall, some chose to follow me— they knew my intent was good. As it has always been! If you no longer have time or respect for me, then tell me to leave, do not fool me into thinking I am wanted here.”

At this, Castiel turns and begins to stride away, gathering his grace so he can return to the bunker.

“Castiel, wait, please,” this time it is Hamon who speaks. Castiel does not turn around, he only slows down. “I have not forgotten the debt I owe you. That is why I came here… I ask you now, Castiel, on the behalf of this garrison, please, consider leading us against Metatron. We will not ask anymore of you after this task is completed. Please, Castiel, one last victory.”

Castiel turns his head enough to see Hannah and Hamon out of the corner of his eye. “I will give you my answer in seventy-two hours.”

He gathers his grace enough to direct him back to the exact spot in the laundry room. He picks up the pair of pants that dropped when he was summoned.

Castiel decides not to finish with the laundry and instead goes to find Dean. He hears the muttering before he enters the hallway.

“Sure, I'll just ‘poof’ right out of the bunker right after I promise to suck your dick. No, I didn’t
realize you wanted that. I was too busy doing angel things to care about your blue balls.” Cas hears the drawer to Dean’s dresser scrape open angrily. “Oh? Were you expecting to have sex with me after your shower?” Cas stands in the doorway to Dean’s room, amused as he listens and watches Dean ready himself for bed. “I’m an angel, I do important angel-y things—that involve me leaving right before we do important sexy things—like fuck.” Dean punctuates the words by throwing back the covers on his bed.

*I’ll speak to him later about what the angels ask of me.*

Cas hurries and slides up behind Dean, slotting against his back and sliding his arms around his torso.

“What was that you were saying about fucking?”

Dean doesn’t even startle at Cas’s touch. Something about that makes him smug.

Dean shifts against Cas’s chest, one hand coming up to cover Cas’s. “Uh-uh, I wasn’t saying a thing. I’m just getting ready for bed since you didn’t appear to want to watch a movie,” he mocks.

Cas muffles his laugh in Dean’s shoulder. “I think I clearly want to watch a movie,” he laughs again, pressing his hips to Dean’s.

Dean just hums in reply.

“I’ll even let you pick the movie,” Cas goads, running his hands up and down Dean’s torso, feeling his warmth.

“What if I—?”

“Any movie,” he cuts off and stands up straighter to kiss Dean’s neck.

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Cas knew not to expect one certain reaction from Dean when he finally told him about what the angels were asking of him. But after arguing about it for the past forty minutes, he’s regretting telling him so nonchalantly in the first place. He should have given Dean some warning first.

“You don’t owe them a damn thing, Cas!” Dean affirms for the fifth time in as many minutes. “Not a damn thing! They left you! You’re free to do as you want—you don’t owe them one single goddamned thing!”

“Dean, I caused this mess and I now have the power to help fix that.”

Dean slams his hands down on the table. “Cas! You know that *none* of this is your fault—how many times do I have to remind you? Metatron was going to find a way to seal off Heaven no matter what! And you already tried to help those dicks once! They turned their backs on you once they realized you didn’t have the answers they were looking for! You don’t owe them *anything,*” Dean reiterates, practically yelling it. He kicks the chair in front of him and slams his hands down again. He starts to pace around the war room. “You don’t have to do this! This isn’t your problem anymore!”

“Dean,” Cas tries to sound calm. “I need to do this.” He doesn’t even sound convincing to himself. *I need to keep you safe,* he thinks.

*I only need to win one more battle, then I can be done with Heaven, I can say I served Heaven to the*
best of my abilities and that is that. No more expectations or duties; I’ll be free to live my life the way I wish to.

“Cas, if this is about penance or whatever, trust me, you’ve made up for your wrongdoings. How many times did you save the fucking world? Man, you’ve saved it like fifty times by this point. Way more than anyone else.” Dean’s trying to find any reason for this not to be true.

“They promised this was the last they would ask of me if I won this battle with them,” he confesses, trying to reason with Dean.

“Yeah, well, it’s always ‘one last time,’ Cas. They’re never going to stop bothering you if you just keep saying yes to every one of their pleas. You don’t have to always solve their problems, you have your own life to live. Besides, c’mon, you know we’ve got a case to handle anyways. You can’t let me take on a pack of vamps by myself.”

Cas knows this is just Dean pleading with him not to help Heaven without saying as much. But he can’t stop the anger that flares up inside him despite that. “So you just want me around to help with cases?” Dean stops pacing. “How many months did I ask you to let me hunt with you and Sam again before you finally let me? How long did you make me train when you and I both knew perfectly well I am a fucking soldier capable of battling monsters and defending myself. I didn’t need you to baby me, Dean. And I certainly don’t need you telling me what to do right now.” He kicks a chair just as Dean had.

He knows it’s a low blow; he knows he shouldn’t bring Sam into it. He also knows exactly why the brothers were so intent on making sure to ease him back into the lifestyle of hunting, it was his own fault he went insane before reuniting with his grace. But that doesn’t stop him from being furious with Dean right now. Continually, Cas would let Dean, and Sam, do as they please, even in situations involving Heaven and angels. How many times did Cas have to fix their mistakes because of their foolish actions? And he still let them choose their own path the next time. The brothers were reckless in their actions, not learning from past mistakes.

And, now, when Cas needs Dean to accept that he’s going to do this— because it’s for the greater good — he can’t make Dean see the double standard.

Suddenly Cas’s anger is reflected right back at him. “You damn well know why we had to do that Cas! It was for your own good!”

“Stop acting like you know what’s best for me! I’m allowed to act however I want— Team Free Will and all!” Irony drips from his voice, but he doesn’t care.

“This isn’t about controlling you!” Dean hits it right on the head. “This is about you not oween those dicks a damn thing, Cas!” He begins pacing again, his steps faster this time.

“You act as if this is some favor I’m doing for them, as if I’m repaying a debt. I’m doing this because I have to— because I want to. I’m still an angel, Dean, I’m still a soldier. I’m still able to help them, so that’s what I’m going to do. I’ve won battles in the past, this is the same thing, I’m going to aid them in this struggle for freedom.” Cas sounds like a piece of outdated war propaganda.

Dean turns, directing the full force of his frustration at Cas. “It’s different this time!” he yells, his chest heaving.

“And why is that?” His voice comes out much sharper than he thought it would.

Dean takes a deep breath and finally says, “You know why.”
Can you just fucking say it? Cas knows he’s being petty but he’s so exhausted at this point.

“Yeah, well, it’d be nice if you actually said it for once, Dean,” he says coolly. The anger that’s been knocking around inside Cas is fighting it’s way out, slowly bleeding out of him, too tired to continue fighting.

He knew he’d talk to Dean about everything one day, even talk about the two of them, but now that the conversation is here… He’s dragging the words out of Dean; Dean fighting back tooth and nail, trying to keep his hardened exterior in place, all his defenses coming up. Cas didn’t want it to happen this way at all, with Dean and him spitting hostility between each other. He wanted Dean to finally feel safe talking about this, and right now he knows Dean is unmeasurably scared. But Cas needs to hear it, he needs to hear Dean say it.

Cas stands staring at Dean, who’s struggling to figure out what to say. He crosses his arms and waits.

“Because you’re not their damn angel,” Dean bites, staring at his boots.

Cas is confused by the statement. “I very well am an angel.”

Dean looks up, his eyes begging Cas not to make him say whatever it is he is going to say next. Cas doesn’t give in, his arms still crossed; he tilts his head, still waiting.

“You’re not their fucking soldier or savior or whatever. You’re my angel,” he admits. Falling into one of the chairs surrounding the table, Dean cradles his head between his hands. He sighs. “You can’t fucking leave me too,” he breathes. It would’ve been too soft for Cas to hear if he were human.

Cas wants to reach out and comfort Dean but he feels rooted to the spot, Dean’s words rendering him motionless.

“Cas, I thought…I was scared if I told you I thought we were together, seriously together… As opposed to what? The words sound harder for Dean to admit than he thought they would. “You would expect certain things of me…or things between us would change. And now look at me! I’m here whining because I don’t want you to do your fucking job.”

The conversation has turned from battling Metatron to the inner workings of their relationship. Cas so selfishly wants to talk about their relationship, but he first needs Dean to understand he’s going to help Heaven.

He leans against the table next to Dean, ducking his head and waiting for Dean to look up. The hunter shakes his head and does so, his knee starting to bounce.

“Dean.” He reaches out, cupping his hand to Dean’s jaw. “You seem to think I have placed you upon a pedestal for how you should act in concern to our relationship. While, yes, I might wish things played out differently sometimes, I wouldn’t change anything about us. I expect no more from you than you are willing to give.” So Heaven can come later.

While it may feel like a lie, Cas knows in his heart it’s not. Even if he gets angry at Dean for never wanting to talk about their continuing relationship, he certainly doesn’t expect any less. He knows Dean does better with a clap on the shoulder and a beer being passed than with words, so even this much of an exchange between them is a stepping stone. He wants Dean, so if that means having to coax the man’s emotions out of him bit by bit, then that’s what he has to do.
I'm really bad at writing in chronological order. Because right now, I'm writing both of Dean's next two chapters simultaneously, and have barely put an outline of a thought together for Cas's next chapter. So, that's another reason these aren't updated on a regular basis.

Update 12/26/15: I am really pushing to get the next chapter posted before the end of the year, so send good vibes my way, please. Hopefully some magic will happen.
I hope everyone had good holidays and enjoyed festivities and whatnot!

Sorry this took so long to post (and I'm 3 days past my self-induced deadline) but here is the next chapter.

This hasn't been beta'd yet (again), but once it has, I will post it again. Enjoy!

Edit 3/21/16: has been beta'd!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cas leaves feathers whenever he has to go on a mission.

If Cas has to leave in the middle of the day, Dean will go to bed that night to find a feather perched on the nightstand or next to the pile of books he's currently using for research; sometimes it's in the windowed room (Cas knows he still likes going in there). Once, he finds it waiting in his preferred coffee cup as he makes breakfast. The most recent time Cas has to leave, he tells Dean it'll be in the middle of the night. Dean says he'll stay up and wait, but Cas tells him he should sleep since he has to drive to a case in Milwaukee the next day. He awakes the next morning to a feather larger than any of the past ones he's received balancing on Cas's pillow.

He now has ten feathers, counting the one from Christmas he'd stuck in the Impala's visor. The rest are stacked in the box he received the original in. He wants to take them out but once he turns the light out they glow too much for him to sleep. He started to think of some way to display them but that got a little too domestic for him, so he went and got a beer.

Cas has been saying since the sixth feather that it won't be much longer, they’re so close to victory. It’s only been three weeks by Earth’s timeline, Cas gone about every other day, but the angel explains about a year of battling is happening up in Heaven. He looks exhausted every time he comes back, so Dean will make him a cup or tea (he’s so domestic he almost can’t take it), and they’ll sit on the couch, Cas’s head in his lap, watching television until it’s time to hit the hay. Cas won’t say a lot to Dean about what’s happening, not that Dean really wants to hear it, it only matters that Cas comes back, but from what he’s gathered, they’re trying to attack Metatron from Heaven’s side of his gate. It’s slow going but it seems to be working.

Cas is gone for four days before Dean really starts to panic. After Cas doesn’t reply to his third prayer, Dean starts to think maybe it’s time he pays Heaven a visit. It has to have been at least a few months for Cas by this time.

He’s pacing in the kitchen, debating whether or not to call Sam (Sam will probably just talk him out of it), when he hears the telltale swoosh alerting him of Cas’s return.

Dean finds Cas leaning heavily on the war room table, breathing harsh and fast. He collapses completely into Dean’s arms when the hunter hugs him.

Hundreds of questions run through Dean’s mind as he holds Cas. Only one makes it past his lips,
“Cas, are you okay?”

He feels the angel nod against his shoulder, his breath not even out yet. Another heartbeat, and Dean’s helping Cas out of his clothes, shoving the coat off, loosening the tie, and pulling it off. Cas makes a noise in the back of his throat, still not speaking.

Dean’s room is closer, so he helps Cas into his bed. Dean tugs his shoes off then his pants, and unbuttons his shirt, tossing it aside too, before pulling the blankets up. The angel’s breath starts to calm as he buries his face in the pillow. Dean starts to back out of the room, with intentions of making the angel something hot to eat.

“Stay.”

“I’m gonna go make you food, you look completely shot, you need recharged,” Dean assures.

“Please...stay,” comes another whisper.

Dean sighs, clammering over Cas, still completely dressed, boots and all. He shoves an arm under his neck and wraps another around his waist. Pressing his face to the back of Cas’s head, he breathes in his scent, finally home. His thumb strokes small arches over Cas’s stomach, feeling the warmth seep through the undershirt.

After a while, Dean thinks Cas might be asleep. The last time all his juice was drained, he was completely human for a few days. Dean wonders how long it will last this time.

He’s been fighting the urge to get up and make Cas food, maybe even fill the bathtub for him, since he laid down. Cas wanted him to stay though, and so he does, for three whole hours.

Cas wakes up around dinner time and slowly turns himself over in Dean’s arms. Buried in Dean’s chest, Dean’s chin propped on his head, Cas finally speaks, “We won. Metatron is dead.” A deep shudder runs through Cas and he holds tighter to Dean. “Hannah died killing him.”

Dean readjusts his arms, pulling Cas impossibly closer. “I’m sorry, Cas,” he breathes, knowing it’s not enough. Dean briefly wonders if he’ll ever see Cas cry but instantly hopes he never has to. He’s still pondering this thought as he falls asleep, relieved for the first time in weeks because Cas is home.

They stay in bed the next three days, only getting up to bring food in or to relieve themselves. Cas ends up curled into his chest, kissing his shoulder, most of the time. Movies play on the television, muted more often than not, as they talk in whispers to each other. The angel ends up detailing as much of the nineteen-month battle against Metatron as best he can, hands holding firm on Dean’s back the whole time. Afterwards, he closes his eyes and doesn’t say anything until the next morning. Then he wants to hear about all the cases Dean worked the past few weeks. There’s only two, a vengeful spirit and one very pissed off warlock. Both cases were only a couple hours away; Dean wanted to stay close in case Cas came to the bunker.

Late that night, as John McClane tries to defuse a bomb on television, Cas sits up stiffly, rubbing his temples.

“Dammit,” he mutters, looking up at the ceiling. Dean looks too, even though he knows he won’t see anything.

“What is it, Cas?” he asks, already knowing the answer, but sitting up and scooting next to Cas anyways. He doesn’t touch him.
“Heaven.” He takes a deep breath, his brow creased in concentration for a few more moments. “They said they’d respect my wishes of not calling upon me for more help. They do not care if they bother me with questions, though, it seems.” Cas turns into Dean then, dropping his forehead to Dean’s shoulder.

Dean wants to stupidly ask if he can turn it off.

“Can we take that shower you suggested earlier?”

Happy to comfort Cas, Dean slides off the bed and heads for the bathroom. The water doesn’t take long to heat up, the room beginning to fill with steam in only a few minutes. As Dean pulls his shirt over his head, Cas appears in the doorway, completely naked now. Dean hurries with the rest of his clothes and holds open the shower door for Cas to step in.

The water is just this side of too hot but Cas doesn’t say anything as he stands directly under the spray. Dean huddles up behind him, wrapping his arms around Cas’s chest, dropping a kiss to his shoulder.

“It’s going to be okay,” Dean says directly into Cas’s ear.

“Just right now it’s not,” Cas instantly replies.

He lets Dean hold him like that for a while, the bathroom completely filled with steam by the time he turns around. Dean pushes the soaking hair off of Cas’s forehead, looking into those navy eyes and at a loss as for what to do to take the hurt out of them. Then, Cas’s lips are desperate against Dean’s as he presses them together. His hands clutch at Dean’s back, fingers slipping on the wet skin as he tries desperately to lose himself. Dean cups Cas’s neck, neither pulling him closer or pushing him away, simply trying to feel him.

God, I need this. Though they haven’t had a chance to fuck since before the whole Heaven ordeal started, and now when Dean’s body furiously craves Cas’s touch, he holds back. It’ll be on Cas’s terms.

“Com’ere,” Dean breathes in the space between kissing Cas and nipping his chin.

The tile is icy on Dean’s back but he ignores it in favor of pulling Cas against him. He forgets how uncomfortable it is when Cas drags a hand through his hair, pulling it roughly. His lips bruise into Dean’s, sucking and biting, desperation evident.

He can feel Cas’s cock grow harder against his thigh, heat instantly pooling in his belly. Cas grinds into him harder, pinning Dean’s hips to the wall as he searches for friction. Cas’s teeth sink into the muscle of his shoulder, and it hurts but Dean only wants more.

Suddenly overwhelmed, Dean needs Cas closer; too many weeks of waiting paired with perfectly placed bites ignite the fire Dean’s been dowsing.

He’s on his knees and Cas’s cock is in his mouth before either of them thinks. Cas curls over Dean, his palms flat against Dean’s head. The angel coughs out a whimper as Dean grabs his ass and pulls him in further. Wrapping a fist around his own cock does nothing to relieve the burning desire. Still focused on Cas’s cock in the back of his mouth, he can’t understand why the angel let go of his hair.

“Cas, c’mon,” he says, “fuck my mouth.” Impossibly, his cock aches more, throbbing harder against his stomach.

The strain is evident in Cas’s eyes when he looks up.
“What?” Dean’s startled enough to pull back.

“Dean,” Cas breathes, his voice so low Dean feels it in his chest. “Dean, please, can I— can I— I want to be inside you.” His breathing gets heavier as he braces himself on the wall.

Dean stands up slowly, leaning against the wall, scant centimeters separating their bodies. He can’t meet Cas’s eyes right on, instead staring at his temple.

This isn’t a new topic of conversation, far from it actually. More than once Cas has fucked him with his fingers, going so slow and deep Dean figured out he’d never truly “writhed” before. Cas has slowly been taking him apart from the beginning, making him comfortable with acts Dean used to never dare think about.

After a particularly draining case and a handful of fingers of whiskey, Dean ended up on his stomach spread eagle, open to Cas’s tongue and mouth joining his fingers. The next morning, it wasn’t dread or shame that he felt sitting in his stomach, but wonder. He was amazed at himself, for allowing himself to be that vulnerable, to let Cas do that to him. And in those waking hours, Cas reading a book next to him, Dean rolled over and laid on Cas, his head pillowed on his stomach. Cas rubbed his fingers through his hair.

Dean remembers how he felt that morning and tries to imagine feeling that same way tomorrow morning. Feeling amazed after letting Cas fuck him. It wouldn’t be just fucking though and that’s what solidifies Dean’s decision.

Dean finds Cas’s eyes, open wide, still strained with the question he asked. He pulls him close, his arms wrapping tight around Cas’s shoulders, and nods, their noses bumping. Cas’s eyes flash. Then Dean’s wrapped in his arms and being pulled out of the bathroom, Cas turning off the shower without ever letting go.

Cas lays Dean out on the bed carefully. Staring up at the ceiling, Dean starts to trace the cracks to distract himself from the nerves that settle in his stomach between the shower and now. Cas still hasn’t climbed on the bed and Dean thinks he might have mistaken what the angel said.

“Dean, do you…?” Cas steps between Dean’s legs, planting his hands on either side of Dean’s thighs. He takes a deep breath and tries again, “Would you like to see my wings?”

The hunter shakes his head, certain he heard wrong this time. “Your wings?” he offers weakly.

“Humans are rarely offered this opportunity, but, Dean, I know you want to see them.” A coy smile breaks out on Cas’s face, he looks down at Dean’s cock, which is still throbbing against his stomach. That might as well be his answer. “I think I have enough energy to change their plane,” he continues when Dean hesitates.

“Give’em to me, Cas,” Dean breathes, sitting up again, pulling at Cas to bring him closer. “Please.”

Dean’s desire to see Cas’s wings outweighs every other worry pressing on his mind, erasing all his insecurities. He’s consumed.

Dean presses his lips to Cas’s again and again, not allowing either of them time to breathe in between.

“Oh, okay,” Cas laughs, pulling away and pressing their foreheads together. “Just hold on, okay. Hold on, baby. Close your eyes.” Dean’s eyes slide shut, heavy with lust. “Yeah, just like that.” Cas presses his mouth to Dean’s again, gentle.

The entire room shifts with the energy it takes for Cas to shift his wings from the plane they usually
rested in. The air fills with a charge like none Dean has felt before, his entire body weightless as Cas’s grace reverberates around the room. His eyelids blaze red as the light shines through. He still doesn’t open his eyes; Cas hasn’t said to yet. Cas kisses him harder, rougher. The smell of electricity and rain fill the rest of Dean’s senses.

“Please, Cas, please,” he begs after what feels like hours. It’s only been seconds.

Cas huffs out a laugh again and turns his head, lips leaving Dean’s. “Okay, you can open them.”

Dean opens his eyes to Cas’s cheekbone, but as he follows the angel’s eyes over his shoulder…

Dean will not admit to the gasp that leaves his mouth and never admit to tears he can feel in the back of his throat the first time he lays eyes on Cas’s wings. Because holy fucking shit he’d go through every horrible moment of his life again—Hell, apocalypses, Purgatory—all of it, if it meant he’d get to see Cas’s motherfucking angel wings.

Cas is still staring over his shoulder at his wings too, his lips downturned. Dean’s not sure if he’s allowed to touch them, they seem too powerful and too fragile, at the same time, for human hands. If Dean had to guess, he’d say they span at least fifteen feet, but right now they’re curled in, as if Cas doesn’t want all of them visible. They’re glowing, which even though Dean knows it’s because of Cas’s grace, he still can’t wrap his mind around the fact. It’s like Cas is made of the universe itself, all of its stars and galaxies. Cas is probably stardust…

“Cas,” he finally manages. His eyes dart back and forth between the wings and Cas’s face. “Castiel,” he corrects.

The wings sweep forward over Cas’s shoulders, closer to Dean, as Cas leans in, studying Dean’s reaction. His breathing hasn’t seemed to calm at all. “This isn’t their true form, but it’s the best interpretation that the Earth’s three dimensions can do.”

