A Complete Kingdom

by komodobits

Summary

DCBB 2015. The sea; it swallows me. It comes up to my knees and it swallows me. The boys owe Jody a few dozen favours, and so when her niece goes missing near an old fishing village on the coast of Maine, Dean, Sam, and a newly human Castiel agree to take the case on. They settle into an old abandoned lighthouse-keepers' cottage, and slowly the tide comes in. (post-s8)

Notes

Art masterpost to be linked shortly!

I know that some people don't always read the warnings before they go into a fic, but I just want to put a note up here to say please, please, before you read this, read the warnings, and make sure that you know what you are getting yourself into. This is a horror fic. If everything went to plan and this fic is as fucked up as I wanted it to be while I was writing, then this fic is going to be violent and disturbing. If you have any issues with depersonalisation, I don't recommend that you read it as there is a lot of unreality stuff. Please be safe!

I would like to also take up this space to thank three people: my artist, the-luckless-lord, for working really hard and making such wonderful art to go alongside my humble fic; my beta, Askee, for being immeasurably patient and working through eight drafts with me to get a
version of this that was actually fit to be seen in public; and my other half, Alex, for giving me the idea in the first place, and for being the world's best sounding-board, and for making really good cups of tea. You're alright.
PART ONE

Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?”

The road is dark ahead, unlit as it winds through the pines, and it grows ever narrower as they drive south. Nineveh is some three hours behind them, settling quiet and still as evening darkens through yellow and purple like a bruise overhead.

Dean sees the lighthouse first. It rises tall, metal, and mostly decrepit, out of a swell of land that crests up over the beach, the ground tangled over by low spruces and unruly hedgerow. The last light catches warmly on the glass of the lantern room. As the road curves around towards the cliffs, the solid lines of a wide, low-set building become slowly clear. Up ahead, the dusty blue pick-up that they are following hits its turn signal; Dean follows suit, and pulls off the road down an uneven gravel track towards the house.
“Jesus,” Sam says, and Dean thinks he's got the right idea. To say that the place is a shit-hole is an understatement.

It's one-story, like most of the buildings back in town – more than a century old, built short and sturdy to withstand the harsh weather coming off the Atlantic at this time of year. It's constructed from dark wood that peels and cracks, the roof tiles irregular and incomplete. Two of the visible windows are crossed with dust-tape. There is ivy scaling the back wall, hemming in what could be a back door if the undergrowth was cleared away, and there is a thin dirt path twisting away through the trees. Dean lets out a low whistle through his teeth; Castiel, in the back seat, with his forehead against the window, says nothing.

“Home sweet home,” Dean says, killing the engine.

The pick-up in front stops just short of the house's front door, and a thick-set Native American woman with short hair scraped back in a ponytail gets out. She lifts a hand and waves impatiently for them.

The original plan was a Microtel off Route 1, but it turns out the place has been demolished for years and Google never got the memo - and by the time they figured out that they were in the middle of nowhere with up of an hour's drive to get back somewhere habitable, it was already going dark, and Dean had a ten-hour drive under his belt already. Maggie Crouse, it turns out, is the answer.

Dean climbs out of the car, and pauses for a second with his hand resting on the open door. “Killer view,” he calls across.

Where the gravel ends, tangled undergrowth and short stubs of pine trees battered by the sea breeze twist up from the earth, but it doesn't impede the view of the bay below. The last rays of evening light are darkly golden, and it reflects in fractures on the water. The waves are a low, shushing background noise that crash and fizz.

“I know,” Maggie says. “Great investment.” There is debris all across the drive and the front yard, flat tires and scrap metal, broken planks of wood rotting into the dirt. Maggie steps over what looks like a busted radiator to get at the front door. “Too bad nobody gives a shit.”

Dean heads around to the trunk to grab his duffel bag. Castiel is the last one out of the car. He comes a couple feet behind him, his footsteps slow and dragging as he stoops to inspect a stray bicycle tire half-buried in the long grass. Sam follows her more closely.
“Wait, so is this the lighthouse-keepers' cottage?” Sam asks. He steps over the fallen garbage with ease, his ridiculously gangly legs finally useful. “Is the lighthouse still active?”

“It's been dead as a door-nail since World War Two, I think. Looks nice, though.” Maggie digs deep into the pockets of her windbreaker in search of keys. “Thought it would make the place more appealing, only, you know--”

“Nobody gives a shit,” Dean finishes. “Yeah.”

“But hey. If this article of yours is any good, maybe my luck will change.” Finally, Maggie comes up triumphant from her coat pockets. “Here we go.” She gets the door open, and then stands back to let Sam in as she doubles back to her truck. “I've got two water tanks here for you. Not hooked up to the pipes yet, but there's a bunch of old cans you can get filled up in town. I'll get the electricity turned on first thing tomorrow morning, and if you need internet, go for the Pollock Cafe along the first road.”

“The first road?” Sam repeats, from inside.

“The only road.” She gestures loosely at the cluttered, isolated landscape that presses in around them. “You can probably imagine that reception is iffy here at best. The Pollock Cafe will do you though. Now, bedding and utensils are in the wardrobe – help yourself. There's one double bed in the main room, and a couch – I've got a camp bed at my sister's I can bring over tomorrow, but I hope that's not a problem for now.”

At this stage, Dean is too tired to care. “Sure. Fine. Thanks.”

He gets his wallet out again, and forks out a hundred and ten bucks into her hand before Sam can do something stupid like complain or decide they don't want it. For that kind of price, he'll share with whoever he has to. He doesn't care if the house is built on a fucking sinkhole.

“Great.” Maggie hands Castiel a slip of paper. “Here's my number if you run into any problems. Problems I can fix, that is. Or if you need a hand at all with that article of yours.”

“Will do. Thanks, Maggie.” Dean drags his duffel up onto his shoulder and heads into the house. Castiel is left standing on the drive beside the Impala, looking out past the lighthouse to the sea.
Dean knocks on the door-frame as he goes in. “Honey, I'm home! Oh, Jesus. This is... nice.”

Sam looks at him, distressed. “Yeah. It's gross. Dean, I don't know if we should--”

“Well, that's too bad, because I've already paid,” Dean says. “And by the way, you're sharing the double with Cas tonight.”

Dean ignores Sam as he splutters indignantly, and he takes a look around instead.

The house is built as a long rectangle, a living room at one end with one sad-looking couch and a distended armchair, and then a small round dining table with water damage. The kitchen is built in as part of the rest of the room, only separated by a row of cabinets that were maybe once meant to serve as a kind of breakfast bar. The kitchen is as run-down as the rest: small, tiles cracked, with dust on every surface. Behind the kitchen's back wall is a walk-in wash-room whose drain is clogged with brick dust, the shower-head held in place by a wad of duct tape the size of Dean's fist. Beyond that, there's a bedroom, which isn't too bad – nothing more offensive than the decorative style of a little old lady from the 1930s. There are lace doilies on one wall. Dean grimaces.

“Well, it's not so bad,” Dean says, and he comes back into the living room. He throws his duffel bag down onto the couch, which makes a dejected sound like a cry for help – and as he watches the couch, he's pretty sure he actually sees it sag as a few more springs break.

Sam pulls a face. “I don't even wanna touch that thing.”

Dean hesitates. “Okay. So it's pretty bad.”

Sam huffs his breath out. “Well... I guess it's not the worst place we've ever been,” he says, like he's trying to find a silver lining. “I mean, there was, uh, there was that dump in the Ozarks somewhere, you remember that motel--”

“What, the one with spunk stains on every fucking surface? Yeah, I remember.”

“I'm sure we can find some semen for you somewhere, Dean,” Castiel says distractedly, and Sam laughs more than Dean from him in a long time. Dean thinks that this place can't be all that terrible,
then – if it makes Sam happy in spite of everything, then, honestly, Dean doesn't see why they shouldn't stay forever.

Castiel, of course, is more interested in the outside of things, but it's quickly getting too dark to see anything beyond the glow of Sam's flashlight app, and they don't want to risk tumbling off a cliff into the Gouldsboro Bay, so they head back in and set up for the night.

The case is this: last week Jody's niece went to stay with a friend in Steuben, the next big town along Route 1, and the two of them went out one day and never came back. Disappearing like this is apparently totally uncharacteristic of Brittany Mills, and what's more is the local PD found the friend's car parked just outside Nineveh, with no sign of the girls.

It's not necessarily their kind of thing, but what little research Sam did on the way up here said that this wasn't the first time this had happened. In 1997, a young couple went honeymooning along the Gouldsboro Coast; they went out hiking and never came back. It was three days until the wife's body was found in the woods, beaten to death with a blunt object, and a week further before the husband's body washed up in the Nineveh harbour. Still – not necessarily their kind of deal, but Jody says that even if they're not legit, they're better detectives than the PD around here, and they still owe her roughly a hundred favours since accidentally letting her go on a murderous blind date with the King of Hell.

They unfurl Maggie's bedding from its protective bags to find it only slightly moth-eaten; they make up beds, and then get a half-empty case of beer out of the back of the car and bring it in. Dean gets a glass of water from the kitchen faucet and drinks alongside them.

Sam stands and stretches until his back pops. “Alright, so who's sleeping where?”

“Well, you're obviously in the bed,” Dean says, reflex-fast.


“Dude, you're unwell. You should at least get to sleep on a real bed, come on.”

“I'm not unwell,” Sam objects. “I'm fine, Dean, really. I feel much better--”

“I think I'll be the judge of that. Besides, look at the size of you.” Dean gestures loosely.
“Fucking... Ginormo. You wouldn't fit on the couch.”

Sam raises his eyebrows. “Seriously, Dean, I'm--”

“He says he's fine, Dean,” Castiel says impatiently, voice muffled, and when Dean looks over, he has his face in his hands, elbows propped on the table. “It's late. I'm inclined to believe him.”

Dean doesn't answer. He knows he's being overbearing, too protective, but the knowledge doesn't lessen the tight clench of anxiety in his gut any. Sometimes when he looks at Sam he still sees him as he was: white-faced, red-eyed, gaunt and gasping out that he deserved to die, that he needed this. The syringe clutched in his fist like a life-line. It's been three months. Some nights it feels like yesterday.

“Okay,” Dean manages. “Yeah.”

Sam looks over at Dean, smug. “Told you,” he says, in a voice like he and Castiel are best friends forever now and always have each other's backs. “Besides, none of us are exactly at our peak right now. It's not worth arguing over. You've been driving like twelve hours straight, and Cas deserves to get some decent rest too, after the angels--”

Sam cuts himself off abruptly, but the damage is done.

Dean looks over to Castiel. His face is carefully neutral.

“By all means, take the couch, Sam,” Castiel says. His voice is hollow. “I don't mind.” Then, as to make a point of just how little he cares where he sleeps, he grabs his bag from by the front door, and he heads through to the bedroom.

Dean watches him go, and then he turns to Sam. “Good going, idiot,” he whispers disapprovingly.

Sam grimaces. “I know, I'm sorry.” He glances over his shoulder at the doorway where Castiel has disappeared. “You think I should go say something?”

Castiel's voice comes through from the bedroom – faint, but distinctly annoyed. “I can hear you,
and I'm not angry at Sam. I'm going to sleep.”

Sam and Dean just look at each other in silence, feeling oddly ashamed, and it takes them a good couple of seconds to summon the courage to speak up and get moving.

“I guess I'm in with Cas, then,” Dean says. He hates this sometimes – that he is the one who always has to put a brave face on. Sam is still shaking off the effects of the Trials, and Castiel is so vehemently Not Depressed that Dean is more or less worried sick about him, but that doesn't mean Dean should have to play mother twenty-four-seven like they're both made of glass.

Still, he takes a deep breath. He forces something close to a smile, because this is what they do now. They're all trying to be better. For him, that means patience and understanding, or something like it.

It doesn't matter that Castiel is the last person on earth Dean wants to share a bed with, or that the last time they shared a bed he's pretty sure he didn't sleep for a second with Castiel stretched out beside him and nothing in the world was there to stop them from reaching out to press their hands together or-- or anything. None of that matters. Dean is exhausted, and he doesn't care.

He grabs his bag and, with one hand raised in a wave and a 'night, Sam! He heads through into the bedroom, and then he stalls in the doorway.

It's dark, but there are no curtains, and there is the shifting silvery of moonlight as it spills through the clouds, and Dean can see Castiel. He lies on his side, his back to Dean, and as he is lying on top of the coverlet, rather than under it, Dean can see that he's stripped down to a pair of boxers and nothing else. For several seconds, Dean can't move. He is caught on the line of Castiel's back, the curve of his hip, the naked soles of his feet. Dean has never seen him like this.

“I've been reliably informed that staring is creepy,” Castiel says.

Dean jumps near out of his skin, and then he is grateful for the dark, because he can feel heat flush up his jaw. “Shit,” he says. “I wasn't – I just. What the fuck are you - Jesus, Cas, put some fucking clothes on.”

Castiel shifts on the bed, and Dean really does not need to see the shift of muscle in his shoulders, the arch of his back, and for a moment he's so irrationally distracted that he almost doesn't hear Castiel mutter irritably, “You sleep in your underwear. What's the difference?”
Dean splutters. “Well, I wasn't gonna sleep in my underwear when I'm sharing with you.” He rubs a hand down over his face, and he sighs. “Come on, man, don't make this weirder than it has to be.”

“I don't think it's weird.”

Originally, Dean had thought that becoming human might make Castiel less of a pedantic, grouchy asshole – in hindsight, Dean doesn't know why he had ever thought that might be the case. Wishful thinking, maybe.

In this case, there's nothing more Dean can do to argue, so he just takes a deep breath and resigns himself to his shitty fate. He kicks off his boots, shrugs out of his outer shirts – keeping his jeans and undershirt – and he stares down at the lumpy bed for several more seconds as though steeling himself to jump into ice water before he gets in.

The bed is wide enough for the both of them. There is nothing weird about it.

Dean gets under the covers. He turns onto his side with his back to Castiel.

It's been four years and he hasn't kissed Castiel yet – he's missed his window. No need to go getting all worked up over sharing a bed like a fucking teenage girl. He goes to bunch the coverlet up around him, but Castiel has it pinned underneath him, and Dean can't get him to budge.

Dean twists to look back over his shoulder at Castiel. “Are you gonna get under the covers at any point, or...?”

“It's too hot.”

“So stick your leg out like a normal person. Jesus. You know, for someone for isn't even using the blankets, you sure are hogging them all.”

Castiel wriggles a little, releasing some of the blankets from his captivity. Dean twists it around and under his chin, but it doesn't help. Dean is still uncomfortable, and as he wriggles against the lumpy mattress, he tries to figure out what's wrong with this scenario – aside from the fact that he
is laid out next to Castiel and they are not touching.

After a moment, he rolls over, frowning through the dark at the indistinct shape of Castiel, and he says, “Have you got the window open?”

Castiel sighs, a long, heavy, world-weary sound. “Yes, Dean.”

Dean drops his head to bury in the pillow. “Why?” he groans. “Why would you do that? What is wrong with you, dude? It's November. We're in Maine.”

“I said, it's too warm in here.”

“It's like twenty degrees out!” Dean says incredulously. “How can you be too warm?”

“I don't know, but if you're so uncomfortable, you could always put more clothes on,” Castiel snaps. “I can't take all mine off. Apparently, I'm making things weird.”

Dean objects to that – to Castiel's irritated tone, like Dean is the worst person in the world for implying that there's something not right about two guys sharing a bed without being fully dressed. It's just common sense. If they're in their underwear, then shit starts getting weird and gay, and Dean has enough trouble keeping his distance as it is. “Well, it is weird,” he says, feebly.

Castiel makes an annoyed noise in the back of his throat, and then swings his legs over and gets out of bed – but he isn't going to close the window. He's leaving.

Dean squints through the dark, bewildered. “Whoa, what are you doing?”

“You're making this unbearable. I'm going to—” Castiel stops, and Dean can see the slope of his shoulders rise and fall as he breathes. He crosses his arms tightly over his chest. “I don't know. Go for a walk.”

Dean sits up. “Dude, no. It's like a fifty foot drop into the sea somewhere around here, and I don't know about you, but I sure as shit can't tell where the edge is. Come on, get back in here.”
Castiel doesn't answer. He just stands in front of the window, and he looks silently out. He hunches over into himself. Dean can see the lines of shoulder-blades where he slumps, sharp like wings.

Dean doesn't know what to say. Castiel is like this now: brittle. Half the time he is withdrawn, quiet; the rest of the time he's a firecracker with no fuse, and he snaps. Dean doesn't want to say that he misses the old Cas, but he wouldn't mind some of that infinite patience.

“Look, man, I'm sorry,” Dean says. He fidgets with the edge of the coverlet, pulling at loose threads. “I didn't mean to be a dick. I'm – I don't know. Tired. Long drive, you know.”

From his place by the window, Castiel says, “You could've let me drive.”

The instinct, for Dean, is to laugh. That's an even worse idea than letting Sam drive – Christ, at least Sam knows how to drive. Castiel's had a couple lessons and he thinks he's Richard Petty, but the last time he was behind the wheel he almost took the Impala into a swamp. Dean doesn't laugh, though, ridiculous as it is. The sad fact is, there's not much that Castiel is actually good at right now. He's always relied on his wings and his grace and his crackling ethereal might to get the job done, and now – even his handwriting is shitty. So Dean doesn't laugh. He says, “Yeah, I could've,” and then goes a step further: “Next time. You can, next time.”

Castiel turns his head just slightly, his chin tucked down towards his shoulder. He doesn't acknowledge Dean, but the tension in his shoulders eases a little.

“Cas, will you please come back to bed?” Dean says, and he ignores the way his heart kicks at the implications of that. The next thing that pops into his head is, it's colder without you, but he sure as shit can't say that, so he just says, “Please.”

Castiel rolls his shoulders back until the bones crack, and then he slumps. “I don't know how to do this,” he says, his voice so quiet that Dean has to strain to hear him at all. He sounds ashamed at the admission.

“How to do what? Sleep? Dude, you sleep all the time. In motels, in the car--”

“I pretend,” Castiel says bluntly. “I pretend, and sometimes it works.”
Dean hesitates. On the tip of his tongue is, *so pretend again*, because he's exhausted and he wants to fucking sleep, and he doesn't want to be having this awkward conversation with Cas right now, but he guesses he's getting old – he doesn't have the energy to be an asshole.

“That's okay,” he says instead. “Some people are just like that. Maybe you're an insomniac.”

“Thank you. That's comforting,” Castiel replies, voice sharp with sarcasm.

Dean rolls his eyes. “Alright, shut up. But seriously, get back in here. It's cold, and you're sure as shit not gonna get to sleep standing up like a fucking vampire.”

Castiel hesitates a moment, but then he does return to Dean, if begrudgingly. He even climbs underneath the covers, and for several moments he lies there on his side, stiff and silent, and looking at Dean through the dark. Dean lies down beside him, and there is nothing is between them but a couple inches of moth-eaten blanket and the quiet.

Against all odds, Dean sleeps well. There are no curtains in the house, nothing but duct tape to stop the first muggy, grey light of dawn from falling in across the bed, and so Dean comes slowly around with his face screwed up against the glare. It's stupidly early, and for a moment he is disoriented, before he remembers: the run-down, doily-plastered bedroom in the asscrack of nowhere, the long dark line of the sea pressing against the coast beyond this house, the fishing village that has seen better days. The case.

Dean lifts a hand to knuckle at his eyes, and then something shifts alongside him. Slowly he comes to full awareness: Castiel beside him, pushed up close to hog his pillow; his hip, bare and cool where his shirt has ridden up, pressed against Dean's thigh; his hair hopelessly untidy; his mouth slack against Dean's shoulder. He exhales, and his breath is warm, a little fusty.

Dean looks at him. He wants to hold his breath, leave this moment indefinitely suspended. He wants to kiss the faint imprint of a furrowed line between his eyebrows, still etched into his skin even when that frown is relaxed away. Dean swallows, and instead he carefully pulls away, and he gets out of bed.

Sam, of course, is already up and messing around with a defunct coffee-maker as though he thinks that he can restore it by the sheer force of optimism alone, and he looks up brightly when Dean
“Hey. Sleep well?”

“Yeah, fine. How'd you do on the couch?” Dean eyes Sam suspiciously – taking in his wet hair, his sweat-damp shirt. “Have you been running?” he accuses.

Sam beams. “Guilty as charged.”

“Christ.” Dean drops down into a seat at the dining table. “I'm not related to you.”

“No, I actually slept really well. Like, really well. And being woken up by the natural light was kind of incredible, you know?”

“Yeah, it was fantastic,” Dean mutters, still squinting at the thin white sunshine spilling into the room. “What does Maggie have against curtains?”

Sam rolls his eyes. “Come on. It won't kill you to get up before ten. You could even come out with me – seriously, you should see the scenery around here. It's incredible.”

Dean gets the feeling that Sam has had a change of heart about this place. Dean crosses to the far window that looks out over the beach, which Sam has propped slightly ajar, and he has to begrudgingly admit that the landscapes is intense. It's a prickly kind of beauty, all thorns and pine down to a beach of hard grey shingle, and the water is dark, but the crests of sharp rock, the crashing waves, it's all still pretty impressive. Just to be a dick, Dean says, “Nice. Where are all the hot dog stands?”

Behind him, Sam just snorts an ugly half-laugh.

Dean stares out a while longer, watches the slow shift of cloud, the whole sky thin, white, and hazy; he watches the way the light changes the water.

“Aha!” Sam crows from the kitchen. “Finally. Success. You want some coffee?”

“God, yes.” Dean turns back in time to see Castiel emerge slowly from the main bedroom – bleary and disoriented, eyes still half-closed. “Morning, grumpy.”
Sam glances over. “Hey, Cas. Coffee?”

Castiel doesn't answer – and instantly, Dean is worried. Castiel lives off coffee now. It's his driving force in life. Castiel moves towards the dining table, his steps slow and shuffling.


Castiel stands a few feet back from the table, hands loose at his sides. He looks rough, the crease to his brow more pronounced than usual. “I'm fine,” he says, voice hoarse with sleep – but, Dean thinks, at least he slept. He rubs at the side of his head with his knuckles, and winces. “Headache.”

“Well, you're in luck. That's actually something I can do something about.” Dean goes to his leather jacket where it hangs off the back of a chair and digs through a pocket until he finds a handful of loose, dusty aspirin. He sets them on the dining table, skittering. “Down those, you'll be okay.”

Sam pours him a glass of water and passes it over, but Castiel ignores him and swallows the aspirin dry. He scrubs a hand backwards through his hair, messing it up even further, and then he turns away and heads back towards the bathroom.

Dean and Sam exchange a look, and Sam starts automatically making Castiel a coffee – black, and strong.

They mean to leave for the town to begin their investigation by noon at the latest, but they get distracted – Sam raves about the scenery and the beach until Castiel is intrigued, and Dean agrees to go along just because means that he can put off getting suited up for a little while longer.

At the foot of the drive, there is a narrow path of dirt and stone, almost entirely overgrown by thick weed and scrub, but as they pick through, it twists ever lower through the pines and over the rocks, until at last they break out onto the beach.

“Hey, Cas, did you bring your bucket and spade?” Sam teases, leaning over, but Castiel – still not entirely caffeinated, and bad-tempered as a result – only squints at him. Dean has already figured out that Castiel before noon is a lost cause.
Dean pushes his hands into his pockets, shoulders hunched against the bracing wind that comes off the Gouldsboro Bay, and he heads down towards the shore. He climbs awkwardly over the sharp jutting rocks, peers into tiny pools at small pale crabs that freeze up when he pokes his finger into the water. He tries to pick one up, gets pinched, and curses it out at length.

“Fucking asshole,” he says sourly, and he kicks at the water to send them all scuttling. “I liked you better in *The Little Mermaid.*”

“Who are you talking to?” Castiel's voice comes up behind him, and Dean nearly jumps out of his skin. For all that Castiel has lost, he still knows how to creep up on a guy and make him shit his pants.

“Uh,” Dean says. “A crab.” It sounds pretty stupid when he says it out loud. “It bit me.” He holds out his thumb as evidence, and only feels a little bit like a wronged kindergartener when Castiel gently takes his hand to inspect the damage.

“You'll live,” Castiel pronounces.

“Thanks, doc. For a second there I was real worried.”

As usual, Castiel pays no attention to Dean's sarcasm. He lets go of Dean's hand and crouches to study the rock pool, concentration furrowing his brow, and Dean can't shake the image of that small crease of a frown while he slept.

“Come on,” Dean says, and he jerks his head back in direction of Sam, who is on his hands and knees doing something weird along the shoreline. “You ever skipped stones?”

Castiel follows him down off the rocks. “No.”

Dean and Castiel head back over to Sam, who it turns out isn't just worshipping the beach like Dean thought, but is collecting nice shells – because Castiel collects weird, sentimental garbage like that, like tourist fridge magnets, and snowglobes – which is all at once so nerdy and thoughtful that Dean kind of wants to push him into the ocean.

Dean teaches Castiel how to find the best rocks, wide and flat and smooth; he teaches him how to hold them, slightly tucked in against his wrist; how to flick them out hard and fast, level with the
water, so that they bounce and bounce out of sight.

Dean peaks at eight hops, while Sam, annoyingly, gets a clean eleven and won't shut up bragging about it. Castiel isn't very good at it. He's never played frisbee, and doesn't really understand the arm movement. He throws underarm, or he wheels his arm around like he's swinging a bat, and his stones fall, hit the water with a crash, sink instantly. He manages to screw it up every time.

“It's harder on choppy water,” Dean says, once he realises the extent to which Castiel sucks.

“Yeah, it's easier on a river or a pond or something,” Sam agrees. “Still water. You'll get the hang of it.”

Castiel doesn't say anything. He stands with the water pushing at his sneakers, and he holds his last stone loose in his hand. He looks out to sea, with the misty line of the small islands in the distance, and he scrunches his face up against the wind and the salt spray. He pulls his arm back, throws the stone as hard as he can. It flies, and it hits the water hard with a sound like cracked glass, and Castiel exhales.

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They drive back up the first road into Nineveh, and from there they get to work. It's a coastal village so small Dean doesn't even think it warrants a population index, and as they come in, the ground slopes down away from the roadside to a small harbour cluttered with old boats and older-looking men, long spools of coarse rope tangled around their feet; on the other side of the road are low-built houses, painted white but peeling, with shutters closed tight against the sea. The sky overhead is a indistinct twist of grey, and the sea whips darkly against the jetty, boats rocking and clanking.

Sam takes advantage of the Wi-Fi code in the Pollock Cafe cafe to get preliminary research done – even though, the way he puts it, he might as well be back to dial-up for the connection speed. Castiel is tasked with going through Nineveh's archives, but it turns out there aren't any in the town, so instead he joins Dean as he goes up to speak to the families of the missing girls.

They go up towards Steuben, and true to his word, Dean lets Castiel drive. He wedges his hands under his thighs so that Castiel can't see him white-knuckling it. Castiel has a lead foot, as usual, but he only runs one red light, so Dean's now got a ticket in forty-three states, which he sees more as an achievement than anything else. They make good time to Morgan Pinheiro's house, a small white-painted thing with a wrap-around porch just off Main Street.
“Alright,” Dean says as they approach. “You wanna try parallel-parking?”

Castiel looks over at him with dismay.

“I'm kidding. Relax. Just pull over anywhere.”

Castiel pulls into a long space behind a beat-up SUV, and he only bumps the curb a little with the front wheel, which Dean pretends not to notice. He can feel a twitch coming on. “Okay, so do you wanna do this together or split up?” he asks. He doesn't entirely trust Castiel to interview a source on his own, but he's trying to look like he does.

Castiel's thumbs rub over the worn leather of the steering wheel as he considers it. “Let's split up.”

Dean shouldn't have called his bluff. “Okay. You know your way to Sullivan?”

Castiel reaches over to pop glove compartment for the map. “I'll find it.”

Dean hesitates. It's only thirteen miles or so. Cas will be fine. “Okay.” Dean climbs out of the car, slams the door behind him, and then he turns back, and crouches to look in through the open window. He hesitates, and Castiel looks back at him, expectant. He hasn't brushed his hair, only flattened it with his hands and some water, and so there are tufts of hair sticking up at awkward angles, hair curling down over his ears. Dean forgets what he was going to say.

“Dean?” Castiel says impatiently.

“Yeah. Sorry – uh. Meet back here at three?”

“Sure.”

Dean slaps the window sill and straightens up. He tugs on the lapels of his suit jakcet and heads up the drive of 5506 to go and meet Mrs Pinheiro. He tries not to listen nervously as Castiel pulls away – he's a little heavy on the clutch there, but that's fine, that's no big deal – and then Mrs.
Pinheiro comes to the door.

She's glad to see him, red-eyed as she is, and she invites him in. She offers him latkes, and she cries more or less consistently, and she doesn't say much that seems relevant.

“Morgan and Brittany are both outdoorsy types, you know, and since Brittany was here for almost a whole week, they knew they'd get bored of being cooped up all day when the weather was still so nice,” she says. “So they took the car out most days – they went one day along to Bar Harbour, another day up to Sunkhaze Meadows... I was perfectly happy with it, since they were out of the way, and keeping active – because so many kids Morgan's age just spend their time on their computers, of course. And then they just – didn't come back. Last Monday.” She blows her nose noisily into a tissue and takes a deep breath. “All I knew is they were going down to the bay. Towards Nineveh.”

“Was she superstitious at all?” Dean asks, thinking of the couple who went missing in that area at the end of 1997. “Into ghost stories, that kind of thing?”

“No, not at all,” Mrs. Pinheiro says. “I don't know about Brittany, but Morgan never liked any of that spooky nonsense. Horror movies, all that – she'd rather watch a nice romantic comedy.”

“That's understandable. Now, have you or your family ever been to Nineveh before?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Pinheiro says, fingers playing anxiously at her collar. “Nineveh is a nice town. It's a little old and backwards, sure, but it's a nice town.”

“Do you know it well?”

“No. Would you like another latke?”

Dean is tempted. “No thanks, I'm good. Any chance I can see Morgan's room?”

Her room doesn't tell him much. She gets good grades, she likes art – and One Direction, but there's no exorcism he knows for shit like that. When the call comes from Castiel, his report on Brittany is much the same – normal girl, normal family, normal home life.
“Although,” Castiel says down the phone, in an undertone, “her father does have an usually large collection of pinned butterflies, which your pop culture has come to associate with being a psychopath, so we'll bear that in mind.”

Dean laughs. “Okay, Clarice. We'll keep an eye on him. Come get me.”

Castiel pulls up a couple minutes later – with the Impala miraculously intact – and honks plaintively for Dean to get in. “Let's go by Wendy's,” he says through the window, as soon as Dean is within five feet.

Dean walks around to the driver's side. “Shift over, I'm driving.”

Castiel frowns. “Why?”

“Because you've been driving all day and it's my turn,” Dean says, with more than a note of *duh* in his voice. “Now budge.”

Not without grumbling, Castiel obediently moves over for Dean to get in. He doesn't move over far enough; when Dean sits down, his leg is pressed flush against Castiel's, and he can feel the heat of his thigh. Castiel says, dead-pan, “We're still going by Wendy's.”

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Sam hasn't had much more luck. Nineveh isn't a big enough town to have its own archives; they're all jumbled in with the rest of the region in the Steuben library. He has a lot of stuff to go through, and so far all he's found is a fire in an old school building in 1976, plus the few incidents they already know about. Otherwise, it seems like nothing interesting has ever happened here.

Dean and Castiel find him in exactly the same position as they left him, only more pissed off.

“The internet here is terrible,” he complains, as he digs into a Wendy's salad, courtesy of Dean. “I mean – I spent ten minutes loading up a single edition of the local newsletter. A single edition! I could've been faster if I'd built a printing press by hand and done it myself, I swear to God.”
“So, basically, we've learned nothing,” Dean says, and he slumps back with a sigh. “Great.”

A stooped man with salt-and-pepper hair comes over, his breath wheezing like an old rattle loud enough to still all conversation even before he reaches the table. “You all wanna sit here, you gotta buy something else.”

Dean frowns at him. “Why?” he asks, and he tilts back in his chair to look pointedly over the rest of the cafe's empty tables. “You got customers fighting for a place to sit?”

“Dean,” Sam says warningly.

“I'm just saying!”

Castiel raises a hand politely. “Can I please get a cup of black coffee? Thank you.”

The man huffs and grumbles. “You young people have no respect.” He snatches the drinks menu off their table and heads away again, and as he goes, Sam turns to give Dean his most disapproving look, but Dean isn't paying attention.

“You hear that?” he says smugly, grinning. “You young people. I'm still a trouble-making whipper-snapper.”

Sam shakes his head with an exasperated laugh. “Dude, you realise you saying that sentence out loud is what makes you old, right?”

Dean's face falls. “Does not.”

“It totally does.”

Out of nowhere, Castiel says, “I think I'm thirty-nine.”

Dean looks up. “What?”
Castiel squints out through the main window, through which they can see the wind of the sea batter the fishing boats together, clap shutters back against the brick work. Dean's first thought is that Castiel's a couple millennia off there, but then Castiel goes on, “I don't know when Jimmy's birthday was,” and Dean understands.

“How don't you just pick your own birthday?” he asks. “It's not like they matter that much, once you're an adult, anyway.”

The man in charge of the cafe comes over with Castiel's coffee, puts it unceremoniously down – slopping a little over the sides, onto the chipped saucer – and when he clears out of the way again, Dean can see that Castiel is considering it. His mouth twists thoughtfully. “I don't know what day I would choose,” he says.

Sam and Dean exchange a look – they're on the same page, almost always are – and Sam says it first. “Pick today.”

Castiel looks between them, and slowly a small smile pulls at his mouth. “Today,” he repeats.

“Sure,” Sam says. “Why the hell not? We can get you some drinks, some cake – happy thirty-ninth, or whatever. It'll be fun.”

Castiel studies Sam for a moment, and then his smile grows gradually wider. He looks over at Dean. “Okay.”

“Okay?”


Sam gets out of his seat, heading back towards the cafe owner at almost a skip, he's so excited, and while he's gone, Dean turns to Castiel. “There you go,” he says. “Easy as pie. Happy birthday, Cas.” He reaches over, claps a hand to Castiel's shoulder, and grins.

Castiel meets his eyes, and his smile is soft at the edges. For the tenth time that day, Dean wants to kiss him. He pulls his hand back into his own space; he swallows and looks away at where Sam is
talking to the cafe owner.

There's no cake in the cafe, and there's no store in town, so they drive back into Steuben to run by Costco. Sam grabs a chocolate cake, another case of beer, and an obscene amount of small kiddie candles; Castiel comes to stand beside the front window and becomes immediately distracted by a collection of mobiles strung up from the ceiling, all sea-shells and dried starfish tangled together. He clinks a shell with his fingernail and sets the whole thing off jangling in a slow melodious chime. Dean sidesteps around him, and trails idly after Sam for an aisle and a half before he figures he should at least do something useful.

He gets a basket of his own, throws in milk, a box of Cheerios, and coffee, then some duct tape, since he figures he's gonna have to work on the refrigerator wiring to keep the milk cool – and then, if he's being handy, he might as well get some other shit. By the time he catches up with Sam, his basket is laden with everything from Pop Tarts to bathroom cleaning product. Of course, the icing on the fucking cake – Castiel comes over and dumps a weird selection of hanging shell-chimes in the basket.

Dean looks at him. “Seriously.”

“I don't have any money,” Castiel says, as though that's the problem with this situation.

Dean can't be bothered to argue, so he just rolls his eyes and gets in the queue for the self-check-out behind Sam – who eyes Dean's basket with an amused look. “You got everything you need there?”

“Yeah, I have, actually,” Dean says, and he shoots a pointed look at the line to the register, which Sam is currently blocking with his giant body. “You mind?”

“No, of course.”

Sam steps out of the way, and Dean pushes past him to pay for his stuff. He buys plastic bags, and ignores the look that Castiel and Sam exchange as he dumps it all in the Impala's trunk. Sam still has that stupid look on his face when he opens the passenger door, and it's this that prompts him to say, “Nope. Out. You're in the back.”

Sam frowns. “What?”
“The birthday boy gets shotgun.” Dean raises his eyebrows. “Skedaddle.”

Sam huffs, but reluctantly does as he's told – after all, this was Sam's idea. Castiel, on the other hand, looks absurdly pleased to be invited into the front seat beside Dean, and as he slides in he looks over at Dean with an expression of the exact same calibre as back in the cafe. It raises something like a shiver of warmth the length of Dean's spine, and he looks away to pump the car into first gear.

“So where the hell are you even gonna put that thing, Cas?” Sam asks, smirking from the backseat as the first turn out of the parking lot sets off a faint jingling from the trunk. “I mean, unless Dean wants to keep it in the car, that is.”

Dean shoots him a glare. “No fucking way. Human civilisation will come and go and that thing will still be fucking jingling. No.”

Sam just laughs.

Back at the house, Maggie Crouse has clearly been to visit. She let herself in, and shut the door behind her, but there is now a camp bed set up opposite the couch, and an icebox on the dining table, which, when opened, turns out to have two giant fish frozen inside it. It's nice gesture, although potentially redundant if they can't get the stove working enough for Dean to cook, but when he flips the light switch, to his surprise and delight, the lights actually do come on.


He dumps his Costco bag in the middle of the floor – ignoring Sam's indignant squawks behind him as Sam trips over it – and crosses to the kitchen to test the stove burners. The oven seems to kind of work, although the fan mostly blows cold air, and the light on the side of the stove doesn't come on, but he can feel heat starting up from the burners.

He glances back towards Sam and Castiel, of a mind to get one of them to pass him something electronic so that he can test the sockets, and instead he sees Castiel digging through the Costco bag with a frown.

“Why do you have all these things?” Castiel asks, and he delves into the bag to pull out the first of the offending items – in this case, a six-pack of colourful sponges.
“They were on sale,” Dean says, scowling, and he snatches the sponges out of Castiel's hand. He stuffs the entire bag under the kitchen sink, kicks the door closed, and then glowers at Castiel as though to dare him to go searching with more questions.

They gather up all the stuff they bought for celebrations, and then they get ready to take it outside – Sam's idea. He figures a lot of people would pay big bucks for a nice sunset celebration overlooking a view like this; they might as well use it.

Castiel takes a moment to come after them, as he stands on tiptoe by the living room's main window – carefully hanging his seashell mobile from the empty curtain rail. It jingles irritatingly, but Castiel steps back to admire his handiwork, and he looks more content than Dean's seen him in weeks, so he doesn't complain. He just jerks his head towards the door, careful not to upset the balance of food in his arms. “Looks great, Cas. Come on. Let's go.”

Outside, they find a narrow dirt path that twists through bracken and low, hedgy tangle, and when it comes out at the other end of a clump of trees, they are at the base of the lighthouse.

“Can you get in?” Dean asks.

Castiel takes a few steps towards it, but he stops before he even gets close. “It's padlocked.”

“Damnit.”

“Well, we can always bust in if we really need to,” Sam says. “After all, it's not like we've never broken into locked buildings before.”

“Sam, you delinquent,” Dean scolds. “I raised you better than that.”

Sam laughs.

Castiel continues up the path to the lighthouse, and treads slowly around the base. He reaches out a hand and trails slow fingers across the metal.

A couple yards back, Sam sets down the beer and the cake and the packet of potato chips, and he
starts arranging tiny, multi-coloured candles. Dean moves as though to follow him, but he realises that Castiel is not with the program. “Come on, Cas. You need a minute alone with that thing?”

Castiel's hand grows still. There is the slow sweep of his thumb over a crack in the metal, the rust underneath.


“I was always curious about lighthouses,” Castiel says softly. “Before – all this.”

Dean sticks his hands into his pockets. “How come?”

“They seem so counter-intuitive, strategically speaking. If your enemies are coming by water, you literally have an enormous sign saying, here I am.”

“That's not all, though. They help people come home.”

Castiel lowers his hand, and he looks back over his shoulder. “Any other species would have prioritised self-preservation over sentimentality,” he says. “As I said: counter-intuitive.”

Dean forgets sometimes that Castiel, with his scrunched up brow and his backwards tie, isn't human – wasn't, rather – but things like this sure bring it right back. It sets off something quiet and aching in his chest. “Well, I'm pretty sure it's cost us a couple times, so you're not wrong.” He tips his head back the way they came, towards Sam. “Come on. We've still gotta sing you the birthday song and all that good, embarrassing shit.”

Castiel does follow, although slowly. His eyes move past the lighthouse to the sea.
Sam bursts through the front door, sweaty and breathing heavy, just as the water in the pot starts to boil like crazy. Dean takes it off the heat with one hand, rummages across the counter for a teaspoon with the other, and he looks up at Sam.

“Coffee?” he asks.

“Sure, yeah, please,” Sam says, from where he is bent double with his hands on his knees.

This is a new thing for Dean – coffee in the mornings, instead of whatever lukewarm booze is left over in last night's bottle. He figures it's a better start to the morning, even if it doesn't leave him as clear-headed and sharp as he wants to be. He tells himself as he stirs in sugar and creamer – *this does not always have to be a war-zone*. He can sleep without a pistol under his pillow. He figures that if Sam has to make all this effort to get better after the Trials, then Dean can put in a little effort to be better as well.

“Good run?” Dean asks, even though he isn't all that interested in Sam's exercise regime. Distantly, he's aware that he's opening himself up here to endless discussions of Sam's tactics and his approaches and his techniques, but he can handle it.

“Yeah, yeah.” Sam pushes a hand back through his hair. “There's some really steep hills up past the beach, so it's good, but man. I am pretty out of shape.”

Dean doesn't point out that Sam's in good enough shape considering that the sickness accompanying the Trials ran him down to skin and bone, and that he nearly got himself killed in
the process – he figures Sam knows as much. Still, Dean's happy to see him getting back to his old self. He's eating like a horse again – last week he even picked a hamburger over a salad – and he's strong enough to go running, doing push-ups, crunches, and it's all so insufferably healthy that Dean hates it, but he's glad of what it means.

“Did you see Cas out there anywhere?” Dean asks as he fiddles with the dials on the stove. “He came out to demand coffee, and now he's disappeared.”

Sam bends in half, reaching for his toes. His voice is muffled when he answers. “I think I saw him heading down to the beach.”

“Goddamnit. Dude can never just sit still.” Despite his grumbling, Dean pours Castiel's coffee – plus one for him, and one for Sam – and then leaves his own mug on the counter as he heads out to find Castiel.

The morning is cool and still, the sky churned up in greys, pale and wispy over darker clouds that threaten rain. Dean holds Castiel's mug out in front of him, careful not to spill it, as he heads down the drive. The wild tangle of trees breaks apart at the foot of the drive to reveal the path down to the beach, and sure enough, there is Castiel's silhouette by the shore.

Dean picks his way down through the undergrowth, almost positive that he's going to break his ankle trying to get this goddamn fucking cup of coffee to Castiel – why can't the guy just fucking stay in one place when he wants a drink? But when Dean emerges onto the shingle and stone, he sees what Castiel is doing, and he doesn't have the heart to be irritated.

As Dean watches, Castiel stoops and picks up a stone. He rubs his thumb over it, and then he turns to the sea. He pulls his arm back, wrist parallel to the ground, and then he flicks the stone out fast. It bounces and bounces and bounces.

Castiel lifts his head. “Hello, Dean.” His voice gets caught by the wind and carried away, as he bends to retrieve another stone.

Dean walks closer, one hand sheltering Castiel's mug against the sea spray. As he approaches, Castiel rocks back onto one foot, arm tucked into his side, and he throws a stone out – fast, and flat – and it bounces four times across the water before sinking.

Dean smiles. “Well, shit, will you look at that?”
Castiel lifts a hand to shield his eyes and looks out after it, as though to gauge the distance. “I got five before you came down,” he says, and there's an accusation in there somewhere. He stoops, retrieves another stone, and tries again, flicking his wrist out past. It bounces twice, then falls. Castiel frowns.

“Come on,” Dean says. “Coffee. Here, boy.” He makes an obnoxious whistling noise through his teeth, and lifts the mug.

Castiel takes the mug from Dean without comment, and he cups it protectively in two hands for a moment before he drinks. Dean's own hands are cold now, with the wind coming off the sea; he shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“So you've been practising, huh?” Dean asks.

Castiel nods over his mug. “It's all in the wrist,” he says, almost thoughtfully. “I was using my shoulder.”

“Yeah. I mean, we did try and tell you, but...”

“But I didn't listen,” Castiel finishes, and he tilts his head over, like I know, I know. “I didn't want to be helped. I wanted to do it myself.” He takes a deep breath. “A lot of human things don't come naturally to me, but I'm – working on it.”

“But dude, don't worry about it so much, okay?” Dean says, and he steps up closer to bump Castiel's arm with his elbow, mindful of his coffee. “It takes time, is all. I mean, Christ, me and Sam had thirty years to get to grips with all this. You've had three months.”

“I've been watching over humanity for millennia. I thought I knew enough already to imitate passably, but it seems I wasn't paying enough attention.”

Castiel scowls into his coffee, and without thinking, Dean reaches out, touches his thumb lightly to the crease of Castiel's brow to ease it. Castiel lets out all his breath, and he makes a point of raising his eyebrows, forcing the frown away, and then he catches Dean eye as though to say, there. Is that better?
Dean says, “All you need is time.”

“Time,” Castiel repeats. He sips his coffee. “You have so little of it and you do so much. I didn't realise, before.”

Dean huffs his breath out in a short laugh. “I bet you didn't figure twenty-six hours would take as long as it did in the car.”

“That wasn't twenty-six hours,” Castiel says, distressed. “That was a life-time.”

Dean laughs out loud at that. “Yeah. At least you weren't driving.”

Castiel nods, drinks more coffee. A moment of companionable silence stretches between them, as they stand there, elbow to elbow, watching the waves. Castiel's warmth seeps through the fabric of Dean's jacket, and he doesn't feel the cold so strongly as he did on the walk down.

“I'm getting better at it, I think,” Castiel says, and when Dean looks over, he clarifies, with a slight roll of his eyes: “Being human.”

Dean nudges him with his shoulder. “Sure you are.”

“I'm – getting the hang of it, so to speak.” Castiel looks at him. “I'm learning.”

Dean swallows. “Cool,” he says, since he's useless and doesn't have an intelligent bone in his body.

Castiel is staring at him, his expression soft and thoughtful. It's been a long time since Dean was bothered by Castiel's intensity; it's almost comforting now, and Dean looks back at him, almost smiling. It's not often, now, that Castiel looks anything but tired and resentful, and Dean is glad to have him back, even in this small way. Even with the staring.

“You okay there?” Dean asks, when Castiel doesn't say anything further, and just regards him evenly, his eyes moving slowly over Dean's face – and Dean doesn't intend the way that his voice comes out soft.
Dean – Dean Winchester, romance connoisseur and man of legendary sexual experience – doesn't realise what's happening until Castiel leans across and kisses him.

His breath catches in his throat. He has his hands in his pockets, and Castiel's warm mug pressed lightly to his ribs as Castiel leans over, and Castiel's mouth is soft and careful, and Dean never thought it could be this easy.

Castiel tips his head over, his nose nudging against Dean's cheek, and presses in closer. He gets a hand up to gently cup the line of Dean's jaw, and his fingers are warm from his mug of coffee. Dean opens his mouth. He kisses back slowly; they have all the time in the world. Dean catches Castiel's bottom lip, sets a hand gentle at Castiel's hip to steady him, the shingle uneven underfoot, and then Dean jerks awake with a gasp.

For several seconds, he is disoriented, blinking up at the ceiling, and then he understands.

He was asleep. He is not out in the sun, sharing that moment with Castiel. He sprawled out on the sagging couch, one leg sticking out from under the blankets, and he is breathing hard with his boxers tight.

“Fuck,” Dean mutters. He lets out his breath and drops his head back against the lumpy cushions. He's here. He is not on the beach, and Castiel is asleep less than five feet away on Maggie's camp bed, and Dean is achingly hard from a dream where he didn't even get any fucking tongue. This is ridiculous. Dean is thirty-four, for fuck's sake.

For a moment, he is worried that Castiel is awake, that Castiel knows, but it's fine. Everything is fine.

It's early still. Even Sam isn't awake yet, and the light through the window is all cast in the dims greys of dawn. The house is quiet. Dean lies frozen for a while, hoping that maybe the problem will just go away on its own, but of course, things never work like that, and the longer he lies there, the more his dick aches, and he can't stop thinking about Castiel. The touch of his hand, the gentleness of his mouth. The way he looked at Dean before he leaned in – like Dean was worth something. The way that, even in reality, Castiel always, always looks at Dean. Fuck. *Fuck.*

Dean climbs off the couch. He pulls his jeans on, wincing a little as he tugs his zipper up, and he adjusts the rough fabric uncomfortably as he heads for the bathroom. He nudges at the water cans behind the bathroom door with his foot, but they're almost empty – not enough for a shower. Shit.
He shuts the door behind him, props a can behind it – still no goddamn lock, which is something he needs to remember to fix – and he sets the toilet seat down. Unzips his jeans and wiggles them down over his thighs. He pulls his dick out, breath catching in his throat, and he tries not to think of Castiel, with his hands and his eyes and his wide, stupid gummy smile, but he does.

It's so embarrassing he wants to throw himself under a bus, but he thinks of Castiel's long fingers and thick, sturdy thighs as he touches himself, and when he comes, all he's thinking of is Castiel's hand fit to the curve of his jaw.

It's still too early for anyone to be up by the time Dean comes out of the bathroom, and he doesn't know what to do with himself. He eyes his duffel bag across the room, and he thinks of his pistol, of his lock-picking gear. There's a lot he could do to keep busy – to keep in shape – but he isn't feeling it.

He starts to clean instead. He scrubs the entire kitchen, and then he finds himself staring at the broken electrical socket and the faulty stove light and the badly-wired refrigerator, and the next thing he knows, he's going out to the Impala to retrieve the toolbox that he uses to fix his Baby up, and he's bringing it in.

Dean gets two of the three problems fixed before Sam gets up – and thankfully, Sam doesn't say anything, but just raises his eyebrows in that obnoxious, all-knowing way he has, like being the little brother makes him wiser than the goddamn Dalai Lama, and then goes out for his run. Dean is still working on the refrigerator when the stirring of springs can be heard from the living room.

He looks up to see Castiel sit up, and for several minutes, Castiel is motionless there, sat on the edge of his camp bed with his back to Dean. His hair is sticking up at ridiculous angles; his shoulders are tense.

For a moment, Dean can't look at him, feeling flushed and obvious. Castiel doesn't know, he reminds himself. He doesn't know. Dean rubs at the back of his neck and keeps on with his work.

Castiel isn't a morning person, so Dean leaves him to get out of bed in his own time. He focuses on the refrigerator, cutting out a frayed wire and fusing a new, clean one in. He thinks he might have it right, so he fits the refrigerator plug back into the wall socket and tests it. Not quite. He unplugs it again, and that point, Castiel gets up and starts towards the bathroom.

Dean is determined not to look at him. He counts Castiel's three steps past the end of the kitchen
before Dena weakens. He glances up at him – the sleep-soft lines of his face, his mussed hair. “You sleep okay?” he asks, doing his best to shove past the part of him that is hot and embarrassed, straight to behaving as though everything is fine. Nothing has changed. However, Castiel doesn't seem to even hear him. He goes straight past, walking slowly. His eyes are half-open. Dean gives a small, nervous laugh. “I guess that's a yes.”

Castiel sets his hand on the wall between the kitchen and bathroom, as though to steady himself. His fingers are jagged on the plasterboard.

Dean looks back at him over his shoulder. “Cas?”

Castiel's thumb smoothes slowly over the plaster, back and forth. Back again. His shoulders rise with his breathing, rise. He takes a long time to exhale.

“Cas,” Dean says again, louder now.

Castiel jumps. His hand drops to his side. “Sorry. I was – half-asleep, I think.” He turns back, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “Yes, I slept well. Did you?”

“Yeah, I was okay.”

Castiel gives a slight nod, and Dean thinks he's probably still not really listening. He turns away to continue to the bathroom, and Dean goes back to his cleaning.

From the bathroom comes a loud bang, and then, unmistakably Castiel's voice: “Fuck.”

Dean half-smiles to himself. Castiel's newfound humanity makes itself known in weird ways. He drinks more coffee than can be medically safe, he uses the internet mainly for identifying birds, and he has no idea how to use a can-opener – he has also taken to swearing like a fucking sailor.

Castiel emerges, looking distinctly more irritated than he went in. “Where's all the water?”

“A mile and a half away, in a tap.”
Castiel stares at him. “You're fucking kidding me.”

Dean grimaces. “Am not.”

Castiel stares a couple seconds longer, as though he thinks that by burning a death-glare at the side of Dean's head, the water cans will miraculously refill. Then he turns and goes back into the bathroom – slamming the door behind him like a teenager.

When Sam comes back from his run, Castiel is no better-tempered, and instead sits at the table in his sweats, sullen and silent, as he works on an amateur lock-picking kit that Sam got him. Sam gets washed in the bathroom with what little water they have left, and Dean can hear Castiel getting increasingly frustrated with his lock. Sam offers everyone a round of coffees, and Dean is grateful for it, although something settles itchy and uncomfortable under his skin when Sam asks, like deja vu. It's a relief to get out of the house and back on the case.

Sam goes to man the Wi-Fi in the Pollock Cafe again, since Dean would rather chew off his own leg like a bear caught in a trap than sit for hours at a computer reading old articles, and Castiel isn't yet trusted to navigate the Internet on his own – the last case they were on, someone actually recommended Ask Jeeves to him, which he's now convinced is the pinnacle of artificial intelligence and the best search engine ever created.

Dean and Castiel get suited up and head over to the Steuben Police Department to infiltrate their investigation on the missing girls and see what their files have to say that isn't public knowledge.

The answer: not a great deal. Thankfully, Castiel's a little better with a badge than he used to be. He leads the way in. “Agent Macmillan, this is Agent Carmichael.” His hand fishes in his inside pocket for a badge, unfolds it almost boredly to present: FBI. “We're here about the missing girls.”

The files have some of the more boring details of the girls that the parents didn't tell them – blood type, allergies, whether they were sexually active, which Dean doesn't want to know about – and where Morgan Pinheiro's car was found, but otherwise, they tell them jack with a side of shit.

According to Mrs Pinheiro, there's a tow company in Steuben who've said they'll pull Morgan's car out of the mud and bring it home, but it hasn't been done yet, which is good news for the investigation. It means they can stake out the last known position of the girls without having to deal with the families' having cleared it out or tampered with things.
They pick Sam up, and then they follow the first road as far as it goes, past the lighthouse and up from the beach, until the asphalt bleeds into gravel, and then into dirt, and then only into a narrow leafy space between trees. Finally they break out into a clear space just short of the cliff’s edge – a place that might have been set up with picnic tables and camera opportunities, if Nineveh had been the kind of place to do something like that. As it is, there is only the trampled wild-flowers, and the view, and a 1973 Plymouth Fury, sunk down into the muddy turf.

“Nice car,” Dean says, surprised.

Castiel gets out and takes slow steps through the grass and flowers until he reaches the cliff’s edge, and he looks out. Dean watches him for a moment – the breeze in his hair, tugging at the collar of his windbreaker – and then he follows Sam out.

“Weird place to come hang out,” Sam comments, and he cups his hands around his eyes to peer through the dark glass of the Morgan Pinheiro's car. “I mean, there isn't exactly anything to do up here.”

“I dunno. Drink? Drugs?”

“Maybe. The parents said they were good girls, though. Straight-A’s, do-gooders, wholesome – you know.”

“Yeah, well, the parents always do.” Dean tries the door handle, finds it open. “Huh. Guess they thought they were coming back soon.”

“That, or they never went very far,” Sam says. His eyes track past Dean. “What's Cas doing?”

Dean follows his gaze. “Aw, fuck if I know, man.”

Castiel is crouched now, at the edge; Dean can faintly see his hands move, but can't see what he's doing.

Dean turns back to Sam and shrugs.
There's not much of any use to be found in the car, it seems – boy-band CDs, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, candy wrappers. A single shoe with the sole peeling away. A soda bottle, a baseball cap. Weirdest of all, there's a full first-aid kit in the back-seat.

“Okay,” Sam says slowly, as he picks through the bandages, the tourniquet, the emergency blanket glinting silver in the thin light. “So we know they weren't stupid – they knew how dangerous it could be going off in the wilderness on their own. But they didn't take this with them.” He goes around to pop the trunk.

Dean checks around the car for any sign of footprints, but it's been days, and it rains a lot around here. Even now, the sky overhead is heavy with the promise of a storm.

Eventually Dean gives up looking for prints, feeling a little too much like Scooby-Doo hunched over in the grass, and so he crosses to Castiel. “What are you looking at?” he asks.

“I think this is a way down,” Castiel says, and he points. “Or it was, before the rain.”

Dean crouches beside him. “Well, I'll be damned, Velma. You actually found something.”

Castiel squints at him, but Dean isn't paying attention, because Castiel is right. The cliff edge is decidedly worn from footsteps, and below are rocks set out as steps. At first glance, the way down seems impossible, but the longer Dean looks, the more he can pick out the way that the rocks form a clear path; one or two rocks are marked out with chalk – where it's safe to stand – but most have been washed away by the rain. Below them is nothing but water, dark and churning thickly, white foam cresting over the sharp rocks that jut out above the waves.

Dean leans back from the edge. “So where the hell were they going?”

“Maybe they were going swimming,” Castiel says.

“I don't think so. I mean, sure, kids do dumb shit like that all the time, but I don't know. These kids seemed careful.” Dean grimaces. He turns back the car. “Hey, Sammy – come see this.”

“Hang on a sec – I think I got something – just hang on--”
Of course, when Sam does get over there, he has the bright idea that somebody should go down there to scope it out; of course, Sam wants to be the one to do it.

“No way,” Dean says, and when Sam and Castiel look pointedly to him as the next option - “Oh, absolutely no fucking way.”

Castiel strips off his coat and starts to pick his way down.

It turns out to be not as steep or as difficult as it looks; he climbs down easily, but still Dean feels worry coiled thick in his gut when Castiel drops out of sight. He can feel himself becoming totally unbearable about it – Christ, I should have done it instead, he’s so fucking clumsy. Shouldn't he be back by now? Jesus, he's gonna have fallen in the water. He's fallen in and one of us is gonna have to go all Baywatch to get him back out of the goddamn sea, and do you even know if he can swim? Sam? Can he swim? - until Castiel appears, damp, salt-shiny, and slightly out of breath. Castiel shakes his head as he climbs up.

“Goddamnit.” Dean holds out a hand for Castiel and pulls him back up onto solid ground. “You okay?”

“I'm fine. It levels out just below these steps, and it winds further down, but there's nothing there that I can see. Just more rocks, and then water.” He ruffles a hand backwards through his damp hair, and pulls his wet shirt collar away from his neck. Dean makes a concerted effort of not looking at the smooth line of his collarbone.

“What was it you found, Sam?” Dean asks.

“Oh, yeah.” Sam digs into the pocket of his suit jacket, and then produces a small string of beads. “This. It was under the driver's seat.”

“That's from a rosary,” Castiel says instantly.

Dean glances at him. Angel of the Lord, he reminds himself – or at least something like it.

“Yeah, that's what I thought, too, but look.” Sam holds the broken string up by one end so that they
can see the full length of it.

Dean doesn't get it, but it only takes Castiel a second. “The number of beads is wrong. And – what is that?” Castiel takes the broken rosary from Sam's hand, and he turns over in his hand the small silver charm that hangs between the beads.

“I don't know, but it's definitely not a crucifix.”

Dean steps in closer to see. It's a small circular disc, engraved with a strange rune – a circle cut through by a series of straight and curving lines, some tilting off at strange angles when they break through the outer circle. Dean's never seen anything like it before.

Castiel says, decisively, with all the seriousness of a heart attack, “Maybe Ask Jeeves will have seen it before.”

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As it turns out, Google doesn't have the magic answer – and neither, for that matter, does Jeeves, when Castiel complains and insists enough that Dean gives up explaining why it's a terrible idea and just lets him try. There are maybe two or three results on the thing they're actually after – all with no source, no caption, and no context – and then everything else is irrelevant.

They sit in the cafe for almost two hours while Sam scours the internet for information, and Dean feels like he's losing his mind. There are only so many sugar packets he can flick at Castiel before Castiel gets annoyed and takes the packets away from him, because Castiel is the worst person in the universe and hates fun.

“Do you think fish know that they're fish?” Dean asks, chin propped in his hand.

Castiel doesn't look up from where he is re-organising the sugar packets, separating brown from white in the pot. “Fish haven't evolved brains complex enough to process self-awareness,” he says.

Dean considers this. “Sam, Google whether fish know that they're fish.”
“Google what?” Sam says absently, eyes fixed on his screen.

“Whether fish know they're fish.”

Sam lifts his eyes. For a second, he only stares at Dean, incredulous. “What?”

“Fish, Sam,” Dean says. “Do they know--”

“They don't,” Castiel interrupts. “I told you, they don't. Even dolphins, which are one of the most intelligent species on the planet, haven't developed--”

“Yeah, but dolphins aren't fish, dude.”

Castiel narrows his eyes. “I know that, Dean. Given that I was actually around when dolphins evolved from pakicetidae, I am in fact aware that they're mammals, so--”

“You need to learn how to have an argument without throwing in the whole *I was there* thing, you know – I'm pretty sure that’s the angelic equivalent of guys dropping the Nazi comparison bomb on the internet--”

“How would I even begin to compare a dolphin to a Nazi if--”

“Oh my God, please shut up,” Sam talks over them, voice raised, and he lifts his hands in surrender between them. “I thought you guys were supposed to be helping me with the research here, not bickering about – whatever – fucking dolphins--”

“We weren't bickering,” Castiel says, at exactly the same moment that Dean dead-pans, “We don't want to fuck dolphins.”

Sam stares at them, unimpressed, and Dean snorts a laugh into his hand, and he looks over at Castiel to see him completely straight-faced, but Dean knows him well enough to recognise when he is trying not to smile. Dean nudges Castiel's leg with his knee under the table, and when Castiel meets his eyes, there it is, the tiniest lift of the corner of his lips.
Sam's face settles even more deeply into one of his trademark bitch-faces, mouth pulling down, but before he can say anything further in complaint, the cafe owner comes wheezing over, presumably to let them know that the cafe is busy to the bursting point, and that they all need to order a three-course meal or suffer his wrath, but when he reaches their table, he doesn't say anything.

After a moment, Dean looks up, a little unsettled. “Can I help you?” he asks, with maybe a little more belligerence than is necessary, but he thinks this guy warrants it – and then he notices that the guy is staring at Sam's broken rosary.

“Where'd you get a thing like that?” the man asks, and his eyes are equal parts hostile and cautious as he eyes Castiel, whose hand is closest to it on the table.

“Birthday present,” Castiel says, and it's the weirdest thing, the rush of warm pride Dean feels at the way Castiel lies now, flat and easy, like he's been going in for identity fraud and obstruction of justice all his life.

Sam looks up, wide-eyed. “Sorry, do you know what this?” he asks, and he picks up the rosary.


“Earn it how?” Sam asks.

Dean reads the man's next move a split-second before he does it – Dean reaches across the table and takes the rosary in his hand just as the man lunges for it. “Sorry,” he says, with a smart-ass smile that he's been reliably informed makes people want to kick his teeth in, and he slips it into his jacket pocket. “Finders-keepers.”

Castiel glances over. Dean knows that look – Dean, you're being deliberately insufferable and it's not funny – and so Dean only raises his eyebrows at him.

“Excuse me,” Sam says, and he leans forwards in his seat to try and get the man's attention again. “You said you've gotta earn this – how? Where did it come from?”
“Nothing to do with you,” the man says, and he shakes his head. He rubs a hand backwards over his thinning hair and starts away backwards without taking their order. “You wanna put that back wherever you found it. Take it on back to the salt church, first chance you get.”

“The salt church?” Dean echoes. He frowns at Castiel. “The hell is a salt church?”

Castiel shakes his head.

Dean looks over at Sam, who is similarly confused. “Well, that's fucking weird.” He leans over to see Sam's screen as he types salt church into the search engine, but the page is still loading when out of nowhere there is the cafe owner again, clattering past them to slam shutters closed, to crash chairs back under tables.

He jolts Sam's chair in his near-frantic bustling, and Castiel ducks to narrowly avoid being hit over the head by a flying cane.

Sam holds his hands up protectively over his laptop. “Sorry, what're you--”

“Café's closed,” the man snaps. He slams another storm shutter.

Dean blinks. “Don't we at least get, like, last orders or something?”

“No.” Another shutter crashes shut. The man heaves the front door open and holds it expectantly. “Like I said. Café's closed.”

Dean, Sam, and Castiel all exchange a look of bewilderment, but reluctantly, they get out of their seats and start packing up their shit to get out.

Dean leans over towards the cafe owner as he gets up. “Anyone ever tell you you've got a smile that just lights up a room?”

The man glowers at him. “Café's closed. Out.”
Dean huffs and shrugs into his jacket. He leads the way out.

He pauses by the car to wait for Sam and Castiel, hands deep in the pockets of his jacket. He watches them come, Sam with his head stooped a little to better talk to Castiel, Castiel tilting his face over slightly. Castiel in Walmart jeans and a thrift store sweatshirt faded from dark red towards pink, his new sneakers already scuffed. He's been human for three months.

Sometimes, looking at the two of them together, Dean gets flashes of his old resentment – Castiel on the wrong side of holy fire, claiming it wasn't his fault; Sam with his hand sliced wide open, Castiel with black gore trickling from his eyes and mouth. It's not often that Dean has to remind himself all is forgiven – usually when he and Castiel are arguing, and that betrayal flares up hot and angry inside him, because first Castiel leaves him and breaks his brother, and now this? Things are different now, though. Sam is better, mostly, and Castiel is most days somewhere close to okay.

Looking at him, Dean thinks of the walk through the bunker one day weeks ago, passing the trash-can and seeing an old, neat dark Sunday suit stuffed into the bottom, under tattered clementine peel. He remembers the conversation: that's not me anymore. That was never me. I can never go back.

As Sam and Castiel approach, Castiel looks up and meets Dean's eyes. A small frown pulls down between his eyebrows, and he pauses on the pavement. “Are you alright?” he asks.

“Yes,” Dean says. “I'm good.” He unlocks the car, opens the back door and then heads around the front to get to the driver's seat. He doesn't think of it like holding the door open for Castiel until he catches Sam's amused look over the roof of the car. He scowls, and gets in without acknowledging it.

They sit in the car together a little while, Sam using his laptop to latch onto the Wi-Fi in Pollock Cafe from out here for a little last-minute research on whatever the hell a salt church is, while Castiel leans forwards from the back-seat to offer Sam advice and suggestions. In the meantime Dean blares Blue Oyster Cult and gets his phone out to check on Charlie and Kevin, who have been working together on a chain of vampire nests in western Wisconsin in the months since the angels fell - although mostly it sounds like they're dorking out on Skyrim together on their respective laptops. Either way, they're doing fine.

They get thirty-six minutes on the Wi-Fi before it gets shut off, and by then it's only coming up to five PM. They aren't sure what to do with the rest of the day, but Dean points the car down the first road towards the lighthouse and home. They might need to find somewhere else to do research, and to get hot drinks for keeping away the chill off the sea, but for now there's not much they can do. More importantly, Dean still has that fish in the freezer that Maggie gave them, and now that the power is back on, he might actually be able to do something nice with it – previously, it looked
like char-grilling it over the Impala's engine was the only option.

The cabin is still and quiet when they pull in, the sky just beginning to light itself up in hot orange through the thick tangle of cloud overhead, and the burgeoning sunset glints off the grimy windows, catches at the top of the lighthouse until it looks like it's burning.

“I'd like to take a look inside,” Castiel says thoughtfully as he climbs out of the car.

“Go for it,” Sam says. “I mean, it'd be good lock-picking practice, so I guess if you can get it open, knock yourself out.”

Castiel makes a faintly displeased noise to himself – he's no good at lock-picking. Dean figures he was expecting for someone to offer to come with him and help, but he sure as shit won't ask for help, so he's on his own now. “Maybe later,” he mutters.

Dean unlocks the front door. “Hey, Cas, now that the power's back on, you want me to make you some proper coffee? None of that instant crap.”

The first time that day, an expression somewhere nearing contentment appears on Castiel's face, blooming slow. “I'd like that.”

Sam heads down the hallway towards his bedroom, shrugging out of his jacket. As Dean moves through the kitchen finding ground coffee, Castiel leans back against the counter, and he pushes one hand down into a pocket of his slacks. Dean glances at his relaxed posture, his hands going to loosen his tie; he thinks Castiel has come a long way in five years. His fingers are slow, assured, on his shirt collar.

“How do you think he's doing?” Castiel asks.

Dean's hands become still on his bag of coffee. “What – Sam?”

“Yeah.”

Dean considers it as he arranges the mugs. “I don't know,” he says. “He doesn't ever talk about it,
but – yeah, I think he's doing better. I mean, he's eating right, he's exercising... okay, so he still doesn't sleep right, but he hasn't collapsed in like two months, so. Yeah. I don't know.” Dean shrugs. “I think he's getting there but – I guess I don't wanna jinx it, you know.”

“I'm not sure I do know,” Castiel says. There's an undertone of something sour in his words at admitting that he doesn't understand: shame, Dean realises. Of all the human things that Dean passed on to him, he regrets teaching him that.

“A jinx?”

Castiel nods.

“Oh. It's just dumb superstition, I guess. Bad luck.”

Castiel studies him. “You think that if you say it out loud, it'll cease to be true.”

“Something like that.” Dean says. He can hear the water boiling behind him, steam dampening the back of his shirt as the pot bubbles too wildly. Castiel's gaze is steady, soft. Dean drags himself away, turns to the pot and the waiting mugs. “It's like – when you say the same thing as someone else at the same time, you gotta say jinx,” he explains, and he pours. “And whoever says it first, then the other guy can't talk until your say-so. Or until the curses wears off or whatever, in fifteen minutes or something.”

Behind him, Castiel says, “Fifteen minutes. Is that a standardised time?”

Dean laughs. “Well, yeah, duh. Otherwise kids would cheat.”

“How honourable.”

“Come on. No-one wants to play with a cheater.” Dean shrugs. “It takes all the fun out, you know, and then it doesn't mean anything. You spoil it for everyone if you don't play fair.” He starts into this story about the time he and Sam were in school in Lake Andes for six months, long enough for Dean to get enrolled in this club that played dumb board games at lunch time – which, okay, is pretty fucking nerdy, but Dean didn't have any other friends and he was only eleven and apparently Charlie played something similar, so it's not too bad. He's going to tell Castiel about this kid, Ted Atkinson, who cheated every fucking game and ruined the whole club, but he was really popular –
or at least, as popular as nerds get – and then he turns around and he sees Castiel looking at him.

Dean stops.

He doesn't remember what he was saying, but it's not important. It doesn't matter, not with the way Castiel is looking at him, eyes soft and warm, the small smile on his mouth falling in territory dangerously close to adoring, and Dean doesn't know what to do. He feels like he's been ambushed.

“What?” Dean grouches. “What's that face for?”

Castiel squints a little, nonplussed, but his smile stays in place. “What face?”

Dean waves a hand in the general direction of his head. “That face. That dumb shit you've got going on right now--”

“This is my face,” Castiel says. “Or at least, it is now, even if technically I wasn't--”

“No, I mean you're doing--”

“Doing what?”

Dean opens his mouth but gets no further to explaining himself. He pulls a face. “I don't know. You're just--” Dean can't say it.

He can't acknowledge this thing between them, all the things they never say out loud. Castiel probably already knows – the same way Dean knows that Castiel is probably as in love with him as he's ever been – but he can't say it out loud. He can't say that sometimes he almost hates the way Castiel looks at him like he's everything.

“I don't know,” Dean says at last. “Forget it.”

Castiel studies him a couple seconds longer. Then at last, he says, voice quiet, “I was just thinking how remarkable you are. As an individual. As a microcosm for humanity as a whole.”
There it is. Dean wants the earth to swallow him. He wants to stop feeling this way. “Oh, is that all?” he says faintly.

“You have so much enthusiasm for things. That's not to say you're an optimist.” Castiel clarifies quickly, and he tips his head over to one side a little as he says, matter-of-fact, like it's obvious, “After all, your outlook on life is at times, frankly, depressing – but you care a great deal. You have a good heart.”

Dean doesn't know what to say. He has a thickness in his throat, a tight feeling in his chest like he's ready for battle. Fight or flight, and Castiel's expression is gentle. Dean swallows. “Thanks.”

“You're welcome,” Castiel says, like it's nothing. He touches a light, careful hand to the inside of Dean's elbow. “Coffee's ready,” he reminds Dean gently.

“What? Oh – shit, yeah.” Dean clears his throat and goes to pour it.

For several moments there is a thick silence between them, not necessarily uncomfortable, but the space between them is so small and the house so quiet that it's impossible not to notice. There is only the sound of the teaspoon clinking against the sides of the coffee mugs, and the sea outside.

Thankfully, Castiel seems to figure out that this conversation is a little heavy for Dean, and he changes the subject. “Do you ever regret it?” Castiel asks. “Choosing Sam?”

Dean hesitates. “No,” he says, and it's the truth. “But I, uh. I do think about it a lot, on cases. Wherever we're hunting some twisted demonic fucker and another body shows up, I can't help thinking, you know. Sam over them.” Dean swallows. “That they'd still be alive if I hadn't picked Sammy. That this could all be over forever if I'd only had the guts to let him die.”

Castiel looks evenly at him, considering. At last, he says, “I don't think saving Sam was necessarily cowardice. I think that, too, took courage.” He tips his head over a little, grimaces. “Some stupidity, perhaps, but courage nonetheless.”

Stupidity. Dean's heard that before. He knows it was a bad call, that if it'd gone down any other way he would have burned everything down to make the world safe, emotions and personal feeling be damned. “So you would've let Sam die?”
Castiel meets his eyes. “I didn't say that,” he says, voice quiet, and Dean knows what that means. Castiel loves Sam, too; he would have been just as stupid.

Dean doesn't answer. He tosses the coffee-wet teaspoon into the sink, and then he passes a mug of coffee across to Castiel.

“Thank you.” Castiel takes it eagerly in two hands, and sips without waiting for the coffee to cool. Dean sees the scrunch of his nose when it's too hot, burning his mouth a little – he's still impatient, but when you hit your sixth millennia, Dean figures you're entitled to be – but then he sees the ease of tension in his shoulders, which is a good sign. Dean's not good at a lot of things, but he knows how to make a mean cup of coffee.

“Do you ever regret it?” Dean asks, out of nowhere, because he's an idiot. He means it as a parallel to what they were talking about earlier, about Sam and the Trials and everything that has happened since. He doesn't think.

Almost instantly, Castiel's demeanour changes. He closes in on himself; his voice is hard. “Regret what?”

Dean knows he's made a mistake.

Recently, Castiel has been so shut-off and bad-tempered, and it's understandable – Dean figures inadvertently destroying your home, betraying your family, and forcing yourself into exile in order to keep from being killed by your own brothers, not to mention falling eighty-thousand feet out of the sky, will probably do that to a guy – but in the last few days, he's been better. Not necessarily comfortable with himself, but less unhappy. The idea that Dean may have single-handedly ruined that turns something sour and heavy in his gut; he tries to fix it. “Choosing us.”

Castiel makes a short, dismissive noise in the back of his throat, and the sound of it is ugly in the quiet between them. “Don't romanticise it,” he says. “You were my only option.”

“It didn't have to be. We could've set you up anywhere. Got you some money, a job, you know, get you started. You could've found a new place in Vermont, maybe, or somewhere in the south. You could've found a nice girl.” So sue him, Dean is fishing for the answer he wants. “Be normal, have a family—”
Dean isn't expecting the way Castiel snaps at him. “Dean, my falling was not intentional – I'm not ready to become an abomination just yet.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--” Dean trails off. “Sorry,” he says again, uselessly.

“If you want to ask whether I regret being here with you, then just ask,” Castiel says irritably. “Which, for the record, I don't.”

Dean's ears are burning hot and embarrassed. “I just – I don't know.” He can't leave well enough alone. He can hear himself making an idiot of himself as though from far away; he can't do anything to make himself stop. “You could've had anything.”

“But I wanted this,” Castiel says, blunt. For a moment, he keeps his eyes on Dean, his face hard, but his resolve wavers. He looks down into his coffee, and the next time he speaks, his voice is quieter. “Don't do this, Dean.”

Dean balks at that. “Don't do--”

“Just don't.” Castiel keeps his eyes on his coffee. His fingers jitter a little on the mug, uneasy. “Don't act like you know better than I do, because I'm just an incompetent fool who doesn't even know how to be human, let alone know what I want, and you have all the answers.”

Dean is silent for a moment. “I didn't say that,” he says, because he doesn't know how else to respond.

“You didn't have to.”

It's official: Dean ruins everything. He wishes desperately that he could take it all back, all the stupid unnecessary words that pollute the space between them, and he wants to say something that will magically repair everything, but he knows that anything he says will only make it worse. Dean is trying to be better – to be more tolerant, more even-tempered. Gentler. He doesn't need to have the last word.

It almost works. Dean almost says nothing, but it's flaring up again, that old sense that everyone he cares for will leave him and he'll regret forever that he couldn't think of the words to make them stay. It seizes in his chest, feeling a little like panic, and he bursts out, “Cas.”
Castiel looks at him. Dean expects him to be angry still, drawn cold and tight in that way he has when he closes himself off from everyone; he isn't expecting the way that Castiel just looks exhausted. Heavy.

“For what it's worth, I'm, uh—” Dean hesitates. He doesn't know how to say this without making more of an asshole of himself. “I'm glad you're here, with us. I just wish it'd happened different.”

Castiel raises his eyebrows a little, but there is no humour to his expression. “Yeah,” he says, voice flat. “Me too.” He takes a deep breath as though he's pulling it up from somewhere painful, and then he sets his coffee down beside the sink. “I'm going to go look at the lighthouse.”

“Okay.” Dean scratches at the back of his head. “You want a hand, or—”

“No.” Castiel walks out past him, and he doesn't look back.

He pauses with the door half-open, his head tilted over, and even with his back turned, Dean can see him looking at his shell-mobile where the breezes comes in through the time and coaxes it into slow music. Then he is gone.

Dean stares for a moment at Castiel's half-drunk mug of coffee where it sits on the counter, still steaming. He lets out his breath.

“Good job, Winchester,” he says.

The thought of just standing around and finishing his coffee in silence is too self-pitying to even contemplate, so he sets his mug down beside Castiel's and makes himself busy. He goes to get the fish out of the fridge, but as he does so he remembers that he hasn't yet fixed up the oven, so he sets the brine-damp newspaper on the kitchen counter and gets his tools from under the kitchen sink. He may be no good with treading delicately around Castiel, but he's good with his hands, and he's got work to do.
Dean wakes up to the icy glint of stars and fingers frosted pale, and he realises that somehow he has ended up outside.

He is lying supine on cold tarmac – more specifically, the cold tarmac in the middle of Route 1 leading into Nineveh. He picks himself up with aching bones, and he stretches until his joints pop, and then he stares ahead into the darkness.

“How in the hell--” he whispers to himself, and he spins to look behind him. Maybe this is a prank. Maybe Sam is parked somewhere down the road in the Impala, with the lights turned down low, sniggering to himself because he's so goddamn funny. Dean squints in every direction, and he doesn't see anything except the trees and the shape of low, stone houses in the distance. His heart sinks.

He's never gone sleep-walking before.

It's a long walk home. He's a little paranoid that someone is gonna look out of a window or be still in the street's at this time and see him coming along – out here in the biting cold in his worn old Black Sabbath T-shirt and a pair of boxers he's had since he was twenty-four – but he's alone. He has his boots on, so at least even unconscious he's got some common sense.

A clattering old pick-up truck blazes past him with a roar of a honk, flashing its lights, because Dean’s night really needed to be made that bit worse, and he hears someone arguing in an apartment set back from one of the stores in town, but otherwise the night is still. He has his ears out for any signs of someone following him, or for someone who might help him get back to the cabin in one piece, but everything is quiet. Even the sea makes no sound as it pulses lazily against
the town's jetties and harbour. The old fishing boats rock, slow, and silent where they should be creaking, sails rustling. There is just the dull crunch of his boots over gravel as he walks.

The woods between Nineveh and the cabin are darker and quieter, still, but that's to be expected, and after Purgatory, Dean feels almost comfortable with that. Of course, he'd feel more comfortable with a machete in his hand, but that's something that can't be helped.

The front door to the house looks to be closed when Dean reaches it – thank God, and also fuck his luck. He doesn’t know how he’ll get back inside, dressed only in his boxers and T-shirt with no pockets for door-keys, but at least he knows that he didn't leave the door wide open for just anybody to get in.

For a few seconds, he is strangely peaceful, looking over at the house. There is a soft, comforting glow of light through the curtains in the main bedroom.

He steps closer, old leaves crinkling under his boots, and he is just about to climb the rickety front steps when he catches movement from the corner of his eye. Dean doesn't turn his head; he just stops, and he watches his peripheral vision, and he waits.

From behind the curtain of the bedroom, the dark silhouette of a person steps into view.

Dean looks over.

The figure is gone.

His breath mists out in front of him, and the front door is open now, yawning, swallowing whole.

Dean wakes up under blankets. Loose thread on the top quilt runs dark blue and bobbly through his fingers, and he takes a couple of seconds to adjust to being awake. He blinks at the pale light slanting in through the windows – still without curtains, which he makes a mental note of, so that maybe next time they're in Steuben he can grab some. He breathes.

That was weird.
He climbs out of bed, reaching for his jeans where they lie at the end of the couch. His feet touch the floorboards, and he realises he's wearing his boots.

Dean frowns.

He kicks his boots off and gets dressed properly – quiet, so as not to walk anyone else up – but then he doesn't know what to do next. He looks across the room at the camp bed, where Castiel is still fast asleep. He is so still, half-buried under blankets, that for a second Dean has an irrational fear that he's died in the night, and he watches for a second to be sure that Castiel is still breathing – and then, once Castiel has inhaled deeply and Dean is sure that he's still alive, Dean watches a second longer. He sits there, quiet, and he watches Castiel breathe, because at the moment everything feels like taking one step forwards and three steps back, and he doesn't know how to make it stop.

Dean fishes his cell phone out of his jeans and texts Maggie – first of all, to thank her for the pollock, which was delicious when Dean finally got the oven working, and then, as an afterthought, to ask whether she knew anything about a salt church. She answers pretty quick, in spite of how early it is.

no problem. what do you want to know about the salt church for. this for that article of yours? up 1 road out nineveh route 1 way, turning 1.5 mile right. maybe 15 mins from you. careful. folks round here are real private.

They drive up north-east, through Nineveh and out the other side, until they find the turning that Maggie mentioned, and they drive fifteen minutes as instructed along the winding coastline, flashes of sea and stone through the pines as they the road grows ever narrower. It's more like twenty minutes than fifteen, and Dean is beginning to think that they're lost.

A corner comes up ahead, and as soon as they round the corner, the church is easy to spot. The road dwindles up ahead, back through the trees again, but to the right there is a turning that leads out onto gravel and then onto a wide space cleared on the stones up ahead, a hundred yards or so back from the sea wall. The church sits there more like a root twisted out of the ground than something ever built by human hands. With the sky grey and lazily churning behind it, threatening rain, it's straight out of a poster-book for abandoned buildings to avoid at all costs – and yet, apparently, it's not. Apparently it's well known all over this area of coastline, and according to Maggie's latest text, there's at least one more like it up towards Millbridge.

The church is small and stout, made of wood that looks old, faintly gnarled, but smooth – driftwood, Dean realises. Some of it is faintly rotten, revealing hard grey stone underneath, and the metal pins and bars that hold it all together are pink with rust. The roof top is sharply pointed, and rain has taken some of the tiles off, leaving them in shards around the base of the church that blend
in with the shingle. The double doors are tightly closed; it looks unwelcoming.

“Creepy,” Dean comments as he pushes the car into neutral. “I love it.”

“And the whole town is into this thing?” Sam says incredulously. “It's – kind of a dump.”

In the back-seat, Castiel makes a tutting noise, but when Dean looks back at him, his expression is carefully neutral as he looks out the window, so whatever Castiel took issue with, he doesn't care that much. Dean thumps the flat of his hand against the back of the front seat. “Come on, let's shake a leg.”

He and Sam swing out of the car, and head over the gravel and rough grey shingle towards the church. However, as they near the large double doors, Dean realises that Castiel is no longer at his side. He turns back to call for him to catch up, and then stops in the doorway when he sees him motionless, some fifteen feet back, beside the car.

“Cas,” he calls. “Come on, dude. Day's a-wasting.”

Castiel doesn't raise his voice to let it carry, and so Dean hears him as a whisper against the water. “I'm not going in.”

Dean frowns. “What?”

Castiel looks away, over his shoulder. He doesn't say anything else, and Dean's heart sinks. This is gonna be one of those things, he realises. The way Sam didn't want to deal with cases about house-fires; the way he sometimes still gets jumpy hearing about the devil. Castiel won't go in churches.

Dean scrunches his face up against the sting of salt as it whips off the water, and he tries to think of something to say to make it all better. He comes up blank. He says, “You sure?”

Faint, again: “I'm sure.”

Dean sighs, and he follows Sam into the church. Inside, it's cold and dark, all hard, unpolished wood and ragged stone. There are only two rows of pews before an altar covered in thick grey
cloth. The only windows are thin, high things in a strip just below the arch of the ceiling, not stained-glass but thick enough that the light comes through dimly. The walls are bare.

Dean whistles, and the sound echoes and echoes. “Doesn't look like anyone's ever been in here,” he comments. He glances back at Sam, who has paused just left of the entrance. “Does it say anywhere when the services are?”

“Uhh... I don't think there are any.” Sam stands by a plaque mounted on the wall – the only decoration, it seems, in the entire building, and he begins to read out loud. “You of noisy prayer for the ears of others, this place is not for you. You who are unclean, this place is not for you. You who say, I need no absolution; I am whole, this place is not for you. You of desperation, who believe when convenient, this place is not for you. You who – Jesus.” Sam raises his eyebrows. “Sure has a lot of rules.”

Dean steps up, frowning. He reads ahead. “You of material desire, who care only for the appearance of things – well, that's you out, Sam. You said it was a dump.”

Sam gives him a disapproving look.

Dean raises his eyebrows – well, you did – and he leads the way in. He heads down the aisle, scanning the pews on either side for anything worth noting, while behind him Sam traces around the edges of the nave. The church is pretty empty, looking about as abandoned on the inside as it does outside, and Dean is trying to put his finger on what's weird about it when he realises that there is no dust.

Every part of this place looks neglected and forgotten, and yet this place is clean. The flagstones are neatly swept, the pews are worn but neat; Dean stoops to run a finger over the wood of a prayer bench and finds it similarly well looked-after. It's weird.

He heads the rest of the way down the aisle, and pauses a second before he climbs the two stone steps into the chancel, to scope out behind the altar – similarly bare, and cold, and hard, and clean. Nothing interesting. He glances back over his shoulder, and then he stops.

Behind the altar, a couple feet back, there is a pit cut into the flagstones, and it is filled with stones.

Dean stares at it for a second, as though not sure of what he's seeing, and then he wanders slowly over to it. He crouches to pick one up. As he lifts it, he sees that it's not just a random stone – it's
smooth, flat, perfect, and there are faint words on it, either in white chalk or scratched on.

*Give me my absolution. I want to be clean.*

Dean puts the stone down, picks up another.

*My sacrifice is in the name of my Lord. Thank you for absolving me of sin. I have longed to be clean.*

Another.

*Forgive me my sins, Lord. I am not worthy. I am blessed to be offered redemption.*

Another: the same rock as the first one Dean picked up, he realises belatedly. Or not – maybe just the same message. Different writing.

*Give me my absolution. I want to be clean.*

“Jesus,” Dean mutters. He straightens up, turns towards Sam. “Hey, come look at this,” he calls – and he isn’t prepared for the way the acoustics bend his voice back towards him instead of towards Sam. His voice bounces off the chancel walls and comes back at him from all sides; his own words sound sharp and angry, and the first thing he thinks, ridiculously, is that he should lower his voice. He should have some respect. Then he shakes himself, because seriously, fuck this church, and he tries again: “Hey, Sammy. Sam!”

Sam looks up with a frown, and Dean wonders if Sam could even hear him. Dean gestures for him to come over.

Sam climbs the steps from the nave, skirts past the altar almost nervously, and then comes to stand beside Dean. “What the hell?” he says quietly.

“Yeah, I know, right? Jeepers,” Dean says, and he holds out the stone in his hand for Sam to see. “Fuckin' crazy people.”
Sam is silent for a moment, staring down. Then, he says, “How deep is this thing?”