Dean realizes how dry his mouth is now. “What?”

Cas smirks, realizing Dean is dumbfounded. “They’re larger and not so...physically solid. The feathers are ‘cradling’ my grace right now, containing it the best they can.” The right wing folds completely over Cas’s shoulder, now inches from Dean’s own shoulder. “You can touch, if you like.”

Dean hesitates, unsure of how to proceed. Does he bury his hand in the feathers like he’s been thinking about for months? Does he trace his fingers along the structure of the bones? Does he barely let his fingertips touch as he brushes over the feathers? He’s been thinking about this basically since, well, since Emmanuel, and now he can’t even move; he’s like a teenage boy frozen in front of the cheerleading squad.

When Cas lost his memory, Dean thought he'd lost the opportunity of ever seeing Cas’s wings. Honestly, he wasn't sure if Cas was even in there anymore. But Dean was stubborn enough that he wouldn’t believe anything other than Cas coming back. He’s needed the angel a lot longer than he realizes. Once Cas regained his memories and powers, the thought of wings latched itself into Dean's mind. Even though he knew Cas was back, and needed no proof, he wanted to touch, to see the angel as an angel. Of course, Cas's true form would blind him, but his wings...he figured wings were a possibility. Wings, something that would not be just another one of the vessel's appendages, but would be wholly Castiel.

Dean’s hands were gripping Cas’s hips but he brings them up to the wings, his fingertips barely
skimming the feathers. It’s like a fucking magnet, his entire body seems engulfed in a hot-cold burn emanating from the wings. Unable to resist, he holds on tight to the wings. Cas twitches, Dean’s hands now completely buried in the feathers. Then he’s lost to a sea of feathers as the press into him from all sides. From his thighs, to his hips, his stomach, and chest, his neck, everything bathed in the electricity of Cas’s grace.

Except for his mouth, currently occupied with Cas, all tongue and teeth, moans filling the rest of Dean’s mouth. Cas lifts one of his thighs, hitching it over his elbow, opening Dean up for him. Dean hears the scrape of the nightstand drawer and the smack of the bottle as it Cas wills it into his hand. Something catches in his chest. Not panic, he doesn’t want to back out. But something he would compare to confusion, complete disbelief that this is happening, that he is—

Cas’s slick fingers pull on his cock twice (leaving Dean distracted) before tripping back to press against his hole. Dean’s entire body contracts and relaxes at the same time; he feels like he’s being pulled inside out. He loves when he’s inside Cas, feeling every atom of the angel curl and release around him, but having Cas inside of him completely undoes him.

A moan punches out of him as Cas steadily strokes his prostate. *Fuck.* It’s agonizingly slow, Cas dragging his fingers in and out of Dean. Dean feels everything too sharply. The heat of Cas’s hand as he grips to Dean’s shoulder, the sting of his teeth as he bites his thigh, the emptiness inside him pushed out and replaced with more than Cas’s fingers. He curls up, his stomach tight as Cas continues to fuck him open, he grabs at Cas’s shoulders, fingers searching until they’re buried in the connecting joint of Cas’s wings. A low whine leaves Dean’s mouth as Cas adds a third finger, then Dean’s entire body breaks out in sweat, vibrating, trying to hold back so he doesn’t come yet.

“*Dean,*” Cas breathes against his neck. “*Please, *” he begs softly, kissing behind Dean’s ear.

It takes a moment for Dean to reorient himself, remember what was happening before he had his hands on Cas’s wings. “*Yeah, Cas, yeah.*” He hitches his other knee on Cas’s hip, bringing him in closer, feeling utterly wanton.

Dean closes his eyes but almost immediately—

“*Look at me, Dean.*”

It takes every ounce of self control for Dean’s eyes not to roll back as Cas pushes into him. He feels full to the brim, about to spill over and explode; he’s not sure with what though: emotions or otherwise. Everywhere is Castiel. One of his hands planted on Dean’s hip, holding Dean still as he presses in far too slowly. The other hand curled around Dean’s thigh, blunt fingers, hot against Dean’s skin. Wings filling the space around them, an unnatural glow touching everything Dean can feel. Navy eyes bore into his own, reading every emotion and thought flicking across Dean’s mind. Most prominently though, Cas’s cock, still fucking into him, filling him, anchoring him, taking him. Everything Dean knows right now is Castiel.

Cas’s hips press against the back of Dean’s thighs, and he grinds his hips in small circles, not giving Dean time to adjust, knowing how desperately they both crave this. Dean doesn’t want time, he wants Cas, around him, on him, in him. He pulls Cas down, their foreheads pressed together as they both huff out harsh breaths. Looking down, seeing Cas’s hips grind into him, actually feeling those movements, Cas’s cock touching too much and not enough of him, overwhelms Dean. He squeezes his eyes shut, ignoring Cas’s frustrated groan, because he can already feel his joints tightening, his body readying for release.

*Fuck, Castiel, oh god, oh god*—“Cas, please— yeah, yeah—*yeah, like that* . So fucking good, Castiel,” he murmurs into Cas’s hairline, lips pressing to his temple.
Castiel’s wings fold over them, cutting them off from the rest of the world. They’re fluttering along Dean’s sides, smoothing over his flanks, caressing his thighs. The cold burn left behind on his skin lights Dean’s body in ways he never knew.

“Oh—fuck,” he groans, Castiel’s teeth dragging across a nipple. His fingers tangle themselves in Cas’s hair, nails scratching across his scalp.

“Dean, Dean,” Castiel continues to mutter, the words drifting across Dean’s chest.

Heat. A blurred thought as it crosses Dean’s mind. Castiel’s hands are sliding over him, finding no purchase against his sweat-slicked skin. His entire body burning with need, clenching around Castiel, wanting him deeper, closer. He wants to beg Castiel, let him come, please, let the wave of ecstasy roll over him, claim him.

Castiel grabs his cock, heavy in his palm, bruised red with Dean’s desire. Dean sees stars, so thankful that Cas is touching him—

“Cas-tiel, what the hell? Fuck me!”

Castiel stops his movements, laying heavy across Dean’s body, his forehead digging into Dean’s chest as he looks to where their bodies connect. “Dean, I— Dean, I—” he starts, fingers squeezing the base of Dean’s cock. Dean groans, back arching into Cas’s hand and gripping his wings tighter.

“C’mon, Cas.” It’s a small, weak sound that leaves Dean’s throat but it’s desperate nonetheless. Cas looks up, his eyes so full of an emotion Dean does not have the mental capacity to put a name to. He grabs the back of Dean’s head, and pushes himself up until they’re kissing. Dean moans into Cas’s mouth. Cas cradles him close, doesn’t move, just fucking covers Dean with himself, his mouth still obscene and filthy where it presses to Dean’s lips. And the hunter loses himself in the kiss, grabbing at Cas with an urgency not borne of their fucking, but from their intimacy as a... Being together. He hopes Cas can taste the words he never says, the thoughts he buries, the emotions still so raw in himself that he cannot put a name to. Dean can taste the devotion seeping from Cas’s lips, how lost he is in this act of just kissing.

The angel’s hips grind a handful of times, dragging across Dean’s prostate, Dean trying to move in sync with them, but the thrusts slow until they stop. Dean huffs out of frustration, wanting Castiel to do this properly.

“Castiel,” he whines, the voice not sounding like his own.

“Dean.” Castiel sounds completely wrecked, his voice scratching through Dean’s mind.

Dean pulls his hands out of Castiel’s wings, wanting to grab his face instead, turn it up towards his own. Castiel’s head immediately shoots up, eyes dark as they meet his own. He has to still, paralyzed by the angel’s gaze as his eyes mirror the glow of his wings.

“Don’t let go,” he practically growls. Dean slides his hands back into Castiel’s wings, the hot-cold tingling along his fingers.

Castiel pulls his hips back then snaps them forward, pushing a gasp out of Dean. He doesn’t stop this time; pounding into Dean with all the energy he can muster.

Time doesn’t seem to matter right now, Dean thinks it’s been hours since they’ve started. His body exhausted and compliant thanks to Castiel’s eager fucking. He feels the orgasm growing in his stomach, spreading throughout his torso and thighs, gathering strength every time Castiel presses into
him. Feathers slide through his fingers as he tries to find something to hold onto without letting go. He grabs the base of Castiel’s wings again, feeling their heat and strength.

“Castiel, please, please, I need—” Castiel cuts him off, their mouths colliding roughly. The angel bites his lip hard, receiving a moan in return.

Dean twists his hips, the angle changing so Cas hits his prostate dead on now, dirty sounds forced from his mouth.

“Dean, Dean,” he breathes directly into Dean’s mouth as his hips stutter, then grabs Dean’s cock and pulls on it slowly, in contrast to his hips.

The orgasm bursts through Dean, leaving his body in freefall as he clings to Castiel, waiting for it to end but never wanting it to be over. Castiel’s hips continue to cant into him, the angel still trying for his own release. Dean’s body loosens then, molding to Castiel’s shape. His arms drape over the angel, fingers slipping through feathers; his thighs welcoming the hard jut of Castiel’s hips; lips slicking across the angel’s neck and shoulder.

He can feel when Castiel is about to come, from the inside and out, his body so in tune with the angel’s he can feel it vibrating. Dean pulls Castiel closer, wrapping his arms tight, as Castiel shouts into his ear, a beautiful sound. The rooms goes silent except for Castiel’s moans as his body releases into Dean’s.

*I’m yours, I’m all yours, take me*. Dean swipes a hand across Castiel’s sweaty forehead before kissing it.

“You did good, angel,” he whispers, dropping his legs to the bed as Cas collapses on top of him.

Cas doesn’t respond but his hands creep along the sheet, clutching to the cloth.

A quiet few minutes pass, their breathing even now.

Dean is slowly sifting through the feathers closest to his face. “What, did I tire you out, Cas?” he teases.

Cas finally moves, readjusting his hips as he slides out of Dean. He looks up at Dean, the angle awkward, but their eyes meet and that’s all they really want anyways.

Dean sighs, kissing the top of Cas’s head.

Awhile later, Cas finally pushes himself upright, hovering over Dean, looking down at him with such... *reverence* that Dean feels a thousand times smaller than he actually is.

He has to crack a joke to stifle his misplaced unease. “So...your wings your hotspot, huh, Cas?”

Cas smiles down at Dean.

“It’s not because my wings are more sensitive than the rest of me. In fact, I’d say, in my true form they’re only as sensitive as the rest of me. But, since the human body has no parallel for wings, my grace itself has to come up with a translated structure for them.” Cas sighs, cradling Dean closer as he turns them both on their sides, a smile pulling at his lips. “This is the closest you’ll ever get to touching my grace, so it was all a bit overwhelming.”

Dean tries to turn, to look at Cas, but Cas holds firm and just kisses his neck.
The hunter wants to ask if they’ll get to do this again, if Cas will let him see his wings again, if they’ll get to fuck with Cas’s wings out again, but anyway he words it, it sounds ridiculous and juvenile in his head. Silence lies lightly between them, Dean’s fingertips brushing through what portion of Cas’s wing he can still touch. He wants more, he wants all of it.

Cas drapes a wing over the both of them, seemingly reading Dean’s mind, which he probably did. Dean clutches to the wing then, not knowing when will be the next time this happens.

He wishes he knew what to say to Cas right now. He’s not even sure if he has to say anything. But his mind keeps telling him he should thank Cas or say something to let Cas know he knows the importance of their situation. Cas needs to know this means a lot to Dean too.

Dean forces Cas’s arms to loosen around him, turning himself over until they’re face to face.

He looks Cas dead in the eye. “Thank you,” he states, his voice firmer than he thought he could muster with the exhaustion he feels right now.

Cas looks confused. “For what?”

“Your wings, Cas. You know I’ve wanted to see them for a while and you kept telling me no because humans aren’t really able to see angels’ true forms, but you let me. So thank you.”

Cas gives a small laugh, the sound lighting up Dean’s chest. Cas then blushes. It’s beautiful. And Dean will never tell anyone, but making Cas blush has been a goal of his since the beginning.

“Yeah, I…” Cas looks down at his fingers where they lay on Dean’s shoulder, thumb grazing over the handprint. “I was self conscious about showing you my wings.”

Dean splutters, hands automatically brushing through the feathers. “Wh-why? They’re awesome.”

The corners of Cas’s mouth turn down, he’s nervous even now. “Like I said…it was the first time you were seeing me.”

“I... you,” Dean whispers, pulling Cas into a kiss that he hopes conveys what he wants to say better than spoken word could.

Cas falls asleep not soon after, face buried in Dean’s neck. He’s got the sneaking suspicion that Cas has been forcing himself to fall asleep so he doesn’t have to deal with the reality of the war. It’s okay now though, Dean hopes, he doesn’t have to go back to Heaven and he can stay here where I can take care of him.

There’s a case in Nashville that sounds like it could be a werewolf, Dean’s been watching the reports for a couple days now, following the “hunting gone wrong” stories the news is spewing. Hopefully Cas will be up to coming with him, it would be good to get out of the bunker. Cas could stay in the motel room for all he cares, as long as he comes with him.

He falls asleep with both arms looped around Cas’s back, hands sifting through the feathers.

Dean wakes up before his alarm is set to go off, so he stares up at the ceiling, tracing the crack he knows he should be more concerned about. Cas’s wings went back to their normal dimension sometime in the middle of the night, and Dean tries to ignore the feeling manifesting itself behind his jaw that tells him he misses the wings.

The angel stirs awake when Dean’s alarm goes off, alerting them it’s six in the morning and time to start their job.
Cas pretends to be grumpy, upset that he has to wake up, knowing Dean will kiss him to cheer him up.

“There’s—” Kiss to his temple. “— a case—” Kiss to his cheek. “— in Tennessee—” Kiss to his chin. “— could be—” Kiss to the corner of his mouth. “— a werewolf.” A proper kiss, chaste. Dean pushes at Cas’s shoulders so he can look him in the eye. “What do you say to getting out of here for a few days?”

Dean’s had much worse cabin fever than what he feels right now, but he wants to get out for Cas’s sake.

Cas goes to close his eyes again but Dean swats his ass playfully. His eyes go wide, surprised, but Dean pointedly stares back, obviously wanting an answer.

“Fine,” Cas grumbles, turning over, “I’ll be ready when you’re ready.”

“You sure?” Dean asks, running a hand over the cheek he just smacked.

“Yes, just make sure the Impala is ready to go.” Cas knows Dean won’t ask him to zap them there, especially now while he’s still recuperating.

Cas pushes at Dean as he clambers out of the bed, laughing as Dean’s legs get tangled in the sheets. “Are your legs still a little unstable, from last night,” Cas quips, face half buried in the pillow to muffle his laughter.

“Shut up.” Any intended harshness to his words is lost behind his smile. He hides his face as he picks up discarded clothes that accumulated from the past few days.

It doesn’t take long for Dean to shower and load up the trunk; he’s even able to finish a second cup of coffee by the time Cas comes into the kitchen, ready to leave.

“You...you wanna drive Baby?” Dean asks, as they walk towards the carport. He’s not sure if he wants Cas to say yes and his fingers twitch awkwardly at the thought.

Cas smirks. “You haven’t even told me where in Tennessee we’re going, I doubt you want me driving to undisclosed locations.”

“Just outside of Nashville. And clearly—” Cas stops walking. “Cas?”

He squints and twists his shoulders awkwardly. “I should get more reading material if we’re going that far.”

A few minutes later, they’re seated in the Impala, Dean riffling through his tape collection and Cas stacking his books at his feet.

“You know,” Dean notes, still looking down at his music, “you can get digital versions of all those books, Cas. Keep them all in one place. Get something that’ll fit in your pocket.”

“Says the pot to the kettle,” Cas deadpans, tracing his finger along a line of text.

Dean pops in a Seger cassette. “You know I’m a creature of habit, that ain’t nothing new.”

Cas meets Dean’s eye, and Dean stops, his hand gripping the gearshift. He raises his eyebrow in question.

“Dean…” Cas closes his book.
“Yeah, Cas?”

Cas takes a deep breath, holding it in much longer than a human would. He releases it in a rush of words, “You know who’s in Nashville?”

“Sam.” Dean punctuates the answer by shifting into drive. “Sam’s in Nashville.” He feels an itch under his skin that only the road under his tires can scratch.

“How long have you known?” Cas asks as they pull out onto the main road.

Dean shrugs, shifting his hips in the seat, needlessly adjusting his mirrors. “A couple weeks after he left.”

“And...you’re not upset?”

“Man, I don’t know, Cas. I don’t know.” He’s not angry, he’s more exasperated. “I just know there’s a werewolf in Nashville and maybe we might see Sam.”

“Dean, I’m—”

“Cas, read your book, babe.” The pet name slips out and Dean hopes Cas catches on that he’s begging without as many words.

Then angel opens his book to the beginning, pulling a pen from his laptop case.

Dean turns off the stereo. “Read it out loud?” He reaches a hand across the bench and squeezes Cas’s knee.

Cas slips the pen back in his bag, no longer willing to edit if he’s reading aloud.

“Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns...driven time and again off course, once he had plundered the hallowed heights of Troy. Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds, many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea, fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home. But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove—the recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all, the blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun and the Sungod blotted out the day of their return. Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus, start from where you will—sing for our time too…”

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The next morning, after spending the night on a crappy motel bed, Dean wants to go to the latest crime scene first, whereas Cas wants to go to the police station. After a brief talk (involving a stare down that lasts entirely too long), they end up at the police station. Dean fixes Cas’s coat collar before they walk into the building.

No matter how tense and wound up Dean feels, he has to remember that Cas is still healing or recovering or whatever. This case is just a simple run of the mill monster that will help get them both back up on their feet. No need to nitpick every decision or argue about their choices. They will catch the asshole in a matter of days and be back on their way, either to the bunker or another case; it all depends on what Cas can handle.

The police station is bigger than Dean would have expected. The floors look too shiny and too new for a little town in this part of the country, just like the officer behind the desk, his eyes too bright and ears perked like a dog.
“We’re Special Agents Delp and Sheehan.” The young officer behind the counter’s eyes go wide at the mention of of “special agents.” “We’re here about the series of maulings,” Dean continues.

“What do you guys want with a couple of butcherings?” he asks crassly.

“Dormer, that’s no way to treat our guests.” And older woman comes from around the corner, a stack of files in her hands. “And for being rude, you can take these down to evidence for me.” She turns back to Dean and Cas with a smile. “I’m Detective Allens. Now what can I help you fellas with?”

“We’re here about the maulings,” Cas says.

“You boys don’t think it’s animals either?” She starts typing on the computer behind the counter.

Dean clenches his jaw. “Now, ma’am, we don’t know anything yet. We just go where our superiors send us.”

“They’re too clean to be animals, but we can’t say that in our reports. We don’t need the public freaking out about anything sooner than necessary.”

Dean’s a little thrown by how helpful Allens is being; usually the locals don’t want the big guys coming in and stealing their thunder.

The detective finally turns away from the computer. “We just found another pair of bodies this morning— that’s half a dozen in total now. I’m real glad we’re going to have some help solving this. Even if it is just a bear or coyotes or whatever. It could be bigfoot for all I know.” She laughs at the joke then goes on to give them unreleased details about the victims and the location of this morning’s attack.

Once they’re back in the Impala, Cas says, “Good thing we came to the station first, right?”

“The cops at any of the crime scenes could have told us where the newest attack took place,” Dean retorts.

Cas smirks. “We would have never have gotten the coroner’s reports so easily, either.” He begins reading the topmost report.

Dean doesn’t have the energy to expend on witty remarks rightnow. “Yeah, well, whatever.” Dean turns on the radio but it does nothing to drown out the spark of Cas’s sigh.

The location Detective Allens gave them belongs to a stretch of road inside the Wildlife Management Area.

Dean stops on the opposite side of the road the cop cars and ambulances. He scrubs his hands through his hair, thinking. It’s going to be a long trek through the woods, Allens said most of the bodies are all within the same three square mile of forest. Their day clothes are still back at the motel.

“Always knew these monkey suits were a bad idea,” he grumbles, turning the car off.

“I could go back to the motel and get more suitable clothes,” Cas guesses, still going through the reports.

“I’m not gonna ask you to zap in and out just because it’s convenient now, Cas.” Look how far I’ve come. “I can survive in this damn tie for a couple hours.”
Cas carefully piles the files on the bench between them as Dean shifts to get out of the car. When Dean turns around after shutting the door, Cas is standing there with his duffle bag, already wearing jeans and boots.

“Goddammit, Cas,” he grumbles, grabbing the bag from his hand rougher than intended but not caring. “I said I’d be fine.”

Cas turns towards the police cars. “I’ll wait for you by the trail’s entrance,” he says, his voice tight.

_Fuck it all._

The entire morning has been filled with sidesteps and terse words. He didn’t offer to make Cas a cup of coffee and Cas didn’t bother to leave any hot water for Dean. They’re not necessarily angry with one another, just angry at the situation. And seeing as they’re the only two around, they both get the brunt of the other’s frustration. Dean likes to pretend he’s not anxious about working a case so close to Sam. It doesn’t bother him as much as he once would have thought, but it’s still raw inside him; like a sore throat before the flu, not actually sick but irritating nonetheless. Cas has been treating him as if he is already infected though.

Dean changes his clothes behind the Impala, shoving the duffle in the trunk before he loads a gun with silver bullets and tucks a knife into the back of his belt. He loads a second one for Cas; so Cas doesn’t get any closer to the werewolf than necessary.

He approaches Cas, who’s staring intently through the trees, seeing what he can’t see, and silently hands him the gun. They don’t speak. They only pass a few cops as they work their way through the trail, stopping to flash their badges and extract any new information Allens wasn’t able to give them. After about twenty minutes of hiking down the path, they hear the murmur of a crowd. Dean pats the gun in his holster, a habit he has, to remind himself he’s the hunter and not the hunted.

The police, investigators, and EMTs surrounding the pair of bodies don’t even notice them approaching. As they step closer to the bodies, a guy wearing a Wildlife Management uniform makes eye contact with Dean.