Dean grimaces. “You got me, man.” Then he glances over, and he realises that Sam is uncomfortable. He can tell, almost instantly, by the way that he shuffles his weight from foot to foot, presses his arms close to his body. Dean thinks, too late, of the Trials – of Sam's voice, broken and feverish: *these Trials, they're purifying me.* “I mean, it's probably just, you know, superstitious garbage,” Dean says, and makes a big show of dusting his hands clean.

“Yeah,” Sam says. His voice sounds a little hollow.

Dean looks at him. “Come on, Sammy. You don't need this bullshit,” he says bluntly, all pretences dropped, but he is trying to be gentle with it. He touches a hand to Sam's elbow. “You're good.”

“Yeah,” Sam says again. He drags his eyes from the pit of stones and clears his throat loudly. “Yeah, I know.”

Dean tosses the rock in his hand into the pit, where it hits the others with a dull clank that echoes and echoes. “Alright. You think we've seen everything in here we need to see, or...?”

Sam lets out a slow breath, and then he draws himself up straight. “Yeah. I wanna take a walk around the outside before we head out, though.”

“Okay.”

Dean can see the effort it takes him to pull himself together and get back into the role of Sam Winchester, Monster Hunter, but he does it, and Dean doesn't say a word. He wonders who Sam is when he's not playing that part.

They head out together, Dean bumping Sam with his shoulder as they walk, just to be sure he's okay, and Sam looks over with a small smile which is more sad than reassuring, but it's something.

Dean doesn't realise just how dark it is inside the church until he comes out into the real world again, and he scrunches his face up against the light while he adjusts. As he opens his eyes, he sees that Castiel is no longer by the car, and he glances around until he finds him – fifty yards away or
so, by the old sea wall, looking out at the water. The wall is run-down in places, crumbling into a slope until Dean's not even sure it would be any good at holding off a piss-stream, let alone the advancing shore-line, but it looks like it still stands a good few metres above the shore, with low tide further out on the shingle. Dean thinks of calling Castiel over to join them, but he looks peaceful there, hands in the pockets of his jacket, so he leaves him.

Together Sam and Dean trace the outside of church for anything else they might have missed – an out-building, or another door, or some room they couldn't see from within the main part of the church, but there is nothing. No hidden doorways, no back passages: just the one small building, out here on its own, surrounding by dark stone and pine-trees on three sides, looking out towards the sea.

Dean fishes the broken rosary out of his pocket and lets it hang between two fingers. “So we have this thing,” he says, and he jerks his head in the direction of the church, “and that thing – and nothing in between.”

“That's not true. We know that either Morgan or Brittany were somehow involved with this.... and we know that it's, uh - not exactly Catholic.”

“Wow, Sam, say what you really think,” Dean says, dead-pan.

Sam ignores him. “It's all about repentance, right? And sacrifice – atonement, I guess. So there must be something they were hiding. Maybe something like our kind of thing.”

Dean tips his head over, considering it. “Maybe ten years ago one of them made a demon deal and now they're trying to get out of it.”

“Ten years ago?” Sam says incredulously. “Dean. They're sixteen.”

“Oh, pretty please with a cherry on top can I have a pony.” Dean raises his eyebrows. “Now we just gotta go see whether Morgan or Brittany have a unicorn in the back yard.”

Sam shakes his head, but the look on his face is somewhere close to amusement. “Right.” He heads past Dean, back towards the car, and he pats him on the shoulder as he goes. “Come on. We've got a lot more research to do.”
Dean groans, but he follows.

As they head for the Impala, Dean looks over towards the sea wall, where Castiel is still standing with his hands in his pockets, staring out at the water.

“Alright, let's shake a leg,” Dean calls across to him, already digging in his pants pocket for his car keys. He unlocks the car, opens the door, and then looks back over his shoulder towards Castiel, who hasn't moved an inch. “Cas. Hey! You hear me?”

Down by the sea wall, he turns slowly, and for just a moment, Dean has the surreal sense that this is not Castiel. This is someone else in those ragged jeans, that old jacket of Dean's, with the same tired slope of his shoulders, the same untidy dark hair. The man at the edge of the rocks will turn to face Dean, and the face will be different, and Castiel will be gone.

The slow way he turns means that the moment lasts and lasts, and something ratchets tight in Dean's chest, and he is already starting to slip into the thought that this is a fight. How he'll get Sam to safety; how he'll take him out.

Then Castiel meets Dean's eyes, across a hundred yards of gravel, and he looks distracted, but more or less the same. Dean lets out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding.

“Come on, asshole,” Dean calls. “Let's move.”

Castiel glances back towards the water, something still and quiet in his expression, and then he comes.

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“Okay, let's go over what we've got so far,” Dean says. They're back in the cafe, even though the guy behind the counter is still eyeing them with more than a little suspicion, and Castiel nurses a coffee the size of his head while Dean picks at a mostly-stale blueberry muffin.

Sam reaches for his notebook. “Uhh... here we go. Hang on.” He flips over a page with his free hand, lines covered in his tiny, neat scrawl, and he reads aloud. “The sea. Drowning. Sin and repentance, question mark?”
“You know, Sammy, you don't need to say the question mark out loud,” Dean says, deliberately obnoxious. “If you tilt your voice up a little at the end, it does it for y--”

“Go on, Sam,” Castiel interrupts, and Sam flashes him a grateful look. Dean rolls his eyes.

“Salt church – and here I wrote down all the church's weird little commandments, uh...” Sam turns the page. “I've got a list of names here – the Pinheiros’ and Mills' extended families. I already searched for a couple, but it looks like most of them have moved way out of Maine, so that could be tough going. And then here, I've written 'the sea' again, because, well.” Sam jerks one shoulder in a kind of non-committal shrug.

“Alright,” Castiel says, and he loosens his tie – and Dean knows it is time for some serious brainstorming. He's going to need at least three more coffees before he feels ready for anything close to this level of intellectual discussion. He starts counting change out of his pocket for another drink.

“So, what are we thinking?” Sam starts, like a goddamn professor.

“Siren?” Dean suggests.

“No, I don't think so. This thing isn't giving people what they wants, it's – getting them to atone. It's big into absolution, so... we could maybe be talking about an original sin type deal here, since it sounds like this thing isn't exactly picky.”

Castiel agrees, and Sam writes it down. “So we know there were those two incidents, but has there been anything before then? I mean, that's fairly recent, considering how old this town is,” he says as he scribbles.

“Maybe there are a couple more missing persons cases we missed,” Dean offers, and as he finds three dollars in loose change, he gets to his feet.

Sam hums. “Maybe. We can look into it, but I wouldn't count on anything. I already checked all the local leads I could think of.”
“Damn it.”

“Still, I'll make a note. We can work on it.”

Dean heads over to the counter – with a winning smile for the man running the cafe, who remains unimpressed – and comes back to find Sam and Castiel debating over rusalka.

“--but according to the other cases, from back in '97, it affects men too, whereas rusalka only affect women,” Sam is saying.

“But perhaps the death of the man wasn't the work of a rusalka,” Castiel replies. “Perhaps his suicide was simply – human. He beat his wife to death with a rock. It's understandable he might be upset.”

Sam hums in his throat, uncertain. “Okay. I won't rule it out – I'm just saying it seems unlikely.”

“Not a rusalka,” Dean says, summarising what he's missed, and he sits back down. “Okay. So what else goes bump in the night and likes the seaside?”

“I was thinking about ghost ships – you know, like that death omen we saw in Sea Pines?”

“Sure. There's bound to be a haunted dinghy somewhere around here.”

“Dean.”

“I'm just saying! This place doesn't have much in the way of ships, exactly. Tiny fishing boats? Sure. Maybe even a lilo somewhere, but ships? No way.”

Sam doesn't argue, but he directs his bitchiest little face at the notebook as he crosses something out. Castiel watches him, patient, until he finishes writing, and then says, “Make a list.”

Sam looks up. “What?”
“You said that your primary theories work around the sea, salt, and sacrifice,” Castiel says. “We can work with that.” He nods at Sam's paper, and then he starts. “In Norse mythology, the sea is the giant Aegir. In Greek, it's Poseidon, with numerous relatives of varying intimacy including but not limited to Amphitrite, Charybdis, Nereus, and Triton. The Hindus have Varuna, Lord of the Ocean. There's a Japanese sea spirit called Watatsumi, occasionally conflated with the sea dragon Ryujin. There's Tahoratakara from Polynesian folklore, and selkies from that of Scotland. If you're interested in floods, the earth is flooded by Zeus in Greek mythology, Enlil in the Epic of Gilgamesh, and inadvertently by Tezcatlipoca in Aztec creation lore – and of course,” Castiel says, and he tips his head over a little, “Christianity's flood narrative I assume you're familiar with--”

“Okay, slow down!” Sam is scribbling frantically, his handwriting near-illegible. “Epic of Gilgamesh and – Tezka--”

“Tezcatlipoca,” Castiel repeats, his tongue fluent on the pronounciation, and Dean is reminded again that Castiel is more than the body he's in.

“Well. And you said something about salt--”

“Salt's often used as an offering to the gods. As far as mythology goes, the Romans recognised a seawater goddess called Salacia, the Greeks a 'white goddess' called Leucothea, while in Norse mythos, the cow Audumla licked the first being out of a block of salt – and then you have Huixtocihuatl, and Lot's wife...” Castiel trails off. “Sacrifice, on the other hand, is much more broad. Most earthly civilisations have been into ritual sacrifice at some point or another.”

Sam huffs out his breath. He scratches the end of his pen over his head. “Okay. So … what I'm hearing is we've got a lot more research to do,” he says, and Dean can't tell if sounds defeated or excited by that prospect.


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Birds are circling overhead in loops ever higher and higher, and Dean leans back against an old tire, a mug of lukewarm coffee in hand, and he looks out at the view. He knows he had his issues with this place when they first pulled up alongside the debris and the overgrown weeds, but it's grown on him, and he's comfortable now. He likes the way so much of this cabin already is fixed by his own hand, and he likes the short walk to shell and shingle. He likes that they are far away
Gradually Dean becomes aware of a presence just beside him, and he turns to look up over his shoulder.

Castiel doesn't acknowledge him in any way. He simply says, “This is good sailing weather.”

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Okay, Long John Silver. Since when do you know a thing about sailing?”

“Since I spent three millennia garrisoned on Earth to watch over humanity,” Castiel says, annoyance thinly veiled in his tone. “I know about everything.”

Dean turns back out to face the front. “You don't know how to use a microwave.”

Castiel doesn't dignify that with an answer. Instead, he nudges at Dean's leg with his foot, and so Dean scooches up to make room for him. Castiel sits awkwardly, knees pulled up in front of his chest, and he loops his arms loosely around his ankles.

Dean looks over at him, at the untidy spikes of his hair, at the line of his jaw made hard by overdue stubble, at his mouth. Dean says, “Okay, I'll bite. Tell me about sailing.”

Castiel is quiet for a moment, as though considering where to start. “For a time I sailed with Fernão de Magalhães,” he says, and Dean shouldn't be surprised anymore at the easy and fluent way he slips into other languages, but it still catches him off-guard. “It was 1519. He was looking for the Spice Islands, but instead he – 'sailed off the edge of the world'. And then he came back. I didn't know they were going to make history, I was only there to watch over a cartographer whose maps unknowingly detailed the location of several Enochian artefacts.” His mouth turns slightly with a smile. “Circumnavigating the globe was a bonus.”

Dean does his best not to be impressed. “What was it like?”

“The journey? Or the map?”
Dean rolls his eyes. “The journey, dude.”

“Unpleasant.” Castiel squints through the morning light, pale and hazily bright. “Mutiny, thunderstorms, scurvy... we got lost a lot, too.”

“No shit,” Dean laughs.

“They were doing their best,” Castiel chastises him. “They were in unfamiliar territory.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” Dean looks over at him, and he's not expecting to find Castiel already looking at him, eyes soft. Dean was going to say something to that, but he's having trouble holding onto the threads of it. “So what, you were sailing with them? Or were you just hanging out the old-fashioned way – blinding light and eardrum-shattering sound-waves?”

Castiel makes a small displeased sound in the back of his throat at Dean's description of what his true form used to be. “I was the cabin boy. It was gruelling, and undignified, but it allowed me to be close to my charge without being suspected. It helped that my vessel was highly religious, but back then, everybody was. Possession consent was easy to come by in the Middle Ages.”

Dean snorts. “Yeah, I bet.”

Castiel reaches over and, without asking, takes Dean's mug of coffee from his hands. Dean lets him – he knows Castiel won't like it the way Dean takes it. Sure enough, Castiel takes a sip, pulls a face, and hands it back.

Dean takes the mug from him. “So what was he like?” he asks.

Castiel looks over, uncomprehending.

“The guy, the - the map dude.” Dean tries to copy what Castiel said, the rolling R's and strange vowels. “Farene- Fernah--”

“Fernão de Magalhães,” Castiel repeats, more slowly.
“Ferno? De--”

Castiel takes him through it, syllable by unfamiliar syllable, and Dean's bad at languages – not like Sam, with his Spanish, Latin, ancient Greek, and casual French – but Castiel doesn't patronise him. He just repeats himself, slow and clear, until Dean has a garbled approximation of it in his own mouth. Dean says it again. “Is that right?”

Castiel's mouth presses into a thin line, and Dean knows that he's trying to be kind. “It's close,” he says.

“Goddamnit.” Dean tips his head back against the tire behind them, lets out his breath in a frustrated burst. “Fuck knows how you do it.”

Castiel hums under his breath. He closes his eyes, chin tilting up to catch the sun. “Enochian is complicated. Portuguese is, by comparison, not difficult.”

Dean hesitates. There is that familiar feeling kicking in his chest, like he's too close to Castiel already and wants to be closer. He pushes through the flutter of nerves in his gut and he goes for it. “You think you could teach me?”

“Enochian?”

Dean laughs. “Portuguese.”

Castiel cracks one eye open, and he looks over. “Are you planning a vacation?”

“I could. Brazil, or somewhere like that.” Dean's mouth twists. “I'd have to fly though. Maybe not.”

“I could have taken you,” Castiel says, and the rest of the sentence remains unspoken: that he can't now, human and wingless as he is.

Dean leans towards Castiel, just tipping over slightly so that his shift is almost undetectable, but it
presses his arm against Castiel's. “It's okay,” he says. “I don't really wanna go.”

Castiel doesn't react, but he doesn't pull away either. He is warm and solid against Dean's arm, and he breathes slow and even.

“You okay, anyway?” Dean asks.

“Fine. Why?”


Castiel doesn't answer.

“Cas?” Dean asks tentatively, after the silence stretches on a moment too long.

“Yes,” Castiel says stiffly.

“If you want, I was thinking maybe if we ever have to go back there – or to another church, I don't know – then maybe we could leave you on some other job. If you want.” Dean peeks at him out of the corner of his eye, trying to pretend he's not carefully gauging his every reaction for how bad this thing is. “What do you think of that?”


It's not exactly informative, but it's something, and Dean is willing to work with it. “Okay. Uh. I don't wanna pry here, exactly, but - can I ask what was wrong?”

“No.”

Well, that's the end of that. Dean leans back.
“I'm not--” Castiel cuts himself off.

Dean doesn't prompt him. He leaves him the space to keep going.

Castiel's eyes are unblinking on the horizon and the dark crisp blue of the water beneath. “There's no place for me there anymore.”

Dean nudges him gently with his shoulder. “C'mon, man. You don't mean that.”

“Dean, after what I did--”

“Yeah, but – I don't know, I thought your old man was all about forgiveness and shit.”

Castiel makes a soft noise in the back of his throat – like a laugh, but dry, faintly resentful. “We must not be thinking of the same person,” he says. “Think Old Testament.”

That's a fair enough point. Dean doesn't know much about Judeo-Christian doctrine besides what he had to brush up on quick during the Apocalypse – mainly the fact that Michael wanted to wear him like a fucking condom – but he knows about the wrath of God. “Okay, fine, but dude, I'm sure you could still--”

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“Cas--”

“I said no, Dean,” Castiel says sharply.

Dean clamps his mouth shut, and he tries to ignore the voice in the back of his head going, *well done, genius, you fucking ruined it.* He scuffs his boots in the dirt, crumpling leaves and too-tall grass. He tries to think of something to say, but all he can think is, *I'm sorry* and he feels like he says that too much. He feels like it doesn't mean anything anymore.

It's late. The light is already going thin as they sit there, the horizon a blurred purple line over the
sea that casts the water in dimly glittering colours. The moon is a white sliver, leaving a chalky haze indented in the sky, and Dean can't help thinking that all of it, the colours, the light, the open sky, is a lot closer to the real Castiel than the body next to him.

In the early days, when Dean was just figuring out that this thing with Castiel wasn't just something he could shrug off, he used to think about what could happen if Castiel took a female body. He could love Cas a whole lot easier with tits, smooth hips, long hair. Of course, since then, Dean has to some extent got over it – he knows his way around a dick now, and not just his own, which is one thing – but that old line of fantasy, the thought that Castiel could always maybe flit to a more conventional, convenient body, meant that he was always very aware of all the ways in which Castiel was not Jimmy. They were sharing limbs and organs, but it was only temporary. Castiel was more than that.

It's not temporary anymore.

Dean's not bothered by the fact that now the chances of Castiel skipping into a body with boobs are nixed. He just figures that Jimmy's tired body must be a little like trying to fit the sun into a soup-can.

Because he's an idiot who doesn't know when to shut his mouth, Dean speaks without thinking. He says, “Cas - do you think we missed our shot?”

Castiel is silent. Dean listens to him breathe, too afraid to look at him, and he tries not to think that he's ruined everything now. Maybe Castiel doesn't know what Dean is talking about – what shot? Missed it when? Maybe Cas didn't even hear him.

Castiel pulls in a long breath, lets it out slowly. “I didn't know we ever had a shot.”

Dean winces. “Wow. Fuck, that's depressing.”

Castiel doesn't answer that. Out of the corner of his eye, Dean can see Castiel's hands twist together by his ankles.

“No, I guess you're right,” Dean says, after a moment, and fuck, it hurts, but he can see Castiel's logic. He sighs, feels himself deflate. “You're right. Shit. There was always some reason why we couldn't, why it wasn't a good time – but with us, the way things are, I don't think there's ever really gonna be a good time, so.”
Quietly, Castiel says, “What about now?”

Dean doesn't understand at first. He looks over, frown scrunching up his nose and brow. “What?”

Castiel won't meet his eyes. He tips his head a little towards Dean, but he keeps his chin lowered, his eyes on the dirt around Dean's boots. His hands have grown still. “Is now a good time?”

Dean's mouth is very dry and his throat feels tight. Something is twisting hot and panicked in his stomach, because he isn't ready for this. He isn't ready. His heart is beating jack-rabbit fast against his ribs; he almost feels out of breath. “What are you saying?” he asks.

Castiel looks up, and his expression is impossibly gentle, the line of his lower lip the softest thing Dean's ever seen. He opens his mouth. “Dean—”

The cabin's side door clatters open, and Dean pulls himself up straight-backed, looking straight at the lighthouse and the sea – and it's only then he realises the way he was leaning in, the downwards tilt of his face towards Castiel's. He takes a deep breath, and then he looks over, past Castiel, at Sam approaching with his laptop cupped carefully in both hands.

“Hey, guys, I was just listening to the--” Sam stops. He stares at them, suspicious. “Everything alright out here?”

“Yeah, peachy.” Dean forces a bright grin, and he climbs to his feet with his coffee mug held carefully out to keep it from slopping. His left arm feels cold without Castiel's weight pressed to it. “You were listening to the...?”

Sam's eyes flick between Dean and Castiel, seemingly unconvinced, but he does continue. “The police scanner, for the Steuben PD. Something's going on up there, but I don't know what. Take a listen – you think it's anything important?”

Dean crosses to him and comes up close to peer at his laptop screen as Sam taps up the volume. As the scanner reception crackles and grows louder, Dean's eyes flash over to Castiel again. He is still sat back against the tire, arms looped around his legs, his gaze lost in the distance, somewhere between here and the horizon.
He drags himself back to the laptop, forcing himself to pay attention as the connection snarls and cuts a few times before becoming clear.

“--ten-four, okay, we've got a possible fifty-one fifty out on Route 1, please advise--”

“Fifty-one fifty?” Dean frowns at Sam. “That's nothing to do with us.”

Sam's face twists up with uncertainty. “The way they were talking earlier was like something terrible had happened – it sounded like a murder, or at least an assault. You don't think it's worth checking out, then?”

“I don't know,” Dean says, and he pulls a face. “Look, man, if you really think it sounds like our kind of thing, then sure, let's go for it, but I'm just saying I don't think it sounds like anything relevant, is all.”

Castiel hauls himself slowly to his feet and comes to join them. “What's a fifty-one fifty?”

“Unstable,” Sam says. “Sounds like maybe they found someone on the road.”

“Yeah, but it could be anything. Like, drunk, lost, frightened – or you know, just...” Dean twirls a finger by his head, gives a low whistle like a cuckoo-call.

Sam shoots him a glare. “Dean, you really shouldn't--”

“Okay, okay, I'm sorry.” Dean holds his hands up in surrender. “Point is, it could be anything. I mean, this town's like ninety percent old people – it's probably just some old dear wandered out of her house or something.”

Castiel meets Dean's eyes, just fleetingly, and then he looks away, down at Sam's laptop. “Have they said anything specific on the scanner?”

“Not really.” Sam bites his lip. “Okay. Yeah, I guess you're right. And if it's not nothing, we can go check it out in the morning, right?”
Dean claps Sam on the shoulder. “Right! Nothing to get your panties twisted up about.”

Sam doesn't look totally convinced, but Dean gives him most winning smile, and then he heads inside to start cooking something up for dinner, because it's a better option that staying outside where Castiel is sitting, solemn and quietly-spoken, suggesting that maybe now, finally, they could start something.

Dean makes burgers – not as good as he makes back in Lebanon, where he has his full array of spices to actually flavour the meat properly, but still pretty delicious – and Sam and Castiel drink cold beers while Dean sips at OJ and pretends it does the same thing. He talk about the latest updates from Kevin and Charlie, and they go over what they know about the case so far.

When the last of the light outside has drained from the sky, leaving small bugs to beat distractedly against the windowpanes in search of the electric bulbs, Castiel goes to shut the window, his mobile of sea-shells clanking gently as they move. He plays a fingertip carefully over their edges, sending them chiming all over again.

When it's time to go to bed, Dean and Castiel look at each other and don't say anything.

Castiel goes to his camp bed, Dean to his couch. Dean has the tight stretch of nerves all through his chest, something hollow and heavy in the centre of it, and as he shrugs out of his plaid shirt, he thinks that this isn't a big deal. He unbuckles his belt, back turned to Castiel, drops his jeans, and gets into bed. It's only when he rolls over to get more comfortable that he sees Castiel, already under the covers, watching him.

Their eyes meet.

There is nothing more than four feet of uneven floorboard between them and the near-insurmountable obstacle of five years' silence. Dean wonders what would happen if he just got up, walked across the room to Castiel, and lay down beside him. It's not the first time he's wanted to – it probably won't be the last. Tonight, though, is the first it almost seems possible. He could do it. He wonders if he could come back from that.

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This situation has gone on way too long already and Dean figures that something must be done. He
buys curtains from a small family-owned place on the way out of Steuben, and they're not exactly glamorous – all three pairs in identical brown and cream pinstripes – but they were cheap, they fit the windows to within a few inches, and Dean can't take another day of being woken up by the daylight like a fucking cockerel.

It was never intended to be an exercise in teamwork, but somehow that's just what falls into place along the way. Castiel threads the curtain rings onto the curtains, because Dean is too impatient, his broad hands clumsy on the small, fiddly detail; Sam holds the rail up in position while Dean stands on a chair to nail the brackets to the wall, and Castiel stands back to call out whether or not it's straight.


“Finally,” Dean mutters, and he pulls a nail from his mouth where he has a couple pinned between his teeth. He gets three out of the four nails in, and then he drops the last one. “Aw, shit. Sorry, Cas, can you--?”

Sam shifts. “Everything okay up there?”

“Yeah, fine, just – dropped one.”

Castiel retrieves the last nail from the floor and hands it over. Dean's fingers graze over his thumb. Dean says, “Thanks,” and Castiel only answers with the small tilt of a smile.

Dean looks away and puts in the last nail, and Castiel stands at his hip until he's done. Sam makes a long, exaggerated noise of relief as he is allowed to lower his arms for a moment, and he looks over at Castiel with his eyebrows pointedly raised. “You having fun over there, taking it easy at the back?”

Castiel nods. “Yes, thank you.”

Dean snorts an undignified laugh. “Come on, Sam, you weren't exactly working hard either--”

“My part was the hardest! I just had to stay totally still and do nothing--”
“Yeah, you're right. That sounds super, super stressful, Sammy.”

“--and just hold up all the weight of the curtains until you get your lazy ass organised enough to fit the brackets, which could take anywhere up to weeks, as far as I can tell--”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Okay, what the hell do you have guns the size of my head for, then, if not for heavy-lifting?”

“For strangling you?” Sam points out, although his face is lit up by a grin wider and more content than Dean has seen in a long time, and Dean can't help but laugh.

“Ha! You wish--”

Dean opens his eyes to sunlight streaming through the windows, falling across the couch in a hot yellow square. He squints over at the dirt-smeared glass and the view of the sky beyond, and he rubs his knuckles into one eye as he slowly adjusts to being awake. He has a headache, which sucks – probably from all the weird-ass dreams he's been having – and he has pins-and-needles in one foot where it's been twisted at a weird angle while he sleeps, but otherwise he feels good.

He rolls out of bed and heads over to the kitchen, opening the fridge for some milk or some orange juice. Instinct kicks in; his hand is on a cold bottle of beer before he knows what he's doing. He closes the fridge, and he wakes up on the couch.

Dean blinks, startled, and for several seconds he just lies there trying to work out what the hell just happened. He was asleep. He was still asleep when he thought he wasn't. He is still asleep when he – no. He pulls in a deep breath, then another. Then another.

Dean lifts his head and looks over at Castiel on the camp bed. There's no movement there – for all his initial complaints about not knowing to sleep when they first got here, he now sleeps like he's taken a brick to the head. He lies flat on his back, limbs faintly outlined through his blanket as being sprawled out all over the place.

Dean scratches the back of his head and gets up, stumbling around in search of his jeans, and then as he does up his belt, he finds his way across to the window where Castiel's mobile hangs. Outside, the sky is a swirl of pale colour, grey and the faint pink tinge of lingering dawn, blue through the cracks.
Dean frowns as he knuckles roughly at his eyes, and he tries to ignore the strange unsettled sensation under his skin, the gut feeling that this is all wrong. The day is hot and yellow and crisp, and this here, with the cloud cover and the vague promise of rain, this isn't right.

Beside his head, Castiel's shell-mobile jangles softly. Dean stills it with a finger.

He drags himself away from the window, and makes his way towards the bathroom. No use trying to get back to sleep now. He pisses, and brushes his teeth, and then he starts to quietly clean, because he is still a little unsettled and he doesn't know what to do with his hands, but he figures he might as well make himself useful.

As he crosses to the kitchen, stepping carefully over clothes and duffel bags strewn all across the living room – because Castiel likes tidying up, but he has a habit of making a terrible mess first – his instinct is to put coffee on, but he doesn't. He feels washed-out with coffee, lately, and it's reaching a point where he can't pretend anymore that he's drinking coffee because he loves it. It doesn't feel the same as a bottle.

He gets a cup of water from the faucet, and then feels bad because the water is already starting to run in thinning spurts, which means they need to top up with a can. Dean fills up the water, and makes a mental note to sort out the plumbing proper.

By the time he comes back in, of the thought that he'll maybe need to get Maggie to come down and help him repair a couple of pipes down the backyard drain, Sam is fiddling around in the kitchen. Most horrifyingly, his hair is held back with some kind of scrunchie.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Dean says.

“Trying to see if you kept any hidden cereal stash in your weird little Costco bag of treasures,” Sam says, from underneath the sink.

“No, I mean, with your hair. What the fuck is that?”

Sam sits back on his heels, frowning, and the disturbing little bun he's got on the back of his head actually wobbles around. “It's keeping it off my face.”
“Oh, okay,” Dean says, heavily sarcastic. “I didn't realise that. Then, by all means, keep going.”

“Dean,” Sam says. “It's a bun. It's not going to hurt you.”

“It's hurting me already.”

Sam rolls his eyes, and just raises a hand to flip him off before he ducks back under the counter. “So is there any cereal in here? That's all I need to know right now.”

“Cereal is only for people without fuckin' gay top-knots,” Dean says, and he heads to the fridge to see what food they do have in.

Sam sits back on his heels with a sigh, and he looks over his shoulder at Dean. “Okay, first of all, I can't believe you actually know the technical term for what this is--”

“It's a travesty, is what it is, and come on, Charlie wears them all the time--”

“--and second of all, are we really still doing this?”

Dean looks at him around the edge of the open fridge door. “Doing what?”

“You calling things gay and me telling you not to.”

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Getting pretty defensive there, Samantha. Something you wanna tell me?”

Sam just looks at him with an expression so close to pity that it kind of almost pisses Dean off.

“What?” Dean says.

“You know, I know, right?” Sam says, exasperated.
Dean stalls. He doesn't know what to do. He holds onto the fridge door with a white-knuckle grip, and all his options go through his head like the reel of an old movie, flashing black and white before his eyes. *Know what? I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not gay. You're wrong.* He swallows, and he looks away into the fridge. He grabs the half-eaten loaf of bread. “Since when?”

“Earlier this year,” Sam says. “I accidentally found some of your magazines in the Bunker. I mean, I already had an idea but that was, uh.” He frowns. “Pretty explicit.”

“Oh.” Dean figures he doesn't have to explain to Sam that he still likes girls, too – Sam's been a liberal-thinking hippie for years, throwing around terms like bisexual and reeling LGBTQIA off his tongue, easy, even when Dean thought it was all made-up garbage. “Okay.”

“Plus, you and Cas aren't exactly subtle,” Sam adds, and he rolls his eyes.

Dean looks over at him sharply. “Me and Cas?”

Sam meets his eyes, and then his frown deepens. “You...”

Dean doesn't say anything.

Slowly, Sam gets it, and the expression that blooms across his face nearly guts Dean – Sam reeling instinctively back a little, like he can't process the idea that Castiel and Dean aren't that way. Dean doesn't know what that says about them, the way they are together. He knows he's been in love with Castiel longer than he can remember, but God. The fact that it's apparently so glaringly, painfully obvious just fucking sucks. Sam blinks. “You're not--”

“No,” Dean says shortly. “We're not – I mean.” It wouldn't strictly be true to say we're not like that. Dean thinks of Castiel last night, the shape of his mouth, the way he said, *is now a good time?* He shuts the fridge door and rubs his hand over the back of his neck. “We haven't – yeah. No.”

“Shit. Sorry.” Sam sounds genuinely apologetic, and he's not even making fun of Dean, which is something. “I didn't mean to assume, I just thought--”

“It's fine, Sam,” Dean interrupts, because Jesus Christ, he does not want to have this conversation
for a second longer than he has to, especially not with Castiel less than ten feet away. “And if you try and talk to me about this, I swear to God, I will piss in your salad.”

Sam grimaces. “Duly noted.”

He steps around Dean to get at the fridge, while Dean stuffs plain bread into his mouth, slice by slice. Dean leaves one slice plus the crust left in the bag, and is just putting it back in the fridge when there comes from the living room a rustle of fabric, a creaking of springs.

Dean looks over to see Castiel sitting at the edge of his camp bed, back turned. The line of his shoulders is surprisingly hard for a guy who just woke up, and Dean watches him for a second. He doesn't move, but just sits there, completely still.

“Morning, Cas!” Sam calls across the counter. “You okay?”

Castiel tilts his head slowly over to one side. Even from the other side of the room, Dean can hear the faint click and pop of his bones. Then Castiel stands, and he is motionless for a moment longer, looking across the room at the windows, through which the lighthouse can be seen, tall and rusting, over the trees.

Dean tries very hard not to look at him the wrong way, which is difficult when he's only wearing boxer shorts and socks. He feels hot at the collar already, just thinking about having had that conversation with Sam about Castiel with him just on the other side of the counter, and he decides the best course of action is just to get the hell out of here until Castiel puts some fucking clothes on.

He heads into the bathroom, shutting the door tight behind him, and for a moment, he just stands with his back against the door, eyes shut, thinking, you idiot. Now that he's told Sam about it, Sam isn't gonna shut up for a million dollars – or worse, Sam will be fucking sensitive about it, and he'll give Dean his space, in that awful, suffocating way he does sometimes when he thinks Dean is fragile. Fuck.

Dean pushes off the door and crosses to the sink. He plugs it, and grabs the fuller of the two water cans to fill the sink so that he can get washed. The water is ice cold, and has a funky smell to it like it's starting to go stagnant, but it'll do fine for now.

He scrubs at his face, briefly passes a soapy hand under each armpit, since there's not enough water
for a shower until they head into town, and he is just rinsing when he hears the low murmur of voices from the other room.

Dean stays bent over the sink. He isn't eavesdropping, but even through a wall, he can recognise Sam's quiet voice, and that low rumble that Castiel drops into when he's keeping a low profile. Dean wipes the water from his face.

He goes to the door and gets as far as the handle before he stops himself. He knows that if he goes barging straight in, Castiel and Sam will probably tell him what's going on – but still. There is that but in the back of his mind.

He isn't eavesdropping – or at least, he doesn't mean to. He is stood so close to the bathroom door, undecided as to whether to stay or go, that he can't help but hear.

“What kind of dreams?” Sam asks.

Dean stops. His fingers grow still on the door-handle, and something rises inside him that is unsteady and wavering. He can't put his finger on what it is or how to settle it. He thinks of waking in a cold sweat to a grey sky coloured all wrong.

Castiel's voice is almost inaudible. There is something like shame in it. He hesitates before speaking. “You'll think it's stupid.”

“Hey. Try me.”

There is a long silence.

Dean puts his hand on the door-handle, and then: “I'm standing on the beach,” Castiel starts, voice quiet. “And I'm standing at the water's edge looking out.”

“Okay. And then what?”

“That's it. That's all that happens.” Another pause. “I look out at the sea and I--” His voice drops until Dean has to strain against the wood to hear him. “And I am afraid.”
Dean frowns.

“Of course, I know that, neurologically speaking, the duration of a dream only occupies the final few minutes of sleep,” Castiel starts, louder now, and talking quickly, as though eager to justify himself, “but – it feels like hours. I stand there, and I am afraid, and slowly the tide comes in to wash over my feet. And it feels... like I'm waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” Sam asks.

“I don't know. But every night since we moved in, that's been what I dream, and – I don't know. It weighs on me.” Castiel's voice is quiet again, and strangely distant. He sounds distracted. “And I can't be certain, but I feel as though every night the water comes in a little higher.”

“I'm sorry,” Sam says. “I figure it's the suspense that gets to you. I mean, I know it's not the same, but when I was a kid, I had these recurring dreams that I was, uh – watching a tea-pot, actually.”

Dean remembers this dream, remembers Sam at eight years old waking up breathless with panic and immediately crawling over into Dean's bed for safety.

“I was watching this tea-pot,” Sam goes on, “and I was waiting for it to boil, I think. And that's all the dream was. I was waiting for it to boil, and you know, it was getting hotter, it was starting to steam a little, and I just... I felt like something terrible was going to happen when it boiled. I still have no idea what, but I knew it was terrible and it would be my fault and I couldn't stop it.”

“It was the anticipation,” Castiel says, a frown faintly creasing up his forehead.

Sam gives a little shrug. “Yeah, it probably was. I mean, it still scared the shit out of me, but – it was only a dream, you know?” he says, and he bumps Castiel with his elbow. “It was okay.”

Castiel doesn't look entirely convinced, but he nods. “Yeah. Only a dream.”

“Uh, you know, I got some advice from a teacher back then that actually really helped. I mean, it was third-grade stuff, so it's a little lame, but it might still work,” Sam says, and then he pauses as though he's considering whether saying this is a terrible idea. “It's, uh - keeping a kind of dream
journal, I guess.”

Dean drops his head down into his chest – almost banging his forehead on the door in the process – because, really, Sam? A dream journal? Is this who they are now? Besides it doesn't matter whether writing it down would help Castiel process it, because it won't happen. It's a nice idea, but Castiel won't go for it.

Castiel doesn't like writing stuff down; it's just one of those things. He's existed for six millennia, but he hasn't had a lot of supposedly crucial life experience, and so he has a vague idea of writing in that same way that he has a vague idea of sports – he knows the theory well enough, but in practice, he is slow and clumsy. And his handwriting is terrible. The way he argues it, he was a warrior, not a scribe. Other people wrote things down for him.

Dean can hear Sam making his feeble recommendations, and this is the point at which Dean heads back into the bathroom. He grabs a towel, dries his face off, and then tosses the damp towel somewhere in the direction of the lopsided, rusty towel rail. He misses.

By the time he comes out, the conversation is over.

“Everything okay out here?” Dean asks, bright and cheery, as he comes in to see Castiel hunched over at the dining table, something small and dark in his hands. Sam is opposite him with his hands outstretched on the wood as though he might have made an attempt to hold Castiel's hands, which is kind of awkwardly hilarious.

“Fine,” Castiel says. He rubs at the knuckles of one hand, pulling distractedly at the creases of his skin. Between his fingers, Dean can glimpse Sam's old dictaphone.

“What've you got there, Cas?” Dean asks, although he thinks he already knows.

Castiel stares at him as though he has no idea what he's talking about, and then looks blankly down at his hands, where the dictaphone rests.

“It's my voice recorder from college,” Sam says, his voice overbearingingly light and casual. “Cas is borrowing it.”

Castiel continues to stare down at his hands, and then slowly, he pulls them back towards him,
dragging the dictaphone towards him with a grating sound of plastic over the wooden table's surface. At that moment, there is a shrill ring, a rising and falling tone.

Sam gets up to retrieve his cell phone from the kitchen counter, where it sits next to the coffee-maker. He turns it over to look at it, and frowns. “Huh.”

“What is it?” Dean asks.

“Not sure. It's a Maine area code – not Maggie, though.” He glances up at Dean. “You gave Steuben PD all our numbers when you were working the case, right?”

“Yeah, it's probably them. Come on, dude, answer it.”

Sam swipes, and presses the phone up to his face with a brisk, professional-sounding, “Roesky speaking,” and he heads down the corridor towards the bedroom to avoid being distracted.

Dean glances over at Castiel and pulls a face. Castiel doesn't react.

The call doesn't last long. There is the dim sound of Sam in the other room - going *yeah, uh-huh, are you sure? Yeah, okay* – and then there is the thank you, the goodbye, and Sam comes back in looking more than a little stunned.

He stops in the entrance to the kitchen, and for a second, he just looks between Dean and Castiel like he forgot they were there. “Okay,” he says. “So, uh. You know the fifty-one fifty last night? That was Steuben PD, after all, they brought them in and got a positive ID – and it's Morgan. They've, uh. They've found Morgan Pinheiro.”

“Alive?” Castiel says, similarly startled.

“Wait, what?” Dean frowns. “Just Morgan? Well, where the hell is Brittany?”

Sam lets out all his breath in one burst. “No idea. Honestly, your guess is as good as mine, but I figure if we wanna find out what the hell is going on, we've definitely got one good source now. I say let's go ask.”
“Shit,” Dean says, and then, looking over at Castiel, who is still standing there in his boxers, socks, and that worn old T-shirt: “Well, you heard the man. Get some pants on.”

Castiel makes a huffy, grumbling noise under his breath, but he goes to do as he's told. Dean doesn't say anything, but he notices that Castiel takes Sam's dictaphone with him, discreetly slipping it into the side pocket of his duffel.

Dean crosses the kitchen, snatches his jacket from the back of one of the dining chairs, and shrugs into it – it's cold outside, sky open and cloudless, with the wind off the sea chilling the air near-frosty. It's not, Dean thinks, ideal weather to be found half-sane on a roadside.

He stands near the front door to wait for Sam and Castiel to finish getting ready, and as he waits, he notices the broken salt church rosary, abandoned on the table. It's weird, the twist in his gut at the sight of it – it makes him nervous.

He doesn't think about it; he goes to the table, picks it up, slips it into the pocket of his jacket. They should take it with them. They might need it.
There is something terribly wrong with his face--
Empty, restless, one side older than the other.
What is a thing? Sediment. A slow river clogged with
Silt.

Dean knocks three times, and then takes a step back, hands in the pockets of his suit pants. He
hunches his shoulders over, trying to keep under the tiny roof that juts out over the Pinheiros’ front
door, which isn't easy with Sam and Castiel squeezed under there as well. Rain is slicing down
hard, the air cold and grey, and Sam counted six seconds from thunder to flash on the way over. It's
shaping up to be a lovely day.

When Mrs. Pinheiro answers the door, she looks rough and sleepless. Her hair is unkempt, and her
clothes are rumpled.

It takes her a moment to recognise them. “You're from the FBI,” she says, blinking.

“Hi, Mrs. Pinheiro,” Dean says. “You remember me? We spoke a few days ago about your
daughter and Brittany Mills. These are my colleagues--”

“I remember you,” Mrs. Pinheiro interrupts. “What are you doing here?”
“We heard this morning that Morgan's been found,” Sam says, and when Mrs. Pinheiro just stares at him as though he's speaking Swedish, he gives her his gentlest smile and extends a hand towards her. “Agent Roesky. You can call me Sam. How are you doing?”

“Fine, thank you,” Mrs. Pinheiro says haltingly. She doesn't shake Sam's hand. “What do you want?”

Sam lowers his hand. “We just wanted to say, on behalf of everyone at the bureau, how relieved we are that Morgan is home safe, and to say that we're here if you need anything from us – anything at all.”

“We were also wondering whether it might be possible to speak to Morgan at all about what happened,” Dean adds, of the opinion that Sam is taking way too long to get to the freaking point.

“No. Absolutely not.”

Dean balks. Castiel and Sam exchange a look.

“My daughter is traumatised. She's been missing for eight days, she's been through hell in that time, and now she's home – no thanks, I might add, to you three, if you'll excuse my saying so – and I don't think she wants to dwell on it too much.” Mrs. Pinheiro says all this in one breath, all filled up with indignation, but then she seems to deflate. She slumps a little. Her hand slides down the edge of the door-frame, then falls to her side. She steps more clearly into view. “I understand that Olivia Mills' sister sent you here to get my little girl back, and I am grateful, but she's here. It's over.”

She has a point. Dean is about to apologise, but Castiel speaks up first. “So Brittany is safe, too?”

Mrs. Pinheiro opens her mouth, but seems to think better of it. She fidgets. “No. It was only Morgan. I don't know what happened – where Brittany is.”

Castiel inclines his head a little, as though he thought as much. “Then our job's not done. If we can't talk to Morgan, we'll talk to you instead.”

For a moment, Mrs. Pinheiro looks like she is going to argue, but there is no real strength in her defiance. Castiel's look doesn't allow for that. She steps back, and silently holds the door open for
them.

Dean enters first, squeezing past an over-stuffed coat closet and a trunk that belches hats and scarves across the carpet. There is a charcoal sketch of a farmyard scene mounted by the door into the sitting room, just over a thermostat turned up to the highest setting. They stand awkwardly in the hall for a second, trying to figure out a compromise between getting out of their wet jackets and staying professional. Dean opts for shrugging out of the jacket and taking it with him, folded over his arm, and Castiel follows suit.

“They found her along the first road,” Mrs. Pinheiro starts, when they find their way into the sitting room, crowded together onto one too-soft couch. “A nice elderly couple from Nineveh. They nearly hit her with their car.” Her voice thickens, and she clears her throat. “She was just – in the middle of the road. Standing there, shaking, they said. They said she was soaking wet, and she was half-frozen, and they wanted to help her but she – she was – the word the police used, when they got there, was unresponsive. Like she was sleepwalking.”

Dean lifts his head.

Beside him, Sam scribbles away in his notebook, unfazed, but Dean has the first road in his head: the long walk home, the headlights sweeping past. The open front doorway.

“She wouldn't talk to the police, not a word – but she spoke to me in the car, on the way home. A little, anyway. She said she and Brittany went along the cliffs just past Nineveh--”

“Where the car was found?” Sam asks.

“Yeah, that's right. And they went down to the beach to explore the caves, and--” She takes a deep, slow breath. Her hand jitters a little on her knee, but when she speaks, she is calm. “And the tide came in. And they were trapped.”

Dean stares at her.

Faintly, Castiel says, “The beach,” and Dean knows that he has realised, as Dean just has, that they must have gone to investigate the cliffs at high tide, when there was nothing to see.

They must have been standing over the caves where the girls were trapped – speculating about
what might have happened, and debating over rosaries, while Morgan and Brittany were treading water. Dean tries to imagine the dark, the water, the struggle to keep afloat. Eight days. He feels sick.

“Is it okay if we just ask you a couple more questions?” Sam asks, and he has on his gentlest voice. “We won't be in your hair much longer – we're just trying to put all this together so we can find Brittany.”

Mrs. Pinheiro nods. “Yes, sure.”

“Did Morgan have any enemies? Anyone who might've wished to hurt her?”

“No, of course not. I mean, she's sixteen. She's not a criminal.” Mrs. Pinheiro looks over at Dean, dismayed. “You asked me this last week. Is there something going on that I don't know about?”

“No, ma'am, this is just procedure,” Sam says, and he smiles small and friendly for her – a private little smile designed to make her feel safe. Dean has seen it used a thousand times; today is the first time it doesn't seem to work.

“Excuse me,” Castiel says, out of nowhere. “Might I use your bathroom?”

Dean frowns at him, but Castiel doesn't pay him any attention, and strangely enough, Mrs. Pinheiro seems to be somewhat put at ease by the request.

“Go for it,” she says, relaxing. “Down the hall to your left, first door on the right. Sorry about the mess in there.”

“I'm sure it's fine,” Castiel tells her as he stands, and he leaves the room. Dean doesn't watch him, careful not to draw attention to him, but out of the corner of his eye, Dean can see that Castiel turns right.

“Now, Morgan and Brittany, they were good friends, is that right?” Sam asks.

“Yes, they were very close. They were inseparable in elementary school, back when we both lived
in Steuben, but then the Mills moved away to get Brittany into a better middle school, over in Hancock County, so they saw less of each other, then. But they would make sure to have weekends together every now and then, to keep in touch – weekends like this one.”

Sam writes it down. “Okay, great. And just quickly – do you know whether Morgan would have had any involvement with the salt church in Nineveh?”

The colour drains from Mrs. Pinheiro’s face. “The what?”

“The salt church,” Sam says again, his eyes still on his notepaper. “You might have heard of it, it’s just down past Route--” He lifts his head, and cuts himself off as he sees Mrs. Pinheiro’s expression.

“You know about the salt church,” Dean says.

“Most people around here have heard of them,” Mrs. Pinheiro replies, her voice calm and even, which isn't suspicious at all. She is pale. “We've got weird neighbours. People tell stories, you know.”

“Are you or your family at all affiliated with the churches?” Sam asks. There is a flash of lightning, white and sharp, out the far window, beyond the kitchen.

“No. Of course not. No.”

Dean frowns. “Huh,” he says. “That's weird.” Mrs. Pinheiro looks up at him, and Dean digs in his jacket pocket until he feels it amongst the loose changes and old receipts – beads brushing against his fingertips – and he pulls out the rosary, lets it hang between his fingers. “Cause we found this in Morgan's car.”

There's no denying it this time: Mrs. Pinheiro recognises it.

“You're familiar with it, I guess,” Sam says.

Mrs. Pinheiro's mouth is slightly open. Her throat works, and her voice, when she speaks, is small.
“That's – that's mine.”

Sam lowers his pen. “You're from Nineveh.”

“I thought you said you weren't a believer,” Dean says, tone only a little accusatory.

She almost laughs, and the sound is high, nervous. “I'm not, believe me. I got out of there a long time ago, I left it all behind. I moved away, my husband is Jewish, I converted. I thought I left all that behind me – she must have found it somewhere,” Mrs. Pinheiro fiddles nervously with her collar, her eyes darting between them. “I mean, don't get me wrong, of course Nineveh is a nice town. Sure, it's a little old and backwards, but it's a nice town. They just have weird beliefs, is all. I had to get out of there. I didn't want Morgan mixed up in that.”

Sam frowns. “What do you mean, weird beliefs?”

Mrs. Pinheiro hesitates. “They're just – very conservative, in their lives. And very... I don't know. Pious.” She gives a tight-lipped smile. “Speak to Joseph Tracy, in town. You'll see what I mean.”

Dean sees Sam write the name down in his notebook, and at that moment, Castiel returns from the bathroom, his hands a little damp, which Dean wrinkles his nose at. Outside, thunder crunches, loud and echoing, and the rain rattles harder through the pipes. Dean edges up on the couch to make room for Castiel, and then regrets being associated with him at all as he comes up and says, “Mrs. Pinheiro, you have beautiful towels.”

She blinks at him. “Oh. Thank you.”

Castiel sits, and as he adjusts the jacket of his suit, he glances over and catches Dean's eyes. He doesn't say anything, but Dean knows that look – he found something.

“Okay, that's almost all for our questions, now--”

“Wow,” Dean says loudly, and he pulls at his the collar of his shirt. “Geez. It's hot for November, right?”
Sam shoots him a glare, but Dean ignores him.

Mrs. Pinheiro grimaces apologetically. “Sorry about that,” she says. “My husband – as soon as we're into fall, he always turns that thermostat all the way up and leaves it there. Such a waste of electricity, I always tell him. I'll turn it down a little.”

“Oh, no,” Dean says, all sweet handsome charm with his warmest smile. “Mrs. Pinheiro, that's too much, I wouldn't--”

“No, I really should. It's such a waste. Just one moment.” She gets up and crosses out into the hallway, half-shuffling as one of her slippers come off her feet.

The instant Mrs. Pinheiro is out of earshot, Castiel leans over to Dean and Sam. “Morgan's room is directly above us – can you hear? No movement. And I checked, she's gone.”

Dean frowns. “Where the hell is she?”

“Good question.”

“Maybe she was in the bathroom?” Sam tries.

“No, I looked, and it was--”

“There we go,” Mrs. Pinheiro says as she comes back in, and she pushes her sleeves up. “That should be better now. I'm sorry about that.”

“No, thank you, that's perfect,” Dean says, and he gives her his sunniest grin as she comes to stand in front of them.

“Now, do you any of you want anything to drink, anything to eat? I was – inhospitable, when you arrived, and I'm sorry about that,” Mrs. Pinheiro says. “Worrying about Morgan, I just... I haven't slept a whole lot. But I don't mean to be so rude. Can I get you a coffee, some juice?”
Castiel sits up a little straighter. “Coffee?”

“Coffee would be great, ma'am,” Sam says with a smile. “Thank you so much.”

“No, I really ought to be thanking you for all that you're doing for my family and for the Mills family, too.” Mrs. Pinheiro turns to head out to the kitchen, calling back over her shoulders, “Three coffees?” Her voice is almost drowned out by the rain outside.

“Yes, please!” Sam calls back, and then turns to Dean and Castiel. “So what do you think? Is Morgan definitely gone?” Sam asks.

Castiel nods.

“So what about the salt church?” Dean asks, and when Castiel only frowns, Dean quickly fills him in on what he missed – Mrs. Pinheiro being from Nineveh, moving away, disliking their beliefs, something about Joseph Tracy.

“It sounds like they're just fundamentalists, is all,” Sam says, and he gives a small shrug. “Is that really that bad?”

Dean stares at him. “Are you actually trying to tell me you agree with them?”

“Well, I don't disagree with them, either,” Sam objects. “They're doing their own thing and I respect that, but, you know. As far as kooky local religions go, this one doesn't seem so bad. I mean, if you're gonna devote your life to something, this whole trying to be good thing--”

Dean sighs. “Sam, we've talked about this.”

“It's not too different from mainstream religion, that's all I'm saying.” He looks down at his hands. “It's not like they're all devoting themselves to drowning kittens or something.”

Castiel doesn't say anything.
“So – Morgan and Brittany,” Dean says, in an loud and obnoxious topic change. “Shit, right?”

“I can't believe we didn't think about the tide,” Sam says. “It was so obvious – right in front of us, and we just didn't think.” He has that frown creased up through his eyebrows as he runs through what happened. “So they go into the caves. They get caught out by the tide. The caves fill, they run or climb or swim for wherever they can stay above water – probably not paying too much attention to which way they're going, or how they're gonna get back afterwards... Plus, I'm guessing whatever they took with them to explore wasn't exactly an advanced underwater flashlight, so – no light.”

“Jesus,” Dean says.

“They were down there for eight days. That's what, sixteen, maybe seventeen changes of the tide. God. Can you imagine? Being lost like that. Trying to find your way out in the dark every time the water goes down, knowing you've only got a couple hours before it comes back...”

“Okay, you're starting to make my head hurt.”

“So where was Brittany?” Castiel asks.

Sam looks over at Dean, and then twists to peer over the front seat. “What?”

“You've speculated quite thoroughly on Morgan's movements and thought processes during the time she was trapped, but where was Brittany during all this?”

Sam worries at his bottom lip with his thumb. “I don't know. Maybe they got split up when the water started coming in. Cut and run, everyone for themselves.”

“Nah, I don't buy that,” Dean says. “She's sixteen, she's not that ruthless.”

Castiel shrugs. “Maybe Morgan is.”

“Morgan is sixteen too!”

“Dude, we've met some pretty fucked-up teenagers in our time,” Sam points outs reluctantly.

Dean pulls a face. He's not wrong.

From the kitchen there comes a few last bustling, busy sounds – tea spoons clattering, cupboard doors slamming – and then in comes Mrs. Pinheiro with a tray full of little porcelain cups and saucers.

“Here we are,” she says.

“Thanks so much, ma'am,” Sam replies as he takes his cup and saucer from the tray, his giant hands dwarfing it as he tries not to spill. Castiel starts to drink immediately; Dean sets his straight down on the coffee table.

“Mrs. Pinheiro, we just have a couple more questions before we get out of your hair. Where is Morgan at the moment?”

Mrs. Pinheiro frowns. “I told you, she's just upstairs. She's in bed. Recovering. I mean, she can't even speak at the moment, she can barely walk – why?”

It doesn't sound like a lie; it sounds like she believes it. For a second, like a real asshole, Dean thinks, Christ, she better not be missing again.

Sam gives her a tight smile. “No reason, ma'am. And your husband, where is he?”

“He's just at Walmart at the moment – we blew a bulb in the basement. But he'll be back soon, if you want to wait to speak to him?”

“That's great, thank you. And do you know whether he--”

Then, out of nowhere, Castiel's hand is groping blindly for the front of Dean's jacket, fingers clinging, and he says, “Dean – Dean--”
Dean looks over, and then he follows Castiel's gaze, and then he sees: through the window in the kitchen, the storm outside is picking up strength, swirling cold and dark while rain lashes the glass – and out in the neatly-manicured yard, in the driving rain, there is the figure of a girl.

She is in an oversized T-shirt and pyjama shorts, plastered tight against her body with the rain water. Her arms and legs are splinter-thin, her skin faintly mottled, her shoulders high and tense. She has something small and dark in her hand.

“Shit,” Dean says. “Ma'am – your--”

He doesn't get much further than that, as lightning snaps hot and sharp through the sky, illuminating the back yard in white and silver, and Mrs. Pinheiro twists in her seat just in time to see Morgan lift the box-cutter to her throat.

Dean only realises what is about to happen a split-second before a high, wordless sound of terror makes it out of Mrs. Pinheiro's throat.

A porcelain cup falls, shatters against the carpet with a small explosion of sharp slivers. Dean launches himself out of his seat, and Sam is only a moment behind him.

Dean yells her name, his voice a rough thing strangled with panic, and then he is at the back door – still left wide open, rain hissing into the kitchen – but by the time he gets out into the storm, it's too late.

Through the lightning, he sees it as though in a series of brightly flashing stills – Morgan's knees buckling, her blood-darkened hands outstretched, the way her head rocks back as she falls. The box-cutter. The rain.

“Sam – 911--” Dean yells, and he has his suit jacket off as he gets to her, and he's ripping out of his nice white button-up too, leaving himself only in his white undershirt as he balls up his shirt to stem the blood flow. There is background noise, heard as though far away: Mrs. Pinheiro screaming herself hoarse, Castiel speaking in a low, urgent voice to calm her, Sam calling emergency services. Dean drops to his knees beside her, and with careful hands he turns her over onto her back.

For a single instant, his stomach pitches violently and he thinks he's going to vomit – he pushes it
down, and he settles himself into the cold detachment that lets him behead a ghoul in the shape of a toddler, put a bullet in the brain of a scared teenage girl who doesn't know she's a werewolf yet. Underneath the hot pulses of blood over her skin, here is a hot dark flutter of muscle, a yellow-ish glint of bone, and Morgan gasps and chokes and struggles.

“Hey, hey, it's okay,” Dean says, his voice low and reassuring as he applies pressure to the wound – “here, look at me, alright, look at me--” and then she does, and the words die in Dean's throat.

Morgan's eyes are empty. Dean has seen enough corpses in his time to recognise death when he sees it, and there is nothing left in her.

Her expression is completely void of panic, almost calm, and there are those cold, hollow eyes staring back at him even as blood leaks out of her throat, wave after wave over Dean's clenched knuckles. The rain glides over her skin like molten wax.

Dean can hear Sam on the phone behind him, and he starts relaying information over his shoulder – she's breathing, she missed the jugular and the carotid, she might be going into shock – and there is Castiel at his side, with nice cream towels in his hand he must have gotten from the house. Dean takes them from him, tosses his bloody shirt aside, and starts pressing in with the towels. The blood spreads quickly, absorbed and staining, and the rain stings at the skin of Dean's bare arms.

Dean says, “Go take care of her mom,” because he can't think how to say *this girl is already dead*, and Castiel goes.

Sam is still talking: “--yeah, that's 5506 Menzies Drive, we're around the back--”

Morgan's stained hand clutches at Dean's wrist, fingers tight and sharp like claws, nails digging in, and her lips move soundlessly. There is blood in her mouth. She jerks and spasms, and her hollow eyes roll in her head, and the rain lashes down over them.

Dean holds her until the sirens come. The water catches in her eyelashes, spills into her open, choking mouth.

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Sam drives them back to the cabin. Dean sits in the back-seat, shivering in his thin T-shirt, stained
with blood spatters and dirty hand prints, translucent from the rain. He still has his ruined button-up clenched tight in one hand. Beside him, Castiel shrugs out of his suit jacket and drapes it carefully over Dean's shoulders. The wind-shield wipers work in overdrive, rain thundering the metal and glass, and the road bumps steadily on.

They left Menzies Drive shortly after Morgan and Mrs. Pinheiro disappeared into an ambulance, although for a while there were paramedics who lingered to check that Dean was okay, that he wasn't going into shock. Dean didn't know how to tell them he'd seen worse. It had been Sam, with his softly-spoken reassurances and soothing smile, who had convinced the paramedics that everything was under control, and then Castiel had taken Dean's hand to help him up and back to the Impala. Now, there is a silence in the car as thick as the thunder-clouds overhead. Castiel still has his fingers curled loosely through Dean's, and Dean doesn't have the presence of mind to overthink it.

“Gotta love the weather, huh?” Sam says, in a voice that tries to be light-hearted and falls short. He puts on the turn signal and the ticking sound drums through Dean's brain.

They pull into the cabin's drive, wheels grinding slow over gravel, and in the near distance, the lighthouse is tall and dark. As Sam settles the Impala into park, lightning forks sharply over the sea, and that hot white light catches on the glass at its head as though, briefly illuminating the lantern room.

Dean pulls his hand from Castiel's and gets out of the car. His hand feels clammy, empty, now. Sam goes back to the trunk and pops it open, but Dean doesn't wait for him. He goes straight for the cabin door, doing his best not to shiver as cold rainwater flattens his hair to his skull, glides the length of the back of his neck and under Castiel's jacket.

Inside, the cabin is showing its lack of waterproofing. There are at least three immediately obvious places where the roof is leaking, and water drips fast to puddle on the floorboards. When they left this morning, the drizzle was unthreatening, and so they left open a couple windows, which Dean figures now is a mistake. Castiel's shell mobile jangles aggressively as it swings and bounces, seashells and sweet smooth stones striking the wall hard. Dean goes to slam it shut, and catches sight of a piece of paper on the table.

Hey. came by to get some of my sisters stuff from the closet, let myself in. looks like youre doing the place up nice. I'll give you a refund on some of your rent if you can get it habitable. I'll be back over later to clear out the rest of that closet, between 4 + 5. see you then. - maggie

Dean shrugs off Castiel's jacket, letting it fall on the floor, and kicks off his nice shoes. He crosses arms, pinches the hem of his sopping wet T-shirt, and peels it off over his head. He wriggles out of his suit pants. He slams the window shut.
Across the living room, Dean goes in search of some clothes that aren't sodden with rain and covered in Morgan Pinheiro's blood. He would shower to get rid of the slick feeling of rain and blood on his skin, but truth be told, he's used to it, and he can't have a real shower here anyway – just a shallow bath, with a mug to cast lukewarm water over his head and shoulders, like he's in the fucking 1800s.

He needs to fix that. He makes a mental note – if Maggie is coming over later, he'll get her to help him connect the cabin to the water pipes outside. In the mean-time, he bundles up all his dirty suit, of the thought to go throw it in the bath-tub to be washed, but by the time he gets his hands on that button-up, he figures it's a lost cause. He kicks it under the couch.

Sam puts on some coffee, and then heads through into the bedroom – presumably to change out of his suit, now that Dean's back in civilian wear – and Castiel stands in the middle of the room with his hands curled into loose fists. The quiet is deafening, and the storm outside snaps at the windows.

Dean retrieves buckets and bowls to put around the house where the roof leaks – sidestepping Castiel each time he has to go past him, since he stands like an island in the middle of the room, staring out the far window at the distant, dark froth of the sea past the cliff's end. Dean lays down something to catch the dripping water, and for a moment he just crouches by his bowls, looks at the water slowly filling, and he listens to the thunderous roar of the rain overhead, and he thinks again of Morgan. Her clutching hands as she convulsed, her hollow eyes. It makes something itch underneath Dean's skin.

“Hey, Sam?” he says, straightening. There is some muffled response from the far bedroom, and so Dean heads towards him. He knocks on the bedroom door, and then opens the door, leans against the door-frame. He means to go right in with his theory, but he gets distracted. “You okay?”

Sam is sat on the edge of his bed, shirtless, with his duffel bag in his lap as he searches through for something to wear. He looks up at Dean and he stops searching. He doesn't say anything, at first. His eyes dart away and he spends a couple seconds glancing along the wall, the floor, the edge of the mattress, and everything else in the room before he says, “Yeah. I'm fine.”

He has that twitchy, nervous look; his hands won't stop moving. He's not fine.

“You sure about that?” Dean pushes. “Just 'cause, you know, you can get weird about that kind of stuff.” He doesn't know a better way to express that. He doesn't want to make Sam feel delicate, saying that he knows how sometimes suicide cases upset him. He doesn't want to say outright that he sees the way he looks sometimes, like he's fighting something back, trying not to breathe in case
it's contagious. Dean hears the confession again, inside his head: I'm not clean.

Sam pulls at the long hair behind his ear. “No, yeah. I know. But it's not – that.”

Dean watches him. He's not as good at figuring out when his baby brother is telling the truth as he used to be, but he trusts this. “Okay. But if anything, like... I don't know. Gets to you, or whatever-”

“Yeah, I'll let you know,” Sam says, almost sounding tired, and Dean isn't sure he believes that one. Sam may be fine now, but if shit hits the fan, Dean doesn't think Sam ever got the hang of telling people when he isn't okay. For now, Dean doesn't push the issue. Like Sam said: he's fine.

“Okay. You better.” Dean pushes himself off the door-frame. “By the way, in all your research, did you find anything about what the salt church folks think about the afterlife?”

Sam starts rummaging through his bag again. “The afterlife?”

“Yeah. You know, heaven, hell, something in between. Or a lack thereof, I dunno.”

“I've barely found anything about the church, Dean,” Sam points out, still digging. “I barely understand their way of worship, let alone knowing about their theology.”

“Huh.”

Sam finds a grey T-shirt, followed by a green plaid shirt, and he sets the duffel bag aside so he can stand up to get dressed. “Why do you want to know, anyway? I thought you wanted to stay as far as possible away from that side of things.”

Dean shifts his weight, uncomfortable. “I dunno,” he says again. “I just – I guess I just thought something was a little off about Morgan, is all.”

Sam is quiet for a moment. “Morgan's gonna be fine,” he says. “She missed the artery, okay, Dean, I know it looked really bad but the paramedics said she would be--”
“I know, I know – look, it's not that, okay?” Dean rubs a hand down over his face. “Sam. We've seen a lot of people get ganked, right? You trust me to know a dead body when I see one.”

Sam frowns. “Well, yeah, of course. But--”

“Morgan was dead, Sam.”

Sam stares at him. “That doesn't make any sense,” he says at last, but he doesn't sound entirely sure. “She bled gallons, her heart was pumping--”

“Okay, then maybe her body was alive, you know, technically. But I'm telling you, Sammy, there was no-one in there. Whatever came fucking sleepwalking out of the sea, it wasn't Morgan. And the thing that bled all over me and traumatised Mrs. Pinheiro, that wasn't Morgan either. At least, I don't think so.”

Sam takes a deep breath. “Fuck.”

“Right?” Dean exclaims. “It's fucking – Jesus, Sam, I swear to God, it was... I don't know. Creepy.”

“Okay.” Sam pushes a hand backwards through his hair, and Dean can hear him taking slow, even breaths. “Okay, fine. I'll look into it.”

“Thanks.” Dean hears a low, rattling buzz from back in the room, and he glances back over his shoulder, down the hall, as though he expects there to be some giant neon sign telling him whose phone is going off and whether it's anything important. He looks back at Sam. “We'll figure it out,” he says, because he knows Sam is pretty shaken by the whole thing with Morgan too, even if he's pretending it's all fine and dandy for Dean's sake.

Sam nods. “Sure.”

Dean pats his hand against the door-frame, and then he pushes himself off and heads back down the hall towards the living room, where his phone is probably tangled up somewhere in his wet suit pants. He needs to text Maggie – if he wants her to help out with plumbing, she might need to bring
some things over, so it's best to let her know.

The text turns out to be from Maggie after all – warning them that she's coming over imminently, and sure enough, just after four o'clock, the quiet is broken by the sound of a car horn outside, followed immediately by Maggie Crouse's voice: “Open up, it's the police!”

Now at the dining table, Sam lifts his head with a smile, and Dean looks up through the window. Over the tangle of trees and thorns that hem in either side of the path back down the cabin, he can faintly see Maggie's pick-up on the drive.

Dean gets up to answer the door, pausing a little with his hand on the knob as Sam scrapes his chair back from the table, and they open the door together like a cute little estate-agents' duo.

“Hi, Maggie,” Sam says.

“Hey,” she says, and then looks between Sam and Dean with an unimpressed tilt to her mouth. “Where's the weird one?”

Dean almost smiles. Of course Cas is her favourite; he has that effect on people. “Just washing up in the bathroom, I think. He'll be out.”

“Allright. Anyway, I've got the stuff for the plumbing here. It's not too tough a job to crack, it just takes a little elbow grease and time, and I've been running low on both. With you here, it should be okay.”

“Well, ma'am, I'll do what I can to help.”

“You've got this place looking pretty nice, I have to say.” She glances up at the house and gives a small grimace. “Nicer, at least.”

“I figured, the favour you're doing us? The least I could do was tidy up a little, maybe make it easier for you to sell the place whenever you get around to it.”

“Hey, sure – maybe then I don't need to bring your rent down afterwards,” she says, and it's hard to
tell whether or not she's kidding, but Dean figures he's safe with a small laugh.

They get out into the rain to pry up the grate and work on the pipes underneath – which is annoying, since it means that now one more set of Dean's clothes, of the few that he has, is soaking wet and unusable, but as he gets steadily drenched, he tells himself it's worth it if it means he can get the shower actually working.

It's hard work, and it takes more than an hour, leaving Dean soaked to the bone and shivering again by the time they're done, but when he bangs on one of the windows and yells through to Sam, “Run the faucet!”, he can hear water rushing through the pipes they've fixed.

“Fuck, yes,” Dean exclaims, and he holds his hand up for a high-five. Maggie regards his outstretched hand with eyebrows raised, and then she dusts off her muddy hands on her jeans and heads back towards the house, even as Dean calls, “Come on, don't leave me hanging!”

He follows her in, shakes his arms out like a wet dog, and peels out of his sodden jacket and flannel shirt while Maggie squeezes water out of the ends of her hair. Castiel is at the dining table now, squinting at something on his cell phone. On the other side of the kitchen counter, a pan is boiling hot water for coffee, because Sam is apparently the greatest, and Sam even throws a couple of damp towels over towards them.

“Thanks,” Maggie says, although she only uses the towel to dry her hands. Dean guesses she's probably used to this kind of weather.

“No, really, we should be thanking you – you've done so much for us,” Sam says, and he has that earnest smile like he's thirteen again as he heads to the fridge for their half-case of Yuengling – and the orange juice, as an afterthought. “Do you want a beer or anything?”

Maggie shakes her head. “Can't stay, I'm afraid. Weatherman's talking about a storm coming and I've got a hole in my roof that needs seeing to. You spill some for me.”

“Alright.” Sam sets down the beer, and instead he walks with her to the door. “Do you need any help with your roof at all?”

“No. Should be fine.” Her eyes move over Sam with some suspicion, as though her image of him as some brooding six-foot-five FBI agent don't exactly pare up with the dweeb falling over himself to patch up broken roof tiles as a favour. “Thanks, though.”
“No problem.” Sam gets the door for her. “Oh – by the way. Do you know anything about a guy called Joseph Tracy?”

Maggie takes a half-step through the doorway, face screwed up against the rain. “Sure do. What do you want him for?”

“We heard about him from someone we interviewed earlier – we were just thinking about asking him a couple questions. You know, for the Gazette.”

She snorts. “Right. Well, I can tell you for sure that if promoting tourism in this area is what you're after, Tracy's not the man you want to talk to.”

Sam frowns. “Why not?”

“For one thing, he's a recluse. For another, he's an asshole. A crazy asshole.”

Sam glances back over his shoulder at Dean, eyebrows raised. “What do you mean?” he asks, turning back to Maggie.

“He's just getting old, is all. He's got some weird beliefs, same as the rest of them here, thinking they're all blessed or something, but he's mostly harmless. Just don't mention the Word of God if you wanna get a single coherent word out of him for your article.”

Castiel lifts his head.

Maggie flips up the collar of her coat as the wind outside picks up, lashing rain hard against the walls and hissing in through the door. “You wanna talk to him, you try to catch him in the afternoon, Wednesdays or Saturdays. He's wheelchair-bound in a house up two flights of stairs, so he doesn't get a lot of visitors, but he sees family Wednesday mornings, so if you go after, he might be a little better-tempered. You got a pen?”

“Um--” Sam starts up patting his pockets like a loser, so Dean comes to his rescue with a blotchy ball-point from the dining table and the back of a receipt, and he leans on Sam's arm to write the address down.
Behind them, Castiel gets up, the legs of his chair scraping sharply over the floorboards.

“You got it?” Maggie asks. “Good. Let me know if you need anything else. You take care, though. Folks here don't take kindly to prying. Keep to tourism – don't get personal, or these people'll turn on you fast.”

Somehow, Dean doesn't think that he needs to worry about get shanked by old fishermen. He smiles. “We'll be careful.”

Sam folds the address into his pocket, wishes Maggie a safe drive back through the rain, and then shuts the door after her. He heads back towards the dining table, and Dean just looks down at the puddle gradually spreading from the front door. He keeps meaning to get some kind of mat to put here, to stop this from happening, but it's too late for preventative measures now – he's gonna need a mop.

Dean heads for the bathroom, where he tucked the mop in the corner of the shower, out of the way. The door is closed over.

“Hey,” Dean calls through, rapping on the wood. “Cas, can I--”

As Dean knocks, the door swings further open, and he sees Castiel with his back turned.

He stands with his hands braced on the edges of the sink, as the faucet runs fast and cold. The way he leans his weight onto his wrists tilts his elbows out to the sides, tenses his shoulder-blades up into sharp points that jut underneath his shirt. Dean's first thought is of wings, beneath his clothes; his second thought is broken bones.

“Cas,” Dean says, and then he notices the sink filling.

There's a problem with the drain, he knows that much – the water doesn't drain fast enough, and if you leave the faucet on too long then you pretty quickly end up with the sink overflowing – and right now Castiel is staring down at a sink that is less than inch and roughly thirty seconds from flowing over onto the counter and onto the floor.
“Dude – whoa, Cas!” Dean lunges past him and shuts off the faucet, accidentally dragging the hem of his shirt through the water in the process. He leaps back out of the way after, and holds his shirt out to keep the wetness away. “Jesus. Is it the fucking leaky roof not enough for you? Come on. I know it's exciting that we have running water now, but. Seriously.”

Castiel stares down into the sink, a frown creasing up his brow. His lips part as though to speak, but nothing comes out.

Dean holds the hem of his shirt away from his stomach, cold and wet, but he can't be bothered to change again. He can take care of that later. He looks back at Castiel. The only sound between them is the slow, rattling gurgle of the water making its way down through the pipes, and Castiel's mouth is open.

“Cas,” Dean says. “You okay there?”

“Sorry,” Castiel says, and he lifts his head. He meets Dean's eyes in the mirror, his expression somewhere between ashamed and confused. “I got distracted.”


Dean's heart sinks. So that's what this is about. “Cas, the way Maggie put it – it sounds like this Joseph is just some crazy person--”

“Amelia thought I was a crazy person,” Castiel says distantly. He stares into the mirror as though he's looking right through it. Then, after a long pause, he amends, “Thought Jimmy was.”

It's the first time Dean has heard Castiel accidentally blur the line between himself and his vessel. He wonders how often that happens.

Dean shifts his weight. “Yeah. I guess most people who don't know how this shit works would have a hard time with it.”
Castiel tilts his head slowly over to one side. The shift of muscle, of tendon, is visible underneath his skin. He swallows, and his Adam's apple moves within his throat. In the harsh, washed-out white light of the electric bulb, his skin is off-colour – casting into higher contrast the darkness beneath his eyes, the pale pink fissure of his mouth. In this light, Castiel's skin looks a size too small.

“What if he's not crazy?” Castiel asks. His voice is quiet.

Dean lets out his breath. “I guess we'll find out tomorrow.”

Castiel hums a little in his throat, a faintly displeased noise, but he doesn't say anything.

He stands by the sink long after Dean has wandered away to text Maggie, and when Dean glances back, he is there with his hands on the edges of the sink. The faucet drips, slow.
Dean gets one mouthful into his Cheerios before he realises that the milk has gone bad, but by that point it's too late to spit. He holds it in his mouth and stares into the middle distance, and he considers the possibility that the universe is deliberately conspiring to make his life as terrible as possible. He gulps it down.

“Ugh. Fuck.” He grimaces at his bowl, and drags himself up out of his chair to empty it. It's near enough a criminal act, wasting perfectly good Cheerios, but he guesses it's just gonna be that kind of shitty day.

On the other side of the kitchen counter, Castiel lifts his head from where he's making up the cot bed. “Everything alright?”

“Shitty fucking milk's fucking off,” Dean grouches. “Ruined my cereal.”

Castiel's mouth twists a little to one side in a kind of sympathetic expression that Dean recognises as one he's picked up from Sam. “My condolences,” he says mildly.

“Yeah, yeah.” Dean empties the rest of the milk carton into the kitchen sink, watching despondently as it whirls away down the drain alongside scattered coffee granules. “Do you think we're gonna have time to go by Costco before we head out to the archives?”

Castiel bends to straighten his comforter. “Perhaps if Sam sacrifices his shower, but as to how likely that is, I can't say.”
Dean groans. “He has so much fucking hair.”

In the back of his throat, Castiel huffs a small laugh. “Therein lies the problem.”

“Okay. I'll ask.” Dean sets down his bowl on the counter.

He rubs a hand over the back of his head, considering whether he actually needs a shower as well, and then Castiel is coming around the end of the counter into the kitchen – his bare feet sticking a little to the floorboards, his boxers sleep-rumpled in a way that Dean decidedly not does pay attention to. His hair is a mess, sticking up in dark clumps, and he has the soft pink impression of his pillowcase on one cheek.

“Hey, there,” Dean says, as Castiel comes closer in a way that makes something in Dean's gut flutter nervously. “Can I help you?”

“Sure,” Castiel says, and he moves up into Dean's space, crowding him against the kitchen counter until the plastic digs into Dean's ass.

“Cas?” Dean says, voice a little strangled at the proximity. “Everything, uh – everything okay?”

Castiel comes in close enough that Dean can count his eyelashes, can see the sweet curve of his mouth. “Fine, thank you,” he says, and and when he sets one hand on the counter top either side of Dean, his hands are dark and wet. “I'm doing fine.”

Castiel's eyes drop to Dean's mouth; Dean lets out his breath in a rush, confusion and want tangled together in his chest. “Okay,” Dean says, trying to summon courage. “Okay. Cool.”

Then Castiel kisses him. His mouth is slow and distracted; his hands push underneath Dean's outer shirt and skate up over his sides. “Dean,” Castiel says against his mouth, his breath heavy. “Dean.” He tips his head over, catches Dean's lips again.

Castiel's hands slide up Dean's chest, over his collarbones, and then slip up the back of Dean's neck, brush through the short hair there. His fingers curl around Dean's throat.
Dean wakes up cold and breathing hard.

He's awake now, and that, before, wasn't real. It felt – Jesus, it felt so fucking real. He reaches out blindly, curls his hand around the back of the couch, digs his fingers into the cushion. He can feel the ridges of the ugly fabric against his skin, the zip of a cushion cover scratchy against his palm. He is here. He is here.

“Come on, Winchester,” Dean says under his breath. “Fucking get it together.”

His heart is racing so fast he almost feels sick, and he doesn't even know why. A weird dream, that's all: a weird dream with Castiel's soft, sweet mouth, where he has woken up near-shaking as though from a nightmare. He sits up, twists his legs around to rest his feet on the floor – and he can feel the cool floorboards beneath his toes, he can feel that, he is here – and takes a second to breathe. He tries to hold onto the last tendrils of that nightmare, to figure out what the fuck is wrong with him, but it's already slipping away from him. All he remembers is the icy touch of Castiel's mouth, his hands on Dean's skin.

“Fuck,” he says again, and he scrubs his hands down over his face.

On the other side of the room, Castiel's camp bed is empty, the blankets strewn haphazardly across the lopsided mattress to trail across the floor. For a moment, Dean just stares at the vacant bed, and he breathes.

He drags himself out of the tangle of his bedding, and shakes off a shiver that crawls the length of his spine. He goes for the window.

Outside, the morning is still and quiet, the sky pale and frosted with cloud, the horizon grey above the sea. The window is pushed slightly ajar, Castiel's shell-chimes faintly singing as they catch in the wind. Dean is just about to turn back inside, considering getting some breakfast, when he catches sight of a silhouette in the lighthouse's lantern room.

He does a double-take, squinting up through the thin grey light, but he's not imagining it – someone is up there, and the longer Dean looks, the more he is certain that he knows who it is.

Dean toes into his boots, neglecting socks out of laziness, and he grabs his jacket from the back of a dining chair as he heads out.
The path up the hill to the lighthouse is overgrown, tangled with snares of tough root and long grass, but there is a narrow line where the undergrowth has been tamped down by footsteps. Dean follows, twisting one arm up in front of him to keep leaves and low-hanging branches from hitting him in the face, and he kicks his way through the tangle as the hill grows steeper and steeper until he breaks out at the foot of the lighthouse. The rusty metal door is ajar.

Dean climbs the narrow steps, slow and cautious, with one hand tight on a railing that stains red rust like a scar across his palm. The metal beneath his feet creaks and groans, popping faintly as it flexes beneath his weight and snaps back after.

At the top the lantern room is dusty, disused, with a film of sticky grime across the lamp lens. Two of the windows have been shattered, and there is a door out to a narrow, rickety-looking balcony that overlooks the sea, and there is Castiel, outlined palely against the dark water.

“Hey,” Dean says.

Castiel turns his head towards his shoulder, not enough to look at Dean, but enough to acknowledge that he's there. “Morning, Dean,” he says, and he looks out at the sea again.

Hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, Dean comes up to stand beside him. Up here it's cold, the air brisk, but Dean, with his jacket collar turned up, is willing to withstand it, and Castiel doesn't seem to mind. It's too high up here for Dean's liking, and he's not entirely confident in the safety of this balcony, with the way that some of the slats tilt away underfoot, the peeling rust on the metal, but he trusts Castiel.

“Nice view,” he comments. He tilts sideways to peer over the edge. At the foot of the lighthouse, the cliff drops away to rocks and surf, the rest of the shoreline tucked away out of sight behind them, and on three sides there is nothing but the water, the cloud-swirled grey sky, and the pale yellowing bruise of the horizon. Dean looks over at Castiel. “How are you holding up?”

Castiel breathes slowly. His eyes, cast out to sea, are closer to grey than blue in the thin light, dark and calm. “Fine,” he says, at last.

Castiel considers this. “I like it here,” he says after a beat. “The sound of the sea, it's – calming. Everywhere I go, even in sleep, I can feel it.”

Dean looks over, watches him carefully as his hands play on the metal balustrade of the lighthouse balcony, long fingers playing with a flake of rust where it peels away. The wind sweeps hard around them, and catches in Castiel's hair, tangling it in his eyes and snagging at the corner of his mouth.

“One of the most difficult things about what happened was … the silence. You don't understand what it was like, the constant noise. The voices, the eternal songs of praise – granted, it was irritating, but.” Castiel falls silent. “Everything is so quiet now.”

Dean doesn't know what to say. He looks out at the sky and the water, all bleeding murky yellow together.

“Things were tolerable in the car, with your meaningless talk and your music and the sound of the road, the engine – of course, it was also terrible, claustrophobic, and agonisingly slow, but it was tolerable. This...” he trails off, and when Dean looks over, there is real peace on his face. He is calm. “The endless sound of the water, the open sky. Up here – this is the closest I have felt to flying.”

Not without some nervousness, Dean eyes the balcony edge, the distance to the sea from the outermost edge – at least eighty feet to the foot of the lighthouse, and a further fifty feet or so down the cliff to the water, where rocks jut darkly through the cresting waves, sharp like broken teeth. Dean doesn't much like flying; he doesn't think he'd like falling either.

“The sea – it comforts me,” Castiel finishes, and he lets out his pent-up breath in one long, slow sigh.

Dean looks over at him. “What about those dreams of yours?”

Something shifts in Castiel's face, like the flicker of a movie that skips a few frames. Dean can't put his finger on what has changed, but something is different. Castiel says, his voice measured, “You overheard me talking to Sam.”

“Small house, thin walls,” Dean says, by way of apology. “I didn't mean to eavesdrop.” He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, shrugs his shoulders up. “Plus, I was worried, so.”
“That's why I told Sam, and not you.”

Dean frowns. “Sam worries, too.”

“But you don't worry about overbearingly caring for people. Sam appreciates boundaries.”

Dean is going to object to that, because he knows for a fact that Sam can get super, super overbearing about aggressively caring for people, but before he opens his mouth to say anything, he thinks of Sam's careful treatment of Castiel – skirting around the subject, giving him what he needs and then giving him the space to figure it out – and Dean thinks of barging in head first like usual, thoughtless. He remembers the way that Castiel only opened up about his weird dreams once Dean was supposedly out of earshot, and he closes his mouth.

“Okay,” he says, at last, and Castiel's eyes flick over to look at him with an expression that falls somewhere close to being reluctantly impressed, and Dean doesn't know what that says about how argumentative he usually is. Dean takes a deep breath and tries again. “Look, I know you don't like all this touchy-feely stuff, okay – me neither. And I don't mean to, like... push you or whatever. I just – I don't know.” Dean knows what he's trying to say here, that he can't get out. Dean is bad at anything other than all-systems-go, full-steam-ahead. He doesn't know how to turn it off, even just for giving someone a little room to breathe. In his head, room to breathe is stifling. He wants to tell Cas he loves him. Dean scrubs his hand over the top of his head, nervous. “Come on. You know. Don't make me say it.”

Castiel lets out a small huff of impatience through his nose. “So don't say it,” he says, blunt as ever.

Dean swallows. Room to breathe, he reminds himself. Cas wants to be alone right now. “I'm sorry for caring,” he says, and then winces, because he can hear the way that sounds, sharp and accusatory. Passive-aggressive, for Christ's sake, like he's in high school. “I mean – no. That's not what I meant. I'm just – sorry. In general.”

Castiel breathes long and slow. “Dean, you have nothing to be sorry for,” he says, and it sounds rehearsed.

Dean isn't so sure – and not just because he's an asshole, and he knows he can veer wildly between insensitive and smothering. He remembers everything that has happened between them for the last five years.
He can't say that, though. He lets the guilt rest heavy on him and he says, “Still. Sorry.”

Castiel doesn't answer.

Dean stands beside him for a moment longer, quiet, looking out at the sky, dove-grey and pearly with the approaching rain. “We should head back,” he says at last. “We gotta go get suited and booted for our interview, and I wanna get something to eat before we leave.” He touches a loose hand to Castiel's elbow – bumps bare skin with knuckles, not fingertips. “Come on.”

Castiel doesn't move. “You go. I want to stay here a while longer.”

Dean hesitates. Castiel's hands flex on the railing, his knuckles faintly visible through thin skin, white like teeth. “You sure?” he asks.

“I'm sure.”

“Cas--”

“I'll be fine, Dean,” Castiel says, and he tilts his head towards Dean – not fully, but enough that Dean can see the soft line of his mouth, the straight edge of his nose in profile. “I'll see you down there. I'll only be a minute.”

“Okay.” Dean tries for something close to a smile, and with something clenched tight in his chest for courage, he reaches out a hand for Castiel's shoulder and squeezes. “Be careful up here. I'll put some coffee on.”

His hand glides away down Castiel's arm, to no reaction aside from Castiel turning his face back out to sea, and so Dean turns away to head back down. The rusted metal steps seem ever steeper on the way down, and he clings tight to the rail until he gets to the last two curving steps. He nearly turns his ankle over on one loose step, and hops quickly away to reach the bottom.

Dean heads out, but as he makes for the path back towards the house, he turns halfway, and looks back up at the lighthouse looming above him. Through the fogged glass of the lantern room, he can see Castiel inside, moving slowly. He circles the lens, once, then again. His hand drifts over the
Joseph Tracy lives in an old building in the central part of town, in a flat up above a store that sells fishing tackle. They already know from Maggie that he's been wheelchair-bound since 2001, but apparently there are relatives who look after, bringing him food and helping him clean, since the flight of stairs isn't exactly disabled-access friendly.

Sam knocks. No answer. Sam knocks again, and then as he goes to try the door, see if it opens anyway, it swings open to reveal the business end of a shotgun.

“`You here to rob me?’” the man behind the gun growls. “I got nothing worth stealing, but I dare you to try.”

Dean reels back, throws his hands up. “Whoa, whoa, whoa – we're not here to steal from you, okay?”

“Sir, my name is Sam Winchester, these are my colleagues Dean, and Castiel – we're reporters, and we'd just like to ask you a couple questions--”

“No reporters here. Now get the hell out!” The man goes to slam the door.

“It's about the word of God,” Castiel says quietly.

Dean looks at him. In his peripheral vision, he sees Sam frown – but whatever they might think of it, Castiel's plan works. The man's hand stills on the door, half-way to closing. His fingers are shaky.

Castiel doesn't look at Dean or Sam, but he takes a small step forwards. He has his head slightly bowed, eyes on the floor near his feet – as though out of respect, deference, even. Dean watches him, and he can't tell whether or not this is all part of the act. “We know He spoke to you. I'd like to know what He said.”
Dean's eyebrows lift. He and Sam taught Castiel everything he knows, but it doesn't mean he's not still impressed.

There is a long pause, in which Dean can see fingers twitching on the edge of the door. Beyond it, Dean can hear the slow creak of his wheelchair as he shifts. “No,” he says, at last. “You don't.”

“Please,” Sam says.

Dean takes a deep breath. “Look, we're not actually reporters, okay?”

Sam looks sharply over at him, the lines of his frown all what the fuck are you doing, but Dean ignores him.

“We just wanna talk to you,” Dean goes on. “There were girls missing, and one of them is still out there, and your story is the only real lead we've got, so, uh. Pretty please with a cherry on top?”

Sam rolls his eyes.

There is no answer, and Dean thinks it might be time for desperate measures. He can feel Castiel's eyes on him, and Dean wonders if he knows what Dean is about to say. He swallows, and tries to push down the sense that Castiel is either going to hit him, or walk away and not come back – because they need to do this. It's the only leverage they have.