“Fellas, fellas, you can’t be here,” he quietly directs.

Dean and Cas pull out their badges, flipping them in sync like some bad cop show. Dean flashes him a withering look before turning back to the officer. “Detective Allens said you guys knew we were coming.” He stuffs the badge back in his pocket.

He seems to understand now. “Ah, you’re the feds that showed up outta the blue this morning.” He relays this information to another officer that walks up. “Just figured you guys would be decked out in your suits or something.”

“We’re federal agents, not politicians, we don’t always wear suits in the field,” Cas mutters, though loud enough for the cops to laugh. He moves away to inspect the body, apparently Dean isn’t the only one Cas doesn’t wanna be around right now.

After some conversation, one of the officers offers Dean a map of the surrounding area that pinpoints each of the found bodies. They’re all pretty close to a creek that runs through a part of the reserve. A guy had come boating down the creek with his grandson, somewhere off the beaten path so the kid wouldn’t have any trouble focusing on learning, and when the kid stepped off the boat he practically fell onto one of the bodies.

The first cop to speak to them, Officer Wailer, points Dean and Cas in the direction of the next
closest crime scene, informing them more officers will be there too, and that he’ll radio ahead to tell them they’re coming.

They’re walking along the creek for about twenty minutes, following the footprints left behind by the local law enforcement, speaking only about the case. Dean can’t take the before Dean finally speaks, ”I heard one of the guys at the motel last night talking about a restaurant that serves really good barbeque, if you’d want to check that out tonight.”

“If you want.” Cas says it quickly, his voice scratching around the words.

Dean swallows a bit of his pride. “Cas, are you mad at me?” He sounds so pathetic in his mind.

Cas sighs and rubs the back of his neck, a habit Dean thinks he might have picked up from him. “I’m just frustrated at the situation.”

“We’ve barely started the case yet, Cas, and we’re pretty damn sure it’s a werewolf.”

Cas looks him in the eye, he looks sad. “I’m frustrated about Sam.”

*What the fuck? Why? “Umm?”*

“I just don’t want you to…” Cas stops walking, so Dean stops. He tilts his head, searching for the right words. “I don’t want you to fall back into how you were after Sam left…”

*What the hell? How was I supposed to react to my brother leaving me? Was I supposed to just roll with it? Just let it fucking be, as if nothing had changed. I couldn’t do that, I couldn’t just fucking pretend it was right.*

Dean doesn’t say what he’s thinking, instead swallowing his anger, letting it sour in his gut. “I don’t want to be like that either, Cas.” It’s true, Dean doesn’t want to fall into that depression again.

But he still doesn’t know how he feels about being this close to Sam and not being in contact.

Cas starts walking again, faster this time. Dean follows, and after only a few minutes Dean can hear the murmur of conversation as they approach the next crime scene.

Less people are surrounding this one, only a dozen or so, probably since they’ve already gathered evidence from this scene. Cas immediately goes to the patch of taped off earth, speaking with the forensic guy already gathering information crouched over it. Dean sees a park ranger, the first one they’ve met so far, and he wants to ask about the surrounding area.

Is this park really as used as everyone says? What areas are more used than others? How does he think these people could be killed without anyone else in the park coming across them sooner? What kind of animals inhabit this area? Have they ever dealt with any animals as dangerous as this before? What kind of watch do they have over the area?

He doesn’t get a chance to ask the questions before he hears a familiar voice coming up the trail behind him.

He turns slowly, half hoping he’s mistaken. *No . “ Sam ?”* he forces out through his teeth.

Sam’s eyes flash up from the report the officer is discussing with him. He stops walking and exaggerates a cough. “I think I put my notebook down at the last crime scene,” he lies, excusing himself from the cop.
Dean looks back at Cas quickly, to make sure he’s occupied examining the scene. Then turns and catches up to Sam in a few dozen steps, grabbing his shoulder and forcing him to turn. He doesn’t want to yell, he doesn’t want to draw attention.

Sam’s eyes are desperate, pleading. “I can’t do this right now, Dean, I’m working.”

He’s talked to Sam about once a week since he left months ago. Most of their conversation as of late have actually been easy. Sam tells him about his classes, sometimes alluding to a girl he’s seeing; they discuss football and baseball games, Sam teases Dean for bragging about any new recipes he tries out. It had been really good the last couple months; but now Dean is thrown through a loop seeing Sam, seeing Sam working a case.

“You’re working this case?” he spits. “You’re hunting.” The anger Dean swallowed earlier bitterly churns in his stomach.

Sam starts walking again, his hands shaking. “I will talk to you later— we can get dinner or something.” His voice gruff as he coughs again.

“Sam,” Dean says, trying to keep his voice firm.

“Later, I promise.” And with that Sam starts jogging away down the path.

Dean stares, not knowing what else to do. The frustration and anger bubbles inside him, clawing at the control he has.

Sam is hunting this case, Sam hightailed it out of here the moment he saw Dean. What does that even friggen mean?

He slowly makes his way back to the crime scene, fighting the urge to hit something.

As soon as he’s within speaking distance of Cas, Cas turns to him, his eyes narrowed. “Dean,” he starts.

Of course he fucking knows, fucking angel hearing bullshit. “Cas, I can’t— not right now.”

“Dean,” he repeats, and Dean wants so badly to hit the tree he’s standing in front of, “would you like to go back to the motel?”

“We have a case to solve, Cas, I’m not gonna drop it just because I saw Sam.”

Cas takes a deep breath. “I wasn’t going to go back with you. I’d stay here and finish examining each of the scenes then head to the coroner’s before returning to the motel.” He’s purposefully keeping his voice calm, Dean can tell, because it’s higher than usual.

Dean’s shoulders square, the anger inside him solidifying. “Fine, Cas. Solve the fucking case alone for all I care,” he spits out, not even looking at Cas.

He turns and heads back to the car without looking back.

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“It’s been months, Dean! You’ve had months to come to terms with the fact that Sam isn’t hunting with you anymore!”

Cas returned to the motel soon after Dean had. He was not in a good mood, and Dean suspected the one-third empty bottle of whiskey sitting on the old wood table wasn’t helping. Their argument
escalated from there.

Cas’s words cut across Dean, hurting more than he will admit, the truth stinging him like a live wire.

“Cas, he’s the only person who’s been there with me through it all, he’s the only one—”

“Only what, Dean? Only one you have? As if I haven’t been with only you for months— been there for years even before this? Why are you so dense, Dean? How many times do I have to spell it out?”

Dean grips the back of the side chair, digging his nails into the wood’s finish. He sees Cas’s movement out of the corner of his eye, he’s pacing. A habit he picked up from being around Dean so much. “You know I don’t mean it like that, Cas, I know you’re here for me too.” His voice sounds small even to himself.

One of the books falls off the table as Cas passes it; he doesn’t bother to pick it up. “Do you? Then I don’t understand why you never acknowledge all that I do for you.”

You’re wrong, Dean thinks. I know everything you’ve done for me. That’s the problem, Dean will never be able to give Cas anything like what Cas has given him. He’ll never be able to repay Cas for every time he’s save his stupid ass from dying, he’ll never be able to turn his back on his family for Cas, he’ll never be able to be the man Cas needs him to be.

C’mon, Cas has made it possible for Dean to save the world multiple times— Cas has saved the world multiple times. He wouldn’t be standing here without him.

And that still scares the shit out of him.

It terrifies that Dean he doesn’t know what to do without Cas anymore.

“I’m sorry,” Dean apologizes, voice directed at the back of Cas’s neck. “I know I don’t give you enough credit.”

Cas doesn’t turn around; he sinks into the old lounge chair by the bed, head in his hands.

“It’s not even about that,” Cas mumbles into his hands, voice scratching around the words. He looks up, staring at the bottle on the table in front of Dean. “I said earlier, I don’t want a repeat of how you were when Sam left the first time, I don’t want to see you like that again. It wasn’t good for you, Dean.”

Anger flares inside Dean, but for the first time today, it’s directed at himself.

“I know it’s hard for you, Dean… I’m just asking that you don’t let the pity or the guilt, or whatever you’re feeling, consume you again.”

Dean wants to tell Cas isn’t not as simple as snapping his fingers and the problem is solved. He wants to make some remark about how his emotions aren’t programmed into a switchboard; but he knows for years that that’s exactly how his emotions were controlled. The other shoe has dropped. Yeah, Cas has nudged himself into all of Dean’s cracks and crevices, but now he’s splintered open and raw around Cas. He’s no longer a shell of a human trying to hide away who he is, what he feels.

He knew it would hurt to feel this much.

Dean takes a breath, not yet knowing what he’s going to say to Cas but hoping his mouth knows.
His phone rings from where it sits upon his duffle bag, lighting up as Sam’s name scrolls across the screen. Dean hurries to answer it, his eyes trained on Cas.

Cas sinks further into the chair, face turned to the ceiling now as he mutters something to himself.

“Dean,” Sam says, “how are you?”

Dean wants to scream. “Sam.” He really doesn’t know what else to say.

There’s a long moment where no one speaks. Dean stares at Cas as he chews his jaw, wishing he knew what the angel was thinking.

“So, do you want to grab a beer or something?” Sam finally asks.

Dean nods before realizing Sam won’t see his movement. “I saw this bar near the police station,” he comments.

“No, not there, trust me.” Sam gives a small laugh. “There’s this German pub that I think you guys would like.”

Dean agrees and Sam gives him the address, and they decide to meet there at seven before hanging up.

Cas looks asleep, except for his jaw working every few seconds, eyes still closed and body slumped against the chair. Dean grabs a chair from the table, pulling it up in front of Cas, their knees knocking when he settles into it. The wait for Cas to open his eyes feels much longer than it actually is. Dean wrings his hands together, twisting the watch on his wrist, when their eyes meet.

“Sam wants to meet us for dinner.”

Cas narrows his eyes. “And do you want me there?”

Fuck. “Shit, Cas.” Dean shakes his head, looking down at his feet as he continues to speak, “Yes, I want you there. I’m not upset with you; you were right to say what you said.”

It feels like the first time he’s admitted to Cas how wrong he is about this whole situation with Sam. He knows Sam was only doing what was right for himself, and there’s no reason Dean should have reacted as juvenile as he did. He threw fits like a child, he hit walls like an angry drunk, he stopped speaking for days like a moody teenager. He was a fucking mess and he dragged Cas along behind him, expecting him to handle it with his normal patience and steadfastness. Cas doesn’t talk about how much it hurt when Sam left him too, he bottles it up, doesn’t let Dean know because Dean already had too much to deal with.

Cas stayed strong when Dean couldn’t, and only now Dean realizes how fucked up these last months have been.

Not only did Cas have to deal with Sam leaving and Dean’s reaction, he had to deal with the weight of yet another one of Heaven’s battles. Fucking selfish, Winchester.

With a little bit more navigating through awkward conversation, Cas and Dean manage to come to an agreement. Dean won’t force Sam to give any answers or explanations he doesn’t have, and Cas won’t get frustrated with Dean if he’s a little upset later.

They make their way to the restaurant, grabbing a table in the corner and ordering drinks as they wait for Sam.
“I miss him too, you know,” Cas says, squinting at the bread basket the waitress just put down on their table.

Dean grabs one of the rolls, tearing it in half. “I know you do, Cas.” He pops one half in his mouth, chewing it almost too fast. “He’s your friend too.”

Cas sighs. “Sometimes it’s difficult to talk to you about that though.”

Dean clenches his beer bottle. He is almost positive the lines on Cas’s face have deepened; he looks so tired. “Cas, I know I haven’t been the easiest guy to get along with since Sam left—”

“That’s an understatement,” Cas snorts.

“Fair enough,” Dean replies, bowing his head. “But I think I’ll be a lot better after this case.” *I wanna be better, for the both of us.*

“I hope,” Cas says. “I also hope this burger is as good as the menu makes it out to be.”

Dean laughs, pulling Cas’s menu between them to look at the superfluous description of the sandwich.

As he looks back up, deciding to order the over-the-top burger, he sees Sam standing at the hostess station, scanning the tables for them. Dean’s halfway to standing up when they make eye contact. Cas stands when Sam reaches the table (“Cas!”), his smile wide as he pulls Sam into a hug; returned tenfold by the sound of Cas’s grunt.

*Better for all of us,* Dean thinks. His face breaks into a smile when Sam turns towards him. He instantly pulls Sam into a hug, his brother’s unsure laugh resonating in his ear.

“Man, have you seen the house special burger here?” Dean asks, pulling away.

“Why do you think I suggested this place?” Sam retorts, sliding into his chair.

“You knew I couldn’t say no to a damn good burger.”

The night continues well, the three of them exchanging stories. Cas finally tells Sam about the war against Metatron, and Sam actually friggen compares what Cas tells him to what he learned from his Christmas present. Dean details a few cases, nothing too spectacular had run across their path recently. He also jokes about giving Sam cooking lessons since he’s gotten pretty smooth in the kitchen now. That’s when Sam brings up this mystery girl Dean’s been hearing about, she’s finally got a name: Nicole. He pulls out a picture of her after they’re done eating; she looks like she could kill with one pointed glance but there’s something soft about her despite that.

When Sam excuses himself to go to the bathroom, Cas notes, “You probably want some time alone with Sam, right? I can leave now, work on the case some before you—”

Dean grabs his thigh beneath the table (only thinking about looking around to see if anyone is watching but not actually doing so). “No, Cas, please stay.” Half of Dean wants Cas to stay because he keeps him calm, the other half wants him to stay so that things don’t go downhill with Sam.

Cas gives him a small smile. “Everything will be fine, Dean.” He puts his hand on top of Dean’s in return. “Besides, we really need to make a little more headway on this case if we want to get it solved anytime soon.”
After as many drinks as Dean’s had, he’s more than a little desperate. “No, Cas, please.” He squeezes Cas’s hand way harder than he should.

“You’ll be fine, Dean, it’ll be okay,” the angel soothes, his voice soft. Cas pulls him in and kisses his temple, lips as soft and dry as ever.

“Yeah?” Dean breathes, eyes a little wider when they pull away from each other.

“Yes.” Cas smiles again. He maneuvers out of his seat as Sam approaches their table again. “I’ll see you tomorrow. I presume we’re working this case together now,” he says, hugging Sam again.

“Has Dean turned you into an old man, is it your bedtime now? You don’t have to leave, Cas.” Sam shoots Dean a look.

“Nothing of the likes; we all know Dean is the oldtimer of this bunch. But no, I wanted to go over some more details of the case before we headed back out tomorrow.”

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

Cas squeezes Dean’s shoulder one last time before heading for the door.

Dean stands awkwardly, looking at his wallet as he pulls it out. “Wanna move to the bar?”

“Sure.”

Dean throws down enough bills to cover the check and tip. He stares at Sam’s back as they make their way to the bar, trying to think of what to say. Sam motions to the bartender for a couple beers. They sit there, staring at their reflections in the mirror behind the bar, waiting for their drinks.

“Look, Dean, I—” Sam starts.

“I fucking knew you were leaving before you told me,” Dean interrupts, surprising himself by admitting that fact for the first time. Sam closes his mouth. “Sometime after that solo case you worked here in Nashville,” he continues. “You probably stopped by Vanderbilt and talked to someone then?” he guesses, correctly.

“I had to talk to a professor about some evidence. She kinda talked me into going to school, yeah.”

“Okay, so you slept with some anthropology professor and she convinced you to go back to school.”

Sam wrinkles his nose at the assumption. “It’s not like that, Dean. Nicole grew up in the life too, her parents were hunters.” Didn’t see that coming. Now Dean’s actually listening. “After her older sister was killed by an angry spirit that lived in their house, her parents dove head first into hunting, determined to make sure families never had to suffer like theirs did. She stopped traveling with them when she got into Vanderbilt, but she kept hunting any cases that happened around Nashville. She told me about how much happier she was living her life for herself but still being able to help people.”

You never told me you were going to keep hunting, you just fucking left.

“We kept talking after I finished the case. She knew hunting was getting to me, the schedule we were on, all the cases Cas kept—”

“Don’t you blame Cas,” Dean warns, clenching his jaw.

Sam sighs. “I’m not blaming Cas, he didn’t do anything wrong. He was finding cases we never
would have without him, maybe no one would have solved those cases if we didn’t. But I couldn’t keep up anymore, Dean, I couldn’t work a case every week and keep traveling. I needed something else. And Nicole helped me realize I could have a life outside of hunting while continuing to hunt. Only hunting cases surrounding Nashville seemed the answer to what I was searching for.”

Dean lets everything Sam said sink in. He finishes his beer, rolling it between his palms. He had already forgiven Sam, not long after he left, for leaving hunting because he’d known all along that Sam would not stick around and keep hunting if the world wasn’t at stake. Sam loves helping people, but hunting was never his perfect answer to the problem. How many times had they been forced to save the world? How many permanent scars are etched into his being? Sam deserves a break from everything. The universe has been gunning for him his entire life, and now it’s about as quiet as it could possible get, of course he should feel like it’s the proper time to leave as smoothly as possible.

Dean sighs, letting the thoughts settle themselves. He looks at Sam again, a smirk pulling at his lips, “But, I swear, Sam, I don’t know how you ever thought you could be a lawyer— you suck at hiding evidence. You’d leave papers lying around or the school’s homepage up on your computer when you fell asleep in the library.”

Sam barks out a laugh, not expecting Dean’s reply. “Man, they give you like sixty papers in every orientation packet— no way I could keep track of them all.”

“Again, Sammy, like I said, you suck at hiding evidence. Good thing you’re studying anthro and history.”

“How come you never said anything then? If you knew beforehand.”

Dean sighs, scrubbing his hands over his face. He can tell he looks exhausted. “You always talked about leaving some day. I mean, you felt like you couldn’t most days though, so you stayed,” he admits. “You kept up the family business. I just assumed it was another pipe dream of leaving that you’d get over once we worked a really good case, like it always was before that.” Dean takes a swallow of his new beer. “But then you were actually leaving this time. Fuck, if I’d been mad with you before, it was nothing compared to then.” He laughs a little but Sam just stares back at him. “Man, I thought you were abandoning me and Cas, and giving up hunting even though you knew there were still monsters out there.”

“Dean, you know I—”

“I know, I know, that’s not what you were doing.” Dean takes a deep breath, tracing the wood grain of the bar with his thumbnail. “You were going out and doing what you wanted to do. That didn’t mean you were never going to hunt again, it just meant you were going to go back to school.”

Dean looks over at his younger brother now. For the first time he doesn’t see Sam as his little brother, a kid he needs to protect from what goes bump in the night. He sees Sam, a hunter, going to school in Nashville, living his own life.

He claps Sam on the shoulder. “Sammy, you know I’m proud of you.” Sam smiles at him, looking like he wants to say something. “Alright, no chick flick moments. Let’s hit the hay so we can gank this bastard sooner rather than later.” He swallows most of his beer and throws down a twenty to cover their tab.

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Cas is still awake when Dean walks into the motel room, hunched over books spread over the table.
“You keep sitting like that and your shoulders are gonna kill,” he quips, shutting the door behind him.

Cas ponders that for a moment, running his finger down the table of contents before flipping to the referenced page. “My grace will heal any muscle aches the vessel suffers from.”

Dean grabs Cas’s shoulders, digging his thumbs into the muscle. “Or I could do it.” The angel tilts his head back, his eyes shut as his face points to the ceiling, mouth slightly open.

“Come to bed, Cas, even if for just a few hours.”

Cas reaches back and laces his fingers with Dean’s, pulling his left hand forward to press against his chest.

Dean leans down, his face coming around to rest against the right side of Cas’s. “C’mon, bed, Cas, we know it’s a werewolf.” He pulls away and walks to the bathroom.

He rinses off the dirt and dust from their venture into the woods today. By the time he’s finished and slipped into some boxer briefs, Cas is laying in the bed, still researching in one of the books. Dean gently pulls it out of his hands and places it on the bedside table before climbing over Cas and getting under the covers.

He pulls Cas’s arm over his waist and presses himself into his chest. Cas pulls him closer, pressing a leg between Dean’s as he settles himself in for the next four hours.

Thank you, Cas. Dean repeats it a few times until he’s sure Cas heard it by responding with kisses pressed into his shoulder.

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Dean’s eating one of the microwave breakfast burritos they picked up on the way into town, trying to ignore how rubbery the eggs taste. Cas is still sprawled on the bed, his hair as messy as ever.

Dean marvels at how human Cas has become since finally finding a home with him. He sleeps more nights than not, and despite the fact that he has to want to sleep, has to force his grace down, he’s still grumpy as hell in the mornings. Choosing to murmur Enochian under his breath as he stretches his back and takes a cup of coffee from Dean instead of bringing his grace back closer to the surface to wake himself up. Whenever Dean tries a new recipe Cas will eat it; even when he completely screwed up the moussaka, Cas stood at the counter with him and ate around the inedible eggplant, laughing the whole time. He used to whip himself into a presentable human, hair neatly in place and tie finally on straight, but lately he’s resorted to the original mop of hair and a crooked tie.

Cas rolls over when the alarm Dean set for six finally sounds, his hand searching the bedside table fruitlessly. Dean pulls his phone out of his pocket, thumbing at the screen so the alarm stops.

Cas sighs and heaves himself into a sitting position, scrubbing his hands over his face. “Why He thought it was a good idea to have the sun rise every morning, I will never know,” he grumbles.

Partially dressed, shirt still unbuttoned and tie hanging off the back of the chair, Cas is sitting to pull his shoes on, and Dean has to stop himself from staring. The angel’s back flexes and Dean’s sure he can see a glimmer of wings hop across the light shining through the windows. His mouth dries out. He sees Cas’s lips moving but he doesn’t hear what he’s saying, still focused on trying to see another hint of the wings again.

A knock on the door forces his attention elsewhere. Sam’s standing on the other side, a laptop bag
slung over his shoulder, a stack of files in one hand, and a box that looks about the size of half a dozen donuts.

“I don’t think it’s a werewolf,” he starts without prelude, setting his laptop up on the already cramped table. “I was talking to Nicole last night about the case some more, and get this: there’s an old local legend that talks about this “water spirit” that haunts up and down the Cumberland river—and all those bodies were found along that stream that is actually a branch of the river—so it wouldn’t be a far stretch to say that this is related to this same “water spirit.” And I checked with the coroner this morning—”

“It’s seven, how did you check with the coroner already?” Dean asks.

“Oh, he’s friends with Nicole—anyways, so the coroner said that all the bodies have died approximately at the same time. Since there’s no possible way even a werewolf could travel that fast, it means something got all these people who were in the wildlife management area at the same time.”

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Dean concedes, sitting down so he can settle in and listen to Sam’s findings.

“Okay, so, these guys were all hunters, it’s hunting season, they all had permits and were allowed in the park at this time. They all died around dusk, most likely, about five days ago.”

“I figured the werewolf would be taking advantage of the hunting season,” Cas chimes in, buttoning his shirt.

Dean nods in agreement. “And it was just a full moon five days ago. All the signs pointed towards a werewolf, man. I mean, hearts getting ripped out aren’t really an angry spirit thing so much.”

Sam pushes his hair back before replying. “But how come the wounds weren’t that messy? I mean, once a werewolf gets close enough to hear the heart beating, nothing really stops it from shredding the victim’s chest open. These men—notice they were all men—”

“Hunting is a very sexist hobby,” Cas mutters, taking a sip of his coffee.

Both brothers huff a laugh before Sam continues, “They were, it was almost like a hand forced itself into their chests and ripped the heart out.”

“Temple of Doom style?” Dean half guesses. He loves the movie now but his face scrunches at the memory of seeing it for the first time as a kid.

When looking at the crime scene photos, Dean did notice how it was unusually clean for a werewolf. But sometimes there are “skilled” werewolves that are smart enough to try and hide their trail; usually they take other organs too, or rip the head off, anything to steer away from the tell of a missing heart.

“They looked that clean, Cas, their chests?” He’s not questioning Sam’s theory, but Dean’s the only one who hasn’t seen the bodies in the flesh yet, and Cas definitely has the best memory of all of them.

“They did look too...precise. Remember what Detective Allens said about these being too clean a kill for animal maulings?” He tilts his head, working something out. “Also, no other animals seem willing to approach the bodies, no other animals aided in the decay of the body. No insects burrowed in the skin, no coyotes gnawed off flesh; no rodents scavenged their bodies…”

“Like magic touched the body,” Dean continues, “and the animals were smart enough not to mess
“Exactly!” Sam agrees. “This has gotta be some endowed spirit that guards the waters, we just gotta find out what brand of monster it is.”

Together they set to work researching various water related spirits, guardians, demons, and anything else that thrives on rivers. It’s beginning to feel like old times: the three of them spread out across a motel room, researching through their various mediums, until one of them comes up with the answer of how to kill it.

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In hindsight, Dean really should have known that a witch was behind this entire ordeal. The holly blooming on the ground where the bodies were found should have alerted him that something witchy was up.

Because then maybe his head wouldn’t hurt from cracking against a tree, Sam would be conscious, and Cas wouldn’t be immobilized.

A damned vengeful spirit that just happened to be witch in her glory days, fucking fantastic.

Right now she’s circling Cas, who’s pressed against a tree, fidgeting against whatever spell she’s holding him under while she cooks up the rest of her plan. If Dean could just get to the fucking wand she’s encased in that tree, he could burn it and that would be that. But his head has to stop spinning first.

The witch turns, facing the stream again, murmuring under her breath. Dean steals this opportunity to half-crawl-half-drag himself over to Cas. He takes his time, trying not to make any more noise than necessary, luckily the babble of the stream seems to be covering the crunch and scrape of his movements. Hidden from view now, behind the tree, he tugs on Cas’s sleeve and watches as the angel’s eyes dart down to him. His head still kills, throbbing at the base. He tugs on Cas’s sleeve again, making a stabbing motion with his other arm. Cas understands now.

The angel blade accidentally slips through Dean’s muddy fingers when Cas materializes it. It chinks against a rock near the tree roots.

The witch is on him in an instant, pinning him face first against the tree. Cas crumbles to the ground, curled in on himself as he starts choking. Dean’s confused by Cas’s retching until water starts to fill his own mouth and rush down his throat. He grapples to the best of his abilities, trying to cough up the water.

No fucking way.

Dean feels his chest getting tighter as more water is forced into his lungs, he squeezes his eyes shut, trying to think of a plan with what oxygen he has left.

If he could just…

The ground is cold beneath him as he convulses, grabbing at his throat. He doesn’t know why he’s not immobilized anymore.

He just wants some fucking air again… If he could just fucking breathe…

Forcing his eyes open, trying to find Sam or Cas, Dean watches as his brother wraps the spirit in iron chains, pinning her to the ground with his body. His head starts to swim as he hears Sam and Cas
yelling at each other.

Cas stands up, still spitting out water, grabs his angel blade, and in between one coughing heave and the next, throws his blade at the wand encased in the tree. The entire tree shatters, the branches falling, the bark splintering. The wand lands close to the water’s edge, holly immediately sprouting around it.

Dean gasps, sitting up and coughing against the water no longer pushing into his lungs. Sam’s still laying on the ground, breathing hard as he finally pulls himself up. Cas is on his knees, his hand braced against a tree.

*Everyone is okay*, Dean thinks.

His head still hurts too much to move too fast, so Cas ends up supporting him on their walk back to the car as Sam sets the wand on fire. Dean lays out in the back seat, his head cradled on his jacket as Cas searches the trunk for some water bottles. The angel comes back around, pushing a bottle into Dean’s hands. Then his fingers are gingerly probing Dean’s skull, looking for the tender spot that clashed with the tree; he finds it when Dean can’t suppress a gasp of pain at the fingers against the base of his skull. The burn of grace through his body is cool as Cas heals his head wound.

Then Dean passes out.

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The trunk is nearly repacked by eight in the morning; normally Dean would stay a little longer after for a case like this but Sam is here in case anything residual pops up. Dean’s standing at the open door to their room, letting the steam from his shower waft outside, thinking about mentioning the broken fan to the front desk, when he sees Sam pull up.

“Nicole had class, otherwise she would’ve come to introduce herself,” Sam says, getting out of his car. “Also, she made you guys some food for the road.” He pulls a few tupperware containers from the back seat, handing them to Dean’s outstretched palms.

Cas steps outside with his and Dean’s duffles in hand, saying hello to Sam as he situates them into the trunk.

Dean pulls the corner up on one of the containers, he’s hit with the smell of cured meat. “Man, did she make jerky?” Dean’s way more excited than he should be about jerky at this age.

Sam laughs. “She thought it would be kinda funny, seeing as we just worked on this case where hunters— you know, animal hunters— were involved. Anyway, her brother hunts, so we always end up with more venison and jerky than we can eat.” Sam clears his throat, the morning air cold in his throat. “She also made granola trail mix, but don’t worry she put chocolate in it.”

Cas comes up to stand with them now. “That sounds like something more up my alley than Dean’s,” he jokes, a glint in his eye.

“Anyway, she said she wants the tupperware back.” Sam looks nervous. “Maybe you two could swing by at Thanksgiving, if you want,” he says, tucking hair behind his ears as he looks down the street.

Dean grins, kicking the gravel under his shoe. “I was thinking you two could come our way, since we’re more central to you two, Charlie, and Jody.”

Sam looks Dean in the eye, a smile breaking out on his face. “I’ll have to talk to Nicole about—”
“Don’t tell me she has you whipped, Sam,” Cas laughs, repeating Sam’s words from the other night.

Sam claps a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll fucking be there, guys, don’t worry. Even if I have to bribe her with tons of mind-blowing—”

“And this is where I tell you goodbye,” Dean interrupts, pulling his brother into a hug.

They say their farewells, then Cas and Dean are on the road back to the bunker, with nothing between them and home but eight hundred miles and maybe a stop in Kansas City to see a baseball game.

Chapter End Notes

I'm doing something a little different with the next chapter, but I hope y'all will enjoy it. Stay tuned for more information.
Storytelling

Chapter Summary

Sam has some unusual input and insight into Cas's life.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took awhile, school started again. :/

This hasn't been beta'd yet (again), but once it has, I will post it again. Enjoy!

Edit 6/12/16: has been beta'd!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

RECORDING ONE

Hey, Cas, it's me. I'm guessing it took you what— six months?— to stumble onto this. Don't go listening to this all in one night now. I'm probably gone from the bunker by now, you probably know where I am, and Dean's probably sitting driver seat right now blaring Ozzy.

I hope by this point he's pretty much running on one hundred again. I know it was cowardly what I am going to do, not giving him enough time to process I am leaving, not telling him where I am going. But if I did, he could convince me to stay, and it wouldn't take much, that's how fragile this entire situation is. I would rescind my acceptance if Dean had enough time to gather pressing enough cases. I can't do that to myself again, I owe myself that. Yeah, I know school might not actually be the answer I'm looking for, but it's a start. I need to try. I need to find out who I am outside of hunting. I realize now, when I went to Stanford, half the reason I went was to prove to my dad that I could, that I made my own decisions. I'm doing this now to prove to myself... I don't know what I'm trying to prove, but I feel this— this need to help in a different way. Hunting is not the only way to save people, that's what I realized. I think that's what's driving this. I want to help more, yeah.

And thank you, Cas. I know you know doing this for me, but I don't say it enough, you have earned it though. Thank you. I couldn't leave without knowing someone was going to be there for Dean. We both know that Dean covers himself with walls of angst and nonchalance so that he won't have to admit he feels anything else. And we both know that's a lie. I'm sorry it's going to be hard, having to deal with the full force of every harsh thing he's going to do in these coming months. But you can handle it, Cas, I know you can. You pulled his angst ridden ass out of Hell, you can handle whatever he throws at you.

He won't admit to how he feels for you, so I don't know if you'll admit how much you care about him as well. But I'm happy for you guys. After six years of having to painfully watch you guys go back and forth, it is such a relief for it to finally happen. If Dean repressed it anything longer I'm pretty sure he was going to have an aneurysm. You know how long it's been since I've heard Dean admit he's happy...
Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you, Cas.

Cas pulls out the earphones once the first recording is finished. He just stares down at the electronic, seeing the little number in the corner indicate that there are over three dozen more to follow this one. He wonders when Sam found the time and the privacy to record all of these.

It’s been almost a year and Cas is now just listening to the pre-downloaded album “For Cas” that he found while scrolling through his iPod. It’s late, well past three in the morning, and Cas knows tonight is going to be another sleepless night. Even before the promise of thirty-eight recordings from Sam, Cas had no intention of sleeping. He still wakes up in cold sweats with a tight chest when he dreams of the battle.

It’s been a couple months since he came back from Heaven, with new scars carved into his grace. The first week or so was simple enough, he’d been so exhausted and run thin that he was physically unable to think about the battle, repressing almost everything but what he let himself tell Dean. Now though, he spends every moment awake, scared that if he succumbs to sleep he’ll have to relive the death of Hannah and the rest of his murdered brethren.

Dean lies on his chest, ear to his heart and arm slung across his waist, snoring because he refuses to admit he’s sick. His leg twitches when his snoring gets a little too loud.

Cas smiles when Dean’s mouth falls open against his t-shirt, his snoring quieter now. He places his headphones back in and starts the second recording.

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RECORDING SEVEN

Hey, Cas.

So, some important things you need to remember. You probably know them all— they might not even apply to you— but it doesn’t hurt to be sure, you know? Anyways, Things to Remember About Dean Winchester…

- He’s really bad at putting the toilet seat back down

- He’ll bitch about the snow because of the Impala’s engine, but he loves it

- He’s a blanket hog when he’s sick— sharing a bed when we were young sucked in the spring when his allergies flared

- November is a really hard month for him; just feed him pie and try not to pick on him too often

- He’ll eat wherever you want to eat, as long as it’s got burgers

- He takes his coffee black; if it’s a good day, he’ll add sugar

- He doesn’t like when people watch him eat

- He’s self conscious about his height— that’s probably my fault
• And his looks— again, also my fault

• He only likes sleeping in during holidays— otherwise he feels too lazy

• He likes being lazy, he’ll just never admit it— because when we were young, if we weren’t doing something that probably meant we were being punished or not helping enough

• He’ll tell you he doesn’t care what kind of pie he gets, but his favorite is apple, with a crust top, not the streusel stuff

• He changes channels during commercials

• Seeing blood still kinda freaks him out— when it’s not his— just because he thinks it means he didn’t do everything he could to keep us safe

• If there’s a case and something dangerous needs to be done— some goddess needs stabbed or siren seduced— he will want to be the one to do it— don’t waste your breath trying to talk him out of it

• He’s a neat freak, a germaphobe, and anal retentive

• He hides his feelings with jokes or anger

• Don’t forget to say I love you when the opportunity arises, sometimes it might be the last time for a while

• He likes talking to people

• He also hates it— I don’t know, you figure it out

• Don’t let him forget his birthday— or any other holidays you might want to celebrate

• Nag him about his music, otherwise he might start to think you like it

• Don’t keep doors open

• If he’s cleaning, just let him do it his way

• His actual-real-game-playing poker face sucks, use that to your advantage

• Don’t let him hustle pool when he’s actually drunk

• He talks in his sleep when he’s sick— again, allergy season sucked

• Baseball is his favorite sport, even though he watches football more often

• Make sure he goes to the movies or a park or something normal every now and again

• Be thankful Dr. Sexy is only on once a week

• He hates taking out the trash, please remind him about it

• Tease him about his singing— he knows he’s good, but don’t let him get cocky

• He actually doesn’t mind when he doesn’t catch any fish when he goes fishing

• He doesn’t like rice of any sort, unless it’s in a burrito
- His grey FBI suit is his favorite work suit; his green plaid is his favorite shirt; his black steel-toe boots are his favorite shoes; he doesn’t like wearing sunglasses; he prefers briefs to boxers; and I don’t think he owns a pair of shorts

- He cheats at darts, so look out

- He always picks scissors

- Don’t leave food in the car

- Let him take care of you, but don’t let him smother you

There’s probably more, but I think I got most of the important ones, and maybe some not as important ones. Whatever. You know him well enough at this point that you can figure out anything else that comes your way. Good luck, Cas.

Cas only gets as far as that recording before Dean blearily opens his eyes and presses his face into his chest. Dean quickly turns over and starts coughing into his elbow, kicking the sheets away.

“Where the hell did I get this bug from?” he complains, his voice scratching its way out.

Cas presses the back of his hand to Dean’s forehead. He receives a withering look in response. “I’ll go find you some medication.” Cas sits up, pulling on the first pair of sweats he finds puddled on the floor next to the bed. “Do you want me to make breakfast too?”

Dean feels the need to be the one who cooks, especially since it was one of the only ways he could surely take care of Sam growing up. It’s not that he doesn’t enjoy Cas’s basic recipes, but that his sense of responsibility far outweighs many of his wants in his life. Cas has been trying to help Dean realize that he doesn’t need to do everything himself, and that handing off some of the responsibility is not showing weakness or carelessness. He’s been hoping that letting Dean know he is willing to help gives Dean the opportunity to choose to let him.

Dean scrubs his hands over his face, looking at the clock on the bedside table. He groans quietly, trying to hide a cough. “Uhh, yeah, just something quick. We gotta go on a supply run before we head out on this hunt.” He sits up, his joints popping all over. Cas watches as his hands come up to rub his neck. “I’m going to take a shower then if you’re making breakfast.”

Cas is still standing next to the bed, staring at Dean, calculating their morning out. Dean scoots over, his knee knocking against Cas’s leg as he swings his feet over the side. He rubs his neck a few more times before standing up, his hand brushing Cas’s as he passes.

His phone chimes with another weather report from the town they’re headed for and he thumbs it off. “I could go on the supply run while you get stuff packed here,” he suggests, turning to face Dean as he reads the report.

“Nah, Cas, you just gotta come give me my medicine.” Dean winks suggestively then heads towards the bathrooms.

The report calls for heavy thunderstorms with mild winds; nothing they can’t handle.

Cas find some medicine in the top drawer of the dresser, and pops a few store-brand antihistamines
and decongestants into his palm and fills a cup with orange juice. He considers seeing if Sam left any vitamin C tablets in his room, but as he’s passing the bathrooms, the humming coming from within pulls him in there instead.

Dean barely accepts the pills before he’s turning away and having a coughing fit into his fists. His chest is still heaving as he turns around to chase the pills with the juice Cas brought.

Stepping back into the shower, now naked and reaching for the shampoo, Cas comments, “We’ll pick up more medication and cough drops at Walmart.”

“It’s just a cough, Cas, jeez,” Dean complains, turning Cas around to scrub at his back.

Cas hums in response, focusing on Dean’s fingers against his back, curling around his shoulder blades and pressing along his spine.

“Getting sick means we can’t make out,” he finally says, once Dean removes his hands.

A too sharp laugh from Dean is all it takes for Dean to start coughing again. He pounds on his sternum, failing to loosen the mucus in his chest. “You’re an angel, you asshole, you’re not gonna get sick from kissing me.” He forces the bar of soap into Cas’s hand and turns around.

Cas starts with his neck, working the suds in methodically. “It was worth a shot,” he teases.

The Walmart is an hour southeast, and luckily it’s barely out of the way as they head for the hunt in Broken Arrow.

Dean hums along to the radio station for now, as they’re leaving Lebanon, in between his comments about how they need to be quick and methodical about this supply run if they’re going to make it in and out before the storm hits.

For as attentive as Cas is, he’s only half listening. All morning he’s been fighting with himself to listen to more of Sam’s recordings. It seems ridiculous, so badly wanting to know just a fraction more about Dean that he’s not listening to Dean speak now. But he is only able to understand Dean from his own point of view, and to a smaller degree, from Dean’s as well. The insight that Sam would have on Dean would be extremely helpful in navigating their relationship.

It’s not that Cas doesn’t know how to give Dean time or space or just sit there when he’s having a bad day. But those days when his shame hits the tipping point or his guilt overrides any other emotion or his memories are remembered too sharply, Cas can’t empathize with. Some human emotions still fly over his head, not able to comprehend the shame that comes with actions, desires, or thoughts. Sure he feels his own guilt for the mistakes he’s made in the grand scheme of trying to fix Heaven and Earth, the mistakes involving Dean’s trust, but never has he been ashamed to feel for Dean the way he does. He wasn’t there for a large portion of Dean’s life, the most defining years, he was stuck in Heaven watching over but never interfering. He likes to think that if he interacted sooner, Dean would not have to experience a fraction of the fear or self-consciousness he now feels day to day, sometimes overwhelming him.

For as attentive as Cas is, he’s only half listening. All morning he’s been fighting with himself to listen to more of Sam’s recordings. It seems ridiculous, so badly wanting to know just a fraction more about Dean that he’s not listening to Dean speak now. But he is only able to understand Dean from his own point of view, and to a smaller degree, from Dean’s as well. The insight that Sam would have on Dean would be extremely helpful in navigating their relationship.

Remembering back to all the times he and Dean were intimate, are especially telling of the depth of Dean’s fear. In the beginning, the moment they stopped touching, Dean would curl in on himself and try to force any lingering emotions as far down as possible. Cas was beyond frustration then. He knew Dean was experiencing a myriad of emotions that he was not ready to face yet, he knew Dean’s past and that he would react according to that. Cas was unable to understand it completely
because he could not empathize.

But Cas finally understood when he caught the expression on Dean’s face one day they were working a case in upstate New York. Dean was fighting so hard with himself, he wanted so badly to let Cas touch him when they were in some bar, three drinks in their system, but the anxiety quelling inside Dean was palpable. He wanted to, but society said he couldn’t, society was telling him he should ‘man up’ and ‘act like a man.’ And it hit Cas, in that moment he was able to relate absolutely to the fear of doing what was considered wrong, what was considered abominable, no matter how good it felt.

Then, the longer they were together, especially after Dean admitted to Sam the nature of their relationship, Dean would steal himself little moments of joy. Whether it be pulling Cas up against him out back of a bar, grabbing Cas’s hand while driving, or not shying away when Cas told him how gorgeous he looked. He began to, not exactly embrace, but definitely not push away or ignore what was steadily growing between them.

Sometimes, Cas feels so large and so full with everything that is Earth, the life he’s living, being with Dean, that he doesn’t know how he’s expected to possibly fit more. But god does he want to, he wants every bit of it he can get his hands on. He wants to wrap himself in it so completely that it all becomes the defining whole of him.

This gift from Sam seems like something he would give to Cas if he knew how he felt. But how can that be when Cas didn’t even come to this realization until after Sam had given him these recordings? Cas is trying to remember if Sam dropped any hints about these recordings over the past year. He probably thought Cas would find them sooner…

“Hey, Cas, where you at?” Dean asks, his voice thin from coughing so much.

“So you think they’ll be out of those microwave breakfast sandwiches again?” Cas asks, pulling their supply list out of his pocket.

\textit{Beer}

\textit{Cough drops}

\textit{15lb rock salt}

\textit{Bandages — Ace, tape, gauze}

\textit{Vodka handle}

\textit{3x-antibiotic}

\textit{Trip food}

Dean coughs again. “You weren’t thinking about sausage biscuits.” He gestures to the list then flips his turn signal on.

Cas sighs, the rain drops peeling down the window getting bigger by the minute. “I was thinking about all the important information I know about you.”

Dean dips his head and pulls at his collar self-consciously. “About me?” he asks after clearing his throat.
Cas doesn’t really know how to say it, to tell Dean he wants to be a bigger part of the important things in Dean’s life without scaring Dean (he already knows he’s incredibly important to Dean). He knows it’s not that Dean wouldn’t want it, but Dean is still growing enormously in terms of his emotions and ability to process them. He never does too well with change or the unexpected. The permanence of Cas in his life still seems to surprise him more mornings than not. He’ll look at Cas softly, taking in everything he can, when he thinks Cas won’t notice; but of course Cas notices, he relishes in it.