He puts on his most solemn voice and says, “Sir, we've got an Angel of the Lord here who'd really like to speak to you.”

Castiel freezes up.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean can see Sam, looking at him like, you asshole, you stupid fucking asshole, but Dean doesn't care, because Joseph Tracy has opened his door.

Dean doesn't look at Castiel. He turns his most humble, sincere expression towards Joseph Tracy – a small man, white and withered, dark hair straggly at the temples and otherwise bald. He has his shotgun lowered, but his finger is still on the trigger.
“An angel, you say.” His voice is heavy with suspicion.

“Yes, sir.” Dean holds his eyes. “And I'll tell you all about that, everything you wanna know, but you gotta talk to us first.”

Joseph Tracy looks them all over, his gaze moving slow and hostile. He lingers longest on Castiel; Dean wonders if he already knows. “Fine,” he says at last. “Fine.”

He nudges the door wider with his elbow, and then awkwardly wheels himself backwards down the narrow hallway, to allow them room to come in.

Inside, his house is small and poky, wallpaper yellowing as it peels in crumpled strips from the walls. There is a scattering of mould around each window, a cold draft that comes through an open window that crashes its shutters against the sill and away again. The floorboards squeak underfoot.

Joseph Tracy directs them to a worn old couch with a hideous floral pattern, which nearly swallows Sam whole as he sits down on a broken spring.

“So what are you after?” Joseph Tracy grousches, settling his chair in front of the couch. He keeps his shotgun folded across his lap.

Dean hesitates. He was good with the reporter story – he had his questions all planned out, his cover bulletproof. He doesn't know what he's going with if they're here on some weirdo religious quest. He lets Sam take this one.

“So,” Sam starts, a little tentatively as well, and glancing at Castiel. “We heard this town is blessed.”

Joseph Tracy gives a curt nod. His fingers are tight on his shotgun.

“I guess we were hoping you could tell us a little about that,” Sam goes on.
“It's like it sounds. We got a connection here.” Tracy's eyes dart nervously. “He favours us. Tells us things.”

“What kind of things?” Dean asks.

“Warnings, mostly. The Poverty Year, 1816. The Saxby Gale. The 1960 nor'easter, that storm in 1997 – we got told. Natural disasters. Crop failure. Friend of my father's got his house broken into in 1947. He was waiting there with a gun.” Joseph Tracy nods his head at Sam, who has his notebook. “You check. You see. We knew.”

“So how does it work?” Sam asks.

“He gives you a warning, and He tells you how to take care of it. You take care of it, He takes care of you. Just like that.” Joseph Tracy nods his head curtly. “So long as you're pure.”

“Pure?” Sam repeats. His voice is slightly strangled.

Joseph Tracy nods again.

“Who gets the warning?”

“Depends.” Tracy jerks his head over. “Usually one of the older ones.”

Dean raises his eyebrows. From what he's seen of the population of Nineveh, it isn't exactly as though there are a whole lot of younger people to choose between. Dean doesn't think he's seen anyone under fifty the whole time he's been here.

“Town leaders, typically,” Joseph Tracy says. His hands fidget nervously on the forestock of his shotgun. He avoids their eyes. “Only happened to me once.”

Castiel becomes still.

“God spoke to you?” Sam asks.
“He warned me. 1976. Things were bad for us here. Mount Desert Island, Winter Harbour – we were losing money. He came to me in dreams – poverty and death and hell-fire, ruin for all of us. We weren't pure. We were losing faith and we had to atone. I didn't know what to do. And then He gave me a sign.”

“What sign?” Castiel says.

“There used to be an elementary school, up on the hill by Goods' Point. Maybe forty minutes from here.”

Sam lowers his notebook. He has something cold and wary in his expression. “Yeah, we know. It burned down. In 1976.”

Joseph Tracy rubs the back of his hand underneath his nose. “Yes. Up on the hill. And – there was a lightning strike. Ding. Right off the weathervane. I was out in the bay that day. I saw it myself.”

“And that was that the sign?” Dean asks.

“Yes.” Joseph Tracy had sounded a little uncertain on the details – he must be past eighty now, and it was nearly fifty years ago – but is sure of this. His eyes are lost, somewhere past them. “That was the sign.”

“You said you had to atone,” Dean says. “How?”

Joseph Tracy snaps back to them, and then drops his eyes to his hands. He speaks flatly, matter-of-fact. “So I let everyone know, and we destroyed the church. We said it was a fire, you know, to keep off the papers. Decided to build a salt church there instead. To appease Him. We made plans to build more, up Millbridge way and down near Sorrento.” He takes a deep breath. “And then we took the sinners down to the caves and let the tide come in.”

There is silence. Dean stares at Joseph Tracy, and he doesn't know what to say. The quiet stretches longer and longer, growing thick and heavy, and then at last, Sam just says, “What?”

Joseph Tracy opens his mouth to elaborate, but Castiel cuts over him.
“You drowned them all,” he says, blunt as ever.

Sam lowers his pen. “But that was--”


“Forty-seven,” Dean repeats. “I'm sorry, I don't think I'm getting this right. You killed forty-seven people because of a thunderstorm getting out of control?”

Joseph Tracy turns his head and fixes his pale eyes on Dean. “I'm guessing you're not a man with a lot of faith,” he says, his tone sharp. “Let me explain. When God tells you to do something, you do it. You just trust that He knows what's best for you – that's what faith is.”

Dean tilts his head up. “That what you tell yourself at night?”

“Don't you judge me,” Joseph Tracy says. “Don't you dare. My son was in that cave.”

Dean leans forwards in his chair. “Then you should have fucking got him out.”

Sam takes a deep breath, and Dean can tell that he is forcing himself to be calm. Dean can see it in the nervous jitter of his fingers on his knees, the way he clenches his fists tight before he speaks. “Did you ever think,” he says, slow, “that maybe the lightning only hit the church because it was the highest point in a hundred miles?”

Joseph Tracy swallows. “What are you saying?” he asks. His old, curled hands tremble on the arms of his wheelchair. “Are you saying that you think God didn't mean to pick the church? That it was an accident?”

Sam's face tenses, his mouth pulling tight into the ultimate of bitch-faces, but he and Dean both know that now isn't really the time to explain the finer points of God didn't pick the church at all, you stupid bastard.
Somehow, Castiel gets there first. “God doesn't choose anything,” he says. He's been mostly quiet so far, but now Dean looks over at him, and his face is hard.

Joseph Tracy looks at him, and for just a moment, he looks at Castiel with something close to the wonder that used to be a regular part of life for them. His expression softens, and there is fear in his eyes, maybe as though he is treading the line of realising that he is speaking to something celestial – but then Dean sees that he is wrong. Joseph starts laughing.

“You expect me to believe you know a thing about it?” he asks, and his tone has turned sharp, derisive. “Look at you. I see it in your face - you wouldn't know real faith if it hit you with a truck.”

Castiel flinches. His eyes find a middle distance somewhere and fix on it, and to his credit, he stays calm. He breathes in through his nose, and quietly, he says, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

Joseph Tracy stares at him.

“If we confess our sins,” Castiel goes on, still soft, but with a hardness underneath his words that cannot be underestimated, “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

There is a long silence, heavy and stilted, until at last Joseph Tracy says, “You're a religious man, after all.”

“No,” Castiel says, and he turns to meet Joseph Tracy's eyes with a look that is all carefully restrained fury. “And neither should you be – you self-righteous dick.”

Sam looks over sharply. “Cas!”

Joseph Tracy's mouth falls open, and for a moment he is silent, his throat working as he struggles for words. “I think you should leave now,” he says at last, shaky and indignant. “All three of you. Go on, get out! You force your way into my home, you attack my beliefs, you insult me, accuse me of murder – you lie to me,” he goes on, louder, as though that's the worst of it, and he gets his hands on the wheels of his wheelchair to come up close to them, one wheel banging the side of the couch. “I wanted to ask you for help. Your angel. I wanted guidance, you know. But you, look at you – there's not a devout bone between the three of you. You've never heard the word of the
“Neither have you.” Castiel stands up in one sharp movement, and there is a moment, just one second, where a snap of cold air comes in from the open window to catch at his clothes and lift goosebumps on the back of Dean's neck, and it feels like it used to: thunder and glory. He is in a mustard-yellow windbreaker instead of his trenchcoat, his hair longer now, unbrushed, but he is Castiel again, as he was before. He looks down on Joseph Tracy, his eyes hard, and in a voice that is low and cold, he says, “At least I know I was forsaken. I'd rather be a lost cause than as wilfully blind as you are.”

Joseph Tracy sits back in his chair, head tipped back to look up at Castiel. His thin mouth twitches near to speech, his lined face crumpling. It takes a minute, and then he gets it. “There is no angel,” he says.

“No,” Castiel says flatly. “No God either.” He sidesteps Joseph Tracy's chair. “My condolences. Have a nice day.”

And with that, he's gone, halfway to the door before Dean can open his mouth, and by the time he gets out the words, “Cas, wait--” it's too late. The door slams behind him. There is a thick, stifling silence in his wake.

“He's wrong,” Joseph Tracy manages into the quiet, sounding lost behind the sound of the wind outside, the banging of the shutter. “I'm chosen. I am. We are all chosen here.”

Sam moves towards him, hand outstretched, but Tracy jerks back as though stung. “Mr. Tracy, you said you wanted to ask for help--”

“We're chosen, all of us,” Joseph Tracy starts muttering, faster now. “All of us. You wouldn't know that. It's not for you, not for the likes of you.”

“What do you mean?” Sam says. “Please, Mr. Tracy, we only want to understand--”

“Get out, now,” Joseph Tracy says abruptly, his voice stronger. “Leave me in peace. Go. Go!”

Sam exchanges a look with Dean, eyes wide and signalling what Dean would approximate as being time to get the fuck outta here before he shoots our dicks off, and Dean doesn't waste any time in
hauling himself out from the depths of Tracy's broken couch.

“Well, thanks very much for all your help,” Dean says brightly, Sam somewhere behind him making apologies and urging Tracy to call them if anything comes up – *anything at all, please, I insist* – as they sidle past Joseph Tracy's chair.

He follows them to the door, wheels creaking over the floorboards, and Dean is convinced he's going to feel the cold metal of his shotgun at the small of his back before he gets to the stairwell, but it doesn't happen. He turns as he reaches the hallway, and just before the door shuts after them, Dean sees him – shotgun abandoned, one hand close to his chest with his fingers curled tight. He mutters to himself, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want – he maketh me to lie--” and then Dean sees the rosary charm glint in his fist, and then the door snaps shut.

Sam lets out his breath, shoulders slumping, and he goes to loosen his tie. “Well, that went well.”

“He had a rosary,” Dean says.

Sam looks over. “For real?”

“Yep. Fuckin' creepy jack-ass,” Dean mutters, and he leads the way down the stairs.

At first, when he steps out into the thin grey light, he doesn't expect to see Castiel there – of course, Castiel is mad, so he'll have taken off somewhere to all points distant until he can cool down.

Dean comes out, and he looks across the sidewalk at his car to see Castiel half-sat on the hood, and Dean remembers that Cas has nowhere else to go. His heart sinks a little to see him. Castiel has his arms tightly folded across his chest in such an obvious and unnecessary display of anger – because Cas might not have the option to disappear and sulk on his own, but he's still angry, and he wants Dean to know it – that it’s just fucking depressing.

“Hey,” Dean calls across.

Castiel gets up, unfolding his arms, and he walks around the side of the car to get to the back door. He doesn't answer; he impatiently rattles the door handle without looking at Dean.
Dean sighs. He unlocks the car.

Castiel gets in silently, and he stares out the window with his hands balled into fists in his lap until Sam and Dean get in the front. He doesn't say a word all the way home.

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Dean stands, knees creaking, as he scratches brick-dust and dirt out of his hair, he says, “One down, only a bajillion more to go.”

“A bajillion of what?” Sam asks absently from the kitchen table, where he is poring over a thick book of local history from the Steuben archives.

“Well, I gotta get that power socket working so we can actually use the kitchen like real people, and the bathroom's still a fucking train-wreck – you know, there's that hole in the shower, the faucet doesn't come on right. I gotta re-tile the roof and seal the windows properly before another storm comes in, plus I really should tear out the wainscoting if I wanna stop us all getting mould poisoning before we're forty. And then there's always the small shit – the leaky faucets, the rusty door-hinges, all that jazz. Shit like that.” Dean glances around, surveying counter-tops and the kitchen table. “I don't know, there's more I think, but I don't know where I put my list.”

Sam laughs. “Okay, since when are you Mr. Fix-It all of sudden?”

Dean looks up at him with a frown. “What?” He peels off his gloves. “Dude, since always.”

“Right. ’Cause you were so desperate to redecorate the bunker.”

“I'm not redecorating,” Dean objects. “I'm just – Jesus, I'm just trying to make sure we don't all get electrocuted, for Christ's sake. And that we have a toilet that actually flushes when you take a giant fucking dump. Which, by the way, the bunker didn't need, because it already had a working toilet.”

Sam closes his book over. “Dean, that's gonna take months – you don't need to do that. We're only gonna be here, like, a week more, tops.”
Dean turns his gloves over in his hands. “Yeah,” he says. He looks at his hands. “Yeah, I know that.”


“What?”

“I was just thinking, of course, if you wanted to stay...”

Dean stares at him. Staying is something Dean had never thought about – not deliberately, because he’s not the pathetic little kid he used to be, with ridiculous pipe dreams that maybe one day he could settle down somewhere and leave the life behind. He's never said it to himself in so many words, but here he is with sandpaper and a toolbox, thinking about ripping up creaky floorboards and replacing window-panes, because this place isn't homely enough.

“Yeah, right,” Dean says, finally, but he can hear that his voice is weak. There is dust all across the kitchen counter where he was sanding the wood, and he trails a slow fingertip through it. “What would I even do here?”

“I dunno,” Sam says. He pauses, and then he says – too casually - “Cas likes it here.”

And there it is, Sam's million-dollar statement of the freaking obvious, because Sam has to push his big nose into everybody else's business, and he can't leave well enough alone. “So?” Dean grunts, and he starts diligently putting his tools away.

“I don't know,” Sam says. “It's nice, is all. He seems so settled here—”

“Yeah, I know.”

“--and here you are making everything up all comfy--”

“Because otherwise it's a fucking biohazard, Sam!”
“--so I just figure,” Sam says, drawing his words out long and slow like he's only just thinking of the idea as he speaks, like this isn't all planned out, “if the two of you are gonna settle at all, why not, I don't know, settle together?”

Dean opens his mouth to object to that but he realises before he speaks that whatever he says is only going to in some way fuel Sam's idea that Dean and Castiel are going to fucking elope somewhere, so he stops himself. Instead, he just gives Sam this bratty little smile. “Nice try, Sammy.”

“Come on – I almost got you!”

It's almost laughable, the idea that Sam is just going around trying to be sneaky about getting Dean to admit that he and Cas having something going on. Sometimes Dean misses Charlie for that – she wasn't so subtle.

She's not ever yet met Cas, but she's heard enough about him to quirk suggestive eyes whenever Dean mentions him. Charlie was the first person Dean said the B-word to, out loud. It's not that he's ashamed, although there's some residual traces of that, too; it's just that his voice sounds a little too like his father's, now that he's the far side of thirty, and he can't shake the way that bisexual sounds like an insult when it comes out of his mouth sometimes.

“Not quite,” Dean says, and he shakes his head. “Try harder, dude. That was weak.”

Sam laughs. “I was close, though, right?”

“No, you weren't.” Dean adjusts his sleeves, pushing them up past his elbows, and he goes digging under the sink for something to clean the counter with. He doesn't really need to say anymore, but for some reason, he does. “Anyway, he's still really mad at me, so.”

Sam hums thoughtfully. “Yeah,” he says at last. “Can't say I blame him. You pulled a real dick move.”

“Nice to see you're on my side, as ever,” Dean mutters into the cupboard.

“What side? You have no side.” Behind him, Sam's voice is – of all things – fucking disappointed. Because that's really what Dean needs right now. “You were an asshole, end of.”
Dean grabs the sponge and the spray, and he straightens up. “Okay, okay, I know. But hey, I also got us the info we need, so... at least it wasn't for nothing.”

Sam's face is quietly disapproving, his mouth pulled down at the corners.

“Where is Cas, anyway?” Dean asks, as he starts to wipe down the counter.

“Out at the lighthouse, I think. He told me last night he got it open and I haven't seen him since.”

Dean frowns. He opens his mouth to make some smart-ass comment about how he guesses it is hard to find any privacy here to jack off, but he remembers his conversation with Castiel from the morning – the height, like flying; the peace he finds there, when he can't find it anywhere else. He shuts his mouth.

“So, uh,” he starts instead, because he's about as subtle with a conversation change as a freighter through a nursing home, “what are we thinking with the case?”

Sam glances at him, eyebrows slightly raised, but if he thinks anything of Dean's awkwardness, he doesn't mention it. “Not sure,” he says. “I got down the names of the forty-seven and their families, but aside from Tracy, none of them live here anymore – or anywhere within six hundred miles, for that matter. Our closest relative is just out of Pittsburgh, so.”

“Any links between the families?”

“Not that I've found so far, although it's hard with no internet up here...” Sam scratches at his head. “To be honest, I don't think there are gonna be any links. Picking them as the sinners feels random – they were probably just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Dean sighs. He tosses the damp sponge in the direction of the sink – misses, spectacularly – and trudges across the kitchen to retrieve it. “So it's just bad luck for the school. Okay. Then we focus on these weird visions – the fact that one guy went, hey, y'all, I think we should drown the elementary school, and everyone else thought that seemed like a pretty good idea. I mean, what the fuck, Sam?”
Sam props his elbows on the kitchen table, and drops his chin into his hands. “I don't know. Maybe it's like... a Pied Piper thing. One guy with the power to convince everybody. Maybe Joseph Tracy, or his family, have always been around to call the shots. Maybe they were always behind the predictions.”

“What, since the 1800s?”

Sam shrugs. “It's an old town, you know. It's possible.”

Dean leans back against the kitchen counter, hands pushed into the pockets of his jeans – and he finds, at the bottom of one pocket, past old change and a crumpled receipt, the cold touch of the salt church rosary. “Yeah, maybe,” he says, but he isn't convinced.

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The next day, Dean wakes up early. It's probably the lack of curtains, still.

He stretches his arms above his head, arches his back where it aches from the shitty couch, and then he rolls over to get up. The floorboards are cool beneath his bare toes, and there is a slow, faintly discordant melody as Castiel's shell-chimes dance against each other in the wind from the open window. There is the muted sound of running water from the bathroom, and down the end of the hallway, the door to the main bedroom is open. On the other side of the coffee table, Castiel's bed is empty.

Dean kneads at his eyes with his knuckles and hauls himself up onto his feet. He kicks past his piles of dirty clothing, which, yeah, he should probably get around to actually washing today or tomorrow, and he makes his way to the kitchen for something to drink.

He grabs the near-empty jug of orange juice from the fridge door – neglects to grab a glass, because Sam isn't around to give him shit – and he leans back against the kitchen to drink when he sees a small, slowly-moving shape on the beach below, something dimly cast in browns and blues against the dark slate. Dean lowers his juice carton.

He was an asshole yesterday, he knows that. He crossed a line – the one line that Castiel has been absolutely concrete about – and he fucked up. It feels like every time Castiel gets two steps forwards, Dean is there to kick him three back.
With a sigh, Dean sets down the juice. He grabs his jeans from the floor by the couch, pulling them on over the underwear he slept in, and toes into his boots sockless. His jacket hangs from the back of a dining chair, and he heads out into the morning.

The air is crisp and cold as winter comes settling in, proper. Overhead, the sky is mostly clear with dirty threads of grey cloud overhead, behind which the sun skirts, pale and hazy. He hunches his shoulders against the wind that sweeps up off the sea and stings at his skin, and he crosses his arms over his chest as he heads down the drive to find the narrow path to the sea.

When he breaks out of the trees, he sees Castiel, some hundred feet away, standing just at the shore's edge so that the water nudges at the toes of his sneakers. He has his hands deep in the pockets of his jacket, and he stares silently out at the sea, his mouth a hard, solemn line.

Dean walks towards him. “Hey.”

Castiel doesn't answer him. He doesn't even acknowledge that Dean is there.

Dean stops a couple feet from him, nervous. He clears his throat. “You, uh. You okay?” he tries.

Castiel continues ignoring him. If it wasn't for the near-imperceptible tightening of his jaw, Dean would say that Castiel didn't even know he was there.

“Look, I just wanted to say I'm, uh. I'm really sorry about what happened over at Joseph Tracy's.” Dean scrunches his face up against the sun, tilting his face away from the cold whip of the wind off the water. “I thought it was the fastest way to get him to help us, but you know, it wasn't my place to do that and I should've – I dunno. I should've done it different.”

“You shouldn't have done it at all.”

Dean shifts his weight nervously. “Yeah. That, too.”

“You're only lying to people.” Castiel's voice is quiet. “Saying that I'm an angel. It's not true.”

Dean drops his head to his chest, looks down at his feet. “Cas--”
“I’m not,” he says again, more firmly now. “Don't do it anymore.” His hands move restlessly at his sides, fingers jittering. He clenches fists tight. “Tell them something else.”

“Okay,” Dean says. “I will.”

Castiel looks at him.

“I got more interesting things than that to say about you anyway,” Dean goes on, his voice carefully light and easy. “If we have to go and interview anyone else, I'll open with something different. This is Cas. He likes black coffee and pancakes.”

Castiel realises what Dean is doing. He makes an irritated sound in the back of his throat and looks away, out at the sea.

“I'll tell them you're a crappy cook but you make good scrambled eggs--”

“Scrambled eggs aren't complicated,” Castiel says, unimpressed.

“--and that you have a good taste for spices.”

“White Western culture's concept of the correct use of spices is laughable. It's not hard.”

Dean frowns. “You helped me with that really complicated curry back in Ainsworth,” he objects.

“I was stationed in Rajshahi during the thirteenth century. You pick things up.”

Dean is going about this wrong – using things Cas knows because of being six millennia older than everyone else. He looks at Castiel, with his head turned away to watch the water; he studies the long line of his nose, the shape of his mouth, the curl of his eyelashes. The annoyed crease to his eyebrows.
“I'll them them you're a grumpy fucking asshole,” Dean says.

Castiel looks over sharply with a glare.

“That you hate being awake before ten, and you hate traffic, and you would rather die than put carrot cake in your mouth.”

“Cake shouldn't be made of out vegetables,” Castiel grouchès.

“I'll them you prefer deep-dish pizza, which is a travesty, and that you don't like The Fifth Element. I mean, you'll probably start a fucking riot in Mrs. Pinheiro's kitchen, but--”

“I just don't understand the appeal,” Castiel starts, and he still has that frown on his face, but the hard line of his shoulders is easing. “The plot is recycled from every other Apocalyptic movie you claim to despise, with the additional fact that its climactic deus ex machina, is, of all things, love.”

“Bruce Willis in that movie is the fourth most handsome man of all time,” Dean argues.

Castiel raises his eyebrows. “The fourth?”


“You've spent too much time thinking about this list.”

“Dude, I have to do something in the car while I'm driving. And quit derailing!” Dean says, and he pushes at Castiel's shoulder.

“Am I derailing?” Castiel asks, and his face is still solemn, but it's different now. The line of his brow is smoother, calmer. He has that tilt to his mouth like he might be making fun of Dean.

It's weird, the way Dean doesn't feel self-conscious about this like he does with other people. Castiel, with no real gender beyond the body he's in, who acknowledges specific sexual preference
but doesn't entirely understand it – Castiel is safe. Dean slipped up once, mentioned Thomas Wolfe from Cincinnati, and then he had to explain the whole thing, the kiss against the gym room lockers when they stayed behind after track to look for Dean's lost gym sock. Then, somehow, Dean had ended up telling him everything: Gregory Levins in Richmond; Jack Pattenson just south of Fort Collins; William Poskanzer in Jackson, twice; Ethan Grover in Missoula. He remembers all their names. Then, of course, because he started to panic that the score was set a certain way, he had to tell Cas about the women as well. He had to tell him everything.

“Yeah, you are,” Dean finally says, and he pushes his hands back into the pockets of his jeans. “I was gonna say a whole bunch more stuff – about that time you helped that kid in Toledo when he fell off his bike, and when we were on that Tulpa case in Calhoun, and you agreed to babysit for those toddlers in the motel room next door on your first night off the job. I was gonna say some shit about how you love babies, and you cried watching Titanic, and how you're probably definitely the nicest person I know, on top of being, like, crazy good at board games.” Dean tips his head over, shrugs one shoulders up, and pulls a face. “But like I said. You derailed me.”

Castiel makes a small noise, huffing his breath out – almost a laugh. Not quite, but Dean will take it. Castiel turns and starts off slowly down the beach, trailing his sneakered feet slowly over the ground to kick up stones. Dean goes with him, falling into step, and at their side, the water foams lazily towards their shoes, shushing over the slate.

“Seriously, though, Cas,” Dean says after a moment, and his voice is soft. He bumps Castiel with his shoulder. “That was a dick move. I'm sorry.”

Castiel bumps back against him, a split-second after, like an after-thought, and the misplaced impact is a little jarring. “It's forgotten,” Castiel says. “Don't do it again.”

“I won’t.”

As they walk, Dean stops for a second as he notices a perfectly smooth, flat stone mixed in among the shingle. He picks it up and takes a couple steps towards the shoreline. Castiel notices him going off-route, and turns to watch as Dean skips it out hard. It bounces ten times before sinking.


“Not better than Sam's record, though,” Dean grumbles.
Castiel tilts his head over in consideration of this. “True,” he concedes at last, and then he bends to pick up his own stone. He throws it out, and it sinks instantly – but Castiel only looks a little disappointed, and he's been doing better recently, feeling less miserable, so Dean doesn't feel too bad about making fun of him.

“Ouch,” he comments. “Don't give up the day job.”

“I don't have a day job,” Castiel says, and he stoops to get another stone, determined and ready to try again. He takes a deep breath, concentrating like some serious athlete at the rock-skipping Olympics, and then he throws it out fast.

Dean watches with a rising oooohhh as it flies, and then the rock hits another rock, hidden by surf, and bounces off to land dead in the water. Castiel turns back to Dean, and Dean can just tell that he is T-minus-ten to claiming that his throw counts as a success because it did at least bounce once, and Dean has to cut that off straight away.

“Well, that's embarrassing.”

“It is not embarrassing,” Castiel objects, scowling, “because I am not embarrassed. I can do it.”

“Okay, see, I'm pretty sure you have to actually hit the water to qualify,” he tells Castiel, grinning wide and obnoxious.

“I can do it!”

“You sure, hotshot? Maybe we should stick to something you're good at, huh--”

“If we all stuck to things we were good at, you would never cease to be an asshole,” Castiel retorts, and as Dean rocks back on his heels with an undignified bark of laughter, Castiel narrows his eyes and goes on, “Although, actually, that would explain a great deal.”

“Aw, Cas, you wound me--”

“You're insufferable. Have I told you?”
“It hurts – please, no more, I'm too delicate--”

Castiel throws Dean a glare, and he crouches to get another stone. He tosses it once in his hand, feeling the weight of it, and then he turns and lets it fly. Dean yells *come on, come on*, and it bounces once, twice, three, and four times before it sinks.

Castiel turns back triumphantly to face Dean, and Dean can only shake his head with a short laugh. “Well, shit, you're pretty good,” he says, his smile wider than ever. “I better watch myself.”

“You should,” Castiel agrees, and his face is serious, but when he tilts his chin up at Dean, it's a gesture of near-defiance, and there is that slight tilt to his mouth that says he's somewhere near smiling, and Dean wants half to wipe that smug look off his face and half to kiss him.

“And there I was so sure you were gonna need to go all Ghost on your ass there,” Dean says, and because he's a little delirious with this moment, and because Sam isn't around to see this, he doesn't stop there. He reaches out for Castiel's jacket, curls his fingers into the rough fabric, and yanks him closer. “You know, get your hands--” – and he does – “show you what to do...”

“But that wasn't necessary,” Castiel says, and Dean almost thinks Castiel might be fucking with him, even as they stand pressed together with Dean's fingers curled around his.

“No,” Dean says, and he thinks, distantly, that he should let go. Step back. Give Castiel his space and shuffle carefully back into maintaining this stupid, stupid illusion that they don't need to be with each other. He doesn't do any of it.

Castiel tips his head over, bird-like, and his gaze is unfaltering, but that hint of a smile is growing wider, crinkles at the corners of his eyes. He studies Dean's face without pretence; he looks at Dean's mouth. Dean swallows.

“So where am I on this list of yours?” Castiel asks, and for a moment, Dean is confused, blinking at him, and then he remembers – his list of the most handsome men of all time.

He flushes a little warm under the jaw, but he holds Castiel's eyes. “Hmmm,” he says, thoughtful, as though it's never occurred to him. He can feel his heartbeat in his throat. “Hard to say. You ever had to escape the Temple of Doom shirtless?”
“Not recently.”

“Ah, shit. Then your standing ain't looking too good.” Dean pulls a face, as though considering it fully. He leans back a little where he stands – still with his hands hooked through Castiel's – and surveys him up and down. He means it as a joke, but he gets a little lost on the length of Castiel’s legs, his thighs in that denim, the way the thin cotton of his T-shirt falls loose enough from his chest and shoulders that Dean can guess at the exact shape of him underneath. He swallows. “Top fifty.”

Castiel raises his eyebrows. “Top fifty,” he repeats, as though impressed. “I've done well.”

“Yeah,” Dean says, dry-mouthed. “Playing off favouritism, probably. The guy in charge of the list must like you.”

“I do enjoy casual bias,” Castiel says thoughtfully.

Dean laughs, and he acts without thinking. He uses his grip on Castiel's hand to pull him in, and he slings an arm around his shoulders, hugs him tight. He thinks of the length of Castiel's body against him, solid and strong, and then he thinks only of the way that the last of the tension seeps from Castiel's shoulders, and Castiel puts a hand to the small of Dean's back.

Dean wants to kiss him, but he doesn't. He hugs him close until Castiel breaks away to point out a seagull wheeling overhead, wings a narrow, white flash against the clouds, and he keeps hold of Dean's hand all the while.
Early the next morning, Sam gets an email back from some American ancestry website he's subscribed to, and he comes bearing bad news. It turns out that Joseph Tracy is not actually Joseph Tracy, but József Sóvany, a first-generation immigrant from Hungary, having moved over to Nineveh with his parents in 1956 – a couple hundred years after the town's first few so-called blessings, which rules him and his family right out.

There goes their presiding theory, and so with most of their research so far gone out the window, their best bet is to try a new route of investigation: they head for the drowning caves.

Dean has a headache like someone's been playing the fucking bongos all night on the top of his skull, and so, with some reluctance, he lets Sam drive. They're en route to the site where Morgan Pinheiro's car was abandoned and the cliffs below, and then cheerful piano comes through the speakers, tinny and loud – *oh, what a night; late December, back in '63* - and Dean tips his head back with a groan. “Aw, come on, man.”

“Hey, I like this song,” Sam says, and he reaches across the twist the volume dial up.

“Yeah, you fuckin' would--”

“Anyway, it's weird, because I was so sure it went something like 'driver picks the music, shotgun-”

“Yeah, yeah, alright.” Dean rolls his eyes, and turns to look over the back of the bench at Castiel. “You feeling any better, dude?”
Castiel has his forehead pressed to the back window, his nose a little bent at the end where it gets
smushed by the glass, and his eyes flick over to give Dean a look that is pointedly grumpy — \textit{what the fuck do you think, assclown}, if Dean had to put words to it.

“Don't sweat it, Top Fifty,” Dean says, and he grins. “We'll be in and out of this thing within a
couple hours and we can swing by Costco on the way back to pick up five thousand painkillers for
you.”

Castiel squints.

“Just hang tight 'til then – and don't hurl in my car.”

“Or if you do, aim for Dean,” Sam says.

Dean rolls his eyes.

They drive on, slowing a little as the road winds ever narrower, and Sam tilts the rearview mirror a
little to keep the sun out of his eyes. Dean drums his fingers along the edge of the window, tapping
idly along with the beat of the music. “\textit{-- sweet surrender, what a night},” he mumbles along with
it, not really thinking, and then he realises that Sam is looking at with a shit-eating grin all across
his idiot face. “What the fuck are you looking at?”

“Nothing!” Sam says, still apparently delighted, although he does at least turn his eyes back to the
road. “I just appreciate that you like The Four Seasons after all.”

“I don't,” Dean grouches. “The one song is decent. The one song!”

“You want me to turn it up so you can sing along?”

“Okay, fuck you.”

Sam bursts out laughing, and Dean half wants to hit him, except they've reached the turning for the
drive down to the cliffs where Morgan left her car, and as annoying as Sam can be, Dean doesn't want to give him an excuse to total his baby.

When they get to the cliff-side, the car is still there among the confers, leave and dirt gathered under the windscreen-wipers, bird-shit on the glass. One of the wheels is sinking slowly into the mud.

Past the car, however, and beyond the trees, there is the dark jut of rock marking the spot where Castiel found a way down. Dean stands at the edge and lets his eyes travel down, down, over the salt-grimy stone and moss-slick steps. Below him, the stairs twist out of sight as before, but now he can see at the bottom that there is not just deep, dark water, but rocky beach.

Dean grimaces. “When I die,” he says, because looking at this drop, it's a *when*, not an *if*, “I want you to bury me with a shit-ton of porn. And Sam? Keep your hands off my car.”

Sam laughs.

Dead-pan, Castiel says, “Don't worry, I'll take care of it for you,” and God, there is an even worse prospect, so Dean just leaves Sam and Castiel making fun of him, and he leads the way down.

They follow Dean's lead, slow and careful, but it's not actually as steep as it looks, and the roughly-hewn rock steps are almost flat and even. Still, Dean's glad to get his feet back on land, when he reaches the bottom, although he looks out at the water where it froths lazily against the shingle, and he tries to remind himself that this place isn't safe either.

“Come on,” he calls up to Castiel and Sam, a few steps behind him, and he makes a show of checking his watch. “Day's a-wasting here. The tide will be back in before too long.”

The beach is small and secluded, shouldered in by the high cliff walls, and the whole thing is cold and bare and hard. It's probably just the angle of the sun at this hour, cast in shadows by the cliff, but to Dean it feels as though the sun has never touched this place. Then there is the cave.

The mouth of it yawns narrow and hungry from the wall, fifteen feet tall at the least and jagged at its edges. Dean thinks of school kids marching in, two by two. He takes a deep breath.

“Well, this looks appealing,” Dean comments. He looks over at Castiel, sweeps his hand out in
front of him in a ridiculously chivalrous gesture. “After you.”

“Dean,” Sam says warningly, disapproval clear in that whiny tone to his voice, but Castiel doesn’t seem to share any of their concerns; he leads the way in.

Dean follows quickly, irrationally afraid that the instant Castiel steps into that darkness, Dean will lose sight of him and he will gone forever, trapped down here with Brittany and the water.

The caves widen as they head in and down, the sandy floor sloping gradually until it becomes broken up by larger and larger rocks, and it reaches a point where the light of a flashlight can no longer illuminate both walls at the same time, and trying to do so means tripping over the darkened floor.

“Sam,” Dean calls over his shoulder. “How long do we have exactly?”

“Two hours and seven minutes.”

Right. Two hours and seven minutes until the sea comes pouring in to wash them all away and drown them. No big deal. Dean's hand tightens on his flashlight.

The air here is thick with the stillness and quiet; it presses coldly in one them. Every sound seems dampened, heard as though from a great distance – their footsteps, the steady drip of water onto stone, the slow repetitive shushing of their breath like the roll of waves. Dean's eyes flit back to Castiel as he walks in front, the collar of his short clumsily half-turned up at the back. He walks with steps that are slow and sure.

At the fifteen-minute mark, Dean steps in ankle-deep stagnant water and jumps back with a yelp. The way ahead is submerged, and from the way that the light passes dim and glassy green over the surface, it only gets deeper. They have to turn back and try a different way.

“By the way,” Dean says, as they clamber up away from the water and stick close to the left wall until it opens back up into the main cave. “Someone is keeping track of how we get back out, right?”

“I remember,” Castiel says, his voice faint and distracted. He stretches a hand out to graze his fingertips over the cave wall; he leaves pale stripes through the slime.
They turn left, then left again. Dean calls out for Brittany and gets no response other than the slow, whispering trickle of water creeping downhill. He doesn’t know whether that mean it's starting.

The glow of their flashlights throw flickering, unstable shadows that dart and scatter behind stalactites; it catches in Dean's peripheral vision and makes him think of small dark things creeping after them in the spaces where the light won't reach. The hollow, echoing plink of water off stone makes him think of footsteps.

“Brittany?” Sam calls out into the dark, panning his flashlight's beam over the walls. “Hello?”

There is no answer; they venture further.

“Time?” he calls back towards Sam.

“Forty-nine minutes. We don't have too much longer.”

Dean nods to himself, and he scans his flashlight over the cave. There in front of him again is Castiel, in his Walmart jeans and too-big flannel hand-me-downs, his shoulder a tight line of determination as he takes slow, unfaltering steps down into the dark. His flashlight is still on, but it hangs at his side in a loose hand, casting its beam of the ground beside his feet. His silhouette is slowly swallowed by the dark as he wanders further from Sam and Dean – the shadows take his shoulders first, leaving a narrow dark sliver of a man; it takes his head from his torso; it slowly creeps the length of his spine.

Dean wants to call out to him, to bring him back. The words bottleneck in his throat.

There is the gentle touch of a hand at the small of Dean's back, and he nearly jumps out of his skin. He wheels around, bursting out with, “What the fuck, Sam? Warn a guy before you creep up on him, you fucking fuck-head--” except that instead he finds himself face to face with Castiel.

Dean blinks. “Cas,” he says, startled.

“I think Sam has found something,” Castiel tells him, and then Dean doesn't have time to ask what the fuck just happened, because have just under fifteen minutes before they have to get the hell out
of here, and Castiel has found something. He nods, and he lets Castiel point him across the cave to the other wall – although not before one quick glance into the gloom where, for just a second he’d been so sure--

“Take a look at this,” Sam says, once Dean comes over, and he crouches beside the wall to point out something large and white and dimly glittering where it catches the beam of Sam’s flashlight. It’s a symbol of some kind, and as Dean gets in closer to study it, he realises why it’s familiar.

“Wait a second, Sam, that's--” Dean cuts himself off to dig in the pocket of his jeans until he fishes out the broken rosary, and he holds it up to the wall. The rune on the wall, the inscription on the rosary's coin: they're the same.

Sam nods. “Yeah. Exactly. And it should have washed away a long time ago, right? But get this,” Sam says, and before Dean can do anything to stop him, Sam reaches out to drag a finger through the middle of the rune – and then sticks it into his mouth.

“Dude,” Dean exclaims, and he recoils. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“It's a salt vein, Dean,” Sam goes on, unfazed.

Dean stares at him, still open-mouthed with disgust. “Or it's salty because this whole place gets filled to the brim with sea water four times a day, maybe?”

Sam shakes his head. “I don't buy it. That's a salt vein, I'm sure of it – naturally and perfectly mimicking the shape of the salt church icon.”

“Oh, let's say it is. Then what?” Dean holds the rosary under his flashlight beam to better scrutinise it. “You think maybe whenever they're worshipping God in that salt church, they're actually worshipping something down here?”

“It's a theory,” Sam says with a shrug.

Dean lets out a whistle between his teeth, because they've met a lot of demi-gods and pseudo-wannabe-gods in their time, and it has always had a messy, difficult end. “Yikes.” He turns the rosary over in his hands under the flashlight’s beam, and at that moment it flickers and goes out. “Shit.”
Sam, still engrossed in the wall, doesn't seem to notice as Dean hits the bottom of his flashlight a couple times. He mutters *come on, come on*, clicking the button with increasing degrees of violence, and as he does so he catches sight of Castiel, ten feet away and slowly wandering further.

“Hey,” Dean calls. “Cas. Stay close, okay?”

The bone-thin line of Castiel in the distance pauses some yards away. The shadows shift, flashlight moving, but Castiel goes no further.

“Five minutes!” Sam announces. “Okay, guys, we've gotta start heading out now. We've got these five minutes head-start, then that whole hour to get back the way we came. Let's move.”

“Aye-aye, captain,” Dean says, and as Sam hauls himself up onto his feet and starts the long climb back up, Dean glances back towards Castiel. “Come on, weirdo. Time to shake a leg.”

They hurry back through the caves, Dean cursing out his dead flashlight as he trips and nearly twists his ankle. They take one bad turn, then two, backtracking quickly when Castiel's voice rings out dimly from the back – *this is wrong; this is wrong* – and Dean pretends he doesn't feel the first cold fingers of panic at his throat. This is how it happens. You get lost. You can't get out fast enough. The water comes in.

They have twenty minutes left.

They move in brisk, decisive steps, up and up, occasionally breaking into a jog where the terrain is flat enough to allow for it. Sam has ten minutes counting down on his watch, numbers flashing dimly red in the gloom. There is a steady trickle of cold water down over the rocks.

“Come on, come on,” Dean urges as they climb, now able to follow the flow as it comes down from the mouth of the cave, and Sam's watch is ticking past 06:02 when daylight is at last visible through that narrow, toothy crack in the cliff-face, the sky pale and grey on the other side.

Dean feels all the air burst from his chest in relief, because thank fuck, they're not gonna drown down here after all, and he lowers his useless flashlight. “Jesus,” he groans, out of breath from the climb, and with his thigh muscles aching to sit down. “Thank God. Thank fucking God.”
“Not much further now, but don't slow down!” Sam calls from up ahead, and he twists back with that wide, goofy grin that says he was shitting himself too, and then his face changes.

Dean stops. The water is rushing fast past their feet now, enough to soak through Dean's boots. “Sam,” he says. “Sam, what--”

Sam's face is drawn tight with something unreadable that sets off icy dread sinking through Dean's stomach. His voice a little strangled, Sam says, “Cas.”

Dean knows before he turns around.

Castiel is not behind him.

For a moment, Dean just stands there, because he doesn't know what to do. He stands motionless, letting the cold water swirl past him, because he thinks that maybe Castiel is just a couple steps behind. Maybe if he stands still and he waits, Castiel will come climbing out of the dark. He doesn't.

“He was right here,” Dean manages, throat thick. “I swear to God, he was right behind me--” Dean doesn't even know if it's true. The last time he glanced back to check on Castiel, Sam's watch was at 13:42, and Castiel could be anywhere now. “Fuck,” he says, and then he yells it. “Fuck – Cas? Cas!”

There is no answer, his own voice bouncing back to him over and over, loud enough that he feels it press in on his head like a crushing weight, and in an instant he decides.

Dean runs the last five feet up to Sam to snatch his flashlight out of his hand – what a fucking perfect time to have a broken flashlight, he thinks, watching the yellow beam on the stone as he passes it over. “Keep going, Sam, okay?” he says sharply, already backing away from his brother. “You get out of here, you get back up those stairs, and – Jesus. Get ready to call the fucking Coastguard. I don't know.”

Sam stares at him, his expression all terror, and when Dean looks back at him, all he can see is the gangly kid with long hair and bad skin, the clutching hands after nightmares and bad days at school. “Dean,” Sam says, and his voice is rough.
“You heard me, Sam – get out of here.”

“I can't just leave you down here--”

“Well, I'm not leaving without him, and we can't all drown down here, or someone's gonna tow my fucking car,” Dean snaps. “So get the hell out of here, right now. You hear me? Go!”

With that, he turns his back on Sam, and he starts to run.

The sea is coming in fast and high now, making it hard to see the rocks underfoot and the path ahead – more than once he slips, lands on his ass, and gets washed down a couple feet before he can regain his balance. He loses his footing and slices his hand open on a stalagmite, and the salt stinging in the cut is so painful his eyes water, but he keeps going. The cave is deafening with the crashing of the water against the walls, and the ice-cold is seeping through Dean's clothes, weighing down his jeans and jacket.

“Cas?” Dean yells again, and he runs, and he is just starting to choke on the fear as the water pastes the denim of his clothes to his calves, and he thinks that if this rises past waist-height then he'll get washed away. If he heads back up to the beach now, he might still make it out, so those are his options: abandon Cas or drown. He breathes through the panic and tries to imagine a world without Castiel, if he could leave him behind even if he wanted to – and all he can think of is that tattered old coat folded in the back of the Impala like a flag, whiskey sour in his mouth, and he is just trying to come to terms with the fact that Sam will be left alone in this world with nothing because his idiot big brother, once again, couldn't let someone die, and then he crashes hard into something.