“If you were to be admitted to the hospital, I have no way of proving my relation to you.” Cas tilts his head, thinking. “I have no way of proving my relation to anyone. And the opposite is true, I suppose. You’d have no way of proving who I am if I were to be unconscious in the ER.”

Dean laughs. “Shit, Cas.” He smiles at Cas, relief evident in his eyes. “We can call Charlie up ASAP and get you some ID and a social and all that. She’ll make sure that we’d be each other’s next of kin and all that, don’t worry,” he reassures, pulling into the Walmart parking lot.

Cas doesn’t want to ask why Dean doesn’t question why, in what situation, Cas would not be able to heal himself or the hunter. He likes the comfortable pressure in his chest that tells him Dean would want to be the one in the hospital next to him if either were incapacitated.

Once inside the Walmart, Cas and Dean split, Cas on non-necessities: food, medication, and first aid; Dean finding the essentials: alcohol and rock salt. They meet back up at the checkout; arguing over which box of breakfast sandwiches to buy. Dean finally concedes to the sausage ones because he got the El Sol instead of the uppity IPA stuff Cas has been drinking ever since Sam introduced him to it in Nashville.

It’s just short of pouring rain by the they make it back out, running to the Impala and haphazardly throwing bags into the trunk, hoping they’re wedged in securely enough between the duffle bags.

Dean pulls the trunk shut and runs the cart to the caroul a few spots down; Cas is still standing by the back bumper when he returns.

“What the hell, Cas?” he half laughs, coughing into his elbow. “Get in the car.”

“I’m an angel,” Cas smiles gleefully. Dean looks confused, so Cas continues, “I could have willed us and the bags into the car with nothing more than a thought,” he laughs, as if it’s one of the most hilarious things he’s said. He turns his face to the sky, marveling at the beauty of nature in the raw.

“Cas, buddy.” Dean shakes his head. “You are losing it,” he laughs, but pulling Cas in my his collar and kissing him anyways.

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RECORDING TWELVE

Hey, Cas!

If you’re ever at a loss at something special to do for Dean, take him to the beach. I know we stopped by that beach in Toronto, but everyone knows that doesn’t really count as a beach. I mean a real beach, in LA or Galveston or North Carolina. Nothing too fancy or touristy, you know, with hundreds of people around. Maybe a pier or jetties or a cliff near by. Make him get in the water. He doesn’t mind swimming, he knows he’s good at it, he just doesn’t do it often so he— he’s like self conscious about it or something. Whatever it is, make him get in the water anyways.

Go the whole nine yards, if you have to. Bring the picnic basket and the beer and a portable radio.
Just stay at the beach for as long as possible. Don’t let him leave until there’s sand literally everywhere. Then stay a little while longer.

Dean needs to learn to relax. He used to be able to... god such a long time ago… Now he needs to again, so make him. Okay? He talks about the beach, about how that would be our first vacation together. Make sure it’s his first vacation, okay, Cas, for me? I know I shouldn’t be the one asking more favors of you, but I’d bet anything you’ll enjoy the beach too.

And if that doesn’t work, there’s always Vegas. You guys would definitely clean out whatever casino you went into. I’m not encouraging you guys to count cards or anything, but hey, I can’t tell you what to do or not do.

Cas looks over at Dean, sprawled on the motel bed, over the sheets and three layers of clothes still on. He could do with a vacation of sorts, even if it was just a week straight of no hunting or research, with only a Netflix marathon to look forward to.

As soon as they made it to the motel, only forty minutes later than they wanted, Dean flopped himself onto the bed and told Cas to wake him up when the Chinese food got there.

It’s been sitting in the fridge for thirty minutes as Cas listens to Dean’s snoring and coughing, his cold unrelenting.

Cas searches for the medication he bought for Dean, placing it on the nightstand next to the cough drops and glass of water he put there not long after Dean fell asleep. He thinks about withholding the takeout until Dean swallows another dose of pills and about a liter of water.

Dean hasn’t asked Cas to heal him, even though one surge of his grace through Dean’s body would mean that virus dead and gone within seconds. A part of Cas, that seems to keep growing (has been ever since he decided to stay in the bunker), is glad that Dean is allowing Cas this small act. Dean is letting Cas heal him in all the ways any other human would, a slow and tedious process, but it shows the depth of his affection anyways. Cas lets Dean kiss him between coughing fits and sneezes, and if that doesn’t prove how willing he is to be here, he doesn’t know what will. He laughs at the absurdity of his thought process, but looks over and Dean and smiles again.

++

RECORDING NINETEEN

Hey, Cas.

I really don’t know how to say this, mostly because I know it won’t be enough. I’ll keep this one short then... I wanted to apologize, for everything. I know Dean and I haven’t always treated you like you deserved— hell man, we even tried to kill you once or twice. We’ve abandoned you, we’ve kept secrets from you, we’ve not listened to you— the list goes on and on, I know. But I just wanted to lay it all out there... I know we fucked up a lot, but, Cas, we appreciate everything you’ve done for us and I just want you to know I’m sorry we’ve never been able to give the same way you have. I’m sorry, Cas. And thank you so much. You believed in us more than anyone else, even when we didn’t believe in ourselves. You have to know we would not be alive if it weren’t for you. Thank you.

Dean stirs awake just as the recording finishes, and Cas turns off the device, putting it down so he can turn around and look at Dean.

It’s well after nine o’clock now, the takeout sitting on a shelf in the fridge so it doesn’t go bad.
Dean pushes himself up, the effort to do so draining his energy. He holds his head between his hands and he tries to wake up more.

“Drink,” Cas demands, from over the laptop screen, “and don’t forget the medicine.”

Dean grunts in response, seemingly annoyed at being coddled, but drains the entire cup of water before he even opens the pill bottle. “I don’t know what the fuck this is, man. I do not get sick like this.”

Dean would be annoyed if Cas started to explain how every human gets sick, and how quickly evolving viruses are (especially the common cold virus), and that there is no sure fire way to ensure Dean’s perfect health. Instead, he holds his tongue, hums a response, and walks to the kitchenette to reheat the Chinese food for Dean.

When they first arrived, Cas hacked his way into the local police station’s server and started researching about the missing people that originally drew them to this case. They all disappeared from within the same few blocks of each other, in a part of town that was less than pleasant but never had any true trouble. Until people started to spread rumors about a supposed serial killer that has taken these victims.

The microwave beeps, and Cas pulls the plastic container out, sitting it on the table, before putting his own container in. Dean perks his head at the smell of the teriyaki beef and sits himself at the table, immediately digging in, starving since he hasn’t eaten since breakfast.

Cas sits with his lo mein in hand as he types another keyword into the police database, looking for any other crimes that might relate to the current case even if it’s not a missing person’s.

“Dude, how long have you been working?” Dean asks, over the table.

Cas rubs a hand over the back of his neck, he sees Dean trace the movement with his eyes. “Since we got here. I wanted to know as much as possible for tomorrow, when we go talk to the cops.” I wanted to keep my mind occupied.

Dean pushes his box aside and moves to shut the laptop. Cas stops him, but does move it to the side.

“We’ll figure it out, I’m not worried about that,” Dean sighs, pulling his food back in front of him.

“And there’s still no evidence that these people are being murdered— no bodies have shown up. So, for now, we have a little time to think about everything,” he reasons.

Cas stares at his food, not in the mood to eat.

This case has him wound up and frustrated, and he can’t pinpoint why. His entire being shakes with unease as his thinks of the missing people that are probably suffering at this very moment.

He’s felt so helpless since he’s come back from Heaven.

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Later that night, Dean’s in the motel bed, on the phone with Sam, while Cas stares at his reflection in the mirror. He knows he’s been in here much longer than necessary, and Dean must have noticed, but he can’t tear himself away from the haunting image in front of him.

Cas looks past the flesh of his vessel, knows it doesn’t reflect the tatters of his grace.

He grace hums with a dull dim that has not recharged itself since the battle. Part of him does not
He hears Dean end the phone call and forces himself out of the bathroom. With barely a glance in Dean’s direction, he flips the lights off and crawls into bed.

Where he would normally pull Dean back against his chest, tonight he curls himself into Dean’s arms, burying his nose in Dean’s collarbone.

Dean doesn’t protest, he wouldn’t, but there’s a sound in the back of his throat that Cas understands clearly.

“What’s wrong, Cas?”

Cas ignores it for the first couple minutes, not understanding where his thoughts are, not knowing how he could possibly answer.

I...I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing. Admitting it feels both a failure and a relief, his chest simultaneously heavier and lighter.

Dean nudges at his shoulder, trying to get a read on his expression, but Cas refuses to pull away from him. “We’re just working a case, Cas…” A thread of worry, that Cas knows to be self-consciousness, laces Dean’s thought.

I have felt broken since coming back from Heaven and I don’t know how to recover. I’m lost, Dean. He’s been trying for so long to deal with this himself, to not burden Dean with the worry of his own mental health.

Now Dean pulls Cas closer, his hands holding him firm; he brushes his lips against Cas’s hairline, his temple; he presses himself tightly against Cas until there’s no room for air. “You’re right here, Cas, you’re right here.” Dean takes a deep breath.

Cas feels so weak.

“You’re here with me, and you’re going to get better. That was one hell of a war up there, you’ve got to give yourself time after something like that. It’s hard on your body— your grace, your soul— it’s hard on everything, Cas. You don’t have to be at one hundred all the time; I don’t expect you to be.”

Cas bites his cheek at the words, digging his nails a little more into Dean’s back. I don’t know how to live with all of this guilt and pain and suffering. It never felt like this in the past. Losing never effected me in this way before… Before I didn’t want to be an angel.

And all of the sudden in slots into place for Cas. He can’t tell that to Dean yet because even if it feels right he needs to understand it better before he can even begin to explain it to Dean.

“I’m right here if you need me, you know that.” Dean sighs again, running a hand through Cas’s hair.

Thank you, Dean. He pulls away enough to press a kiss to the underside of Dean’s jaw, before burrowing himself back into the safety and warmth of Dean’s body.

If Cas doesn’t want to be an angel, there’s so much more to it than just becoming human.
After interviewing coworkers, neighbors, and family. Dean and Cas can’t seem to find anything connecting the victims.

The first victim was a teacher with an apple pie life. She loved her job and her family, the only bump in her life had been when she was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease, but everyone assured Dean that she even took that in stride. She prayed every day and apparently she was “finding solace from her disease in her relationship with the Lord.”

Another victim was some electrician that just got laid off his job for drug abuse. He lived with his daughter as he was supposedly going through AA and rehab, trying to get his life back together so that his wife would let him back in the house. He had never missed a meeting, determined to get better, so that’s when they knew something was wrong.

The latest victim was from New York City, was just here for a short time visiting, as she and her husband took care of his sick mother. She had gone out to get groceries and had never come back. Her husband assumed, at first, she had just gone to the store a couple towns over “to clear her head,” and didn’t think anything was wrong until she didn’t come home before nightfall.

“It doesn’t make sense, they all just up and disappeared one day?” Dean huffs, as they’re driving back from the station, after gathering the police files.

“I think it’s relatively the same area though, that they went missing in,” Cas comments.

“It could just be a serial killer then, you know? Some crazy bastard that just has it out for the people in this town.”

Cas thumbs through the first file. “Again, no real connection. Even serial killers show some preference for who they choose as victims: same background, same age, same watering hole,” he notes, using one of Dean’s trademark terms. He notices Dean’s small smile at that.

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There’s too much blood. It’s everywhere, on everything.

Cas can’t get a grip on Dean, his fingers slipping on the blood soaking them both.

He can barely hear the breathy grunts as Dean struggles to keep his body working as it continues to lose blood. Cas can’t panic, he can’t lose focus.

The rit zien’s vessel lays sprawled in a lump not ten feet from them, Cas’s angel blade still protruding from it’s chest; it’s no longer a threat.

He needs to staunch the bleeding, he needs to heal the cuts slashed deep into Dean’s body. He needs to fix this.

Finally his grace hones in on the source of the bleeding, and he presses his palms to his chest and stomach, pulsing his power through Dean’s veins. His hands continue to scan Dean’s body, but there’s just too many wounds. He’s going to bleed out, he’s already lost too much blood. Castiel can’t replenish his blood.

Then they’re suddenly in the vestibule of an ER, nurses and doctors hurrying past as they tend to other patients.

“I need help,” Cas breathes, still searching for wounds to heal. “I need help,” he repeats, louder this time, less shaky, as the doors to the vestibule slide open.
A nurse notices. She throws the files she was holding onto an empty wheelchair and yells for a gurney. “Sir, what happened?” she asks, kneeling next to Cas, her hands coming up next to his.

“He’s was...he was stabbed.” As sharp as Cas’s mind is, he can’t help but give into the fuzziness that is pressing in on his memory. The nurse pushes Cas’s hands out of the way so that she can assess the damage. “He needs a blood transfusion,” he states obviously.

He’s pushed further away when more professionals come to help. A group of ER doctors and nurses situate Dean’s body on a gurney.

Dean’s eyes are still closed, but even if they were open, Cas wouldn’t notice because his eyes are trained on the spot on Dean’s chest that is stuttering up and down as he continues to breathe.

The gurney passes through a door, and everyone’s in a smaller room as they begin assessing Dean more closely.

“I can’t find the source of all this blood!”

“We need more O neg— no, clamp first, Donnelson!”

“Stop moving him, Rucker!”

Cas looks at his hand, watches as the blood drips off and pools on the ground next to him.

“No, we shouldn’t need to intubate, he’s breathing on his own.”

“But what about surgery?”

“Just wait, maybe we can clamp and assess here, don’t get ahead of ourselves!”

The same woman who threw her files comes up next to Cas, looking him in the eye. “Can you tell us what happened, sir?”

Cas swallows thickly. It’s difficult. “He was— there was a fight, he was stabbed.”

“And the other guy?” she asks cautiously.

Cas looks at his bloodied hands again, understanding what she is asking. “He attacked us...he’s still in the...alley.” Cas has to remember to go back and get his angel blade and…

“Are you hurt, sir?” She’s eyeing the front of his clothes, soaked in Dean’s blood.

Cas looks at her. He’s going to fall to pieces any second now. “No, I wasn’t hurt…”

She goes on to ask a flurry of questions about Dean’s health and habits, making sure nothing interferes at they try to save him. Alison, she tells him, guides him to the waiting room. She pushes a clipboard into his hands and tells him to start filling out what information he can while they wait for an update. Then she leaves him, promising to come check in later when she has new information.

Cas slumps forward in the chair, burying his face in his hands. What do I do next?

After cursing the clock ten times for not making time move faster, Cas gathers enough focus and energy to go back to the rit zien.

The vessel lies there, dead. Cas knows he should feel some remorse for killing a brother, or at least for killing the vessel, but that’s all knocked aside by the rage that flares up inside of him.
He yanks the blade from their chest, then plunges it back in again and again. *I wasn’t quick enough*. His blade clatters to the floor as he pulls the vessel up by its shoulders, throwing it across the alley. *I should have known exactly what was happening here*. The body crumples in a heap, and Cas flings it up into the air, relishing in the sound of the bones cracking as it hits the asphalt. *I should have known it was another angel*. He approaches the body, intent on ripping its limbs off, but changes tactic when he sees the rit zien’s own blade glinting just feet away. *I should have stopped this— this should not have happened*. Forcefully, he grabs the skull between his heads, and despite knowing it will have no effect now, flares his grace. *I should have been stronger, quicker, better*. Not a moment later, he drops the head, as the body now slowly burns from the inside out.

He needs to leave now, the light from smiting would alert someone to his presence if all of the noise he was making did not. With shaking hands, Cas tucks his blade back into his pocket, and finds himself back in the almost empty waiting room.

The first thing Cas notices is that the clipboard is in the same place he left it. As if his entire world has shifted on axis and broken apart. He wants to yell, to release the pressure that’s still building up inside of him.

*How is Dean? Is Dean okay?*

He knows he should call Sam, but as he tries to take his phone out of his pocket, his hands are shaking too badly, and he ends up dropping it on the ground. Defeated, he doesn’t even move to pick it up, he starts pacing, unable to stay still while he waits.

The blood caking his clothes is becoming uncomfortable, the heavy dampness weighing him down in unfamiliar ways. He would erase it all, but it feels wrong to whisk away the evidence of Dean’s peril. Like he would be forgetting he was the reason Dean was here in the first place.

*Dammit. Where the fuck is that nurse?*

Just as Cas is about to approach the desk and demand answers, one of the doctors that worked on Dean turns the corner and walks straight for him.

“Alison said I should give you the news? I’m Doctor Halloway,” she introduces, taking in Cas’s stained apparel.

Cas nods, unable to speak.

“He’s going to be okay.”

Cas collapses in the chair, no longer able to hold himself up, hold himself together. “Dean,” he half sobs, hands still shaking.

“He lost a lot of blood, but we were able to get him the transfusion he needed,” she informs, then goes silent for a minute. “I’ve been working here twenty-three years and I thought I’d seen it all…but… By some miracle, we were unable to find the source of the bleeding, as if his body healed itself from the damage. All we needed to do before the transfusion was sew him up. A miracle…,” she whispers to herself more than to Cas.

Cas clenches his fist, determined to make his hands stop shaking. “When can I see him?”

“We’ve got him set up behind a curtain in the ER for the time being, I can take you to him now.”

“Thank you,” Cas offers eagerly.
Half way down the hall to the ER, Cas wills his cellphone back into his pocket.

The doctor finds him a chair to sit in, and brings him another clipboard of papers to fill out when he “gets a moment.”

For the next couple hours, he stares at Dean from the foot of the bed. His eyes glued to the point on his chest that proves he’s breathing. He’s alive, he’s okay.

They’re only interrupted once, for a nurse to check his charts and stats, to see that everything is progressing as it should be.

Just as Cas leans forward to start filling out the paperwork, Dean’s eyes open. Cas jumps, pushing himself out of the chair and coming to stand by Dean.

Dean takes in his surroundings and his current condition before speaking, “I guess we should have called Charlie a couple days ago, huh?”

Cas almost breaks down right there, the relief cutting through him like a knife. *Yes, Dean is okay.*

“I’ll call her as soon as we get out of here,” Cas reassures, his shaky voice betraying him.

Dean’s expression changes, analyzing now. “Hey, Cas...” He tries to sit up but Cas pushes a hand to his shoulder to keep him down. “I’m going to be fine, I always am,” he reassures, head back on the pillow.

Cas tries and fails to give a smile. “Dean, I should have—”

Dean starts before Cas can even really begin, “Don’t start that, Cas, okay. This—” he gestures to his body in the hospital bed—“is what I signed up for. I’m a hunter, this is what the job entails, nothing more than what I’m used to. I’ve had far worse from far eviler. Don’t you try and blame yourself for this. You can’t save me from everything, Cas, though god knows you try.” Cas works his jaw furiously, trying to figure out what to say. “Don’t say anything, Cas, okay? You don’t need to.” Dean reaches up to grasp Cas’s hand on his shoulder, looking down at it for a moment. “You didn’t fill out any of that paperwork yet, did you?”

Cas thinks about how Sam did not have a recording pertaining to this situation. He has no brotherly advice to turn to in this time of desperation. *It’s been so long since I’ve been unable to heal Dean. And now it’s different, since we’ve been together...I should have prevented this.*

Dean asks a couple more questions about the case, to make sure it’s finished, then tells Cas he’s going to catch a few more hours of sleep before they slip out, the exhaustion becoming too much. Cas nods, telling Dean he’ll have everything ready to go when they need to leave.

As soon as Dean’s breathing evens out, Cas walks out the ER doors; finding his way into an alley off the side of the ambulance bay. He paces for a few moments, trying to reel in the overwhelming emotions.

*I couldn’t save him. I didn’t know it was an angel... All the clues were there, we should have made the connection. We should have seen that each of the victims was obviously suffering, that the rit zien was taking out its frustration on the readily available population.*

He wants to scream; so he does. The sound bursting and bell-like as he swears in Enochian; any close windows shaking with the force of it.

Then he pounds his fists against the brick wall, the masonry shuddering under the force of it, his blood staining the wall. His anger is too great for the limitations of the vessel; he can’t shake the
ground with his fury, he can’t set fire fire to the earth in his despair. He has to settle for the force his vessel can handle.

Deep breaths. Cas forces the air in and out of his lungs at an average rate. He needs to be calm for when he and Dean make their getaway.

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Dean’s laying across the back seats of the Impala as Cas drives them back to the bunker. Cas decides to listen to another one of Sam’s recordings, hoping maybe they hold the answer to the questions he doesn’t know how to ask.

RECORDING TWENTY-SIX

Heya, Cas.

So today is November second. Dean and I are stuck in Iowa working this case that we thought would just be a quick salt and burn. We’ve been here four days longer than we’d guessed, still trying to figure out what we’re dealing with. You keep offering to come up and help, but Dean doesn’t want you to… Well, because you know what day it is. He keeps saying you’ve got to help research for some case Jody is working in Montana though. So we’ve been here a lot longer than expected...long enough for Dean to find the liquor store and pass out for the second night in a row. Some years, he’s okay with Mom’s death, you know, accepted the fact that it happened, doesn’t try to dwell on it or soak in his own tears. Other years he falls apart, like this year, and can’t get the drinks down fast enough. I think, actively being on a case this year didn’t help, was a little too close to home— especially since we might have found some evidence that points to a demon being involved.

He made a complete ass of himself trying to play pool tonight— lost all five games he attempted. He was completely smashed. I thought maybe he’d just stay in the room, like he did last night, when he just turned on the stupid infomercial channel and drank most of the way through that Maker’s Mark.

Hopefully tomorrow will be better, usually the day after isn’t all that bad. He never wants to talk about it, especially if it’s been an especially bad day, so he usually just bottles it up and locks it away to forget about.

I just want to get back to the bunker, wash all the shit away from this case and from the anniversary.

I just...next year I might not be able to be with Dean when the date rolls around, and I just wanted to make sure you knew what to expect, although with Dean, there aren’t really any patterns.

Cas realizes how close November second is— less than a month. He is not sure what he is supposed to do with this information. After all of the shit that this case caused, he’s unsure of how Dean will react to the anniversary of his mother’s death. Unsure if this case has affected him as much as it’s affected Cas.

It’s been pretty quiet between them, even considering how much of that time Dean has spent in and out of consciousness. Every time Cas went to open his mouth in the motel room, an apology was ready to spring forth; Dean didn’t want to hear it, so he would press his mouth the Cas’s. Neither one of them really knew what was the right thing to say in this situation.

By the time Cas pulls up to the bunker’s carport, he has one recording left. Both excitement and anxiety pool in his stomach as he thinks of Sam’s insight, advice, and comfort coming to an end.

“Dean, we’re home,” Cas tells him, opening the back door. Dean rubs his hands over his face as he
wakes up. “C’mon, let’s get you some food in you and a memory foam mattress under you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m comin’,” he almost slurs, pushing himself into a sitting position. Cas reaches out a hand, ready to help Dean out of the car. “I can do this, Cas,” he says gently, “I’m not incapacitated yet.”

Cas purses his lips, not sure how to deal with all of the emotions he’s feeling.

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Cas’s thumb hovers over the last recording; but he’s unsure why he’s hesitating. The discomfort he felt earlier that day at the thought of finishing Sam’s recordings presses against his ribs. The realization of desiring humanity to the point of permanently discarding his grace also weighs on him. Dean’s own mortality and the risks of their jobs is overwhelming, catches his breath sometimes. Everything feels solid, an actual physical weight that’s holding him down.

He needs to remember what it’s like to feel unwavering hope, as he once did, years ago when he first stepped onto Earth. He had no other choice, he had to believe Heaven and the other angels would win in the battle against Lucifer.

How long had it been since the world fell like it was falling apart? Sam left because, for the first time in years, there wasn’t an apocalypse of some sort looming over their heads. There is no rational reason that Cas should feel the fear her feels, not with such a quiet world ahead of them. How human he feels right now.

He finally clicks on the last recording. 

RECORDING THIRTY-EIGHT

Alright, Cas, how’s it going? I hope everything is good right now, I hope that the world isn’t in any imminent doom. I hope you take time to breathe. I hope that life is treating you well. I hope that you’re taking time to enjoy yourself, find yourself, find your place.

I know for so long you felt like you couldn’t come to Dean and I, I know you thought we wouldn’t understand or support your decisions. I know you thought we weren’t reliable. I don’t want to turn this into another apology, I know the mistakes we’ve made, I don’t want to always be punishing myself for them. I just want to make sure you know that that’s no longer the case, Cas. You are family, not by blood, not something so chance; but more importantly we’ve chosen you to be a part of our ramshackle family. You’re just as important to me as Charlie, Jody, Bobby, or Dean.

And as much as he’ll deny it, because, seriously, even after years of expanding the emotions he allows himself to feel, Dean still doesn’t know how to express seventy percent of what he feels. He didn’t know what to do with his emotions when he found out your “profound bond” went deeper than friendship. I doubt he knows now. But I know he doesn’t want it to go away, I know he wants you around for the rest of his life, in whatever capacity that may be.

Don’t let him push you away, Cas, don’t let himself do that to either of you. You two are not bad people, you two deserve happiness, you two deserve each other.

I know it gets hard, trust me, I know. God, how many failed relationships have I been a part of? But, seriously, despite Dean and I’s lack of stable relationships to look at as examples on how to navigate a healthy one, I’m one hundred percent positive, that together, the two of you can make it through anything.
He doesn’t talk to me about Purgatory, and I’m sure part of it has to do with how you two interacted there, the rawness of that forest led to some unexpected shit. From what I’ve gathered, what little I’ve pieced together from what you’ve told me, Purgatory was a defining moment in both your lives. And even though that was an awful year for you guys, sometimes that push is necessary. Everything needs a spark in order to be ignited.

I’m happy for you two, is all. I really am. I honestly didn’t think Dean would be able to be in a long lasting relationship, especially after Lisa and Ben. But, Cas, you were his missing piece. Sorry he’s so dense it took him half a decade to finally act on it.

Don’t be a stranger, call me up whenever, I’m always willing to be another ear to listen to whatever: case details or anything embarrassing Dean has done.

Good luck, Cas, love you.

Chapter End Notes

It's past 4AM, but I grabbed a beer and decided I would finish this chapter this morning. So voila!

Fun fact: my friend Erin (my beta) and I bought tickets to go to PittCon this summer!! I might be mildly (read: utterly) freaking out over the idea that I get to meet the actors!
The catalyst of change in Dean’s life is a day as normal as any other.

It starts early, around six o’clock the hunter wakes up and kisses an already wide-eyed Cas next to him. Their mouths almost lazy against one another’s as their fingers trail over sleep-warm skin. Seven o’clock rolls around, the sun just starting to stream through the tiny window in the motel bathroom, drawing a streak that finally reaches across the foot of their bed; they decide it’s time to get up and leave.

The cars coming to life outside signal that everyone else’s day is starting too.

Dean takes a moment to watch the shadow of Cas’s wings sweep across the bed as he hauls himself into a sitting position. Cas looks over his shoulder back at him, a raised eyebrow asking What? He smiles in reply, eyes flitting back to the glint of strong feathers before they disappear in the light of the shitty fluorescent when Cas turns it on.

By seven-thirty they are on the road, only two hundred miles separating them from the bunker. The hole they trapped the rougarou in is probably still warm with leftover ashes. The dashboard clock reads eleven-twenty when Dean parks the Impala in the carport. Just after noon, and both men are sitting in the library, lunch sits between them, waiting to be finished.

It almost feels like a normal day, normal by other humans’ standards even.

“Young, I want to remove my grace,” Cas says, as casually as possible, while both their heads are bowed over books.

Dean stares at the page in the book he is reading, it now looks like gibberish. He can’t read it anymore. He can’t think. He’s almost certain he did not hear Cas correctly. There’s no possible way that would come out of his mouth. It doesn’t make any sense at all.

“Young?” The hunter flips the page in the book, trying to hold onto reality. “I want to remove my grace.” Another page, and another, and another… He keeps flipping pages, as if he’ll find the answer to Cas’s obvious joke at the end of the book.
Cas snaps his laptop shut. “Dean.”

“What?” he mutters, hoping the end of the book comes soon.

“I want to remove my grace.”

Dean finally looks up at this; he didn’t find the answer at the end, only a blank page, with a yellowing water stain. “But…? Please let there be an ‘but.’”

“That’s it.” Cas stares directly in his eyes, and for the first time in months Dean has to look away because he’s scared. “I don’t know when exactly, but I don’t want to wait forever.”

Dean all but glares at the coffee cup in front of Cas, still too scared to look up. “You can’t though, it might kill you.”

The fact that Cas hesitates in answering leads Dean to believe this might be the only point he has to make so Cas doesn’t go through with this dumbass plan.

“I have been speaking to Hamon about certain spells... He owes me a favor, so he’s willing to help.”

Suddenly it occurs to Dean that Cas hasn’t even said why he wants to remove his grace. He can’t have a real—a good—reason. “Why the hell do you want to do this now? You’ve been human before—you know what it’s like—”

“I no longer wish to be connected to Heaven,” Cas interrupts, his voice strong and soft. Dean knows there’s more to it, but the hard line of Cas’s mouth tells him that the angel won’t say anything more.

“And did you forget everything else you would lose if you became human?” All of your powers, your strength, your endurance, your immortality. Your safety, security.

“None of that matters to me, I no longer want for any of it.”

“You don’t want any of it….” Dean says slowly. “You don’t want to have any more powers?” Incredulous.

“After being an angel and having spent time as a human, I know I’m capable of living without a grace.”

This has to stop now. Dean can’t remember the last time his nerves felt as raw as right now. “Cas, how long did we fucking look for your grace? This shit all of us went through to get that back! And now you’ve had it just over a year and you want to rip it out again?” He cannot go through with this. “After everything, you want to just throw it aside?”

Dean can’t help the anger that seeps from his lips, even if it is misused. All of his vulnerability comes to the surface, and he fights it how his instincts tell him to: wall yourself in, protect yourself. He’s scared more than anything else right now, but he can’t admit that. The thought of losing Cas doesn’t just sting, it destroys. He feels himself caving in. It’s selfish, but Dean can’t live without the comfort of knowing Cas is safer with his grace.

Dean watches as Cas pushes away from the table and leaves the room with tight lips. “So that’s it?!” Dean yells at the doorway, fuming. He glares at Cas’s coffee cup again, like it will apologize to him.

Dean’s almost positive this is just a phase for Cas, who is still reeling from the battle with Metatron that was only a few months ago. The angel still has not forgiven himself for Hannah’s death, thinking somehow he could have saved her. He has woken more than once to find Castiel leaning
over his journal or his face too close to the laptop screen as he tries to forget the pain by throwing himself into their work. It would take fifteen minutes of talking before Cas would concede to laying back down with him.

A stray thought comes from the back of his mind. Some mornings Dean would wake up, Cas already out of bed, and find him whispering into his phone in the kitchen or between the book shelves in the library. He always assumed it was Sam on the other line, Cas trying to spare his feelings by not bringing up his brother more than necessary. It must have been Hamon.

Not knowing why exactly, but mostly anger-fueled, Dean stands and follows Cas to the kitchen. The other man is standing next to the stove, staring at the pot from lunch that hasn’t yet been washed.

“You can’t work in the field anymore then.” Dean knows it’s a low blow but it’s the only argument he can think of at this point. His brain is shutting down, quick; panic setting in. It’s fight or flight time, and his body’s forgetting everything but how to argue with Cas. **Act fierce, act terrifying, act bigger and bolder than whatever you’re fighting, and it will yield quicker than you think**. One of John Winchester’s many sayings whips through Dean’s mind.

“You can’t tell me not to work cases, Dean. I’m not your subordinate.” Cas grips the counter’s edge, his fingers turning white. “Here we go again, you seem to have forgotten I’m a **soldier**!” The last word is forceful, cutting through the air so quickly Dean actually takes a step back.

Dean squares his shoulders, he finds his footing again. **This isn’t about you being a soldier. “OF GOD!” You’ve fought how many wars in Heaven? But hardly any down here! Down here, Cas, in the fucking **real world**, they’re dirtier, they’re messier, there is more at stake! You can’t do the same shit anymore, Cas!”** You won’t be able to ‘pop’ out when shit hits the fan, you won’t be able to will your blade into your hand to instantly defend yourself, you won’t be able to feel someone coming up behind you anymore, you won’t be able to fly, you won’t be able to smite, you won’t be able to heal yourself anymore. **Dean slams his fist down on the counter out of frustration.**

“I can handle myself, you damn well know I know how to survive as a human.”

“You never hunted as a human though!” This isn’t entirely true, but enough so that it’s at least a semi-valid point. “You worked at a godforsaken gas station and slept on the floor!” Dean utterly despises himself for bringing it up, for dragging those memories out of the box the both of them so carefully (non-verbally) agreed to keep tucked away. “You didn’t spend your down time learning to shoot a sawn-off or how to set traps or how to track, Cas. You only know how to hunt as an angel!” The last year is plain evidence that Cas knows how to hunt as a regular hunter, but that sure as hell doesn’t mean Dean will accept it as an answer to Cas wanting humanity over angelic abilities.

Even as the anger seeps out of Cas, his eyes wide with infuriation, Dean realizes...it’s okay... **It’s okay**. He’ll convince Cas to keep his grace, he will. It only makes sense for Cas to stay an angel.

He can’t have a rational desire to be human. No one would willingly choose the life that Dean lives.

“I already told you, Dean,” Cas spits, “I know how to survive as—”

“But I don’t know how to survive without—” slips from his mouth before he stops himself. He kicks a cabinet out of frustration. **I don’t know how to survive without you.**

Cas looks at Dean like he’s a stranger, mouth still a hard line, but his posture changing. Dean meets Cas’s eye for the first time since the conversation started. “Dean.” It sounds like a question; Dean doesn’t have any answers.
He looks down at his hands still flat on the counter, a slight sting still resonating from the earlier slap. Ash embedded under his nails from the fire they set for their last case; the creases of his knuckles permanently stained with motor grease; rough callouses catching on the surface; and he knows they’d be riddled with scars if not for Cas. Cas’s hands don’t look anything like Dean’s, they should never have to. Being human is nothing but dirty and dangerous.

First Sam leaves, then Cas goes off to war, and now he wants to be fucking human. I don’t know how much more I can take. He laughs at himself, the sound shallow in the tense kitchen.

“What?” Cas bites, frustrated and confused. His eyes lose the softness that flashed briefly when he said Dean’s name.

Dean still won’t look back at him. “You already left me how many times? What’s one more time?” Dean knows he’s entirely unfair in saying so, maybe even outright wrong, but he’s too scared to care right now. He’ll apologize later when Cas decides to keep his grace.

The pot crashes into the wall as Cas throws it across the room, hollow echoes ringing as it falls to the ground. Dean can’t remember the last time he’s seen Cas—there’s just no other word for it—livid.

“I always think of you first, Dean, it is my greatest fault,” he growls. Dean’s chest starts to hurt, Cas’s words reverberating off of his ribs like an anvil. “And this is my repayment. I am slandered for making my own decisions. *Heaven forbid* I want to do something for myself— and fuck’s sake—this is for you too!”

Dean steps back, pressing himself to the counter. He hasn’t been this scared of Cas since that time in the gym, well over a year ago.

Whatever it takes so Cas stays an angel.

“Is this about my powers, Dean?” he assumes, voice gritty, forced out between his clenched jaw. “Because I assure you that I’m not helpless without them— I will still have my blade— I will still be able to call upon my brethren for help. I’m sorry you won’t be able to have your own angel at beck and call anymore,” he seethes, sarcasm layered so thickly between the words.

Dean really does not know how to respond.

A tense couple minutes follows before Cas huffs in frustration. He picks up the pot he threw and puts it on the counter before walking down the hall.

Two hours later, once Dean has scrubbed down the entire kitchen while trying to level out, he decides maybe it’s safe to go find Cas.

He doesn’t know what he’s going to say. He knows an apology should be one of the first things… This whole thing is such a fucking mess; their lives are such fucking catastrophes. If Dean was never a hunter, he wouldn’t have to worry about Cas’s life in tangent to their line of work. If Dean was never a hunter, he would have never met Cas.

Pushing open the door to Cas’s rarely used room, intending to find the angel still angry as he researches the case, Dean is greeted only with silence. A single piece of the stationary he bought Cas for Christmas perches on the untouched bed.

*I need time to figure this out, Dean, and so do you. So call me when you’re ready to talk.*
“You’re just going to fucking leave?” Dean yells into the air, half hoping Cas can hear him.

Then the panic sets in. Dean freezes on the spot, his chest concaving. Cas left again. He promised Dean he’d stay and Dean fucking pushed him away again. He couldn’t fucking talk to Cas and instead ended up bluntly throwing all of his anger at him. Dean fucked this again. He pushed Cas to his boiling point— his leaving point. How much of an asshole is he that he does that?

He does this to everyone he’s ever know. He pushes and pushes and pushes until they’re gone and there’s no resisting force because they left him.

His nails bite into his own palm as the note crumples in his hand, bringing him back to the present. He needs to slow down his breathing.

I fucked this— I am fucked— how the fuck do I fix this?

Cas cannot be this stupid. He has to know that his grace is necessary for his survival; with how dangerous our lives are, being an angel is safer. How many times has he fucking died or almost died as an angel? He would be dead if not for the protection of his grace.

The panic reaches its tipping point and Dean can feel himself getting lightheaded.

He collapses on the bed; it smells like Cas, like damp air and the night sky. But it only makes him think of loneliness, without Cas there to stave off his oncoming depression. He curls up on his side, grasping at the comforter as it will hold him together. He can’t fucking fall apart because of this. It’s not like Cas is gone for good, he said he’d come back.

But he left in the first place, didn’t he?

He’s just pissed off at me. Once I apologize…

Cas doesn’t want your apologies. He wants to be human and you can’t fucking stop him. Deal with it.

It won’t be safe for him, he has to know that—

You’re going to lose him, like you’ve lost everyone else in your life. They either die—or worse, they leave you to your worthless self.

Cas isn’t gone.

Isn’t he though? He’s not here now. He got angry and left. What’s to stop him from leaving for good? What if the next argument is more than he wants to deal with? He doesn’t have to stay with you, Winchester. Cas doesn’t owe you a damned thing. And he sure as hell shouldn’t stay with you if you’re going to be this downright pathetic. You’re not worth the trouble, and eventually he’ll see that.

Not sure how much time has passed, Dean sits back up when he starts to fall asleep. Not in here, not tonight. He’s not that pathetic.

Dean tries to continue researching the case, but Cas’s plate from lunch sits on the table distracting him. After thirty minutes, no longer able to focus at all, he heads to shower.

He scratches at his jaw, over two week’s worth of stubble taken up home there. He can’t meet his own eyes right now, but if that bags under them are any sort of indicator, he’s dead. How did it get
to this point? His hair's a fucking mess, he can barely hold himself together, and his body—not to mention the entirety of his being—is weak.

Dean clenches the sides of the porcelain sink until his knuckles are just as white. *I've fucking let myself go. I've been so damn careless, careless with everything in my life. Nothing stays good once I touch it.*

He steps in the shower, the water too hot, but he lets it pelt at his shoulders anyways. It’s a good distraction, the burn. It takes his focus off of his faults, off Cas’s absence, off of the emptiness filling the bunker.

He grits his teeth against the burn, squeezing his eyes shut. *Fucking stop it, Winchester. Man up, tears aren’t going to help you now. Pull yourself together.*

Dean’s knees hit the tile hard. He holds his breath against the renewed panic swelling in his chest, not allowing it to escape. He’s stronger than this. He can’t fall apart because of this, nothing has even happened yet. He’s freaking out at the mere mention of Cas giving up his grace; over Cas disappearing in his anger. What will it be like if it actually happens? His knuckles sting from hitting the wall so many times, over and over, only stopping just as the blood starts to spill.

*You’re stronger than this, you’re stronger than this*. Repeating it doesn’t seem to make it any truer.

He chokes on the water filling his mouth from this angle, hunched over himself.

*I can’t fucking lose Cas, I can’t fucking lose him. I can’t let anything happen to him.* The concern for Cas overshadows even the loudest voice of self-loathing inside his head.

He remembers back to when Zachariah threw him into that Croatoan future. When he saw the results of Cas losing his grace for good and what he had become. Cas had lost every ounce of self-preservation, he was only making it day to day because that Dean wouldn’t let him go, wouldn’t let him succumb. Cas was tweaked out on more drugs than Dean could probably guess, indulging in all the self-destructive behaviors than even Dean had never brought himself to do. That Cas had lost the storm in his eyes that kept Dean grounded these days.

*Fucking selfish, Winchester. Can’t fucking hold yourself together at the thought of Cas changing.*

Dean finds the strength to stand, his legs shaking. He doesn’t bother finishing his shower before turning it off. He wraps himself in his robe, wraps his knuckles in a towel, grabs a bottle of whiskey from the fridge, and falls onto the couch.

The History channel is showing a documentary on the black plague. *Cas fucking loves these dumb documentaries, no matter how much he criticizes them,* Dean bitterly thinks, taking a longer swig than he normally would.

A quarter of the way through the four part series on the plague, and the bottle half empty on the couch next to Dean, he thinks about finding his phone to call Cas.

*Needy, selfish…*

Instead, he ends up staring at the television thinking about Cas. About the way he rubs their jaws together, their stubble catching; or how he’s run his fingers through his hair more often lately; and the time he spends kissing down his chest and torso, his lower stomach peppered with bruises the shape of Cas’s mouth.
Fuck. Dean buries his face in his hands as the television references plague doctor masks. *Fuck.*

*I haven’t let myself go...I’ve gotten comfortable... For the first time in over thirty years I’m home because of Cas. Cas is home.*

If Dean was being honest with himself, which seems a more common occurrence these days, he’s known how he’s felt about Cas since Purgatory. Probably longer. But Purgatory really solidified it; like Cas said, he’d huddle up to him every night because Cas was safety far beyond anything Dean had ever known. They were more dangerous together, as a human and angel, Benny reminded them often but Dean didn’t care. He didn’t want to face those monsters with anyone else.

Cas was his salvation then, and still is now. He keeps Dean together and moving forward without Dean even realizing it. Cas will keep his hand on Dean’s thigh while he drives, calming the nerves he still sometimes gets heading out to a particularly strange case. He will listen to Dean’s rants about “no good bastards” when they figure out the monster’s motive, his patience far exceeding Dean’s. He’ll help Dean cook whenever he asks, their syncrosity in the kitchen surprising Dean until he remembers how well they fight together, both when cornering a monster and arguing with each other.

The two of them are so impassioned when they fight, so sure there is no possible way they could be in the wrong. Cas will hide his fury at first (trying to remain level headed), while Dean lets it spill all over the room, coating the floor and walls until it soaks into Cas too. Then Cas retaliates, his anger well timed to coincide just as Dean’s wanes. It’s a push and pull that continues, leaves them frustrated with each other, until they’re both too tired to continue. They go to bed angry, heads on their own pillows, but then Dean wakes in the morning feeling Cas curled around his back, his phone’s light shining behind Dean’s head as he reads the news. He loves those mornings just as much as every other morning.

He opens the bottle again, not taking too long a pull though.

*Cas is home,* repeats Dean, still too much of a coward to think three other words.

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Sam calls him as he’s heading to bed. Whispering into the phone, he confirms where Cas is, “What the fuck did you do to make Cas show up on my door shit-faced and pass out before even crossing the threshold?” He’s not whispering by the end, clearly angry.

Dean rubs a hand across his face, groaning. “Just make sure he doesn’t choke on his own vomit, Sam.”

He is certain he can hear his brother’s bitchface even through the phone. “Don’t avoid my question, Dean— *what the hell happened*?”