Dean reels back, almost slips in the knee-high water, and he steadies himself, he brings up Sam's flashlight and finds Castiel.

Back turned, frozen still, wet with the salt spray as it crests over nearby rocks. His shoulders rise and fall as he breathes.

“Cas,” Dean bursts out, relief and fear coursing through him like electricity, and he grabs him, hauls him around to look him in the face. “You fucking idiot – what the fuck are you doing? We can't stay here!”

Castiel's mouth opens soundlessly. He meet Dean's eyes, and something in his face is wrong. “Dean,” he says, voice barely audible over the roaring of the water.
Dean still has hold of his arm, and he uses it yank sharply at him, to try and pull him back up towards the beach, but Castiel doesn't move.

“Dean, I--” He turns his head, looks back out into the darkness. “I saw something.”

Dean stops dead and stares at him. “What?” he says, almost disbelieving it, and then: “Brittany?”

Castiel gazes through the shadows, his face calm, but there is a strange hollow look to his eyes. Dean follows his gaze, but there is nothing there – only the dark. “I don't know,” Castiel says at last.

Dean swallows. “Cas, we gotta go,” he says. “Whether it's Brittany or not, man, we've gotta get out of here right fucking now.”

Reluctantly, Castiel lets himself be dragged away, and they run half-staggering back up to the mouth of the cave. The water rushes faster and faster, ice-cold around Dean's knees and pressing heavily on him, and Dean keeps his hand tangled with Castiel's to keep them from getting washed away. They go faster. Castiel slips, looses his footing, and nearly drags them both down backwards, and there is the narrow, jagged mouth of the cave up ahead, but the sea pours through it in a mad white froth, and Dean knows just by looking at it that even if they could push through, the tide would only drag them straight back in.

“Cas,” Dean calls behind him. “You can swim, right?”

Castiel doesn't answer. His hand tightens in Dean's.

They climb upwards and upwards, and they cling to the walls, and Dean holds Castiel's hand so tight it must hurt, and the water rises to thigh, to waist. Dean is already shivering from the frigid water, but he is starting to shake so much that keeping a grip on the slick and slimy walls of the cave is near impossible. They are so close to the opening, Dean can see water crashing white and furious at the mouth of the cave, almost blocking out all view of the world outside. Castiel has one hand clenched through Dean's, the other twisted into the fabric of Dean's shirt, fingers icy.

Dean can barely keep his feet. The water is an agonising pressure at his knees that he can't keep up, his legs desperate to buckle, and Castiel is more or less dead weight on his arm that sets off a burning ache in one shoulder. He twists partway at the waist to yell, “Fuck, Cas, go – go--” and
then out of nowhere, his feet are snatched out from underneath him.

He is underwater before he knows what is happening, his still-open mouth flooding full of salt water, and Castiel is jerked away from him so hard something in Dean's elbow cracks – but he manages to hold on.

Everything is dark. He kicks and flail. The current wrenches off one of his boots, nearly robs him of a sock as well, and Dean can feel his sodden, heavy clothes weighing him down as the riptide sends him spinning. His grip on Castiel's hand is slipping. He twists, thrashes – no idea whether he's in the cave, out at sea, somewhere a hundred miles underground already with the drifting corpses of the forty-seven – and then as the water catches him, flips him over, he finds himself facing back towards the cave.

Maybe, he thinks, he's already drowning. Maybe he has inhaled mouthful after mouthful of water, and his lungs are filled up to the brim with the sea – that's the only explanation. He is moments from death and hallucinating, and that's why he can see the narrow, pale figure of a person just beyond the mouth of the cave.

He only sees it for a split-second, so quick that he could be mistaken, and then he hits the cliff wall so hard that all the breath is punched out of him and his vision whites out.

Dean chokes on water. He struggles. His hand slips out of Castiel's, and he thinks, I'm fucked. I'm going to die here, and then suddenly suddenly there is a hand tucked into his armpit, a hand with a fistful of his jacket, and he is hauled out of the water.

Dean gasps for air the instant his head breaks the surface, spluttering as his throat burns. For a couple seconds he can't see anything through stinging eyes, his head still spinning, but he recognises the hands dragging him up the steps at the cliff edge.

Castiel pulls him out fist over fist, grabbing handfuls of the back of his shirt, his ass, to get him out and to safety. Just behind him there is Sam with one hand steadying himself on the cliff wall as the other clings to Castiel's sodden jacket to keep them all from falling in again.

“Come on, we got you, we got you,” Sam says, and he is yanked up to kneel on the cool, rough stone. He vomits almost immediately, retching on the rock until his gut aches, and he coughs and he gasps, but he has to keep moving. He is exhausted, every bone in his body desperate to lie down and never move again, but he can't. The water is still rising. Breath rattling in his throat, Dean drags himself up onto his feet and lets Sam guide him and Castiel back up towards the car.
They all get up in one piece, and then they reach solid ground at the top and Dean's legs gives out. Sam catches him, holds him steady even as Dean dry-heaves over the grass.

“Jesus,” Sam says, and worry is thick in his voice. “You okay?”

Dean doesn't even have it in him to come up with a smart answer. He lets Sam's flashlight – now shorted out, leaving them with zero functional lights if they ever suddenly lost their minds and decided they wanted to go back down there – fall into the dirt between his feet. He leans on Sam heavily, supporting himself to turn and look backwards. Castiel has sunk to sit in the grass and mud at the top of the stone steps, and he looks out at the water, still swirling dark and hungry.

As Dean watches, the water swallows up the last few inches of the cave entrance, and then it is gone. In the moments that follow, the water creeping steadily higher, Dean isn't sure he could even pinpoint exactly where it was. The sea has washed it all away.

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Sam drives them back. They run a bath as hot as they can get it, and Dean goes in first, once Sam has checked him out for injuries – cleaning the cut on his hand, checking he hasn't broken any ribs. He seems to be mostly okay, at any rate.

Dean slumps against the cold ceramic of the bathtub and tries to stop shivering, fighting to erase the panic soaked deep into his skin. He can still feel the icy water, the heaviness of his clothes. Every time he shuts his eyes he sees that narrow sliver of light underwater, strange enough that for a moment, with his eyes blurred by water and salt and the distance, it looked like a person.

Through the wall, he can faintly hear Sam's and Castiel's voices.

“--said he saw someone, I don't know. Is that possible?”

“Perhaps. But Dean was also drowning, so his hallucinating is not entirely a possibility worth ruling out.”

“And you're sure you didn't see anything?”
“I didn't see anything – but I was only underwater for a moment.”

“So basically, it could go either way, because we don't–” There is a loud clattering sound as Sam does something to prepare drinks, and the rest of the sentence is lost in the clamour. Dean pulls his knees up to allow himself the space to tilt his head back into the bath, until the hot water blocks out all sound. He exhales steam.

When Dean comes out of the bathroom, more swaddled in towels than the infant Jesus, Sam and Castiel shut up immediately and look over at him.

“No, please, go on,” Dean says, and he waves a magnanimous hand at them as he makes his way through to his duffel bag for clean clothes. “Continue talking shit about me. I insist.”

“We weren't talking shit about you,” Sam says automatically – too quickly. Castiel, to his credit, doesn't even try; he just grabs his towel from the dining table and heads past Dean into the bathroom.

“Thin walls, Sammy. Don't worry about it.” Dean grabs dry underwear – which smells a little funky, but at this stage he'll take anything. “So you don't believe me about the freakazoid in the cave.”

“I don't not believe you,” Sam says. “I just – I'm not sure I believe you either. I mean, you say freakazoid, but what you described is, like... a ghost, at best. You said yourself it looked like a trick of the light, dude.”

“Because it did – but it wasn't.”

“And you gotta admit you were a bit screwy the whole time we were there. Like, I don't know what your issue with the flashlight was. Yours was working just fine.”

“Goddamnit. Well, that's just great,” Dean mutters, as he wiggles his boxers up underneath his towel. “Of course it would start working again the instant I don't need it.”

Sam frowns. “No – well, I mean, it was working just fine when you handed it to me.”
Dean grabs his jeans and shirt from the couch. “Yeah, yeah, I'm just the idiot who doesn't know how to use a fucking flashlight.”

Sam makes a short, frustrated noise. “That's not what I'm saying--”

Dean heads back over to the kitchen as he pulls his shirt over his head, bare feet still damp and leaving faint prints on the floorboards, and he goes to dig through the kitchen cupboards for any leftover Pop Tarts. “So,” he says. “What are we thinking, then?”

Sam sighs. “Not sure,” he admits. “But I figure it's an interesting coincidence how all this is linking up. The salt church rosary in the same pattern as what looks like a naturally-occurring salt vein, in the cave system where sacrifices were made to appease the God that the salt church worships... I mean, these people all think they're worshipping God, but if they all have these rosaries with this symbol on, then – then maybe that's directing the prayer somewhere else.”

“Like a Tulpa kind of deal,” Dean says. “It could even be getting its power than way.”

“Maybe that's what their whole atonement thing is about - a sacrifice to their God. The more they atone, the happier this thing is, and so the stronger its powers are to keep them safe.”

“Like some kind of guardian angel,” Dean says, and he's glad Castiel is in the bathroom. Trust him to always say the wrong fucking thing. “Or something else. I dunno. A patron saint, maybe.”

Sam drums his pen against the table top, his fingers shifting. “Yeah, maybe.” He pulls his notebook closer and scribbles it down, his eyes lost somewhere in the direction of his laptop screen. “That might narrow down our searches a little – fingers crossed, anyway.”

The rosary is on top of the dining table. Dean butts at the beads with his fingertips, gently flicking the icon with his thumbnail, and the sound of it catches Sam's attention. He looks up.

“I think we should stop carrying that around, as well,” he says, and he eyes the rosary as though worried it's going to leap off the table and attack him. “If that is how this thing it's getting its power, I want us to have as little to do with it as possible.”
“Dude, it's tiny,” Dean says.

Sam shakes his head. “I don't want us taking any chances until we know for sure what we're up against and what it's doing.”

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Fine. I'll babysit the goddamn Necklace of Doom.”

Sam throws Dean the look he reserves for blasphemy and talking over nature documentaries. Dean slides the rosary off the table into his open hand, and he carries across to his duffel bag, where he has a secure side-pocket for holding all his fake ID and mobile SIM cards. He zips it up tight, giving the bag a loud slap to appease Sam because look, see, it's really definitely very safely closed, and then he comes back to the table.

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The next day, Dean wakes up early. It's probably the lack of curtains, still. Castiel is already awake by this point, standing by the window.

Dean groans, and throws an arm over his face to hide in his elbow. “Ugh.”

“Well, hey, I never cease to be an asshole, right?”

“Good morning, Dean,” Castiel says mildly.

“No, it isn't.” Dean props himself up onto his elbows and squints through the harsh white light of a clear morning. “Hey, move over two steps to the left, will you?”

Castiel, always a fucking asshole, takes two steps to the right. The light falls more hotly onto Dean's face, the sun right in his eyes, and Dean swears at length to the tune of, you fucking fuckhead-fucker.

“Charming.”

“Well, hey, I never cease to be an asshole, right?”
Castiel squints at him. “You know I don't believe that,” he says, blunt and almost confused.

Dean can feel himself flush up from the jaw, because sometimes he forgets Castiel can be like that – full of blunt and unexpected kindnesses like it's as normal as asking someone to pass you the mashed potatoes. “Okay, well. I mean--” Dean gives up on that sentiment; he flops back down onto the couch and covers his face with his hands. “Whatever.” It's too early in the morning to feel as ridiculously in love with Castiel as he does. He needs like, another forty minutes shut-eye to be able to deal with this, at least.

He doesn't get forty minutes; he gets ten, and then Sam is in the living room, loudly doing exercises to warm down from his run, and it's impossible to get any fucking sleep with some asshole heavy breathing and doing squats on the other side of the coffee table, so Dean gets up.

He hits the head, washes, and grabs some orange juice before he feels the itch to be doing something useful. Sam has only just finished his dumb warm-downs, and is due to head into the shower once he's satisfied that he's properly rehydrated, so there's at least an hour before they get moving anywhere to actually move the case forwards.

For one disgusting, awful moment, Dean actually considers sitting down to do some research, but then he gets a hold of himself. He grabs some cleaning product.

“Hey, Cas,” he calls across the room as he heads for the first of the cabin's grimy windows. “You wanna give me a hand?”

Castiel wrinkles his nose. “Not particularly,” he says, but he comes.

Dean gives him a sponge and a spray bottle of mould-remover, and directs him to the far side of the window, where mildew has collected darkly along the edge of the sill.

They clean for several minutes in silence, and then, off-hand, as though it has only just occurred to him, Castiel says, “Will clean windowsills improve our demon warding?”

Dean blinks. “What?”

Castiel looks at him.
“No,” Dean says. “What? Maybe, I don't know. I just--” Then it dawns on him, and he looks away. His hand becomes still on the sponge. “Sam told you, didn't he?”

“He did,” Castiel agrees, and then he returns to his attention to carefully scrubbing away mildew, without further comment.

“What did he say?” Dean grouches. He flicks irritably at a clump of dirt with his fingernail. “Look out, Dean's gone soft and he's thinking about the future?”

“No, but now you have.”

Dean gives him a hard look, but Castiel isn't paying attention. He has found a spot of particularly heavy mould and is working on it with more vigour than Dean thinks the task actually needs, but it's getting the job done. Dean holds out the spray bottle of mould remover for him.

Castiel takes it from him. “Thank you,” he says, and proceeds to spray roughly the entire contents of the bottle on the wall. He meets Dean's eyes as he hands it back. “Why are you thinking about the future?”

“Why?” Dean repeats incredulously. “Why – Jesus, that's depressing. You know, anyone else, with a normal life, all that kind of thing, they'd be like – oh wow, Dean, you're thinking about the future. What a normal and reasonable thing to do--”

“It's not the life, Dean, it's you,” Castiel says, and he lowers his sponge. Dean is trying to figure out whether or not to be offended, but Castiel goes on. “You're reckless, you're not terribly careful. Your disregard for your own safety is at times disturbing.”

“That's not true,” Dean objects.

“Your concept of self-care is eating a candy bar before going into a vampire nest,” Castiel says pointedly.

Dean fidgets. “I need to keep my strength up,” he says, feeble. “So sue me.”
“I know your reasons.” Castiel returns his attention to the mould edging the windowsill. “It's just surprising, that's all.”

For a couple seconds longer, Dean winds up just staring at him – at his hair, growing out a little too long and curling at the nape of his neck; at the whorl of his ear; at the small red scratches along his jaw where he's nicked himself shaving. He speaks without thinking. “Sam thinks I'm nesting.”

“That's ridiculous,” Castiel says, voice low and solemn as he wipes and wipes at a crease of wallpaper. “You're not nesting - you just want things to be nice, and comfortable, and homely.”

“Exactly,” Dean says emphatically, and that's when he sees that Castiel, with his face turned to the wall, is trying to hide his small, giveaway smile, the squinty crinkle at the corner of his eyes. Dean realises Castiel is making fun of him. “Hey. Fuck you.”

“I'm sure your baby birds will love it,” Castiel says, serious as ever, although that smile is stretching wider now, and he sidesteps quickly as Dean goes to push at him.

“You're so full of shit, I swear to God--”

“Dean, the mould,” Castiel says, and his smile is wide, goofy, and he tries again to dodge Dean, twisting his shoulder out of reach. “The mould, Dean, we need to--”

“Yeah, yeah, you're so goddamn worried about the fuckin' mildew now, aren't you?” Dean says, and he swats at him again. Castiel goes backwards, his back bumping the wall, and he holds his hands up between them in surrender. Dean doesn't remember teaching him that. He wonders whether it was Sam backing down from some argument about the car radio, or if he saw it on TV, or when they were interviewing some perp.

Castiel doesn't speak, and Dean just looks at him, aware now of the way that Castiel is backed up against the wall, the water rushing through the pipes that means Sam is in the shower still and Dean is maybe six inches from him and they're all alone.

Castiel breathes, in and out. The shape of his mouth is impossibly gentle, and Dean aches just looking at him. His mouth is dry.
Dean swallows and takes a step back. “Sorry,” he says, and he looks away, scratches at the back of his head. “I didn’t - I just. Look, just forget about it, okay? It's dumb.”

He steps away, going for his sponge and the spray again, and then Castiel reaches out and touches his fingertips to Dean's wrist. His hand is warm and a little soapy.

“Please,” Castiel says, and when Dean looks over, startled, he lowers his voice further, to something so soft that Dean has to strain in to hear him. “Don't mistake my surprise for condemnation. I'm glad,” he says. “Honestly. I'm glad.”

Dean doesn't know what to say. He's caught somewhere between being so in love with Castiel it hurts and desperate not to trip over the edge into something he can't come back from, and all he knows is that he doesn't want this moment to be over yet. He says the first thing that comes into his head, which is never a good idea. “You know, you're – uh. In it.”

Castiel's head tips just slightly over to one side. His hand is still on Dean's wrist. “In what?”

Dean's throat is clenched up so tight with fear he can barely breathe through it. “The future,” he says, at last. “When I think of it.” He swallows. “If I think of it.”

It's easy to pinpoint the moment when Castiel realises that Dean is telling him he loves him. That tiny crease of a frown between his eyebrows eases, and then his expression softens, his mouth something close to a smile. There is the slow curve of his lower lip, the slight scrunch to the corners of his eyes like he's looking into the sun, and Dean can't handle it. He doesn't know how Castiel can look at him like he's something precious when Castiel knows all the things Dean's done, the things he's been – and Dean wants to kiss him so badly that he can't think of a fucking thing else, but he's scared.

“Dean, I'm honoured,” Castiel says, and there it is – another one of those fucking weird things where Castiel completely skips out on everything expected and predictable. Dean has been in love with him for years, and Castiel is, of all things, honoured.

“But?” Dean says, because he can feel it weighing heavy on the end of Castiel's words.

“But what?”
“There's always a but.”

Castiel's smile stretches a little wider. “There isn't,” he says, and then, softly, “Dean. Trust me.”

“I do,” Dean says, because that much he knows for certain, and that much he can say out loud. He trusts Castiel with his life, with his brother, with the truth – most recently, with his car, which is new and terrifying. He takes a deep breath. “Look, Cas. I'm just – I know I'm not good at this, all the explaining and--”

Castiel sets a hand carefully along the line of Dean's jaw, and for once in his life, Dean figures out when to shut up.

He just stares at Castiel, more scared than ever, but Castiel is looking at him with that stupid fucking look on his face like everything is going to be okay, and Dean trusts him, he does. If Castiel knows that things are going to be okay, then they are.

Castiel's thumb sweeps slow over the corner of Dean's mouth, and Dean doesn't say anything, and Castiel kisses him.

His mouth is slow and sure, and for just an instant Dean kind of wants to cry because here is the gentle pressure of Castiel's dry lips, the bump of his nose into the side of Dean's, here is the dull, uninteresting taste of nothing in particular on him, here is the warmth of his breath, and there is no grand moment of the universe imploding. The world doesn't stop if they do this, and it is all so completely ordinary that Dean realises they could have been doing this for years with no real consequence, and he thinks, fuck, fuck. He's wasted so much time.

Dean gets his hands up to cup the back of Castiel's neck, fingers threading through his too-long hair, and Castiel settles his other hand on Dean's waist to smooth his thumb along Dean's side. Dean opens his mouth on an exhalation, and he catches Castiel's bottom lip, and he can barely breathe, his heart is beating so fast, but he knows he is safe.

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It's nearly three miles from the point to the small white-painted sign that reads: CROUSE. LEFT AHEAD. Dean almost drives past Maggie's turning before he spots it, and then, up the lane through the trees, there is a small house made of green clapboard, with a porch at the front and low-set flowerbeds filled with small, struggling shrubs. There is a peeling-painted barn at the back, half-
concealed by the pines pressing close in around Maggie's land.

Dean parks alongside the mud-splattered pick-up and gets out to head up the porch steps.

“Maggie?” he calls, and he knocks hard on the wooden door-frame. “It's Dean.”

“What do you want?”

“More questions for the Gazette. Sorry.”

“I swear to Christ, this is going to be the strangest article ever written.”

Dean smiles wide and charming. “Yes, ma'am.”

She eyes him with suspicion, but at last she rolls her eyes and says, “Come in, then.” As they walk through to the kitchen, she calls back over her shoulder, “How long does it take to write one lousy article, anyway?”

Behind her, Dean grimaces. “Uh. You'd be surprised.”

She makes a disapproving little noise in the back of her throat, but makes no comment. “So where's Goofy and the BFG?”

“At the library. We got a couple interesting leads that we're looking into right now.”

“So what good am I?”

“They sent me over here for, uh - 'local perspective',” Dean says, complete with air quotations. He pulls a face. “No-one here will talk to us. Or even look at us, actually.”

“I told you, they don't much like outsiders – certainly not if those outsiders are prying into their
business, which you are. You didn't piss off Joseph Tracy, did you?"

Dean hesitates. “No,” he lies. “I just thought this might seem a little weird, is all. I wanted to ask if there was any local mythology you might know about that could interest our readers – a ghost story, maybe, specific to this area. You know, Wisconsin has the Hodag, Ohio's got the Loveland Frog – what does Nineveh have?”

“Nineveh doesn't have anything. There's no young people here to make up any shit like that.” She gets up from her seat and crosses to the sink. She runs the faucet and brushes the back of her hand under the stream as a temperature test, and then she gets to filling a glass jug patterned with small red flowers. “The weirdest thing we have is the salt church, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't even qualify for cult status.”

Dean pulls a face. “So, more Rosemary's Baby than Dawn of the Dead.”

Maggie raises her eyebrows at him.

The jug is overflowing. Water spills cold and clear over Maggie’s hand, but she either doesn't notice or doesn't care.

Dean hesitates. “Do you want to get that?”

Maggie doesn't so much as glance at it. “It's fine,” she says, voice measured.

He frowns, a little perturbed, but he decides to ignore it. He's a guest in Maggie's house for now, after all. He looks down at his notebook. “Okay. Is there anything else you can tell me about the salt church?”

“Let me see. It's creepy, it's exclusive, they pin headless fish to my front door sometimes when I have the audacity to put up some Christmas lights. What else? Their saint is pretty weird too--”

Dean looks up, startled. “Wait – saint?”

“Patron saint of the salt church.”
Dean frowns. “We didn't find anything about a saint in there.” He can see water rising slowly in the sink, its surface shiny and wobbling. It creeps up past the heaped dirty dishes; it kisses the bottom of Maggie's glass jug.

Maggie taps a fingernail to her temple. “There we have it. Local knowledge. They're not big into iconography. More into – I don't know, throwing things into the sea. That's who they direct their prayer through, their atonement. The name – I forget. Like Hannah. No – Halia. That's it.”

“Halia?” Dean repeats.

The sink reaches maximum capacity, and the water begins to flow over.

“So you have heard of her,” Maggie says, mouth curving in a smirk.

“Maybe – I've heard it somewhere.”

The water trickles down over the kitchen cupboard doors and puddles on the floor. It sweeps over the kitchen counter like the push of the tide. It wets the front of Maggie's jeans. She doesn't react.

“Maggie--” Dean starts, but the words stick in his throat.

The world has gone still and quiet, everything drawing in close to centre around the cold water gliding over every surface to claim it. Maggie has a newspaper beside the toaster, a pile of unopened bills tucked under the bread. The water swallows it all.

Maggie stands in front of the sink, water pouring all around her, that heavy glass jug still brimming over in her hand. Dean's eyes swim, and the little red flowers move like drops of blood swirling. The water comes to Dean's feet, and he can see himself in the shining reflection of the floor, hollow-eyed. He is struggling to breathe.

Dean doesn't know what to do, and then there is a touch to Dean's elbow, and he jumps near out of his skin. “Jesus--” he bursts out, and there, his mouth is working, and as he blinks, he realise that Maggie is standing in front of him, jeans dry.
The faucet is off, no water anywhere, except for in the glass jug, which stands neatly on the kitchen table. There is a slice of lemon in it.

Dean breathes in, and out, and he swallows down the pitching sensation in his stomach like he's gonna hurl all over Maggie's nice wooden table. “Sorry,” he mutters. “I don't know what – I don't know. Sorry.”

“You look like shit warmed up,” Maggie says bluntly. “What's wrong with you?”

“What? Yeah, I'm fine. Fine.”

“You don't seem fine.”

“You don't seem like someone who gives a shit.”

“I don't. But you're my tenant, so it's in my best interest to make sure you're not going bat-shit crazy. Besides, I've always found that people who don't give a shit can be the best to talk to. No reason to bullshit you, right? They don't care enough about your feelings to lie.”

Dean thinks of the way he and Sam have tangled themselves into knots of carefully withheld truths designed to protect each other, the gentle tone of Castiel's voice on the words, I'm sure it's not as bad as you think; everything is going to be fine; trust me. She's not wrong.

“It's nothing, I just – I don't know.” He scrubs a hand down over his face. “It's like – fuck. Like drifting. Like I'm getting further and further away, and like everything is changing and I don't know why. Like I keep getting sent back to the start and everything is different somehow. I don't know. I'm just always... always starting over, and everything is changing.”

For a moment, Maggie is silent, tracing a fingertip through the coffee stain on the side of her mug. She leaves an unclean smudge on the ceramic. It, and her finger, are dark as with blood. “It's a funny theory you've got there,” she says. Her voice fizzes at the edges lik static, or water.

“A theory?” Dean says faintly.
“It just seems a strange coincidence, is all - that everyone else is changing around you and you're staying the same. You know, maybe they're not changing.” She looks up at him, eyebrows slightly raised. “Maybe you are.”

Dean opens his mouth to object, but the words don't come out. He is untethered.

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It's been two days since Castiel laid one on Dean in the kitchen, and to tell the truth, he still hasn't got used to the idea that it really happened. Sometimes, he actually forgets. He's got so used to pretending that he doesn't notice Castiel – the way he stretches when he's been hunched over in the car too long; the way he moves; the strong line of his forearms when rolls his sleeves up to the elbow to practice lock-picking and putting together shotgun shells – that now he is forever being startled by the realisation that it doesn't matter if he looks at Castiel the wrong way.

He is too used to the knee-jerk reaction of flushing hot, pulling sharply away, and finding absolutely anything else to do except address the elephant in the room – one evening Castiel touches a hand to Dean's hip as he passes him through the kitchen and Dean yanks away as though burned; Dean is forever catching Castiel's eyes over the kitchen table when he thinks Castiel isn't paying attention, and instinct rears up inside him red and bad-tempered to demand what the hell he's looking at. And then Castiel smiles at him, always the same small, quiet smile, and Dean remembers.

Today, it happens over dinner. They're eating late, having been holed up in the library with endless photocopies of local articles and books so old that they feel like they're going to crumble to the touch, and the light from the electric bulb casts the kitchen in a harsh, washed-out white glow that catches in the corners.

Dean has made meatloaf with mashed potatoes and green beans, and Sam is trying to explain to Castiel the whole Windows versus Apple argument, and Castiel, while listening politely, reaches across a hand for the ketchup. He touches his fingertips to the back of Dean's hand – making Dean jump near out of his skin – and then, seemingly without noticing Dean's enormously exaggerated reaction, Castiel extends a hand half towards the ketchup to indicate what he's after.

Dean puts the ketchup into his hand, and Castiel is still busy hanging on Sam's every word, but he does briefly glance over to meet Dean's eyes with a grateful look, and there it is. Their fingers bump on the ketchup bottle, and Castiel has that tiny start of a smile on his lips, and Dean wants in
equal measure to sink through the floor and to knock the kitchen table over kissing Castiel stupid.

“--so yeah, I guess you can say that on a fundamental level, they both do the same thing, but when you get down to the technical aspects of it,” Sam is saying, and Dean looks away, dropping his eyes back to the mashed potatoes while a hot flush lifts on his jaw like he's fifteen again and making eyes at Stacey Fowler across the detention room. This is embarrassing. He's thirty-five, for Christ's sake.

When they're done eating, Dean gets up and clears the plates away, taking them over to the sink to wash up, while Sam and Castiel go on bickering – having moved on now to arguing semantics on whether rosary-beads can be a rosary if it exists outside of Roman Catholicism.

Dean is used to it by now, and he knows better than to get involved. He grabs the dish soap and gets to work.

“--in itself refers to the act of devotion,” Castiel is saying patiently. “If we're going to be technical about it, it's the paternoster--”

“Except it isn't! It's just beads – without the crucifix and the decades, it's just--”

“--then by your argument, this may as well be Misbaha, or--”

“--except that we've established that the salt church – because it is a church – is a Christian fundamentalist group--”

“Worshipping a deity from ancient Greek mythology. It's hardly traditional--”

“Okay, well – what do you think, Dean?” Sam eventually asks, as he always does, and he turns to Dean with frustration in his look.

Dean sets aside the last of the plates onto his make-shift drying rack, carefully arranging the dishes so that they won't slip and fall. “I am totally opinion-less.”

Sam tuts. “Useful. Thanks.”
“Hey, I live to serve.” Dean glances over at the table – looking for stray dishes still to be washed up, but distracted by Castiel leaning back in his seat, shirt rumpled, collar unbuttoned. He has one hand resting on the kitchen table, long fingers playing idly through the condensation at the neck of his beer bottle. Dean clears his throat. “Got any more dishes over there?”

Castiel lifts his beer and shuts one eye to peer into the bottle. Then he holds it out towards Dean.

Dean gives him a dry look. “Cute.”

Sam snorts. “Alright, well--” He stifles a yawn with the back of his hand. “I'm gonna call it a day, then. We're getting up early tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean says, waving dismissively, as he yanks the plug on the sink and goes for the towel to dry his hands.

“And I mean early, Dean – not nine.”

“Nine is early!” Dean objects.

From his other side, Castiel makes a half-laugh in the back of his throat.

“Seven,” Sam says, as he gets up out of his seat, and he raises his eyebrows. “At the latest.” With that, he grabs his phone and his glass of water, and he heads down the hall towards his room with no more than ‘night, guys, thrown back over his shoulder.

Dean turns to look at Castiel. “Thanks for having my back there, asshole,” he grouches, but he isn't annoyed – he doesn't think he could remember how to be, with the way Castiel is looking at him, his expression intense, thoughtful, focused entirely on Dean like the rest of the world is blurred out into insignificance.

Then the bedroom clicks closed behind Sam, and in three seconds, Castiel is out of his chair and rounding the end of the counter to get to Dean.
Dean only has time to lean back against the counter and go, “Hey, what's the--” and then Castiel slides his hand up along the side of Dean's neck, up to push his fingers through the short hair at the nape of Dean's neck and cup the base of his skull, and he uses that hand to pull Dean down, forwards, and he kisses him hard.

For a moment Dean is startled, hands flying out uselessly at his sides as though not sure whether to pull Castiel in closer or push him away, and then Castiel gets his other hand between them, hooks his fingers through Dean's belt buckle and yanks him in closer until their bodies are flush, and Dean doesn't have much room left to think about it. Castiel's body is lean and hard, hips sharp, hands firm, and Dean feels arousal heavy, slow-starting, in his gut as Castiel opens his mouth.

Castiel is a little clumsy at first – inexperience, Dean thinks until, distantly, he remembers Meg Masters against a dirty wall, Daphne's frightened fingers clinging to her husband, and then he thinks that Castiel has fucked a girl before – and then he is quick and sure, his tongue hot as he pushes into Dean's mouth. He kisses Dean with confidence, hands steady, and Castiel pushes his hand down from Dean's belt, palm skimming flat over the front of Dean's jeans to drag over his cock. Dean shouldn't be surprised, not with the way that Castiel just pulled them together so there was no space between them, the heat of each other's bodies tangible through their clothing, but he pulls in a deep breath at the first flickering wave of heat.

Under Castiel's hand, he's only half-hard – he's going on thirty-five, for Christ's sake – but Castiel is firm and persistent, and the way he kisses Dean, decisive and sure, makes him a little weak at the knees. Dean gets a hand in Castiel's hair, a hand at his hip, pulls him in closer to rock his hips against Castiel's fingers. Castiel makes a low noise into Dean's mouth, leans away to mouth at the corner of jaw, the line of his throat; Dean's hand tightens in Castiel's hair, and he gasps. Castiel's hand is slow and unrelenting over Dean's cock, and Dean wants him.

“Cas,” Dean says, and his voice is lost in the quiet between them. He hears it from his own lips as though through glass, and then he kisses Castiel hard, licks into his mouth.

Castiel's fingers are quick and steady at Dean's belt buckle, at the button and fly, and then he uses his grip on Dean's belt to pull him away from the counter, directing him past the kitchen table. He takes quick steps to push Dean backwards until the backs of Dean's knees hit the edge of Castiel's camp bed, and he falls down backwards to sit heavily on the mattress.

Castiel follows, putting one knee either side of Dean's thighs and climbing into his lap, and then his hands slide up Dean's body, rucking up the fabric of his shirt, and when his hands reach Dean's shoulders, he pushes at him again, hard enough that when Dean falls back, he cracks his head against the metal bed-frame. He gasps out, “Fuck--” but Castiel is still coming after him, straddling his hips and grinding down against him.
Dean lets out all his breath in a single burst, heat spiking in his gut, and his hands come to clutch at the front of Castiel's shirt, to palm over his hip and pull him in closer. He crushes their lips together again, licks hotly into Castiel's mouth, dragging short, hitched gasps from him. Castiel writhes over him, rocking their hips together hard, and the way they lie, the way they move, Dean can feel Castiel through the denim of his pants, fabric tight, and the knowledge of it, how Castiel wants him, rushes fizzy through Dean's veins. He cups a hand around the back of Castiel's neck to pull his head down and kiss him hot and fast; his other hand he shoves down the back of Castiel's jeans, grabs a handful of his ass, and hauls him forwards to grind up against his hip.

Castiel presses his forehead against Dean's, mouth open and breathing hard as he rolls his hips down against Dean, and Dean can feel a faint tremble through Castiel's thighs as he moves. Dean pulls away from him, leaning back with the idea to suck at his jaw and shoulder, Castiel surges forwards, catches Dean's bottom lip between his teeth and bites at it hard enough that Dean's eyes water. There is the stickiness of blood over his teeth, the salt of it on his tongue. Dean kisses it into his mouth.

They move together, faster now, and Dean can feel that his mouth is open, that his every exhalation is a breathless sound, something low and hungry from the back of his throat, and Castiel's hand are tight on Dean's hips as he grinds against him, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise. Harder. Something shifts with a painful twinge under Castiel's thumb. Muscle; bone. Dean groans.

Dean threads a hand into Castiel's hair, closes his fist. He yanks backwards, so hard that Castiel's head snaps back, and for a moment the long line of his throat is exposed, Adam's apple jutting sharply through his skin, and the angles of him are twisted. Castiel's neck is a jagged line, no curve. His mouth is open, gasping, but the sound is leaking away from them now. The silence is building.

The grind and creak of bedsprings is gone even as the camp bed judders violently against the wall. Castiel gasps and gasps, and Dean can't hear him breathing. He watches the way Castiel's mouth moves, his lips forming oh, fuck, Dean, fuck without sound. The quiet buzzes around them, vibrating through Dean's skull, fizzing underneath his skin, and he presses his mouth up into the hollow of Castiel's throat. He can feel his heartbeat there, licks over his pulse like he can taste it.

Castiel writhes above him, rolls his hips hard against Dean's, and Dean works his hands up underneath Castiel's shirt. He flattens a palm over Castiel's stomach to feel the flutter and shift of his abdominal muscles, glides his hand up over his sternum and chest, finger and thumb on Castiel's nipple until Castiel throws his head back with a silent gasp that spreads his ribs wide. Dean feels the inflation, ribcage expanding, feels the soft flesh between each curved bone like he could push straight through.

Dean thumbs over Castiel's nipple again, watches as Castiel writhes over him, grinding down to get
the best friction where his cock strains against his zipper, a thick line through the denim, and Dean can tell that he's close. His chest heaves, his mouth open, and his eyelashes flutter with eyes half-closed, and in the thick, pulsating silence that clenches in on them until the air is tight and cold on every side, Castiel's mouth moves with yes, fuck, Dean, like that, like that. He moves like water.

Dean drags his hands down over Castiel's side, nails grating through his skin until, in the dark, he can't tell where sweat ends and blood begins. Still, Dean wants to be closer. He wants to fuck him. He wants to glide his hands down over Castiel's back, hook his fingers into the back of his ribcage and hold on tight. He wants to take Castiel apart, to learn his body better than he knows himself, to see him shatter and dissolve. He wants to pull him to pieces, sinew by sinew by long, lovely muscle. He wants to break his neck.

Dean wakes up on the camp bed, slick with sweat and gasping. For several moments, he is disoriented, frozen, as he sits half-upright with his blankets strewn all about his legs. He is awake. He is awake.

As he comes to himself – as his heart-rate stabilises, and he feels less nauseous – he thinks to look over. The couch is vacant, blankets neatly folded underneath Castiel's pillow; beyond that, there is the empty dining table, scattered with books and dirty mugs, and the kitchen. He is here.

Dean lets out a long breath and he slumps back onto the mattress. He stares up at the ceiling as he breathes, and he tries not to feel as though he might legitimately being losing his mind. Crazy people never think they're crazy, he tells himself. You're self-aware. You're fine.

It takes him another couple minutes before he can bring himself to climb out bed. He steps over his pillow, where it got tossed to the floor at some point, and he heads across the uneven, creaking floorboards to the bathroom to piss.

The door is locked, when he gets there. He hammers on it. “Get out, I gotta take a leak,” he calls through.

Sam's voice comes back. “Get in line.”

Dean stands back and waits. Sam doesn't take long, and he comes out with wet hair, and when he sees Dean, he does a kind of double-take. “Morning, sunshine. You okay?”

“Fine,” Dean grunts, and he pushes past him into the bathroom. He slams the door behind him. He
is awake.

There is Dean's reflection in the mirror – pale, a little wide-eyed, but otherwise fine. He runs the faucet, and he grips the edges of the sink and takes long slow breaths. He splashes his face with cold water. He's fine.

He gets washed, and he pisses, and he thinks that there's gotta be something going on here. Castiel's weird dreams about water coming in, Dean having these disturbing multi-level Inception-type deals every other night. It's not normal. It has to all be connected somehow. It's all part and parcel of this – whatever the fuck it is that turns nice, normal teenage girls into rotting empty shells and makes them slit their own throats. It has to be.

Dean comes out of the wash-room feeling a little better, and he moves past the dining table – where Sam has now set up camp with a thick volume of some dusty old book, plus a mug of coffee the size of his face – to get to his bed and his bag and his clothes.

"Sam," Dean starts, and he doesn't know how to go on. He breathes unsteadily. "Sammy, I need to talk to you."

It must be the tone of Dean's voice that gets Sam – Dean can hear it himself, although as from very far away: he is shaky, confused. Sam puts down what he is holding and looks up with concern in his expression. "Sure, what's up?"

"I--" Dean swallows. He runs a hand backwards over his head. "Shit, I don't know. Jesus."

Sam pushes back his chair, stands up. "Dean, are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, I just." Dean exhales, puffing his cheeks out exaggeratedly. He sets a hand on the counter-top to steady him. He has to tell Sam. He has to tell someone, or he thinks he'll lose his mind. "Sam, I gotta be honest with you, I'm – I'm freaking out a little."

"Okay." Sam nods, and he walks into the kitchen to stand opposite Dean. He leans his hip on the counter's edge, and he folds his arms. "Talk to me."

"Okay." Sam nods, and he walks into the kitchen to stand opposite Dean. He leans his hip on the counter's edge, and he folds his arms. "Talk to me."

"So... I keep having these dreams, okay?" Dean tells him, and he feels ridiculous even saying it – like him and Sam are starting up some kind of therapy group where they make dream journals and
talk about their feelings, fuck. “And they're... Jesus, I don't know, they're getting inside my head.”

Sam frowns. “Is it the same as Cas, with the water?”

“No, it's. It's just me. I wake up, and I'm me. I do, I don't know, normal me things. I make coffee, we hang up curtains, I hang out with Cas, I tell you your hair looks stupid.”

Sam looks a little pissed at that, his mouth pulling down, but he doesn't complain. “So?”

“So – it feels real!” Dean exclaims. “And it happens over, and over, and over.” He can feel panic ratcheting tight in his chest even thinking about it, but he blazes on. “And they're gradually getting – I don't know, weird. Like nothing is wrong but it feels fucked up somehow. And every time I think I'm awake and I'm just living my life, I wake up again. And I wake up again. I don’t--”

Sam reaches out to grab hold of his shoulder. “Dean, it's okay.”

“I'm just wigged out, Sammy, I'm sorry. I guess I'm just--” Dean doesn't want to say it. I'm just having a hard time figuring out what's real. He takes a deep breath, and scrubs a hand down over his face. “Confused,” he finishes, lamely. “That's all.”

“No, I get it. I mean, shit, Dean, that sounds – terrifying, to be honest.” Sam lets out a breath of laughter, but it sounds heavy, worried. “But it's okay, now. You're awake.”

Dean looks at him and he thinks, am I?

“I mean, come on. I feel like you could do better to dream up something a little more interesting than this conversation,” Sam says, and he has the start of a smile to his mouth. “Unless, of course, I'm going green right now. Am I going green right now?”

Dean can feel himself relax slightly. “Nah, you're good,” he says, and in spite of everything, he can feel a small smile starting up. He claps a hand to Sam's shoulder. “Although you know, you don't really need to be green to be ugly. You can do that just fine all on your own.”

Sam bursts out with a laugh. “Okay.” He twists as Dean walks past him, and he leans on the back
of his chair. His eyes follow Dean. “You alright, then?”

“Yeah, I'm good.” Dean's about to say, *maybe I just needed to talk it out*, but then he reels himself quickly in because he is never, ever saying that Sam, or before he knows it they'll end up discussing their emotions at length, and regularly. He flaps a dismissive hand at Sam. “Thanks, dude. You seen Cas around?”

“Uhh – out back, I think? Maybe he's down at the beach again,” Sam says.

“Okay, cool. I'll see you in a sec.” Dean walks across to the back door, and his hand is on the knob, and then he wakes up on the couch.
In Room 527, Morgan Pinheiro's hands move slowly over the hospital beds, palms flat against the mattress, fingers curled. She pulls herself up, inch by inch, spine arching in a slow curve away from the bed, and then sinks. And then again. There is something unsettling in the movement as it slowly repeats and repeats. Dean can't put his finger on why. There is a thick wad of gauze bandaging wrapped tight around her throat.

“What does her chart say?” Sam asks.

Castiel crosses to the foot of the bed and pulls the chart out. He makes an impatient noise between his teeth. “Nothing we don't already know.” He summarises: “Psychotic episode, failed suicide attempt. Pupillary response normal, otherwise unresponsive. As Dean said.” He flips the first page over. “Severed arytenoid cartilage and vagus nerve, damaged trachea...”

Dean's no good at the anatomy part of these cases. “What does that mean for us?”

Castiel flips the chart closed. “It means she can't speak.”

Sam swears under his breath.
They were careful to come at a time when the Pinheiro family weren't lurking around. It's suspicious enough to be measuring a hospital ward for shit like EMF signatures and cold spots, let alone with distraught family members in the way and constantly crying. According to Sam's stunt hanging about in front of the Pinheiro house, it's Mr. Pinheiro's turn on watch at the hospital today, but he excused himself to the cafeteria about ten minutes ago and it's unlikely he'll be back any time soon.

However, Dean is beginning to regret taking the route of avoiding contact, now that they're confronted with an unresponsive victim who can't even speak. Morgan is starting to look like a dead-end.

“Damn it,” Sam says, and the sound of his voice startles Dean back to reality. He looks over to see Sam folding away the EMF detector's antenna to tuck it back into his jacket. “Jack shit.”

“It was kind of a long shot,” Dean says, in an attempt to reassure that falls more than a little flat.

“Yeah, I guess. Okay, I'm gonna go find a doctor to flash my badge at,” Sam says with a sigh, and he begins to rummage in the inside pocket of his suit jacket. “Someone's gotta be able to tell us something. You guys good here?”

Dean pulls a face. “We'll survive, I think. There's gotta be something noteworthy in this goddamn room.”

Sam gives a quick nod, and then he is gone from the room, visible for a moment through the glass door in the window before he disappears.

Dean pushes his hands into the pockets of his slacks, and he glances over at Castiel, who ducks to inspect Morgan's various monitors, and Dean isn't checking him out in a psych ward, but the fit of his suit is good. After Castiel first fell, he was only ever decked out in second-hand shit from the formal section of old thrift stores, and he was skinny, then, as well – not eating well. Now he's solid, all clean lines and crisp lapels, the navy gorgeous against his skin. All that's left is for Dean to persuade him to stop wearing ties with cartoon characters on.

“Dean,” Castiel says, voice loud, and Dean realises that Castiel has said his name twice already. He flushes hot, embarrassed.
“Yeah, sorry. I was just – yeah. What's up?”

Castiel has another clipboard in his hands, leafing through the pages. “It says here that she was examined on entry – she has genital scarring consistent with unsafe abortion methods.”

Dean blinks. “What?”

“Using a sharp object to break the amniotic sac within the uterus,” Castiel says absently, as though he's reading the morning paper. He turns the page over. “She's lucky she wasn't killed.”

“She was pregnant,” Dean says, taken aback.

Castiel's eyes flick up to meet Dean's, exasperated. “Yes,” he says. He looks back at the clipboard. “From what's indicated here, she must have been quite far along by the time she realised. And she had help.”

“With making a baby? No shit, Cas.”

“With getting rid of the baby.”

Dean scrubs a hand down over his face. “Jesus. Okay.” He crosses the room to stand beside Castiel so that he, too, can look at the paper. It's all there: the lacerations indicating a clumsy attempt with a sharp wire; the angle implying the direction of someone else's hand. Dean chews at his lower lip. “Do you think maybe – Brittany--?”

Castiel jerks one shoulder loosely. “It's possible.”

“Well, I don't figure a sixteen-year-old girl exactly knows where the nearest backalley abortionist hangs out, do you?”

Castiel doesn't answer. He sets down the clipboard and wanders slowly towards Morgan's bedside. Dean moves away to inspect her chart, tucked into a pocket at the foot of her bed, but he doesn't understand much of the doctoral jargon, and by the time he figures that it's over his head and better left to Castiel – who knows more or less everything about everything, still – the door is creaking
open and in comes Sam.

“Hey,” Dean says, and he puts the chart back. “Anything good?”

Sam grimaces. He leads the way in. “Not really. According to the nurses, she's basically comatose. Her behaviour hasn't changed one bit in the days since she was admitted. They don't even think she knows she's here.”

“Damn. Well, we've been having a whale of a time in here,” Dean says, and he lifts the report in his hand to wave it. “Turns out she was pregnant not too long ago. It looks like she's had an abortion – but, uh, from the looks of it, she didn't exactly go to Planned Parenthood.”

Open horror plays across Sam's face. “She--?”

“The good old-fashioned wire method,” Dean says. “And she had help.”

“Holy crap,” Sam mutters. “Who the hell would even help her with--” He trails off, and realisation blooms slow through his expression. “Brittany.”

“Our thoughts exactly,” Dean says, and then he half-twists at the waist to look back at Castiel, who is stood at Morgan's bedside still, hands in his pockets.

Castiel watches her as she gradually arches, slackens, her hands twisting against the bed sheets. Her lips move silently, her tongue jerking just behind her teeth. Dean can't read lips, but then Castiel says quietly, “Halia.”

Dean looks at him. He lowers Morgan's chart to his side. “What?”

Castiel nods at Morgan. “She's saying Halia.”

Dean looks at Morgan, and now that he has Castiel's superior lip-reading skills to his advantage, he can see it. The open-mouthed exhalation on the H, tongue curled against teeth for L, the jerk of her mouth wider to finish the vowel. She gasps, her throat a dry rattle, and she speaks again, halia, halia.
“Halia,” Sam repeats, and he heads around the other side of the bed as Dean moves to join Castiel. “I think I've heard that before.”

Dean stares down at her. “It's the name of the patron saint of the salt church,” he says.

“Shit,” Sam says, voice low. “Well, that's not suspicious.”

Castiel tips his head over. His arm is pressed, warm and solid, to Dean's. “She may be praying, but to what end?”

“Repentance,” Sam says softly. “That's what this thing wants, right? It wants them to atone.”

“Guilt,” Castiel says slowly, thinking through even as he speaks, “would be necessary for this thing’s forced atonement to function.”

Dean follows the route Castiel's brain is taking; he jumps one step ahead. “So this unwanted pregnancy – that's probably it. And to repent that sin – you, what? Slit your own throat?”

Castiel's eyes are fixed in an unseen middle distance, distracted. “Or you destroy the one who suggested your sin to you in the first place.”

Dean's stomach turns over. He has to admit – it makes sense. He watches Morgan, and he realises what is familiar about the slow, repetitive pattern of Morgan's hand movements over the bedsheets. She is treading water.

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It's seven-twenty-seven in the morning, and Sam is out running, and Dean feels as though he's T-minus-ten to bouncing off the walls. Sam's not due back for at least another half hour, which means they're a long way off from being ready to get going with the case, and Dean never thought he'd say it, but he's desperate to get going. There's nothing to do here except play endless games of Snake on his cell phone, which he's now so good at that it is isn't even fun, and Sam's recently changed his laptop's log-in so that Dean can't even mess around on it.
He's not sure why he's up so early, today of all days; in the last few days, he's been sleeping weirdly, but usually that makes itself known in weird unsettling dreams that fade almost instantly after waking but leave him cold all over. But here he is, having been up an hour and a half already, doing his best to clean quietly so as not to disturb anyone, and he's going crazy.

Dean has wiped down the kitchen, and he found a broken broom in one cupboard that he used to sweep the floorboards as best as he could, skirting carefully around his and Castiel's bags dumped all across the living room; he peels the limp duct-tape off the showerhead in the bathroom and goes about trying to fix the rail so that it doesn't need crazy amounts of tape in the first place. He switches over the buckets set out to catch rain leaking through through the roof, and he cleans mould off the walls.

It is coming up to eight, and he is just considering his next move, when there is movement from the camp bed.

Dean glances over. Sure enough, a head of dark, unruly hair is slowly emerging from beneath a mountain of blankets. “Morning, grumpy,” Dean says.

From under the blankets comes a low grumbling noise. “I'm not grumpy,” Castiel says, in a rough, grouchy voice that completely undermines what he's saying, and he drags himself out of bed.

Dean smiles. He crosses the room to rinse out his mould-fusty sponge, and as Castiel comes trudging sleepily over, Dean drops his eyes out of habit. He is not supposed to look at Castiel this way, when his thin grey sweatshirt is worn all skewed so that the smooth line of his collarbone is exposed, his check-print boxers rumpled up to reveal more thigh than should be legal – and then, unexpectedly, there is Castiel, stepping in close to press a dry, sleep-warm kiss to Dean's cheek.

Dean looks up, startled, but by then Castiel is pulling away already, passing a light over the small of Dean's back before he wanders away to the bathroom, with his sweatshirt pushed up to scatch lazily at his belly. Dean watches him go.

When Castiel comes out of the bathroom, faintly minty and looking fresher, Dean is toeing into his boots, one sleeve in his leather jacket.

“Going somewhere?” Castiel asks.
Dean hesitates. “I dunno,” he admits. “I just. I've been awake for like, two hours already. I'm going a little stir-crazy. Figured I'd take a walk or something.”

Castiel considers this. “Alright. Can I come?”

Dean blinks. “Uh. Sure.” He zips up his jacket, collar flipped up against the cold. “I mean, it's not gonna be super interesting – I'm probably only gonna go down to the beach, but...”

“I'd like to come,” Castiel says, more firmly now, as he crosses the room to his open duffel bag on the floor. “If I may.”

“Okay.” Dean can't argue with that, and he'd be lying if he said there wasn't something gross fluttering in the pit of his gut at the thought. Walking along the beach in the early morning sunlight with Castiel beside him – it's like some bullshit out of every chick-flick he's ever been forced to sit through, and he wants it. Hell, maybe he can go all out and hold Castiel’s hand. Maybe it's that kind of day. “Sure,” he says. “Get dressed, then.”

It only takes a couple minutes for Castiel to get into his flannel and jeans, his boots laced and his windbreaker zipped up, and then they head out.

They walk down to the beach slowly, tripping over tree roots and tangled weeds, and Dean is surprised when Castiel hooks a finger into the back pocket of Dean's jeans. Dean glances back towards him, but doesn't say anything – doesn't want to spook him away from these small gestures.

By the time they break out of the woods and onto the beach, the wind has picked up brisk and cold, but Dean presses in closer towards Castiel and he doesn't feel the chill. Castiel still has his fingers hooked into Dean’s jeans, and he tilts his face against Dean’s shoulder as they walk. The sky over the sea is a still, clear blue, faintly rosy-coloured towards the horizon, and there are birds circling high overhead in ever larger loops. Ahead of them, the beach curves away into a dark slate distance, and the sea shushes in towards their feet.

“Is it weird that I actually like it here?” Dean blurts out.

Castiel lifts his head. “On the beach?”

“Yeah. I mean, no – everywhere, here.” He gestures ambiguously with one hand. “The beach. The
goddamn run-down house, that broken lighthouse. Even the town's not too bad.”

“The case is horrendous,” Castiel points out, but his voice is light, teasing.

“Okay, fine, the case sucks,” Dean points out, and he rolls his eyes. “But – you know what I mean.”

Castiel hums a kind of agreement under his breath, and he moves away from Dean to kick through the shingle, eyes down at his feet, until at last he stoops to retrieve a single flat piece of slate. “I do know what you mean,” he says thoughtfully, and he takes two steps towards the shoreline before he pulls his arm back and throws his stone out fast. It bounces once, and then falls. He lifts a hand to shield his eyes and look out across the water. “It's peaceful here. Quiet.”

Dean comes over to stand beside him. “Yeah. Plus, far enough from everything that I don't think we'd ever get the cops on our ass wanting to look through the property for fifty-six fake ID's and a whole arsenal of unlicensed weaponry, which isn't nothing,” he says, and realises too late that he's talking about the future again. He's saying we without thinking about it, and it lifts a hot flush of embarrassment along his throat and jaw.

Castiel looks over. Dean is sure that he's noticed, but if so, he doesn't comment. He just looks at Dean, quiet and patient and impossibly soft, with the thin grey light turning his eyes the kind of blue that makes Dean kind of want to kiss him speechless.

Dean flounders for a second, nervous and ridiculously, idiotically shy, and so instead, he ducks down and rummages through the shingle for a stone of his own – one that is large, and flat, but heavy. Dean weighs it in one hand, ready to throw. “I don't know,” he mumbles. “I guess I just never really felt before like... like I could get away with it.”

“There's a reason you've been kept out of trouble,” Castiel says, and Dean knows he's making a joke of it, his voice light, teasing.

“With constantly breaking the law?”


Castiel studies him, head tipped over slightly the way he used to. “You think the hunter's life will follow you wherever you go,” he says.
Dean looks away – at the ground, at the sea; anywhere except at Castiel's open, honest expression, his eyes careful and trusting. “Yeah, well. Doesn't it?”

Castiel breathes in deep, and he steps in close. “It's whatever you want,” he says, voice quiet and only for Dean. He is close enough for Dean to pick out the tiniest details of him – the curve of his mouth, the slow sweep of dark eyelashes as he blinks, the dry skin to the side of his nose – and he is so human it hurts. He is close enough to touch. “But I think there is something good here, and I'd like to hold onto it.”

Dean can feel that something has come over his face that is soft and starstruck, and the way he's gazing at Castiel with that smile on his face, he knows that the way he feels has never been more obvious, and he doesn't care. He can feel under his skin, the way that he loves Castiel; he can feel it restless inside him. He wants badly to kiss him, and he can't stop smiling.

“Yeah,” he says softly, and that's all he can manage, his throat a little thick. “Exactly. Yeah.”

He swings for Castiel's head, the slate rock loose in his fist. It hits his skull with a hard, messy sound.

Castiel's mouth opens soundlessly, and his legs go underneath him, buckling. Dean hits him again, and there is blood on his hand. It sprays over his wrist, over his shirt. He hits him again. Castiel goes down. Dean follows him.

Castiel crashes down onto the shingle, gasping out, and he struggles on the rocks as Dean gets down, straddles his waist. The world has gone quiet, shaky; everything is pulsing in towards Dean, silently vibrating around him, and his eyes are dark. He breathes through his teeth, and he pulls back his arm, smashes the rock down against the front of Castiel's head again. Again. He hits him until his skull is soft.

Dean jerks awake with a strangled yell hoarse in his throat.

He sits bolt upright, hands fumbling blindly in the dark for someone real to hold onto. “Fuck,” he gasps, panic seizing in his chest until his breath comes hard and ragged. “Fuck – shit. Oh my God.”

He can't breathe. He is here – he is awake – and his chest and stomach are tight with terror that hits him in waves until he thinks he is maybe ten seconds from vomiting, and he can only gasp through the waves, “Fuck – fuck – fuck—” with the sense that he is spiralling wildly out of control.
“Dean?” Castiel's voice comes through the dark from the other side of the living room, and it reassures and terrifies Dean in equal measure.

Dean clings to the couch cushions and he struggles to breathe, and then in three seconds Castiel is a shadow moving through the darkness, and there is the cool touch of a hand to Dean's jaw. It makes him flinch, but Castiel doesn't move his hand, and against the steady care of Castiel's fingers, Dean realises that he is shaking.

“It's okay,” Castiel says, voice low and soothing through the pitch gloom. His thumb grazes over Dean's cheek, and the couch tilts under his weight as he sits at Dean's side. “I'm here. I'm here.”

Dean surrenders himself to the gentle way that Castiel cradles his face in two hands, even as he feels himself trembling minutely under his palms, and he lets himself be kissed, carefully, again and again, until he remembers how to breathe. Castiel brushes a hand through the back of Dean's hair, smoothing over the base of his skull and down his neck in slow repetition, comforting. Dean is waiting to wake up.

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Sam glances at his watch for the third time. “Jeez, what's taking him so long?” he grumbles, and he leans back against the wall by the door-frame.

Dean sighs. “Christ knows. Hey, maybe he has the shits.”

Sam shoots him a look of disgust, and Dean just shrugs. It's a possibility. They grabbed Chinese food on the way back from the hospital last night, and Castiel has been shut up in the bathroom for a while now.

“Just go see if he's okay, will you?” Sam says.

Dean balks. “Why me?”

Sam raises his eyebrows.
“Hey – don't. I swear to God, Sammy--”

“He could be dead in there,” Sam says, voice plaintive and sad.

“He could be shitting his guts out. You go check on him.”

Sam pulls his hand out of the pocket of his suit jacket, and he offers Dean a closed fist. Dean takes that offer – with a muttered, one, two, three, and he calls scissors. Sam calls rock.

“Goddamnit.” Dean gets up, grumbling, but he hesitates in front of the bathroom door, and he has only just lifted his hand to knock when the door opens, and there is Castiel. Sleep-rough, dark-eyed, pale. His face is wet, and he braces himself against the door-frame with one hand.

“What the fuck do you want?” he says, voice rough.

Dean takes a step back. “Morning to you, too, sunshine. I was gonna ask if you were okay, but I can see that you're just peachy, so--”

“Dean,” Castiel interrupts, and he closes his eyes, rubs a hand blearily down over his face. “Get out of my way.”

Dean glances over his shoulder to see Sam trying his hardest not to look smug. He narrows his eyes, and Sam clears his throat.

“Cas,” Sam says, and he steps forwards. “You okay?”

“Fine.”

“Cas--”

“Why are we all standing in the hallway? Move.” Castiel goes to push past them, then, and he
stumbles.

Sam steadies him with one hand to his shoulder. “Whoa, dude. Are you gonna be okay to come out today?”

“Fine,” Castiel says again, his voice sharp.

“You look like you're gonna hurl,” Dean says unsympathetically. “And I'm not being cute, but the last library we went to didn't even have a john, so.”

“You know, if you're feeling rough, you can just tell us,” Sam says. “It's not a big deal, okay – me and Dean get sick all the time. I mean, I know it feels shitty but it happens like, at least twice a year, every year, forever, so it's not exactly--”

“It's not--” Castiel starts up, sour-sounding, and then he cuts himself off. “Move. I need my clothes.” He jerks away from Sam's hand and pushes past.

Sam turns to follow him. “It's not what?” he says.

Dean figures it out first. It sinks in his gut like a rock.

He doesn't go after Castiel; he stands in the hall between the bathroom and the kitchen, half in shadow from the bulb he hasn't yet replaced, and he says, “How high is the water?”

Sam looks over his shoulder at Dean, bewildered.

Castiel stops.

“The water,” Dean says again, without raising his voice. He has a hand on the door-frame. “When you're waiting, in your dreams. How high does it come?”

Castiel's back is turned to them, his shoulders pulled tight. Through the thin fabric of the grey sweatshirt he now sleeps in, Dean can see the line of his spinal column, the points of his shoulder-
blades. He doesn't answer.

“I thought you said that had stopped, Cas,” Sam says.

Castiel's head moves, tilting over a little. “I never said that.”

“Cas.” Sam takes a step forwards. “We need to talk about this. That's a serious problem, okay – you know the research, you know that's how this thing starts.”

Dean thinks of an old dream - unsure of the detail of it, but recalling fragments of it. The warmth of Castiel's mouth, the touch of his hands. Running water. Sam's voice, low and reassuring, the words indistinct. A rock heavy in his hand.

“I thought you gave me that voice recorder so that I wouldn't have to talk to you,” Castiel says, irritated.

Sam flinches. He looks hurt, his mouth pulling down at the corners. Truthfully, Dean didn't even know Castiel was using it – he would've thrown it into a garbage compacter as soon as it touched his hand. Sam moves forwards to follow him. “Cas, I'm sorry,” he says, one hand reaching out for him. “I'm just concerned, is all--”

“If you're so concerned about strange dreams, why don't you bother Dean about it?” Castiel snaps.

Sam pulls his hand back. “What?”

Dean says, “What?” a second too late. Sam is already looking at him.

At that moment, Castiel sways, stumbles – and as he goes to steady himself with a hand on the kitchen counter, he knocks over a half-empty glass of orange juice that spills brightly all across the plastic. “Fuck,” he mutters, and he goes to right it, but his fingers are clumsy on the glass.

“Here, I got it,” Sam says, and he picks up the glass. He carries it across to the sink. He glances back over his shoulder at Castiel as he goes. “Look, I know you wanna help, but I really think you should stay here. Just for today. Just until you feel a little better.”
“Come on, it'll be fun,” Dean says. “Hell, you should be glad – I'd love a day off the case. You can take it easy, rest up...”

“And if you really want, you can get at some of these textbooks and work on your own 'til we come back,” Sam says, jabbing a thumb in the direction of the heavy books heaped on the dining table.

Castiel lets out a slow, long-suffering sigh, and he sinks to sit heavily at the dining table, covering his face with his hands. “If I agree to stay behind, will you fucking leave me in peace?” he mumbles into his palm.

“Only if you look after yourself,” Sam says, in his strictest worry-wart voice.

“Fine.” Castiel drops one hand, leaves the other smushing up half his face. “I'll... I don't know. I'll drink more juice. And I'll have a bath. And I can tidy up, too.”

Sam seems satisfied with this. Of course, he's a worrier, so he goes and runs the bath himself, fussing for what seems like a lifetime to make sure the water is running hot, and meanwhile Dean is left in the kitchen with Castiel slumped over the table looking like he's been kicked in the ass by every bug and virus Dean can think of.

Dean looks around the room. He doesn't know what to do while he waits. Awkwardly, he says, “Are you sure you're gonna be okay?”

Castiel doesn't answer. He hauls himself up onto his feet and moves, dragging his feet, shoulders hunched over, in the direction of the bathroom.

Dean watches him go, helpless, and it is a spur-of-the-moment, pathetically sentimental thing when he reaches out and catches Castiel by the wrist. Castiel looks at him, and Dean can only look back at him, an embarrassed flush creeping up into his face and ears.

“Uhh,” he says, nervous, and then he steps forwards. He keeps his hand on Castiel's wrist, the other hand lightly touching his hip, and he presses a kiss to Castiel's temple. He's sweaty and cold, his hair damp and unruly, but surprisingly, he lets himself be kissed – and then Castiel turns halfway, and he bumps his forehead against Dean's in what Dean guesses to be a weird, silent gesture of gratitude. The tips of their noses touch, and then Castiel's hand passes a fleeting touch
over Dean's forearm, and then he pulls away to continue on his slow, trudging route to the bathroom.

Dean rubs a hand over the back of his neck. He tries not to smile.

While Sam can be heard trying to be aggressively helpful, Dean puts on a pot of water for Castiel's coffee, and then, finally, Sam is ready. Dean calls a goodbye through the house, and then they head out.

Today, Dean is the first one to get to the car, so he slides into the driver's seat and sticks a tape in, cranks the volume up loud, and once Sam is in, Dean pulls out in the direction of the Steuben library archives. Sam is unsettling quiet on the way out through Nineveh, and Dean knows that he wants to talk about his feelings or some other bullshit. He's just trying to wager with himself whether they'll make it three miles before Sam says something, when Sam speaks.

“Hey, Dean?”

Dean checks the odometre. One-point-six miles: a new record. “Yeah?”

Sam hesitates. He drums his fingers on the dashboard. “What Cas said – about weird dreams. When he said I should bother you about them. What did he mean by that?”

“Uh.” Dean glances into the wing mirror as he steers around a pothole. “No idea.”

“You sure?”

“Dude. Yeah. I promise, okay, if I start having weird-ass dreams about going paddling, you'll be the first to know. Alright?”

Sam hums a low noise in his throat, unconvinced, but he doesn't push the issue. He reaches across to turn on the radio; Dean slaps his hand away and puts a tape in, instead.

The library is quiet that morning; there are a couple college kids hunched over old computers, and some old dears poring through whatever's coming up in next week's book club, but otherwise they
more or less have the place to themselves, which isn't ideal – too much room to get noticed. They'll have to try and make it quick.

Sam leads the way down the aisles for the right books, piling them high into Dean's arms so that he can carry them over to one of the study desks, and they get started.

It doesn't take long for Dean to be bored out of his skull – most of these books are dense as fuck, and Sam keeps muttering to Dean under his breath about extrapolating, how things aren't entirely clear but they might just have to fucking extrapolate, and the last book Dean tried to look through had a severed penis on the first page. He's not really feeling it.

Dean props his face on his fist, his cheek smushed up, and he tilts in his chair to peer at Sam, who somehow, two hours in, is still going like a trooper. He's got his laptop out, a pencil in hand, and he's even using fucking colour-coded Post-Its, for Christ's sake. He has an orange Post-It in his mouth that he seems to have forgotten about.

“Hungry?” Dean dead-pans.

Sam doesn't look up. “Hmm?”

Dean rolls his eyes. “I said, are you hungry.”

Sam takes the Post-It out of his mouth and tapes it over a picture of some weird underwater volcano thing. “We can stop by a diner or something on the way back,” he says absently.

“He can. Never mind. What are you looking at?”

Sam turns the book halfway towards him. “Some weird geological stuff. I was gonna use it to reference some stuff I've collected about saints associated with the sea, but you know, Cas says Halia's not a saint, and I'm inclined to believe him. After all, I'm not the one with the names of every canonised saint seared into my head, so...” He trails off and flips a page. “I don't know. I'm not sure there's anything in here, to be honest, but there's a couple interesting points that might help in some way.”

He moves the book aside and pulls another towards him, one hand pushing a hand backwards through his hair as he picks up the corner of the pages and flicks fast through them.
“Hold up, hold up.” Dean says suddenly, and he puts a hand on Sam’s to keep him from turning the pages any further. “Go back.”

Sam frowns. “What?”


Sam looks confused, but he obediently starts turning pages, slowly at first, then faster. Dean can't remember exactly what he's looking for, but he squints at the flash of each page as it goes past – unclear blocks of text, small diagrams, and occasional black-and-white prints of old mythological paintings. There is Zeus on top of Mount Olympus; there is Achilles with the arrow through his heel; there is--

“Wait, stop!” Dean throws an arm out across Sam, and he pulls the textbook closer towards him. “There – look.”

Sam pulls his hands back, away from the book, as though he's afraid that by touching it he's gonna something break whatever Dean has found – and then Dean points at the page. He wasn't imagining it after all.

As Sam was flipping through, he caught a glimpse of a small, familiar symbol on one of the paintings, tucked in amongst the long sweeps of the brush, and sure enough, it's exactly what Dean thought. There, alongside the pebbles and conch-shells, is the salt rune from the caves.

“Holy crap,” Sam says. He blinks, rearing his head back a little as he squints. “How the hell did you see that?”

Dean shrugs. “Being bored to tears with this freaking library probably helped,” he says, and ignores the disapproving look he gets from Sam. “Let's see. What's the picture?”

“Menelaus speaks to the Old Man of the Sea; The Iliad,” Sam reads. His frown pulls deeper. “The Old Man of the Sea... that's – well, either Proteus or Nereus, I mean, Homer wasn't picky with his epithets--”
“With his what?”

“--but this narrows it down a lot. We know now that whatever this thing is, it's of ancient Greek origin so--” Sam cuts himself off, his eyes lost somewhere in the middle distance.

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Sam?”

“I know where I've seen the name Halia before,” Sam says.

“What? Where?”

He is still staring through time and space, and Dean can see his brain working in overdrive. He's gonna give himself a hernia.

“Hey. Sam? Come on, Sherlock Holmes, talk to me.” Dean reaches out to slap a hand to Sam's shoulders, and Sam suddenly gets up from his chair. He pushes it back, the legs scraping loudly over the linoleum, and then disappears down the library aisles.

“For God's sake,” Dean mutters, staring after him. He glances back over his shoulder with an apologetic smile at a stooped librarian giving him a tight-lipped glare, and then he gets up to follow.

He finds Sam, unsurprisingly, in the Greek mythology section, leafing through a book the size of his head with a heavy brown cover.

“Dude, what the hell is going on?” Dean demands in a whisper.

“I remember now – a while ago, while we were looking into all possibilities, I was reading about Greek mythology surrounding the sea,” Sam says, furiously turning pages. “Nereus was the son of the Earth and Sea, and his kids – his daughters – were nereids, a bunch of sea nymphs and spirits – and – here--” He freezes with the book clutched tight in two hands. “Here. Look. Halia means of the sea. Haliades was another name for this type of nymph. Fuck, I can't believe I forgot.”

Dean presses in close beside him to see the page. “So Halia's, what, The Little Mermaid on a bad
“No, just a nymph, attributed to the saltiness of the ocean. But it says here: listen.” Sam clears his throat and reads.

“Poseidon when he had grown to manhood, became enamoured of Halia, the sister of the Telkhines, and lying with her he begat six male children and one daughter, called Rhodos, after whom the island was named... And while these were still young men, Aphrodite, they say, as she was journeying from Kytherea to Kypros and dropped anchor near Rhodes, was prevented from stopping there by the sons of Poseidon, who were arrogant and insolent men; whereupon the goddess, in her wrath, brought a madness upon them, and they attacked their mother, lay with her against her will... Halia cast herself into the sea, and she was afterwards given the name Leukothea and attained to immortal honour... When stirred, she would turn her attention to all those in whom she witnessed insolence, arrogance, and the other sins for which she had condemned her only living sons, that she might wash clean their wrong-doings as Poseidon had the fruit of her womb.”

Sam trails off, and he lifts his eyes, giving Dean a significant look.

“Jesus,” Dean says. “Okay. Well, that sounds a little familiar.”

“And it says Halia had Poseidon drown her children them in sea caverns, where legend has it their bodies still remain,” Sam points out.

“Christ.”

“Yeah.” Sam looks back down at the book, and it's clear he's gone again, his eyes flicking fast over the page as he thinks it all through. “There's gotta be more than this,” he mutters. “There has to be.”

Sam closes the book over and starts looking through the book case, and in the meantime, Dean heads back towards their desk, his mind far away, on the painting where they saw the salt rune in the first place.

She would turn her attention to all those in whom she witnessed insolence, arrogance, and the other sins for which she had condemned her only living sons--
He sits back down at the desk and pulls the textbook towards him. There is the Old Man of the Sea, strong and bearded, with a long tail curving away like an eel, and there is the rune mixed in among the shells.

–that she might wash clean their wrong-doings as Poseidon had the fruit of her womb.

He is surrounded by the curving stroke of waves, and small darting fish, and painted in pale strokes amongst it all, there are the small, indistinct faces of women. Long-haired, staring. Dean closes his hand over, his fingers jittering.

She might wash them clean.

He turns the page. On the next one is another painting – this one of some scaled creature launching itself out of the sea foam, its many-toothed mouth open and snarling. With one hand, Dean traces slow fingers over the image, following the crest of the waves, the swirl of dark water, but the rune is cold with slime and salt water. His fingers come away salty from the bare care wall, and he knows that Sam is right – but he can't figure out for the life of him what it would mean if all the town were worshipping some hungry thing from the sea.

Under the flickering beam of his flashlight, he runs his fingers along the edge of that smooth circle, testing it, and he turns the page. Give me me absolution; I want to be clean. Here is another creature from half-forogtten lore, all tentacles and black ink rising from the depths. He turns the page again, and the water is a slow cold trickle down the rocks and over his feet as the tide comes in. The water is rising. He turns the page. They have six minutes left to get out of here before they are swept away, and here is another sea monster, whirlpooling beneath the surface. He turns the page. The water is rising.

“--Dean? Dean.”

He jumps, and looks up. Sam is standing over him, a heavy book clutched in two hands, and a frown on his face.

“You okay there?” Sam asks.

“Yeah,” Dean says, blinking hard. “Yeah, fine.” He rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “So what do you have there?”
Sam arches his eyebrows. “I could ask the same of you,” he says, and his eyes move pointedly to Dean's hand.

Dean looks down. He has one hand at his book to turn pages, and the other is balled into a fist that rests on the desk. He can see the beads of the salt church rosary sticking out between forefinger and thumb, and he realises he has been distractedly worrying it between his fingers while he read. “Oh,” he says. “I, uh – I was just. Comparing it against the drawings in here. Seeing if it came up anywhere else.” He clears his throat. “It doesn't.”

“Cool,” Sam says, in a voice that makes apparent how distinctly uncool it is. “I thought we weren't gonna be carrying that around with us anymore.”

Dean opens his mouth, but he has no idea what to say – and as he searches his brain for the right excuse or explanation, he realises that he doesn't have one. Truthfully, he doesn't remember deciding to bring it. He doesn't know how it got here.

“Yeah,” Dean says at last. He's been quiet for too long now; he has to say something. “Yeah, I know. I just – brought it anyway. Sorry, man.”

Sam doesn't look entirely satisfied, his mouth turning down at the corners with disapproval, but he doesn't push it. “Okay,” he says, and then he drops down heavily into the seat beside Dean, and he sets his book on the table between them. “So I found this book, and get this. The Haliades are said to originate from Rhodes – and in Rhodes, they collate Halia with the so-called 'white goddess', Leucothea. So I went through the archives for mentions of Leucothea, and it kept bringing me back to *Paradise Lost*, and – here.” He starts to read aloud, his finger extended to trace the verse.

*Meanwhile,*

*To resalute the World with sacred light,*

*Leucothea wak'd, and with fresh dews embalm'd*

*The Earth, when Adam and first Matron*

*Had ended their Orisons...*

“--and then it just goes on to talk about heaven and everything else, but, dude.” Sam pauses, and his hands come up from the textbook, incredulous, as he looks up. “Dean, I think it's talking about the flood.”
“The flood?” Dean repeats. “Like, a guy called Noah needing to stock up on Lunchables and dog biscuits - that flood?”

“If Leucothea is thought to be the bringer of the flood,” Sam says, slow, and Dean can see his brain turning over, working it out even as he speaks, “then she'd have reason to want to cause sin. Right? The original flood was to wash away all humanity's sin--”

“Give me my absolution; I want to be clean,” Dean says.

Sam looks at him. “What?”

“The pit in the church,” Dean says, and he glances up at Sam just in time to see the tail-end of some strange expression slipping away from his brother. “The stones – that's what they all said. They wanted to be washed clean.” Dean stares at him, and he doesn't give himself to think about that brief flicker of horror cut through Sam's face, like he thought Dean was regurgitating that verbatim out of the goodness of his heart. He has just thought of something else. “Sam – those dreams that Cas has been having.”

“The tide coming in higher and higher,” Sam says. “And it only started once we got here.”

Dean rubs a hand down over his face. “Fuck.”

“What if that's how she's doing it?” Sam starts, and his eyes are caught somewhere past Dean, almost vacant as he works it through in his head. “She gets in your head, she works on what she can find – what makes you guilty – and she makes you think you've gotta, ah - atone for it. If you can call it atoning.”

Dean stares at the verse in front of him until his eyes swim. The rosary is digging sharply into his hand, and there is a sour taste in his mouth that he can't place.

Sam is still talking through it – Morgan being pregnant, Brittany the accomplice to the abortion; the young couple from 1997, the wife beaten to death, the husband washed up along the shoreline – but Dean is having trouble hearing him.

It's not that he isn't paying attention – his ears are filled with static and the words get lost. He is staring at the rosary. The world is still and silent, the quiet echoing in his ears, as it slowly narrows
around him to a point at the base of his skull.

“--Dean? Hey. Dean!”

Fingers snap in front of Dean's face, and with a blink he finds himself at the library, rosary clenched in one fist so that tight that the skin of his knuckles is bleached white over bone, the metacarpals jutting palely. Dean lets out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. He makes an effort to unclench his hand, and he hears something in his knuckles pop. There is a slow, dull blossom of blood through the creases of his palms where the rosary has cut in; he closes his fist again, pulls it back under the table. “Yeah,” he says. “I'm listening.”

Sam is staring at him incredulously, eyebrows raised. “No, you aren't. Dean – you need to tell me, if this thing is tangling you up like it is Cas, we've gotta--”

“It's not, alright?” Dean interrupts. “It's not like it is with Cas. I'm just – I don't know. Sleeping badly. I'm not... losing it, okay?”

Sam looks unconvinced, and that tugs at something guilty in Dean's gut that reminds him of every other time they've convinced themselves that withholding information is better and easier than the truth.

“I'm fine,” Dean says, voice firm, and he leaves no room for negotiation.

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They stop by Costco on the way back from the library – Sam figures that if today's anything like the time Castiel got a bug, he'll have gone halfway to crazy on coffee and productivity to overcompensate. He just doesn't like to feel useless, Dean knows that much, but it's a little intense.

Dean knocks on the cabin door before he goes in – because realistically, the likelihood of Castiel doing anything private and awkward is minuscule, but he doesn't want to take any chances. But he opens the door to find Castiel nowhere in sight.

Everything is exactly as they left it – dining table still cluttered with dirty mugs, where Castiel usually likes to tidy up; on window still wide open with leaves now scuffing across the floorboards. The orange juice that Castiel spilled this morning has congealed, dark and sticky, on the counter.
There is a terrible smell of burning, and Dean looks over to see that the pot of water he set out for Castiel's coffee four hours ago is still on the stove burners – now boiled completely empty.

Sam rushes across to take the pot off the stove but in the hours they've been gone, the metal is superheated, and nearly takes the skin of Sam's palm when he goes to take the handle. He yelps, cursing, and the pot clatters to the kitchen floor with a deafening crash.

Dean is still in the doorway. He's having trouble persuading his feet to move, fear thick and heavy in the pit of his stomach. “Cas?” he calls out. He already has his pistol pulled out the back of his jeans and in hand, but he doesn't know what to do now. He wasn't supposed to need it. They were supposed to be safe here.

Sam runs his hand under the kitchen faucet, still swearing furiously, but as Dean shouts for Castiel, he lifts his head. “Maybe he went out,” he says. “Went down to the beach or something and lost track of time. Forgot about the coffee.” Even Sam doesn't sound convinced.

Dean ignores him. “Cas?” he calls again.

Pistol raised in front of him, his hands placed solid on the grip and ready to fight, he goes down towards the main bedroom – maybe he just fell asleep, maybe he's here, maybe he's okay – and then he stops in his tracks.

“Cas,” he says. His voice comes out as a dry croak.

There he is. In the bathroom – in the bath. Like he said he would be, four hours ago.

He sits hunched over his knees, the line and bumps of his spine prominent through pale skin mottled faintly blue with cold. His hair is flat against his scalp, damp but curling dry at the ends. He stares straight ahead at the wall, completely vacant and empty.

Not for the first time, Dean thinks of this in front of him not as Castiel, but as Jimmy Novak's body. A hollowed out thing with Castiel poured into the cracks wherever he would fit.

Dean thinks of Castiel abandoning his vessel, leaving the corpse to rot. Dean thinks it would look like this.
Dread freezes Dean's feet; he can't move closer. He still has the pistol up at eye-level. He says, “Cas,” again, then louder. “Cas.”

From the other room comes Sam's voice: “Dean – have you found him?”

Dean doesn't know how to answer.

He lowers the pistol and starts slowly into the room, approaching the tub. Castiel's hands are hooked around the edges of the tub, blue-white and twisted over the porcelain, wrist-bones jutting at sharp angles. Dean doesn't need to touch the water to know that it's stone-cold. Panic is mounting underneath Dean's skin.

“Cas,” he bursts out, crouching to speak right in his ear, and he grabs his shoulder to shake him – but Castiel jolts at the touch as though electrocuted.

Castiel lets his breath out in a shuddering burst, and slowly he turns his head to meet Dean's eyes. “Dean,” he says, with slow, pleasant confusion.

“Jesus Christ,” Dean says. He doesn't know how to say what the fuck were you doing or what's wrong with you or how could you do that to me, making me think you were gone somehow – so instead he says, “You nearly burnt the fucking house down.”

Castiel frowns. “I'm sorry,” he says. “I was--”

He doesn't finish. He looks out to the side, away from Dean. He looks at the water, and finally, in that three feet of ice water, he starts to shiver.

Dean turns back to the doorway, and there is Sam, bewildered. Dean wants to say something to him, but he has no idea what. They just look at each other, and Dean swallows, and then he clicks back the safety on his pistol, sets it on the floor, and he turns back to help Castiel out of the tub.

Sam and Dean get a hand under each of his armpits – Sam hissing a little at the cold of Castiel's skin on his burnt palm – and then support him as he climbs out, shaky. Dean tries not to look at Castiel's cock, small and shrivelled against his thigh. Sam rushes to get more towels, and blankets,
and their cosiest flannels, while Dean wraps Castiel up in the dirty, damp towel available, and sits him down on the toilet lid. He crouches then, between Castiel's knees, to hold him steady as he shivers violently, and with his knees aching on the hard tile, Dean thinks perversely that this was never the way he imagined his first time between Castiel's naked thighs. He doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.
It takes Castiel a long time to warm up.

Sam lets him have the bed in the main bedroom, and he and Dean pile on blankets after blankets, as many layers as they can find. They make him hot drinks that he doesn't touch, and he doesn't so much as lift his head when Dean comes in to offer him dinner. Dean puts Castiel's share of the pasta in a Tupperware box to refrigerate, and he sits at the dining table fidgeting and trying not to stress out while Sam researches. In theory, Dean is helping with research, but every time he looks at a book, his eyes swim. He can't stop thinking of the hard white ridges of Castiel's spine beneath his skin, the crooked curl of his fingers over the edge of the bathtub. The ice-cold water mottling his skin faintly blue. *I want to be clean.*

“Do you mind?” Sam says, without so much as glancing up. He has a Post-It note stuck to his thumb – green, this time.

Dean looks up at him and frowns. “Mind what?”

“Tapping. Stop it.”

Dean realises that in his agitation he has been relentlessly drumming his fingertips on the table top; he forces his hand to be still. “Sorry.”

Sam sighs and scrapes a hand backwards through his hair. “Dude, why don't you just go in there already?”
“What?”

Sam flicks a pointed look in the direction of the bedroom. “You're not getting anything done out here for all your – God, _fretting_--”

“I'm not fretting,” Dean objects.

“--and you're definitely not helping me get anything done either, so.” Sam raises his eyebrows. “Go, man.”

Dean shifts uncomfortably in his seat. He doesn't like Sam knowing about this shit, and is tempted to refuse purely on the grounds that Sam suggested it, but even he knows that's pathetic. “Just gonna check on him quickly,” Dean says as he gets out of his chair. “He might need more blankets. Or a sandwich.”

Sam _mm-hms_ without looking up from his book.

Dean heads down the hallway. He hesitates at the door, wondering if he should knock, but he figures he shouldn't, in case Castiel is asleep. He opens the door and steps inside.

The room is dark and quiet, a faint silver glow cast through the window – still without curtains – where moonlight cuts through the clouds. Castiel is no more than an indistinct lump beneath all the blankets, and for a second Dean just stands there. He feels useless.

There is something happening to Castiel. Dean knows it the same way he knows that there is something happening to himself. They're strong, though; they can handle it. This is no different from a hundred other cases – just as you get close, the monster turns on you, tries to take you down with it. This is just the same as some old ghost trying to rip your heart out just as you light the match over the salted grave. It means they're close.

The blankets stir, and from underneath comes a small, rough voice. “Dean?”

He starts where he stands and takes an instinctive step backwards towards the door. “Shit, I'm sorry,” Dean says. “Didn't mean to wake you. I'll go.”
“I wasn't sleeping,” Castiel says.

“Oh.” The mental image flits into Dean's head unbidden – Castiel, lying there, staring blankly into space. Mouth slack, body vacant. His fingers crooked against the mattress. Dean swallows. “Okay.” He looks back towards the hallway, the door still open behind him. “Still, I should let you--”


Dean looks over towards the bed.

There is a moment's silence. Dean can hear Castiel breathing. Then: “Would you – stay?”

Something aches in Dean's chest, and it takes him a second to respond. “Uh,” he says. “Yeah. Yeah, of course.” He shuts the door carefully behind him, and he struggles out of his boots before crossing to the bed. Conscious of how cold his clothes are, he lifts all but one of the blankets when he gets into bed, and he shimmies in as close as he feels he's allowed.

Slowly, his eyes adjust the dark, and he becomes aware of Castiel facing him, his shoulders curled in defensively, the lowest blanket pulled up to his neck. Dean can't pick out any real details in his face, but he can see the shadow where his eyes are.

Dean keeps his cold hands close to his chest, careful not to touch, and, taking a deep breath for courage, he tilts forwards and presses a kiss to Castiel's hair. “You feeling okay?” he mumbles.

Castiel doesn't answer, but he pushes forwards a little into Dean's touch. Guilt weighs heavy on Dean's chest. He wonders, not for the first time, if this thing – Halia, Leucothea, whatever – would have been locked away with every other monster if he'd let Sam finish the Trials. He wonders if he could've saved Castiel from falling if he'd only listened. He thinks of I did it – all of it – for you, and thinks he probably never could've stopped Cas from falling, but that doesn't make it not his fault.

Dean buries his face into the top of Castiel's head, and he forces himself to breathe. “We're gonna fix this, okay?” he says quietly. He swallows. “You, me, Sam, we're gonna work it out.”

Castiel's shoulders pull further in, high and tense. Dean feels the lines of his body stiffen alongside
him, and slowly, Castiel draws his head back away from Dean.

Dean lifts his head to look at him, but in the dark, Castiel is no more than a silhouette. There is the line of his throat, the sharp edge of his jaw, but in the dark, his face is a black hole. When he opens his mouth, silver light catches on his upper lip, casts a pale half-moon with teeth. “This isn't something you can fix.”

Any words Dean had been planning on saying snag in his throat and die. He stares at Castiel for what feels like hours, and then finally, Castiel turns away. He rolls slowly onto his back, then onto his other side, and turns his back to Dean.

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The following morning, Dean and Sam get up early to start solving this thing. Castiel is still sleeping – they're not confident on leaving him alone, but they're even less sure about taking him with them, especially with where they're going, so Sam figures they'll be in and out quick. Back before Castiel even notices they're gone.

Sam wants to check out the salt church again. He found some stuff last night, chasing up what they found in the library about Paradise Lost, and following up Milton's academic correspondences around the time he was writing it, and he found some things that he thinks could possibly be linked to the case. Dean isn't exactly enthusiastic about going back to the world's creepiest church, not this early in the morning, and especially not when Castiel is still laid up in bed, but he reluctantly he gets into the passenger seat, and as Sam pulls out onto the narrow beginnings of the first road, Dean starts leafing through papers peppered with Sam's multi-coloured post-it notes.

“Fuck,” Dean says, flipping through the pages. “Well. You were busy.”

“Yeah.” Sam glances over briefly before he checks the rear-view mirror. “We couldn't all be playing up the Big Spoon in my bed, so...”

An embarrassed heat makes itself known at the base of Dean's jaw. “Ha-ha.”