Dean wants to chuck his phone across the room; to have control over something as simple as talking or not would be nice. “Just a fucking fight, Sam. Shit happens.”

“Yes, well, I would expect you two to be able to handle it without one of you traveling hundreds of miles to crash on my couch.”

Dean’s not sure why he says it but, “Go big or go home, huh, Sam?”

He definitely hears the bitchface this time. “Fucking make this right, Dean.” A beat of silence. “And sober the hell up.” The line clicks and Dean is left alone again.
Cas is absent from the bunker for four days before Dean completely crumbles and prays to him to return. He only agrees to stay if they talk about his grace. Dean concedes but gives no definite timeline besides “eventually.”

Dean’s immediate reaction when Cas walks through the door is wrap him in a hug. He can feel how stiff Cas is, his frustrations still so close to the surface. But he won’t let go, can’t let go, terrified Cas is going to leave again.

He reassures, “I’m not going to leave, Dean, not again.” Cas seems to sense the desperation and fear Dean’s been trying to hold at bay. Cas softens a little bit.

Dean swipes at his eyes.

They go on with the rest of their day, silence thick between them, waiting for the moment to break it and start one hell of a conversation.

“That’s the longest we’ve been apart since...yeah,” Dean mutters that night, knowing Cas will understand. He’s not sure why he says it, he never thought he’d be the guy to count the days he was away from his— away from Cas.

Cas’s nods tightly as he sits across from Dean at the table in the library.

Returned to the scene of the crime.

Dean reaches both hands across wood surface, palms up in a now familiar gesture. They don’t do this often; the last time Cas projected their thoughts was the night before they caught the rit zien, several months ago now. The angel stares down at the once-white bandages covering Dean’s hands. After a long moment, (where Dean is scared he isn’t going to) Cas grabs his wrists, Dean’s fingers curling in return. They both take a deep breath.

Tonight, Dean is going to be honest even if it kills him. Even if he won’t be able to convince Cas to stay an angel, he can at least admit to Cas why he doesn’t want him to be mortal. Who knows, that might be enough of a reason for Cas to not want to change. He can’t go another four days without knowing where Cas is, if he’s okay, if he’s safe. And if that means talking with Cas about what he actually thinks, then so be it. This argument is no longer about making Cas stay an angel, it’s about making sure Cas stays safe.

I don’t want you to do this. Cas’s hands twitch but they don’t pull away. I don’t want you to be human, it’s too gruesome… Cas’s fingers flex and Dean thinks he should clarify. Not for you, but for me. It’s taken him well over a year to reach this point, and four days of battling with himself to finally admit it. Being human would mean you’re just as vulnerable as the rest of us poor bastards, and I can’t deal with that Cas. I can’t bear thinking about you not being able to heal yourself or ‘zap’ out when things go south. I can’t think about...about losing you too. Cas’s fingers wrap more securely around his wrists.

In reality, Dean knows that Cas being an angel isn’t a guarantee that he won’t die, but, dammit, if it isn’t the best insurance possible for Cas, he doesn’t know what else would be.

His face softens incrementally. Cas thinks over what Dean said, taking his time to formulate a response, his thumbs soothing over Dean’s skin. “Dean, I live with that fear every day, you have to know that. It never goes away, unfortunately, but it will get easier with time. Yes, humanity is lethal,
but it’s also breath-taking. I know the risks, and I know that things might change, but if it means I
get to be a part of this world fully again, not just some poor facsimile of a human...then I’m willing
to put everything on the line for it. It’s what I truly want in this life.”

Dean wants to roll his eyes. It’s not that simple, Cas. It’s going to change everything. You know
how our lives go, we don’t get anything simple.

“Why does it have to change? We’ll still be able to hunt, we’ll still be able to be together.” The
honesty in Cas’s statement: we’ll still be able to be together, punches Dean in the gut. In the best
way possible, like it’s pushing everything back into place, the way it’s meant to be. Cas still wants
to be with me, after everything.

Dean grabs Cas’s wrists tighter, willing himself not to pull away. He can’t, not right now, he needs
to say everything first.

All he’s been able to think about these past days, with Cas gone, is how to make their life safer for
Cas. What the fuck could he possible do to make hunting safer? The whole concept of hunting
revolves around its inherent danger. No one, no matter how good a hunter, knows exactly how a
hunt will end. The possibilities are endless when it comes to cases; Dean has been sidelined by a
thirteen year old girl, he’s mind-melded with a dog, his life was turned into a television show, he’s
had to babysit a shapeshifter. Not knowing what to expect from a case, at one point, was thrilling;
now with the thought of Cas’s mortality in mind, it’s terrifying.

Why couldn’t Cas actually be a tax accountant?

It will change. Cas— Cas... Just fucking say it, you asshole. Cas’s lip twitches. Just fucking do it... Cas, I can’t— we can’t hunt after you give up your grace. Dean’s eyes burn. His nails bite into
Cas’s forearms but the angel doesn’t flinch. I can’t— no, I won’t be able to hunt Afterwards, not
with you. It’s like Dad. Eventually he got to the point where he couldn’t hunt with us because we
were distracting him as he worried about our safety. I won’t be a good enough hunter anymore.
Dean realizes how that sounds and hurries to correct himself. But that’s not why— I don’t want you
getting hurt, I don’t want to put you in any more danger, Cas. I need to keep you safe.

They’ve had this argument plenty of times before. Each concerned more about the other’s safety
than their own, each more willing to fight if it means the other doesn’t have to. Cases where there’s
a monster with a vendetta against angels, where Dean has to threaten Cas with a ring of holy fire
before going out on his own to gank the bastard. Or a particularly evil demon, who lets slip he was
in Alistair’s inner circle, and Cas has to hold Dean back from recklessly attacking. Every case seems
to be another tick on their list, eventually adding up to the point where even Dean can’t ignore how
much they mean to each other.

Dean wants to give him time to think, so he pulls back, but before he can let go, Cas pulls his hands
closer. “Has this entire argument stemmed from the idea that you must keep me safe?”

I gotta protect you, Cas, I can’t let anything happen to you. I don’t know what I’d do. Dean is truly
shocked at himself for being able to say something so vulnerably honest to Cas. But after only being
able to think about Cas’s safety since the beginning of this situation, it really shouldn’t be a surprise.

“Dean, I—”

No, Cas, please, you gotta understand— I can’t fucking lose you to some damned monster because I
wasn’t quick enough to save you. And I know— I know that’s a stupid way to think about but I can’t
help it. I know you can defend yourself, but if something happens to you, Cas— especially
something I could have prevented— then I will never be able to forgive myself. Fear has taken up
permanent residence in Dean’s chest, settling in nicely amongst his ribs, stretching out until it quakes through his fingers.

It’s quiet for a long time after that; both men thinking, churning over thoughts in their own minds. Eventually, Dean starts to get twitchy, unsure now. He begins to rethink everything he’s said, wonder if this was even the right approach to this conversation. He has to keep Cas safe, that has to be justification enough, right? Cas can take care of himself, he knows that, but anything could happen and he can’t chance that. He just can’t.

The grip on Cas’s arms has gotten so tight his knuckles are white, fingers still shaking.

Cas’s thumbs stroke along Dean’s forearms, sensing the tremors. “Would you be open to the idea of us becoming a base for other hunters then?”

Dean’s body tenses. You mean...you mean like Bobby used to be? Or the Roadhouse?

Cas nods.

It would be so much safer. It would mean less hunts, the more hunters that know about them. It wouldn’t be that hard to get the signal out, they already know so many people in the business. With all of the lore and research and information so readily available in the bunker, it’s actually a crime that they aren’t sharing it with the rest of the hunting world. It would be about damn time that there was an actual network started too; Cas would fucking love being in charge of the whole strategy of running the thing.

Dean lets out the breath he didn’t realize he was holding. “Yeah, Cas, we can talk about starting that.”

The angel’s eyes break from Dean’s as he glances down at the table. “To be completely honest, I’ve been thinking about it for a while now…”

Dean wants to smile, it tugs on his lips, but he doesn’t. “I figured...I know you’re not a spur of the moment kind of guy. You’ve always got a reason.” He holds to Cas a little gentler now.

Cas looks up, almost-surprise coloring his face. He coughs into his shoulder. “I know I do, Dean.” He takes a deep breath then, lets it out slowly. “There is still more we need to discuss about the entirety of my becoming mortal, not just the change in our job titles.” Cas turns Dean’s hands over, rubbing his thumbs over the back of them.

“Cas, don’t ruin the moment,” Dean softly chastises, his eyes dancing.

Cas sighs, but he tilts his head and smiles at Dean anyways.

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That evening they go out to dinner, stopping in the small diner across the street from the post office. They have cherry pie tonight, so Dean splits his piece with Cas, letting him eat most of the ice cream. As they kiss outside the restaurant, shrouded in shadow, Dean leaning against the Impala door, he tastes the tartness that lingers behind in Cas’s mouth. He’s grateful to have the chance at this not-so-normal-but-still-normal-anyways moment.

Despite the anger that the two harbored for each other during their argument, neither could deny the physical desires that weren’t being fulfilled in that same time. Even if all Dean will get when they go back to the bunker is a kiss goodnight as Cas lays beside him, god, that’s what he wants the most anyways.
As they lay in bed later (after Dean comes twice from Cas’s mouth alone and repays him with fervent hands and fingers), Dean finally allows Cas the opportunity to explain.

“No interruptions, I promise.” He holds his hand up in a Scout’s Honor, pointedly eyeing the two feet of space between their bodies.

Cas turns on his stomach, and Dean can feel the shadow of Cas’s wing draping over him, a now familiar feeling, as the buzz of energy presses on him, keeping him close and safe.

*I’m going to fucking miss these wings.* He wants so badly to hold them, push his fingers between the feathers, feel the hot-cold of the grace on his skin. But he can’t, not right now, at least. *Focus, listen to Cas.*

Cas sighs, propping his head on his folded forearms. He taps his fingers, trying to find the right words. Dean stares at the crease forming between his eyebrows, watches as his expression switches between definitive and confused.

“I’ve been thinking about removing my grace since the angels called upon me to help fight Metatron,” Cas starts. “Not because I wanted no powers as an excuse to not help them, but because for the first time I did not feel the ever-binding duty to help Heaven. Since my beginning, my one purpose was to act as a function for Heaven, to follow out orders from those above me, and eventually to direct those below me. I was to aid Heaven in any and all ways, such as was the purpose of all angels. Even those who have betrayed, only do so because their grace has been damaged to the point that they truly believe they are helping Heaven.

“But when I was called upon, the overwhelming desire did not compel me as it once had. I had the *choice* to help, my grace was not being resolutely directed by Heaven anymore… God gave humans the ability to choose, he did not do the same for us angels. But for whatever reason, and many of us have theories as to why, my grace’s function has become less purposeful to Heaven. Some think it is because of the time I have spent as a human, when I was given the power of choice and free will, and that somehow has “infected” my grace. Of course, there are surely ways to reverse it, if I wished. But that’s not what I want.

“I want to be fully human again. Because no matter how contorted my grace is, it is still a grace. I will always have a connection to Heaven that I feel I no longer deserve because I no longer want it. Heaven is no longer a defining aspect of who I am as a being.”

Dean doesn’t know how to tell Cas he’s too good for anything Earth has to offer. Cas comes from a place so undiluted, the world down here will only tarnish him. He is so pure, still able to see the positive in every situation, still hopeful when there is no light on the horizon. The entirety of Heaven, Earth, Hell, and everything in between have been on the verge of collapsing ever since Dean broke that first seal. But Cas has never given up, even if he said he has, because Cas doesn’t know how to not hope. *The human world will only take that light out of him.*

“I was entrusted to watch the human race for millenias; I know without a shadow of a doubt I would not hesitate to spend the rest of my remaining days on Earth.”

Dean hears the deeper confession between those words. *I would spend the rest of my life with you.* He is grateful Cas doesn’t say them aloud because he doesn’t know how he would respond. Of course he feels the same towards Cas, figured it out for himself when Cas said he had to go fight in the battles. He can only let those words pass through his mouth so many times without them leading to his own destruction though.

Every time he tells Cas he cares or doesn’t know how to live without him, the words spark both fear
and need inside of him. Sometimes he feels every utterance of devotion to Cas only makes it more destructive if something were to happen to Cas. Other times, Dean can actually see a life full of happiness with Cas every time he speaks his adoration.

“And now Hamon has agreed to help me. There’s a spell, not much unlike a ceremony, that would allow for my grace to completely detach from my soul with little ill effect. Because even when I was human before, my soul still yearned for what my grace had to give, it knew it was missing something. With this spell, it would no longer feel the connection. Hamon said he would alert me when he has everything he needs for this spell, and that I can decide to complete it when I am ready.”

Dean’s hands twitch where they lay on his stomach. There’s too many questions running rabid in his mind to talk.

Cas touches his shoulder. “The ceremony will be safe, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Dean shakes his head, looking just over Cas’s head. “And I don’t have to go through with this until I’m ready.”

Something is stopping Dean from looking Cas in the eye. “When?” he croaks, his voice softer than he thought it would be.

Cas runs his fingers over the handprint etched on Dean’s skin, sending a shiver through him. “Well.” There’s something teasing in Cas’s voice. “I’d like to do it before people start mistaking you for my father, which already happens often enough as it is.”

“Woah, pal,” Dean warns, a laugh bursting from his lips. “I ain’t the one with all these lines on my face.” He rolls towards Cas, feeling the wing shift above him as he does, and lays half on top of him. He traces the lines of Cas’s face with his thumb.

Cas smirks. “You and I both know you like them,” he says, as Dean touches the corner of his eye.

“Shuddup.” He bumps his nose against Cas’s.

After a moment, “Is there anything else you’d like to know now?” Cas asks, stretching under Dean, his hands pressing to the headboard and back arching.

Dean hides his face in Cas’s neck, not sure what to say. Still, so many questions are spinning in his mind; so many points and defenses as to why he should stay human. But he keeps his mouth shut. In the end, this is entirely Cas’s decision, and no matter what Dean wants, it won’t change the fact that Cas has made up his mind already.

Cas grabs one wrist with the other hand, playing with an old bracelet of Dean’s he’s taken to wearing.

“Not right now…,” Dean says, hesitating. “I’m still wrapping my mind around this… I mean, I know what you want and I know that it will happen, but like you said, so many more things are going to change then just our day jobs… I guess, I guess I’m just trying to figure out what else is going to change.”

He rolls off Cas now, nervousness and uncertainty taking center stage as he thinks about what he’s said. What else is going to change? Everything could change. Everything and then some. God, this life is killing me. There lifestyle, the knowledge they are privy to, it’s fucking annoying. Because Dean doesn’t know every which way their lives could change, it’s an every changing number with them. They could be gone tomorrow, it could take decades before they’re finally
forever six feet under— hell, they could be sitting on a fucking decaying radioactive substance right now and slowly killing themselves just by living here. He doesn’t know. And it scares the shit out of him to know end. That’s been the hardest part of this whole job since he could remember.

Dean takes a deep breath. He’s trying to accept this. It’s okay. Dean spots the the bracelet then, his chest warming. “Cas?” he says, burying his face in Cas’s shoulder again, hand coming up to rest on Cas’s back where the wing joint would be.

Cas hums in response.

Now or never. “I’m...how I...reacted, I know this is your decision to make.” Now or never, Winchester. “But...I’m— well...you’re it for me,” he grumbles into the crook of Cas’s neck. Fucking hell, couldn’t even say it properly, could you? “ And I just want you to be here as long as possible,” he rushes out in one short breath.

Cas stills momentarily, then laughs. Dean can feel his face burning. The angel turns over, the wing staying in place to cover Dean.

“I know.” He gives a crooked smile, his entire being glowing.

Dean turns his face into the pillow, groaning, his face even hotter now. Cas wraps his arms around him, pulling and turning him until their eyes stare into each other’s. Neither says anything, Dean still too embarrassed, Cas looking awestruck. Cas noses at Dean’s hairline, his smile radiating onto Dean’s skin.

“Dean, I’m doing this for both of us. I want you to understand, even though this decision is partly about me and my relationship with Heaven, and my choice to break that connection… The other part of this is for you.” Cas fucking blushes now, and Dean’s legs would have given out if he weren’t laying down. “I’m also doing this so that you know, that no matter what happens, I’m staying right here with you.”

Dean wants to kiss Cas, but he can’t stop staring at the man— the angel— in front of him. Cas has been around since before time, when matter was still decompressing at an alarming rate in the universe, and he’s here now. After every single thing they have both done, to the world and to each other, somehow the universe allowed for them to both be here in this moment.

The ugly voice inside Dean tells him to shut up, to not listen, to find the lie between the words. But that light that Cas shines so bright in Dean’s life silences it before it starts to make sense. Dean wants to cry, somehow it feels appropriate in this moment, but the curve of Cas’s smile stops him. He loves me. The thought echos in Dean’s mind for as long as he keeps staring at Cas. He knows it’s true, even if he never thought he’d get to this point in his life.

Cas kisses him, and, oh god, Dean can taste all of the promises Cas is giving him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for reading, seriously, y’all are amazing and wonderful and I don’t even know what else, you’re just that spectacular!
“Gonna go work on the car,” Dean says as he passes their bedroom, his voice gruffer than normal, trying to mask his emotions. 

Cas sighs, looking down as he rifles through the dresser for a t-shirt to wear. His hands suddenly feel unsure, too bulbous and uncertain. He sits back down on the bed, a plain white shirt gripped between his fingers.

Fitting, he thinks, as he staves off the lump forming in his throat. A few minutes of deep breathing helps to refocus him. He pulls the shirt on and walks out of the room.

Sam and Nicole had come into town for the week, deciding to come a few days before Thanksgiving to help get things set up. Charlie, Jody, and Kevin are coming the day after next, for the actual holiday.

In the kitchen, Sam’s working on at least his third cup of coffee. It’s not even nine yet. If it weren’t Sam’s nervous-tell, Cas wouldn’t know how on edge Sam actually is about all of this.

“How are you feeling, man?” Sam asks, as Cas takes the seat opposite him, the mug a welcome heat to his jittery hands. The table seems so large between them.

Cas takes a long pull of the caffeine before he answers, “I’m okay.” He takes another large gulp. “I know this is what I want, but that doesn’t quell the anxiety.”

Nicole sits her plate down on Sam’s empty one and pulls it towards her seat. “That’s understandable, Cas. It’s a huge change; even if you want it, it’s still going to be scary because you just don’t know the answer on the other side.”

Cas balls his hands up, willing them to stop shaking. “I’ve been human before, I know what it’s like,
this doesn’t make sense.”

Sam gets up to pour himself another cup of coffee and refill the appliance. “Yeah, but, Cas, you never chose to be human before. You’ve never chosen to remove your grace before now.”

“I suppose.”

“Free will is a terrifying thing.” Sam jokes, sitting back down, and Nicole knocks his shoulder for it.

Cas smiles.

“Is there a timeframe for this today?” he asks, in all seriousness now.

Cas stays silent for a moment, looking down at the table, tracing the wood grain. “Well, Hamon has been ready for me for a couple weeks now, by our timeline at least. He said he can do it whenever I call him. I just told him today, but I didn’t really specify a time, I guess I wanted to—” And Cas realizes he’s rambling.

The carafe is still dripping steadily. The fridge hums extra loud, working overtime to keep a full fridge cold.

Sam looks at him, his patience obvious as he waits for Cas to finish his thought.

“I was going to go talk to Dean about when exactly.”

Obviously they’ve talked about this happening, they planned on today because as Dean put it, “It’d be a shame to have to wait a whole ‘nother year to pig out on Thanksgiving.”

They’ve had the conversation multiple times in innumerable variations, yet only coming to an agreement half the time it seems. There was still a lot of shouting in the beginning, especially when Cas started telling Dean how he even began thinking of becoming human, giving his reasoning. Dean was somehow able to come up with an excuse or alternative solution to each, no matter how crazy. But now Cas understands that Dean’s lack of cooperation is there to cover up the anxiety and fear he’s trying to hide.

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It was pretty late in the morning for them, after nine-thirty, but they were still lying in bed. Dean had his face buried in Cas’s shoulder, as Cas was reading a book over his back, sometimes rereading the more interesting passages aloud to Dean. There were no cases waiting for them if they left the room; it was quiet out in the world, at least for the day. It was a good day, all things considered.

Suddenly Dean sat up and pushed away from Cas, putting a couple feet between them.

Cas put his book down, waiting patiently as Dean’s mouth moved silently, trying to articulate what he was thinking.

Dean balled his fists into the sheets, gritting his teeth as he began to speak, “Dammit, Cas, what if shit changes?” He dropped his eyes to the bed. “What if...it’s not the same between us?”

He knew Dean wasn’t talking about their job or their lifestyle. He was talking about their relationship. How long had Dean been contemplating this before he finally brought it up?

Cas made to grab for Dean but hesitated when he saw Dean pull back. Defeat had already settled itself into the creases of his forehead, into the line of his mouth.
Cas switched tactics then, he sat up straighter and squared his shoulders. “It won’t, Dean.” He tried to force as much conviction into the words as possible.

He could tell Dean wanted to believe it, but something inside himself wouldn’t let him.

“You don’t know that, Cas,” he almost whispered, in an attempt to keep his voice steady.

“Dean,” Cas coaxed, as he waited for Dean to look up, “how long have you been worrying about this?”

Dean pushed himself off the bed and stood awkwardly next to it, looking distraught. His hands were balled up again, trying to hold back whatever thoughts were running rampant inside him. “Since you first mentioned it,” he mumbled, looking down at the ground.

“Dean,” Cas sighed, wishing he would have brought this up sooner himself. “Do you seriously think I would even consider this if I thought it would negatively alter our relationship?”

Dean huffed out a sigh, his body started to deflate. “I don’t fucking know, Cas.” He looked like he was going to continue so Cas waited as Dean found the words. “I know how important this to you...I couldn’t— I couldn’t just keep coming up with excuses for you to stay an angel. I wasn’t gonna be selfish about this anymore.”

Cas took a deep breath. “Your worry about us isn’t being selfish, Dean,” he said.

Cas reached for Dean again, and Dean leaned into the touch, even if he wasn’t willing to look Cas in the eye yet.

The silence stretched as Dean and Cas both had tried to figure out what to say next. Dean’s fear ran so deep his bones were etched with the emotion.

“It sure as hell feels like it most of the time,” finally came a reply from Dean. His grip tightened around Cas’s fingers.

Cas squeezed right on back.

The guilt that nagged at Cas’s chest couldn’t be held back any longer though.

“Is this because I left?” he blurted. The guilt didn’t go away, it only began to bubble inside him. He dropped his hand, defeat setting in.

Dean finally looked up, startled, his eyes wide. “I— I don’t know....” he said. Cas tried to speak but Dean interrupted him. “Part of me knows you aren’t gonna leave again, Cas.” He had to look away again. “Most of me knows that... But there’s the part of me that’s screaming to protect myself.”

Cas shifted across the bed, threw his legs over the side and stood up next to Dean. “Do you know why I left?” A rhetorical question.

Dean didn’t answer. He kept his eyes down, but his body leaned into Cas’s. Because no matter what they said to each other, their bodies knew better than they did where to find comfort and solace.

Cas continued, “I felt as if you had rejected me.” Dean kept his head down, as he allowed Cas to finish his explanation. “In the past, you had never rejected me, only my ideas, my plans, my actions, but never me. In the end, you always had my back, as you would say. And I know your reaction then wasn’t your rejection of me, I know it was your fear of the situation, I know that now.” Cas leaned closer to Dean, felt his body heat once again. “My hindsight is twenty-twenty. I guess I’m
more human now than I thought, with all of these emotions and eye-opening confessions.” Cas cracked a smile as he tried to ease the tension in his chest.

Dean looked up then, his eyes were wide, almost shining. He pushed himself forward, wrapped his arms around Cas and crashed their mouths together.

“You stupid motherfucker,” he grunted out as he grabbed at Cas’s clothes.

Cas understood the sentiment, understood that it still wasn’t easy for Dean to talk about everything he felt or thought. Dean was never going to be one for lengthy soliloquies or overtly heart-felt conversations out of the blue. Cas was more than willing to take him exactly as he was, a little frayed around the edges but always persevering. Adamantly present in Cas’s life.

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Cas now stands in the doorway to the garage, and sees the Impala isn’t parked in the usual spot Dean pulls it to when he works on it. The door leading to the carport is wedged open with a cinderblock.

The rain outside is steady, a constant beat against the ground. They’ve been waiting for the temperature to drop any day now, for the clouds to start churning out snow.

Under the protection of the carport, Dean sits in the backseat, head bowed as he most certainly is not working on the Impala.

Cas gets in the other side of the car, sliding across the bench until his thigh presses against Dean’s.

Dean doesn’t look up, barely indicates that he realizes Cas is there before he starts talking, “You know, I can’t even remember the last time that I’ve had a real Turkey Day feast. With homemade gravy or meat that isn’t from the deli section, and watching that damned parade.”

“Wait until Christmas then,” Cas notes. Sam and Nicole already invited them, along with everyone else coming, down to their place for the holiday. “A house, full of family and presents and food. We might even roast some chestnuts.” His joke lands flat.

Dean’s hands cling to his knees, knuckles white. The heaviness in the air weighs down on them both.

They need to talk about this, acknowledge what’s happening today. Cas wants Dean by his side the entire time, but he’s not sure if Dean will be able to handle it. To be quite honest, Cas isn’t sure how well he’s going to handle the whole thing. Yes, he knows what it means to be human; yes, he knows what having his grace removed feels like. But, free will over the entire situation is a completely new realm for him.

Cas tries to start talking again, articulate some sort of reassurance (for them both), but before he can, Dean silences him.

It’s gentle, the kiss. Dean’s mouth is soft and yielding against Cas’s; a quiet sigh escapes both of them.

Whatever Cas was expecting, it wasn’t this. He wasn’t prepared for tender touches and delicate movement as Dean shifts, better angling himself closer to Cas. Everything mutes, the buzz of the flood light and the splash of the rain quiet when Dean softly gasps into Cas’s mouth. He pulls Cas’s face closer, palms skimming over the stubble on his neck and face. Cas’s eyes slide shut, trying to remember as much of these physical touches as possible.
Dean licks into Cas’s mouth, searching for answers. Cas can sense, in his bones, the emotions Dean isn’t letting himself feel. Desperation and fear thriving just under the surface of his twitchy hands and flitting tongue.

And then it starts to turn away from tender. A switch flips.

Cas’s breath hitches when Dean grabs at him, pulling. Begging, not with words, but with every new action. Nails bite into Cas’s shoulder where Dean holds him, a hand fists into his shirt where he tries to pull it up. His mouth rougher now, teeth nipping at Cas’s jaw. Cas tries to match it, leaning into Dean’s every touch, pressing as close as he can.

He doesn’t resist.

Dean shifts again, trying to slide down onto the seat, in what space the car will allow. Cas pushes himself up then settles between Dean’s legs. Dean muffles a moan into Cas’s shoulder when he grabs Cas’s hips to pull him deeper. Cas nips at Dean’s throat, making his mark across the sensitive skin.

“Cas, please,” Dean whispers, into the space between their mouths before kissing him again.

Not sure what he means, but so willing to give Dean whatever he wants, Cas obliges.

Cas thinks it, and both their clothes are gone. Dean now so hard and eager below him. He scratches at Cas’s back, and Cas bites into his shoulder to relieve some of the frustration. This isn’t about tenderness, not today. Today is for them to lay claim to the other’s body.

“C’mon, Cas, please, c’mon, just, please,” Dean repeats, brazenly wrapping his legs around Cas’s hips. “I need this, c’mon, please, Cas,” he moans.

The heat that’s always simmering below Cas’s skin, a fire reserved for only Dean, begins to boil as he feels more and more of Dean’s body pressing to his. The softness of his inner thighs giving as the wrap around Cas’s hips, the scrape of Dean’s scruff against his cheek, the calluses of Dean’s fingers digging into Cas’s back. The firmness of Dean’s erection as it presses into his stomach, demanding Cas’s attention.

This is how he loves it. He loves when Dean opens himself up to him, both physically and emotionally. He’s the only one allowed to see Dean this vulnerable and accepting. He’s the one who bears witness to Dean’s succeeding pleasure. He’s the one who eagerly gives him that pleasure.

Cas sticks a hand between Dean’s legs, can already feel his body vibrating. “What do you want, Dean?” he asks, pillow talk more than anything.

Then the lube from the glove compartment is slicked on Cas’s hand. “Oh god!” Dean gasps as Cas presses two fingers into him.

“What do you want?” Cas almost growls, losing it at Dean’s body heat surrounding even just such a small part of him. He presses against Dean’s prostate, hoping to force more undignified and filthy sounds out of him. He wants to hear Dean’s desires, filthily moaned into the space between them

“Fu— fuck me, Cas! Oh god, please, fuck— ” He’s cut off as Cas presses another finger into him, twisting his hand. Cas revels in the way Dean’s body twists around him in response.

Dean’s always so much more responsive when he can use his body instead of his words. The way he’ll beg for Cas with strong fingers; lay himself out and open, ready for Cas’s touch; start to shake when it becomes too much but refusing to ease up; bite when he needs it harder, rougher. Dean falls
to pieces just for Cas to eagerly put back together.

“Do you want to feel me in you, Dean?” All Cas gets is a moan as a response. “You want me to fill you up.” Cas pumps his fingers in and out harder now, not even focusing on Dean’s prostate. “You want me to make you cum.” Dean bites Cas’s shoulder, stifling a moan as Cas removes his fingers.

“Tell me.” Cas slicks up his cock, Dean’s eyes glued to the action the moment he heard the wet sound.

“Cas—” It’s the strangled beginning of a sentence before Dean’s mind frazzles out at watching Cas jerk himself off.

Cas has to be careful when he’s like this. He could so easily come from looking at Dean’s body alone. But the sweet torture of waiting to be inside Dean almost always holds him off.

“Cas, babe, please,” Dean tries again, eyes trained on Cas’s wet cock. He tears his eyes away, looking into Cas’s now. “I need to have you in me.”

Why would Cas refuse? Such a lustful desire, and yet that’s the only action his mind can focus on. Dean.

He moans into Dean’s gasping mouth as he pushes himself into Dean’s body. Every sensor is going off in Cas’s mind, every sensation is felt tenfold as slides deeper into Dean, closer. He feels heat prick behind his eyes, his throat get tighter, as he looks up at Dean’s face. Mouth slack as he moans, cheeks and neck flushed, his beauty so evident in his expression.

Cas has to kiss him. So he does. Feeling Dean’s mouth vibrating against his own, half-sentences and gibberish trying to articulate some of his feelings. Cas just kisses him deeper.

He brings their bodies flush together, not much room in the Impala for much else. The hard line of Dean’s erection presses to Cas’s stomach. Dean’s fingers claw up and down Cas’s back. Dean’s thighs yield to each thrust.

Dammit, Cas can barely keep his eyes open, the feel of Dean wrapped so tight around his cock more than he can handle. But dammit, he has to keep his eyes open. Has to see the way Dean’s soul shines in the most wonderful of ways.

It’s usually a subtle glow underneath his skin, with a concentration at his heart shining bright enough to cut through time and space so Cas can still sense it. Sometimes it breaks free when Dean lets out an especially boisterous laugh, shining behind his smile. Other times, it drips out, coming with Dean’s tears, acting as little stars against the universe of Dean’s body. And sometimes, when Dean can’t control himself, when he and Cas are so lost in one another, is shines bright enough to reach out to Cas’s grace, almost intermingling.

Right now, they’re so close that Cas can barely tell when Dean’s soul ends and his grace begins.

Dean’s whimpering Cas’s name, rambling. “Please, Cas, your wings, please, your wings—” He’s cut off as Cas wills them to their bed.

The air sparks around them, Cas not being as careful as he should be, too distracted by Dean’s mouth on his throat. Then the room quiets, everything held in limbo for a split second, before Cas’s wings wrap around Dean completely.

He can feel every muscle in Dean’s back as he arches into the sensation of Cas’s feathers along every inch of his already heated skin.
Cas can’t tell where Dean’s soul ends anymore.

His eyes burn from the emotions he’s feeling.

Dean’s gasping his name in a continuous string, “CasCasCasCasCasCas.” Cas thinks he doesn’t even realize it.

Then Dean’s hands are grabbing his wings, almost cradling them. Cas presses closer to Dean, keeping his rhythm steady, nowhere near ready for this to be over.

“Fuck,” Cas mutters into Dean’s shoulder when Dean grabs the base of Cas’s wings just right, pulling Cas that much tighter to him. “You feel wonderful, Dean,” he whispers into his temple then, mouth trailing against his hairline.

And he means it so much more than physically. As much as Castiel loves how their bodies fit together, how they work so seamlessly together, as if their hearts are replying to each other’s rhythm. Cas also loves the feel of Dean’s rough hands tracing his body, and how those same hands brush the hair out of Cas’s face before leaning in to kiss him, how those hands help Cas straighten his tie before the start of a case, how those hands span the distance of the car seat to hold his own. Dean hikes his legs further up Cas’s waist, the angle changing, and then he’s moaning a litany of desperate pleas; Cas loves when Dean presses his thigh to his when they’re sitting next to each other, always a source of reassurance. Dean turns his head, gasping for air, moaning softly into the feathers surrounding them. And Cas is reminded about how he loves when Dean’s too tired to hold his head up, and uses whatever body part of Cas’s he can as a pillow, trusting Cas to support him. And Cas does, so wholly.

“You are wonderful, Dean,” he reiterates, picking up the pace as his body comes that much closer to release, watching as Dean’s face goes slack with pleasure.

The heat of Dean surrounding him, the pressure and tightness is sending sparks to every nerve in his body.

“Cas— I— Cas, I—” Dean tilts his hips again, and then he’s shouting as he reaches climax. Cas can barely breathe with the pleasure coursing through his body, feeling and knowing he did that to Dean. He watches in awe as Dean comes.

Dean’s body sinks into the bed, all of his muscles loose. Except for the death grip he has on the base of Cas’s wings.

“C’mon, Cas, I want you.” He readjusts himself slightly. “Want you to feel you in me,” he begs, pulling Cas down for a kiss that’s more teeth than anything.

Cas feels lightheaded, so much stimulation overwhelming him.

He sets a brutal pace, Dean egging him on, “Yeah, like that, baby, like that, c’mon...c’mon.”

Cas can feel it, he can feel his orgasm before it even starts, the gut-wrenching pull in his abdomen.

One of Dean’s hands cups his cheek. Their whole bodies are shifting with the force of Cas’s thrusts. “Cas, c’mon, Cas, I want it— give it to me,” he whimpers against Cas’s mouth. Cas is almost certain he hears Dean sob, so overstimulated.

Something inside him breaks free, and he’s shouting into Dean’s mouth, who hungrily swallows the sound, takes in whatever Cas gives him.
He slowly collapses, carefully, on top of Dean, cradling him in his arms and wings.

Their kisses are soft again, like they were in the car at first. He needs to remind Dean of how loved he is.

But they don’t need to say anything, not right now.

Cas is so content to lie with Dean in silence for as long as he can, glad to ignore the rest of today’s events in favor of listening to Dean’s heartbeat.

Dean’s fingers play with Cas’s feathers, sliding in and out of them. His movements both precise and unhurried. He takes his time to feel through the different types of feathers, focuses on the subtle shade and shape variations. He’s studying them, taking them in, memorizing them for later. Later, when Cas won’t have them.

After a few while, Dean’s fingers halt.

“I can give you more, if you want.” Cas turns his eyes to look at the box on Dean’s nightstand, the faint glow of his feathers barely visible through the slit of the lid.

“I…,” Dean trails off.

“Do you want more, Dean?” he asks, still not looking up, instead keeping his head tucked to Dean’s chest.

Cas can sense the hesitation in Dean’s response. “I want them all,” he finally admits.

It’s telling, how much he truly loves Dean, that Cas actually considers for a moment, cutting off his wings as a gift for the man under him. All because he quietly asked.

Cas doesn’t say anything, not knowing how to respond. Feeling like he should apologize though.

“Just one,” Dean concedes after the silence becomes just too long.

Cas sits up, pulling Dean with him. Their legs are a mess of tangles still, their bodies dirty with their expression of love. “Pick one, any one. Which one do you want, Dean?”

After careful consideration, Dean looks to Cas for approval, before plucking one of the small feathers from the base of Cas’s wing.

“So I can keep it in my wallet,” Dean mumbles, looking down at the small feather.

Cas just kisses him.

Neither of them says it, but they both know it’s time.

They slowly work on getting dressed, neither willing to let go of the other’s body for long. It says a lot that they’re not speaking; that, for once in their life, they’ve come to a sound agreement.

Dean goes to get his brother and Nicole while Cas makes the bed presentable and comfortable for himself. He doesn’t know how long he’ll be out for the count after he comes back. Hours? Days even?

Cas will forever be thankful that Dean has come to agree with his decision to be human. It’s been what he’s wanted for a long time, he’s sure he wanted it even before he realized it himself. Some part of his soul was yearning for the freedom, the beauty, of being human.
He can barely believe that he is allowed to have both, that after the countless mistakes he has made, that he still gets to have this. He is allowed to be happy. Cas used to believe that he would have to be paying for his mistakes for the rest of his life. But in helping Dean cope with not being perfect, in allowing him to make mistakes and realize that they don’t send the world crashing down, Cas realized it applied to him as well. And Dean was there to support him, whenever Cas tried to talk himself out of any repenting he thought he still owed to the world. He could still apologize as a human, though there was no need. He would be human, and humans make mistakes and learn from them. Such a beautiful sequence of events.

Cas sits down on the bed, sending a little prayer to Heaven; *I truly appreciate all that you are doing for me, brother*; alerting and thanking Hamon.

Dean comes back in the room, closely followed by Sam and Nicole. They haven’t changed out of their pajamas either. It’s almost comical, one of the most important days in Cas’s life, and everyone is half-dressed.

Dean comes over, looking hesitant, like a student who’s about to speak in front of the entire class for the first time. He fidgets for a moment, looking unsure of where he should be.

Cas lays back against the pillows, getting comfortable.

“Cas, Cas, wait— ” Dean stops, holding his breath. His palm is shaking where it eventually presses to Cas’s shoulder, before gripping his collar to steady the tremor. “I need you to hear this.” He leans on the bed, levels himself with Cas, looks him in the eye.

*I hope they don’t lose their shine,* Cas thinks, once again questioning his transition. *Will Dean still....* Cas doesn’t finish the thought, doesn’t let himself. Every other time he’s been human, Dean has been exactly the same. He loves Dean as an angel, he’ll love Dean as a human. That, he’s sure of.

Dean grabs Cas’s hand, gripping it so tight it would be painful if Cas were human already. He thinks he can *feel* the words Dean is about to say.

“I love you,” Dean whispers into the space between them. It hangs there, filtering through the air until it bursts through Cas’s conscious. “I need you to hear that before this— ”

Cas pulls Dean forward, crushing his mouth to Dean’s. Dean opens himself up to the affection, grasping for Cas. But then—

“Wait, hold up— ” he pants, pulling away. He’s determinedly looking into Cas’s eyes. “Cas, you...you’ve always been the best thing to ever happen to me. And I know I don’t show it, hardly ever. And god knows I’m awful with words.” Dean takes another breath. Cas cradles his face between his hands. “But I do love you, angel or not.”

They’re kissing again, Dean allowing himself to be pulled back in. Everything so soft now, feeling so new. If this is what humanity brings Cas, then he won’t regret a single moment.

There’s whispering from the audience behind them. But it doesn’t matter, none of this does. All that Cas cares about is Dean’s love, his acceptance.

*Millions of years old, and still all it takes is a kiss from that one special someone, and it’s harder to breathe, to think, to be. But it’s worse to be without.*

Slipping under his palms, Cas feels the tears streaking down Dean’s cheeks.
He smiles against Dean’s mouth. “I’m not a soldier going off to battle anymore, Dean,” he teases. Dean huffs, not pulling away though. “I’m never going anywhere again; not anywhere you aren’t.”

Dean eases back slowly, his hands still tucked against Cas’s neck. “You’re not going to start making me go on your morning runs, are you?” he asks, sounding half serious. Deflection, a Dean Winchester classic Cas has come to know well. He flashes that smile Cas so dearly loves.

Cas grabs Dean’s hands, so familiar a gesture now. I’ll take you anywhere you want to go, Dean.

Dean hesitates, his smile not wavering though. As if Cas could refuse him anything. “I just wanna be with you, Cas.”

Cas’s whole chest explodes with warmth, flowing out through his entire body. You will be.

Another whisper, then, “I know you guys are doing your weird mind-meld thing, but could—” The sound of Nicole slapping Sam is unmistakable.

Cas looks over Dean’s shoulder to mock-glare at Sam. He gets a thumbs up in return. I’ll be right back. He gives Dean one more quick kiss.

“I know,” Dean replies, leaning back and stepping away from the bed.

Cas holds eye contact with Dean for as long as he can, before his body resides too much in Heaven and not enough on Earth.

Hamon is standing next to him. “Are you ready?” he asks once Cas looks at him.

Cas nods.

“It will be over soon,” the angel reassures.

Cas closes his eyes.

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God had ordered Castiel to rescue Dean Winchester from Hell.

No one thought about where the order came from, only that it had been said and that it must be carried out. It was a task Castiel was more than willing to take on. No matter how many would be lost to Hell, if he succumbed himself even, the glory of following God’s command would forever be attached to his grace. He would forever be remembered with reverence and held to the highest esteem. And if he failed? Castiel was ready to face demise if it meant proving his devotion to Heaven and to God.

God commanded Castiel recruit as many angels as possible and fight until the last breath their way through the hellfire until they were able to rescue Dean Winchester. Castiel knew from overhearing older angels, stories from the archangels long ago, that Hell was no place for an angel. Hell destroyed angels faster than it turned souls. The concentrated evil would stick and corrode any angel’s grace. But God commanded it. And so Castiel obeyed.

With a garrison much larger than expected (many angels wanted to take part in God’s command to rescue the Righteous Man), Castiel started to plan a fierce strategy to infiltrate Hell and extract Dean Winchester’s soul intact. With very little time, Castiel’s quick, brutal, and precise plan would have to work. Then angels only had one shot to get to Dean Winchester’s soul before Hell realized their
It was a tortuous journey, maiming the toughest of soldiers, killing even the most well-trained. Castiel cannot put a number to tally of brothers and sisters he lost in just the descent through the fire and brimstone, before they even encountered Dean Winchester’s soul. Finding it was not the problem, for every angel could see how bright the soul of Dean Winchester shined, no matter the distance they still had yet to fight through. Dean Winchester’s soul became their beacon. That was the problem. It shone so brightly in the depths of Hell that it pulled angels to it, they would become so intent on reaching the soul that they would forget to fight. The brightness gave them hope they were only able to imagine if in God’s presence.

Dean Winchester’s soul was a holy relic in and of itself.

Castiel could not put a length to the time it took for him to reach Dean Winchester’s soul, only that it was the longest and fiercest battle angels had fought since Lucifer’s fall. No other human had been worth the efforts of retrieving their soul from Hell; it was not an angel’s duty to extract them, to fight the turmoil of the fire and sin churning in the vast wasteland.

Except when God commanded it.

Not many brethren were still with him when he reached the ledge which upon Dean Winchester’s soul resided. But the few that were left, fought courageously against the demons guarding it as Castiel went to rescue the beacon from its prison.

When he first grasped Dean Winchester’s soul, Castiel was certain he had died a thousand times over. The power, the light, that surged through their bond was stronger than any angelic grace. No longer would he be able to seek God’s light as his only source of command.

And, so, as the angel valiantly struggled to ascend from the depths of Hell, cradling Dean Winchester’s soul (so closely that his grace was almost engulfed by it), Castiel began to fall.

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