They drive mostly in silence. Sam has put the radio on, but this far out it's more static than anything else, news reporters' voices occasionally buzzing through, low and indistinct. Something about a cold weather front sweeping east. Sam puts on his turn signal to steer around a car mounting the kerb alongside Nineveh's main harbour. The tide is low, fishing boats concealed by
the crumbling sea-wall so that all that can be seen are the metal spires of furled-away sails as they sway with the waves. Overhead, the sky is pearly grey.

Dean is about to say something about the research, but he doesn't get a chance, because as he looks up from Sam's research, there is suddenly a woman in the road, and Dean yells, “Look out!” and Sam slams on the brakes hard.

Dean's whole body jerks forwards against the seatbelt, crushing the air from his chest, and the tires squeal and squeal as Sam frantically pumps the brakes on and off to stop skidding.

They come to a halt about two feet from her, breathless and staring, and slowly, the woman looks up. Her face is crumpled like old paper, deeply creased around sunken eyes that stare coldly back at them. She doesn't particularly grateful to have narrowly avoided being roadkill. She lifts a hand as though she's honest to God about to shake her fist and yell, which would've been the point where Dean would've said fuck it, drive over her – except he's frozen in his seat.

Finally, finally, she turns away, and she continues shuffling on her way until she is out of the way, heading into the trees the far side of the road.

“Jesus,” Sam whispers. The car is silent beneath them, the engine stalled, and the only sound in the air is their breathing.

“Wow. You okay?”

“Yeah. Freaking useless old people,” Sam mutters, which is about the most uncharitable thing Dean's ever heard him say, and he fumbles with the ignition.

At least it's not far to go now – only another ten minutes down the road towards the salt church, with hopefully no more old people getting in the way. But as soon as they pull off the road into the salt church's wide, gravel clearing, it becomes clear that something is wrong.

Half the town, it seems, is here – not gathered for worship, but facing out, their backs turned to their church. They stand with withered plum fists curled tight, fight braced, sagging jaw clenched in anger. There are somewhere between thirty and fifty of them.

“Shit,” Dean says, loud enough that they could probably hear him through the glass. “Sam, you
take a wrong turn and wind up at the YMCA, by any chance?”

Sam slows the car. The people of Nineveh are showing no signs of budging any time soon. “What the...”

The elderly watch Dean and Sam as the Impala creeps gradually closer. The nearest is a frail old woman with cataracts that wink in the thin light like coins. She advances one slow, juddering step towards them; the others hold their ground. She opens her mouth and begins to speak. Tucked away inside the car, Dean and Sam can't hear her, but they see the moment when the others pick up after her, mouths moving silently.

“Well, that's not creepy,” Sam says.

Dean opens the car door, and as he swings out, he can pick out those low, calm voices, the threat of it.

“You who are unclean, this place is not for you.” The woman at the forefront takes another slow, jerky step forwards. “You who say, I need no absolution; I am whole, this place is not for you.”

The voices of the others gathered by the church come back as a murmuring echo: “This place is not for you.”

Dean hesitates, one hand still on the open door. He recalls Maggie's warnings about angering the townspeople, that they don't like people prying into their business. He thinks maybe they should've listened. “Sam?” he calls across the car. “I've got a bad feeling about this.”

Sam doesn't look too certain either. He slams the car door, meets Dean's eyes over the roof with a grim expression. “We won't take long,” he says. “Come on.”

Dean shuts the door – not locking it, in case they have to get out of here in a hurry – and he wakes up slumped over the dining table, his mouth slack and wet against the wood.

“I told you to have some coffee,” Castiel says mildly, without looking up from his research.
“Shit,” Dean says, and he hauls himself upright. He blinks blearily as the room comes into focus, and rubs at the drool dried around one side of his mouth. “I don't remember that.”

“I said it three times. Dean, have some coffee. Dean, you ought to get a drink before you pass out. Dean, why don't you--”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Okay. Fine.” Dean doesn't remember that conversation, but he'll take Castiel's word for it. He's getting really tired of this weird lucid-dreaming type shit now; he can't be bothered to argue. He drags himself up from the dining chair – and then a little coffee slops over from Castiel's mug onto the back of Dean's hand, scalding hot. “Fuck,” he bursts out, and he hurries the rest of the way to the dining table so that he can put the mugs down.

“Are you alright?” Castiel asks, half-rising from his chair.

“No yeah, I'm alright, I just – fuck. Burnt my hand a little.” Dean shakes his hand out, and glances back towards the kitchen, trying to work out whether he needs to run it under cold water or if he's just being an idiot about it, and then there is the touch of cool fingers to the back of Dean's hand, and Castiel is just in front of him.

“Here,” he says, and he reaches out to take Dean's hand. “Let me see, in case you of desperation--” and his voice, jarring abruptly, is different now, “--who believe when convenient, this place is not for--”

Dean reels back a step.

“This place is not for you,” the others echo back.

Dean's eyes widen, and he blinks to help himself focus, but it doesn't make a difference – he is back here again, in front of the salt church, with the soothing, repetitive shush of the sea a constant whisper of background noise, and with some thirty-odd hostile elderly villagers staring at him.

No. That's impossible. He woke up. He woke up, he is awake and making coffee. He remembers now. And yet he is here, now, and he feels as though he is struggling to breathe. He is here. He is here. He tries to call out. “Sam--”

Sam's voice comes from up ahead. “Dean, come on! Excuse me. Sorry – excuse me.” Dean can see
him cautiously stepping past the citizens of Nineveh, his politest smile fixed on his mouth to keep them at bay.

Dean takes one slow, nervous step after him, and as he clicks the coffee machine on, he half-turns and calls over his shoulder, “You want one?”

Castiel hums thoughtfully. After a moment, he says, “Yes, please.”

Dean gets out two mugs, puts them side by side on the counter, and reaches for the paper bag of sugar, only to find it gone. He frowns. “Hey, Cas, where'd you put the--” he trails off as he looks around and sees it sitting beside the sink. “Wait, never mind.”

He crosses the kitchen to grab it, and his foot nearly turns over in a pothole amongst the gravel. “Fuck,” he gasps as his ankle twists, and he almost falls. “Shit – fuck--” He crashes straight into someone, and looks up to see one of the elderly men of Nineveh right in his face, staring at him. Alarmed, Dean steps back, hobbling a little on his sore ankle, and lets out of his breath in one bursts. “Crap – sorry, I, uh--”

He doesn't finish what he's saying – he is trying to work out where he is, what is happening. There is the slow gurgle of the coffee-machine, the dim rustle of Castiel turning pages, and there is, you of noisy prayer for the ears of others, this place is not for you, this place is not for you. Dean can feel panic tightening in his chest. He tries to breathe, slow and even. He is losing sight of Sam in the crowd.

Dean tries to call to him. “Sam,” he says, and his voice comes out hoarse. He twists to get past the man in front of him, to find Sam, but he can't get past him. There is a woman at his side who stands motionless at his elbow, and Dean struggle,s but he can't move past them both.

“You of sin,” they say, and the echo is a murmur behind them, you of sin, you who sin, “and sin and sin again--”

Dean can feel something painful in his chest where he is struggling to breathe through the panic. He doesn't know what to do. He could beat these guys in a fair fight, easy – they're all up of sixty and probably have fragile hips – but they're not monsters. They're just people, and Dean can't justify knocking out a tiny old lady, even if she is scaring the crap out of him. “Sorry, look, I'm just trying to – Sam? Sam, I don't – I can't get through, Sam, I don't know what's happening,” he says, and Castiel lifts his head, a small frown pulling down between his eyebrows.
“Dean?” he says. His fingers tighten almost imperceptibly on Dean's wrist, and for some reason it scatters a cold, panicked feeling under his skin.

“It doesn't even hurt that bad,” Dean says. He doesn't know why his voice sounds like that – strained, and anxious. “The coffee only got on me for like a second.”

“Are you alright?” Castiel's eyes move over Dean's face, concerned. “You seem – distressed.”

“I'm fine,” Dean says, and someone pushes him back, hard enough that he stumbles. He swears, and nearly ends up on his ass in the gravel, but he catches himself at the last minute to see the villagers of Nineveh pressing in towards him.

“--not for you,” the man nearest says, his voice low, accent faintly lilting.

“This place is not for you,” the women at his sides echo. “This place is not for you. You, who are unclean--”

“Sam!” Dean yells, and he starts backing away. “Sam, where the hell--”

“Here!” Sam's voice comes back, rough and a little frantic, from somewhere over to Dean's right, and when Dean looks over, he sees him his way forcefully past two small old ladies whose hands drift to slowly clutch at the front of his shirt. “Fuck, Dean – get back to the car, now!”

“You, who want no redemption; you, who sin and sin and sin again, this place--” A man's hands come up and shove at Dean hard, sends him sprawling, and he is caught off-balance. He is steadied by Castiel's hand at his elbow.

“Dean, what's--”

“Is this real?” Dean bursts out, and he can feel a slow tremor starting up in his hands, fear curling tight around the base of his spine. “Is this real? Shit, I don't – oh my God--”

Castiel steps closer. “What are you talking about? Dean?”
“Not here, fuck, not here, it's – fuck.” Dean squeezes his eyes tightly closed and tries to concentrate. He is here. He is here. “I don't know. I don't know what I was saying, I'm sorry, I don't--”

Dean lands on his ass on the gravel, gasping out as pain shoots up through his back. He pushes himself backwards by the heels of his boots, away from the slowly advancing elderly, and the thought foremost in his mind is: this is a nightmare. He is somewhere else, asleep, and these people can't hurt him, because none of this is real.

“This isn't real,” Dean tries out loud. “This isn't--”

“You who are unclean--” their voices are louder now, as they crowd in around Dean, who scrambles to get back and up off to floor, “You who are unwelcome here, you who pry and poke and interfere--”

Dean shuts his eyes tight. “This isn't real,” he says, louder now. “This isn't real--”

“Dean!” Sam comes shoving through, and there is his hand hooked into Dean's armpit to haul him off the ground, and as Dean opens his eyes, stumbling along behind Sam, he catches a glimpse of a girl standing just inside the doors to the church, framed by the shadows behind her and half-hidden. She is small, with long brown hair and a faintly upturned nose. Her skin is pale, mottled, almost grey in the dim light.

Dean recognises Brittany from the pictures.

“What the fuck--” he gasps, and then he is staggering blindly after Sam towards the Impala.

“Go, go,” Sam urges, near enough dragging Dean along, and then he slows down to allow Dean in front. “Where are the keys?”

“Fuck, I don't know,” Dean says, and for one heart-stopping moment, as he fumbles at his jeans' pockets, he thinks that he must have dropped them in the throng of people when he hit the floor, but then he catches the keyring in his jacket pocket. “Wait – got 'em.”
He throws them across to Sam – he doesn't trust himself to drive – and then slides in. He shuts the door, and then, as an afterthought, he locks it, and it's a good thing, too; the people gathered around the church come pressing in towards the car, sealing around it on all sides, and their wrinkled, greyish hands press flat against the glass. Someone is rattling a door handle. Someone is banging on the back window.

Sam pushes the car into reverse, but there are people pressing in at the back of the car, and Dean can feel panic rising in his throat. “Sam--”

“Shit,” Sam mutters under his breath, and he winces a little before he revs – a loud, angry and rattling warning sound – and then he reverses. Something hits the car, crunches sharply, and Dean can't watch. He whips around to stare straight through the front window, where there are gnarled old hands beating on the glass, and he can feel those hands on his skin, around his throat. He can feel hands on his face. He shuts his eyes tight.

Something is cracking under the back wheels, a slow, wet crunch. There is screaming. Someone is saying his name, over and over.

Dean breathes, in and out. In and out. Dean, can you hear me? Dean. Dean. The sound of the crowd is dwindling, their hands against the glass no more than a faint, rhythmic drumming now. He can feel Sam beside him, on the other side of the bench seat. Dean? Dean.

He only opens his eyes when he's sure that it's safe.

Sam is driving. The church is dwindling in the rearview mirror, pulling away behind the trees and the dark grey stone of the hillside, and the pines whip by fast as Sam accelerates. Dean swallows. That was close.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Sam look over.

“You okay?” Sam asks. His voice is tight.

Dean grunts a noise that falls somewhere between I'll live and yeah, just fucking peachy, asshole. He rubs a hand backwards through his hair and looks out the window, still feeling shaken. He can't block out the dread and fear that ripples underneath his skin – the hands on him; the muttering of the men and women; Castiel's voice, reassuring, turning sharp; the narrow white outline of a girl just inside the church.
He reaches across to turn the radio on. Immediately after, Sam puts out a hand and switches it off.

Dean looks at him. “What?”

Sam puts on the turn signal, and he slows down.

“Dude, what are you doing?” Dean asks. He's too jittery for Sam to being doing weird stuff like this out of nowhere – he's starting to freak Dean out all over again.

Sam doesn't answer. He slows to a crawl, and he pulls off the road, easing one tyre up onto uneven grass turf to keep out of the way of any other traffic. Then he turns the engine off.

Dean stares. “Sam?”

“You need to talk to me, and I'm not taking us back until you do,” Sam says, without looking at Dean.

“What?” Dean says incredulously. “Talk about what?”

“Let's start with what the fuck just happened at the church,” Sam says, and he turns in his seat now to level a stare at Dean that is cold and hard – but Dean knows him. There is fear underneath. “Let's start there. What is going on with you?”

Dean picks at the hem of his sleeve. “Nothing. I'm fine. I just – I dunno. Got freaked out by those people.”

For a moment, Sam just looks at him, silent. Then he says, “What people?”

Dean’s hands become still.

The answer bubbles up ready in his throat – the old people at the church, those fucking psychos
who attacked us – but he can hear in Sam's voice what is happening here. He's gonna sound like a crazy person. He doesn't say it.

He fights down the gut-wrenching wave of panic that swells inside him, and instead he gives a dismissive jerk of his head. “That woman in the road,” he says. He's pulling this out of his ass and Sam must know it, but he doesn't care. “The one we nearly hit.”

“That old lady,” Sam says.

“Yeah. Her.”

“That one old lady in the road,” Sam summarises bluntly. “You remembered her. And you--”

“Got a little freaked out, I guess,” Dean snaps. “So sue me. She was weird-looking, okay? I didn't realise it was a crime to be freaked out by old people. I never say shit about you and your fuckin' clowns, okay, so--”

“Dean, 'a little freaked out' is not the words I would've used,” Sam starts.

“So it's a good thing we got out of there fast, right?”

Sam stares at him. He doesn't say anything, just looks at him, his eyes slowly tracking over Dean's face as though he isn't even sure what he's seeing. He looks at him for so long that Dean starts to feel antsy and nervous; he fidgets uncomfortably in his seat. At last, Sam speaks. His voice is soft. “Dean,” he says. “What do you remember from the church?”

This is a trick question. Dean knows it. This is like when the cops ask you about something you shouldn't know, so that you incriminate yourself. Dean's breath is coming short, something unpleasant roiling in his gut. He clenches his hands into the leather of the car seat. This is a trick question. They never went in the church. He says it. “We never got to the church.”

Sam's face is impassive, completely unreadable. “What happened?”

Dean feels like he's gonna throw up. He doesn't know what the right answer is. “We were--” Not
attacked, his brain supplies. *Don't say attacked – he doesn't believe you.* “--stopped. We couldn't get in there. We had to go.”

“When?”

“When what?”

“When did we go?” Sam says, voice calm and patient.

“I don't know. It took us a while. I couldn't find the car keys. I thought I dropped them.”

“Dean, I had your keys.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Okay, well, no wonder I couldn't find them,” he says, trying for obnoxious and falling a few miles short. He sounds small.

Sam is quiet for a moment. “We did get into the church, Dean. Do you remember that?”

Dean doesn't look at him. He doesn't know how he's supposed to answer this. He doesn't know if he remembers. He isn't sure anymore. He remembers the touch of Castiel's hand – but Castiel isn't here. He remembers a pot-hole. Hands curled into his jacket. None of that lines up with the image of going into the church, and he just doesn't know. He is taking too long to answer. He says, “Sam, look--”

“Cas was telling the truth, wasn't he?” Sam interrupts. “About you. Having the same dreams.”

Dean shifts in his seat, uncomfortable. “They're not the same,” he mutters.

“So what are they? And – God, Dean, why the hell haven't you told me?”

“Fuck, I've tried!” Dean bursts out, and finally everything inside him snaps. “I've fucking tried, Sam, okay, I've tried so many fucking times – I've tried and – and every goddamn time I'm just – I'm back at the start. Back wherever I was before, or back before it happened, or back on the
fucking couch and the curtains aren't up. And we put up the curtains and they aren't there anymore, and it starts over and over again, and I tell you, I fucking tel you everything, and then you still don't fucking know!" He is shaken. He can feel that he is wobbling on the precipice of a panic that cuts his breath short. He feels like he needs a paper bag. His hands are trembling where he sets them on his thighs, and he can't think straight. “So I don't know whether you know or not. I never fucking know. Hell, I don't even know if I know what's happening. I just don't fucking--”

Dean's voice breaks and he can't go any further. He's losing his fucking mind. He rubs a hand down over his mouth and tries to press every part of himself into that touch – fingers on skin, his palm sweaty against the mouth. Salty. He can taste the sea.

“Let me tell you what happened,” Sam says. “We went into the church. You were walking slowly. I told you to hurry the hell up. We took a look around inside, and then you started – fucking, I don't know, chanting. Reciting all the same shit that's on the stones. I want to be clean. Under your breath, like you were praying, for Christ's sake. And I had to get you out of there. Dean, you were shaking. You were--” Sam's voice cracks. He looks away sharply, out of his side window.

Something cold settles thick and heavy underneath Dean's skin. “I'm sorry,” he says. He doesn't know what else to say.

“I mean – do you remember anything? Do you remember me getting you into the car to calm you down?” Sam asks. He won't look over at Dean. “Do you remember how long you were just – sat there?”

Dean doesn't know, so he cheats. He looks at his watch to see how far gone it is after seven A.M, when they arrived. It's coming up on nine. He puts his arm back down, and he doesn't answer, but he thinks of Castiel with his shoulders pulled tight, his eyes vacant in the somewhere distance. He tries to keep breathing.

“Dean, how long has this been going on?” Sam asks.

Instinctively, he wants to lie. He wants to downplay this, but he knows that at this point, that isn't going to help anything. He swallows, and looks down at his hands. “Honestly, I have no idea.” He takes a deep breath. “Sam, I don't know what's happening. I don't know if it's been two days or ten since we were down in those caves – hell, I'm not even entirely sure we're not still down there, and that in five minutes I'm not gonna wake up and still be on that stupid fucking couch, batshit crazy, and you'll be out running and you still won't know--”

Dean cuts himself off. He can't go any further. He turns and looks out of the car window, at the
claustrophobic dark press of the pine trees along the shoulder of the road, at the narrow strip of thin grey sky over head.

For a long moment, Sam is silent. In his peripheral vision, Dean can see Sam's hands tightening on the steering wheel. He can hear him breathe, slow and even. Finally, he speaks. “We've got to get out of here.”

Dean looks over. “What?”

“We've got to leave,” Sam says, shaking his head. “As soon as we can.” He looks across at Dean. “This is Halia – you know that, right? She's getting inside our heads. She's fucking with us.”

Dean stares at him, incredulous. He can't believe they're having this conversation. “Yeah, Sam, and that's why it's our job to finish this case and stop her!”

“What does it matter about finishing this case if it kills all of us?” Sam demands. “Dean, we can't stay here. You're losing it, okay – and God only knows what's going on with Cas, because he's probably the only person on earth who is a worse communicator than you are. And if we stay here, this is only going to get worse.”

“Not for you!” Dean shoots back.

Sam sits back in his seat. He blinks. “What?”

Dean waves a vague hand in the air between them, gesturing at Sam. “Not for you,” he says again. “You're not affected. You're – I don't know. Immune somehow. So... you can keep me and Cas on the straight and narrow while you finish the case.”

“I can't keep you and Cas on the straight anything.”

Funny,” Dean says sarcastically, but there's a large part of him that's relieved at Sam being an asshole about it. He can deal with this – bickering with Sam about how he feels – that's fine. It makes things feel normal. He looks at Sam, who still looks worried, his forehead screwed up, his mouth turned small. Dean fidgets with his seatbelt. “Fine. We'll go.”
Something relaxes in the set of Sam's shoulder; the scrunch of his forehead eases. “Really?”

Dean can't believe he's agreeing to this, but Sam's not wrong. “We can retreat to Steuben, or somewhere. Hell, we can go to Bangor. As far as we need to go to get this out of our system, and we can do the research from there to put together the last few pieces. We'll only come back once we're sure we can gank her, easy, and then...” Dean trails off. “We'll be fine.”

“Thank you,” Sam says, and his voice is quiet.

He turns the key in the ignition, the car rumbling to life. He pushes the Impala in gear and, with a glance backwards over his shoulder at the empty highway, he steers them back out into the road and homewards.

They drive for seven minutes in silence before Sam says, “I don't know why it doesn't affect me.”

Dean looks over.

Sam keeps his eyes on the road. His hands are tight enough on the steering wheel that his knuckles are sharp and white through thin skin. “I mean, if anyone was gonna be impure...” he says, and he doesn't go any further.

Dean sighs. “Sam, seriously.”

“I'm not upset,” Sam says, in that light voice of this that says the exact opposite. “I'm just... saying.”

“Well, don't,” Dean says shortly. “You're fine.”

Sam hums a little, like he's not sure whether he agrees. “Yeah,” he says at last, and nothing more. He pushes the car into third gear, into fourth. Overhead, the sky is thickening through darker and darker grey as they drive for home.

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Dean wakes up cold, and there is a dull, repeated banging somewhere on the other side of the house.

He knuckles at his eyes and sits up, and instinctively he glances over at Castiel on the camp bed – if there's something going on, they can fight it together – but his bed is empty. The blanket is strewn across the floor.

As Dean squints through the dark, he realises what the problem is. The front door is wide open, and Dean can hear the wind whistling through the roof, screeching against the faulty window panes, and that same wind catches the door to bang it against the side of the house.

He stumbles across the living room to front door, his arms hugged tight around his own waist to try to keep himself warm as the rain and wind hiss through the doorway. Outside, the night is all dark blue. There is the tall line of the lighthouse on the cliff edge, and there is the endless black stretch of the ocean, and there – as Dean's eyes adjust to the dark – there is someone standing at the end of the drive.

Dean starts where he stands, fear a knee-jerk reaction to the dark, motionless silhouette out by the sea, but he tamps it down. He heads inside, shoves his bare feet into his boots, grabs his pistol, and throws his leather jacket over his T-shirt and boxers, and in spite of the cold, he goes out.

The rain is biting, the air cold enough that after a few minutes' out there, Dean's skin starts to sting, but he continues down the road. Puddles splash underfoot, and the crunch of gravel rings out louder than he would have liked, but it doesn't seem to matter, because the figure is oblivious.

As Dean gets closer, he realises: it is Castiel.

Relief sinks through Dean, and he lowers his pistol. “Cas,” he says.

Castiel doesn't hear him. He stands perfectly still, and Dean is close enough to see him now. He's in his pyjamas still, flannel pants dragging beneath his feet a little. He's barefoot, and he's soaked to the skin by the rain, dark hair plastered flat against his forehead. As Dean watches, a raindrop rolls smoothly down the line of his nose. Castiel doesn't so much as blink.

“Cas,” Dean says, louder now. “What the fuck are you doing?”
There is rainwater on at the ends of his eyelashes. His expression is completely blank, and he stares forwards into the dark without moving – without blinking. Rain spills over his slack, open mouth, slow and pale. He doesn't even know that Dean is here.

Something is tightening in Dean's throat until he feels he could choke on it. “Cas,” he tries, his voice strangled.

Castiel doesn't react. He stares blankly ahead, and then, slowly, slowly, his mouth lifts. The corners of his lips twist, and with his eyes heavy-lidded, out-of-focus, his mouth curves into a hair-thin smile.

Dean can feel panic rising in his gut, and he doesn't know what to do, so he moves instinctively. “Cas,” he yells, and he grabs his arm.

Castiel turns his head to look at Dean. There is a moment, just one almost instantaneous moment, where his eyes meet Dean's and stay vacant; where he doesn't know who Dean is – and then Castiel blinks. “What?” he says, faintly, and it is Cas again. There is his downwards-curving mouth, there is the confusion cut into his brow, there is the wide open blue of his eyes. His shirt clings to his chest and shoulders, and Dean can see the familiar line of his collarbone.

“What the hell is going on?” Dean demands. He can feel that his hand is tightening on Castiel's arm, but he can't stop himself. It's something like three in the morning, and he's in his goddamn boxers and boots in the pouring rain, with his – his best friend – out here in some kind of trance, and he's more than annoyed with this situation, partly because something about it is crawling under his skin and scaring him shitless. Maybe Castiel was just sleepwalking. He had another one of his bad dreams and, unconsciously, it brought him out here. Right – because no-one in their right mind would just choose to do this.

Castiel opens his mouth. He looks away, over his shoulder, in the direction he was originally staring. “I don't know,” he says, and his voice is soft. Distant. “I thought I saw something.”

Dean's stomach turns over. “Out here?” he asks incredulously. “In the rain – at three in the fucking morning, Cas? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I don't know,” Castiel says again. Dean sees his throat work to swallow.
Dean tries not to freak out. His hands on Castiel are tight to the point of bruising, but he wills himself to let go. He slides his hand down to Castiel's wrist, and his fingers are gentle on the back of his hand, coaxing. “Okay, come on. I've got you,” he says, keeping his voice low and soft. “It's pouring out here. Let's get back inside, huh? Get you into something warm and dry.”

Castiel doesn't answer, but when Dean laces their fingers together and tugs at him, he allows himself to be led.

Dean takes him inside, shuts the door tight after him against the storm outside. The house is full of sound, rainwater coming in through the ceiling to drip fast into bowls, buckets, metal pails, until the room is rattling with the rain. Dean doesn't let go of Castiel's hand; he leads him to the dining table and pulls out a chair for him, and it's only when Castiel is sat down that he leaves him. He runs into the bathroom for the dryest towels they have, and he ignores his own sodden clothes, his hair plastered flat and cold to his scalp, and he drapes the towels around Castiel.

“There you go,” Dean says, in the tone he usually reserves for reassuring the kids of victims when they've seen some shit they shouldn't have. He tucks the towels in close around Castiel, and when he finds he's got one left over, he scrunches it up to scrub gently over Castiel's wet hair. “You must be freezing. There we go.”

He wipes away the rainwater trickling coldly down behind his ears, and along the nape of his neck, and he uses his thumbs to smudge away the water from Castiel's face. Castiel doesn't even look at him. His eyes are directed somewhere past him, his gaze unfocused.

“Hey,” Dean says. “Cas?”

Slowly, slowly, Castiel's eyes shift over to meet Dean's. There is something strange about it though, as if Castiel sees straight through Dean and out the other side.

Dean hesitates. He lowers the damp towel, his hands settling on Castiel's knees. “You okay?”

Castiel doesn't answer.

“What happened out there?” Dean asks. “What did you see?”

Castiel doesn't answer.
Dean has one hand tightening on Castiel's knee.

“Was it another bad dream?” Dean tries.

Nothing. Castiel just looks at him. Dean breathes in and out, slowly, and he wills himself to be calm. This is fine. Castiel is just a little spooked. It probably was another one of his weird nightmares. He's just a little shaken – same as Dean is.

“You stay here a second, alright?” Dean says quietly. “I'm gonna get you some dry clothes. Okay?”

Castiel doesn't answer. Dean goes anyway. He knows, even as he crouches down to rummage through Castiel's duffel bag, that Castiel is not okay, but he thinks that maybe if he just fusses enough, he'll come back. He can be overbearing sometimes like this, he knows that, but last time all it took was the touch of Dean's hand and some hot chocolate to get Castiel as right as rain. Maybe that can work again.

He digs deeper through Castiel's stuff – there is his other sweatshirt, the dark blue one, and there is a clean pair of boxers – and deeper – there are his holey, hand-me-down sweatpants – and Dean is just searching for some clean socks for him when he finds the trenchcoat.

Dean's hands still.

He's imagining it. He must be. It must be something else. He stretches out his fingers to graze slowly over the fabric, the stiff beige cotton, the tortoiseshell buttons, and he knows he's not mistaken.

Dean tilts on one foot to glance back other his shoulder, but Castiel is oblivious. He hasn't moved an inch, still piled in his towels, his hands loose in his lap. Dean swallows, and he looks back into the duffel bag.

It doesn't necessarily matter that Castiel is still carrying the coat around. Sure – they have limited space on the road, and they can only carry so much, and it would make sense only to carry what they really need, and not just meaningless sentimental crap, and especially not old things that Castiel has expressly said he associates with who he used to be. He threw out Jimmy's old Sunday suit and said that wasn't him anymore – but it doesn't have to mean anything that he still has the
coat. Castiel is a grown-up human being, as of three months ago. He can do what he wants.

Dean hastily shoves the trenchcoat back underneath a dirty pullover, gathers up Castiel's clean clothes in his arms, and heads back over to the dining table. It doesn't need to mean anything.
Dean wakes up late. He stretches, joints groaning, and then swings his legs over, out of the bed. He kneads at his eyes, and as he blearily blinks the world into focus, his eyes land on Castiel's camp bed. It's empty.

He frowns and looks over towards the kitchen – there is Castiel's yellow windbreaker draped over the back of a dining chair; there is his coffee mug on the table, stained dark and sticky around the rim because he uses and re-uses the stupid thing a thousand times without washing it. The light through the main window is thin and grey, somehow stale.

Dean listens for a moment for the sound of water running in the bathroom, but the house is quiet. There's no movement yet from the bedroom, either, so it's unlikely Sam will know anything. Dean gets up, puts coffee on, and heads for the bathroom.

He washes up, hits the head, and by the time he comes out, Sam is emerging from his room mid-yawn, a towel slung over his shoulder.

“Morning,” Sam mumbles. “You need the bathroom for anything?”

“Nah, I just came out, you're good to go,” Dean says, and then he pauses. “But, uh – don't suppose you've seen Cas?”

Sam rubs at his eyes. “Well, I literally just woke up. And unlike some people, I'm not sleeping with him, so.”
Heat flushes up from Dean's jaw to his ears. “Shut up. I didn't mean – okay, shut up.”

Sam snorts a half-laugh as he disappears into the bathroom for a shower, and when the door clicks closed behind him, Dean is left standing in the middle of the kitchen, his towel in his hands, trying to figure out his next move. The plan established for the day is for Dean and Castiel to hit the books – no more leaving Castiel on his own until they figure this thing out – while Sam goes back to the salt church to see if they can't piece together the last part of this puzzle. Dean isn't exactly thrilled at being delegated research monkey, but he guesses he kind of deserves it for going batshit yesterday.

Dean goes to the window and looks out – first to the lighthouse, to check if there isn't a figure silhouetted against the glass, then down towards the beach. He can't immediately see Castiel, but Dean figures he can't have gone far. He doesn't know how to feel. There's a part of him that's nervous, fingers jittering at his sides – Cas shouldn't be on his own right now; he's been pretty fucked up the last two days – but also he keeps remembering Castiel's sharp comment about Dean not respecting boundaries. It's hard to know if he's doing the right thing.

He throws his towel in the vague direction of his bag, and then goes to the coffee table, where his jacket is slung over a pile of books. He pulls out his phone and writes out a quick text – *where are u? Missed u this morning* - that he immediately deletes without sending. He writes out a new one - *hey just wondering u ok?* - and then eyes the array of weird little emojis his phone has to offer, and then he puts his phone down on the table top without sending anything.

Dean toes into his boots, grabs his jacket from the coffee table, and heads out. Outside, the sky is slate-grey and heavy with the threat of rain, a stiff breeze picking up off the water to press a shiver the length of Dean's spine even through his layers. He winces against the cold and buries his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans as he pushes through the overgrown path towards the lighthouse.

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He doesn't like it here – it's too high up, too dangerous, the metal steps too rickety and uneven, the lantern room covered in broken glass and scraps of sharp metal. Castiel likes it though, and if he's up here then Dean will call it a win for the creepy fucking lighthouse.

“Cas?” Dean calls.

Nothing. There is some of Castiel's stuff at the top, but nothing to indicate that he has been there today.
Dean heads out onto the balcony, which wobbles threateningly under his weight. “Fuck,” he mutters, and he presses in close to the windows of the lantern room as he edges carefully around to check all sides. Still, nothing. He risked his life for no reason. Great. For a moment, Dean stands at the top of the lighthouse and just looks out at the sea, churning grey and dark as it starts to rain.

Dean climbs back down, and as he walks back up the path, he glances towards what glimpses of the beach he is afforded through the trees, but he can't see Castiel there. He heads back up to the house.

It's just a little after ten now – Sam will probably be more or less ready to move and get going with the case, and will probably even be a little pissed that Castiel and Dean are holding things up again.

As he clears the undergrowth and comes out onto the driveway, Dean walks slowly, his nerves gradually tightening in his chest. It's irrational, but he doesn't want to tell Sam that he's worried about Cas. If Sam knows Dean is worried, then Sam will be worried, and if Sam's worried, then that means that something is officially wrong. Right now, as it is, with Dean just wandering around seeing if Castiel shows up somewhere, this isn't a real problem. It's just a he'll show up sooner or later kind of deal.

Before Dean can make any real decision about how to handle this, the front door of the cabin opens and Sam comes leaning out.

“Hey,” he calls. “What's taking you so long? I thought we wanted to get started early today. You found Cas?”

“Uh,” Dean says. “No.”

Sam frowns. “Well, where is he?”

“Beats me, man,” Dean says, like worry isn't coiling in his gut near to the point of nausea. “I checked the lighthouse – can't see him on the beach.” He walks the rest of the way to the front door and lets all his breath out slowly. “I mean, you go running, right? Maybe he's just--”

“Dean, he's been pretty fucked up recently,” Sam says. “I don't exactly think a triathlon is on the cards, here.”
“Yeah, I know.” Dean scratches at the back of his head. “Fuck. Sam, I found him out here last night. In the pouring rain, at like three in the morning – he said he thought he saw something, and I don't know--”

“Wait, and you're only telling me this now?” Sam demands. “Dude – why didn't you wake me up?”

“I thought I could handle it,” Dean says. “It didn't seem that much worse than his – whatever, you know, in the bath. And--” Dean hesitates. He looks at the floor. “And I found his coat.”

Sam’s frown deepens. “What coat?”

“His – trenchcoat. His fucking trenchcoat, Sammy.”

Sam is quiet for a moment that seems to last and last. “I thought he got rid of that.”

“Well, me too. Only apparently he's still carrying it around like some kind of fucking – I don't know, like a memento to not being an angel anymore.”

“Jesus. Okay. How long's he been missing?”

“I don't know. I only woke up a half hour ago and he was gone then.”

“Alright. That's not too long. I mean, like you said, he might just be out walking. Have you called him?”

“No, I was just gonna do that now.”

They head inside together, and Dean fishes his phone out of his pocket. He quickly deletes all the drafts of unsent messages to Castiel that are left open before Sam can see them, and he presses the speed-dial key for Castiel's number. “It's ringing,” he tells Sam.
Sam nods, hands in his pockets, and he stands close by as the phone rings and rings – and then, with a split-second delay, there is a dull vibrating noise from the far side of the coffee table. Sam lifts his head.

Dean lowers the phone. “Aw, crap.”

Sam gets over there first, stepping over the piles of Dean's dirty laundry and a stack of disorganised books Castiel was using for research once upon a time, and he starts digging through for the phone.

“No, dude, it'll be in his duffel,” Dean says as he follows Sam over, still holding the phone near his ear to hear it ring and ring while Sam looks for it. “In his duffel, over there.” He leans over where Sam is crouched to point, saying, “There, you idiot. No, right over--” and then he cuts himself off. “His coat's gone.”

Sam's hands become still, buried halfway into Castiel's stuff. “What?”

“His coat.” Dean swallows. Beside his ear, Dean's phone disconnects from the line and emits a shrill tone. “It was in that bag.”

Sam sits back on his heels. “Okay.” He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. “Okay.” He leans forwards again, rummages a little deeper until he finally comes up with Castiel's phone – his screensaver a picture of a duck; one missed call, low on battery. “Okay,” Sam says again, and that is what tells Dean that Sam has no idea what to do either.

“Christ. He's not a fucking angel more, what is he gonna – he can barely tie his own fucking shoelaces right now, not to mention the fact these last few days he's been--” Dean can't get much further, his throat closing up. “Jesus, Sam. Last night – and when we found him in the bath – you didn't see him, but. He, uh. He was – Jesus.” Dean scrubs a hand down over his mouth. “It was like he was empty. Like, the moment before the Leviathan took him.” He looks over and meets Sam's eyes. “Like Morgan Pinheiro.”

Sam gets up onto his feet and for a moment only stares down at Castiel's phone in his hand. “So it's definitely Halia,” he says. “And those dreams Cas has been having--”

“Shit,” Dean says, and Sam looks up to meet Dean's eyes. “If one girl hit with this thing can drown her best friend and slit her own throat with a boxcutter, what the fuck is it gonna do to Cas?”
“So we gotta find him,” Sam says. “Easy. We find him, we get out of here.”

Dean swallows. “Sounds as good a plan as any. I’ve already checked the lighthouse – I'll head down to the beach if you look up the road?”

“Sure,” Sam says, but then, before Dean can head back out, Sam reaches out and catches Dean's arm. “Wait. Cas isn't the only one getting fucked up by these dreams, remember?”

Dean stares at him. “Sammy, I'm fine.”

“Are you?” Sam asks, and it's clear in his voice – he doesn't believe Dean. “Because if this thing is really getting to Cas, if he's like ten seconds from going full-on crazy, that could happen to you, too. And I need to know if it's know if it's gonna be two against one or if you're gonna be out for the count as well.”

Dean lets out his breath. He hates it, but Sam's not wrong. “Honestly, Sam, I don't know,” he says, and now he's thinking about it – this thin grey light, the look of the clouds through the window as they gather for rain: he's seen it all before. All of this feels familiar. Waking up, Castiel not being where he should be, the threat of a storm over the water. Dean has been here before. “But I'm gonna treat this as reality until I'm proven otherwise.”

“Dean – this is real, okay. I swear.”

“Yeah, well, you always say that.” Dean turns up his jacket's collar – he doesn't like the look of those clouds – and jerks the front door open. “But I promise, alright, the second things start going sideways on me and I don't know what's going on, I'll tell you. Promise.”

Sam doesn't look reassured, exactly, but some of the tension eases from his shoulders, and he quits frowning at least. “Thanks.”

They head out together into a cold morning, and split up on the driveway to start searching.

Sam takes off at a jog towards the main road, and Dean starts picking his way carefully down the twisting and turning path to the beach below. When he breaks out from the trees and comes stumbling onto the shingle, the wind off the sea picks up to snap at his clothes and make his eyes sting, and it tugs the shoreline into waves that froth feverishly against the black stone. Castiel is
“Cas?” Dean calls, and he starts off along the shore-line, just in case. There are a couple of big crests of rock which could be hiding Castiel from immediate view – plus, the beach is pretty long, even if they usually tend to stick closer to their end of things. “Cas, you here?”

Dean alternates walking and an awkward half-jog for fifteen minutes, and he yells himself hoarse, and he can see the end of the beach coming up ahead of him where it swells back up into cliffs and tree-line – and still, nothing.

There is no sign of Castiel, and it is beginning to rain.

Dean heads back to the house at a run, ducking his head low against the first stinging drops of rain, the salt spray crashing against the rocks and threatening to drench him. By the time he gets back to the path and starts weaving through the pine trees and tangled undergrowth to get up there, his clothes are cold and heavy, and his hair is flattened against his skull.

He comes out onto the drive to find Sam standing by the Impala, doing something on his cell phone with it sheltered under his arm. No Castiel standing beside him – no look of elation as if to say, yeah, I found him, he was just taking a walk and got a little lost.

“Hey,” Sam says as Dean approaches. “I'm just texting Maggie, asking if she's seen him. Don't know why he'd be up that way, but you never know.”

“No, that's a good idea.” Dean pulls out his phone and dials – first Maggie, then Kevin and Charlie and every hunter they know – to leave hurried messages in the vein of, have you heard from Cas? He's missing. Let us know if he contacts you, since we need to find him stat. He even tries Garth.

As he flicks through his phone contacts, his thumb comes to hover over Cas. Dean sets his jaw against the worry that tightens in his belly, and he puts his phone away.

“So what now?” Dean asks, and he raises a hand to shield his face from the rain. “I mean, do we go print off a couple hundred posters and stick 'em up around the harbour? What's the protocol here?”

Sam chews his bottom lip. “I have an idea,” he says, and he leads the way back into the house. Without pausing for an explanation, Sam moves towards Castiel's bed, and starts rummaging
through his stuff again.

“Dude, what the hell are you doing?” Dean says increduulously, and then Sam straightens up. He has something small and dark in his hand as he stalks over to Dean.

Sam slams Castiel's voice recorder down onto the dining table, and it skitters across to stop just in front of Dean, who stares at it.

“Dude,” Dean says. “The whole point of this was so Cas could have some fucking privacy.”

“We have to, Dean,” Sam tells him.

Dean swallows. “We shouldn't,” he says faintly.

Sam ignores him. He sits heavily across the table, and when Dean makes no move towards the recorder, Sam pulls it back towards him. He fiddles with it for a second, and then he lays it flat as it starts.

“Sam--” Dean starts, but he goes no further. He knows that it's useless. It's the only choice they have. Castiel isn't himself, and they need to find him before he does something stupid. He is stood in the open doorway, staring at the recorder.

It begins with a low, dull crackle of static.

_I don't know what I'm doing. This feels – ridiculous. On the recording, Castiel clears his throat. The date is November 2nd. Sam gave me this contraption to... have an outlet of some kind. He believes I need to express my emotions in some way in order to feel at peace with myself. I disagree._

Dean's eyes flick up to Sam's. Then, Dean resignedly closes the door, and crosses to sit down at the table opposite Sam.

There is another slow crackle of white noise. There is the distant sound of the shushing sea.
The dreams are what's bothering me. I know Sam wants me to talk about falling, but – that's not important now. It is everything, and I don't know that I'll ever be the same, but that is not important now. I need to talk about the sea.

In my dreams, it is always the sea. In my waking hours, the sea comforts me in its strange likeness to the way heaven would sound. Everything busy, everything moving and talking. In my dreams it is different. The noise of it is gone, the birds, the wind – gone. There is only the sea, and there is me, and I am waiting, and slowly it comes in. It comes up to my toes. It's cold and clean, and I feel as though I'm waiting for it to come up higher, to wash me clean. I feel as though it wants to swallow me, and I'm waiting.

Crackling. Another recording begins.

Castiel clears his throat. His voice is slow and careful.

We went into the town today to investigate the salt church. I became ill approaching that place, and I knew that I couldn't go inside. I knew that I wasn't clean. I wasn't worthy to step on that hallowed ground, and so I stood outside and I waited, and while I waited, I was watching the water.

The water is everywhere. The sound is inescapable, the cool breeze, and it takes me back to my dreams. These same dreams. The sea, the silence, the waiting. The sea. In those dreams I am afraid, but it's not the same fear as in my waking hours. Perhaps fear is the wrong word. Anticipation. I am waiting for the sea to come in and take me. Slowly, slowly, it comes up to my feet. It washes over me, the sea.

A new recording begins with a stutter.

The case is going well, I believe. I haven't been on too many cases so far, so I can't be entirely sure, but I feel it must be so.

I didn't dream last night, and it's strange to say, but I slept restlessly. This is the first time this has happened to me. After – everything, with Metatron, Naomi... when I finally became this, I was so tired. All I wanted to do was sleep. I didn't understand how to do it – who would have thought the mechanics to be so complicated? But I didn't want to talk, or to do anything, and so sleep was easy. Sleep was something I could find solace in, even if most of the time I was only pretending. Since I came here, I have been sleeping well. But last night, I struggled. I awoke several times, and I could hear the water below the cliffs, crashing, whispering, and it's peculiar, but I missed my waiting beach. My silence. The water clean and cold over my feet. The sea.
On another day, Castiel's voice is hoarse with sleep. He sounds muted, dull. If it weren't for the familiar low rasp of his words, Dean wouldn't know it would him.

I'm dreaming again. Of the sea. It rolls up more quickly now, it comes in, it comes in up to my knees, and it is waiting to swallow me. And I am waiting for it. I wait for it like I wait for orders, and it feels right, the way it wants to wash me clean. I want to be clean, and the sea, it comes in and it swallows me.

Castiel's tone sits heavy in Dean's gut like a rock.

We went down to the caves. To where the girls were buried in water and darkness. Sam found something, but there is no way to tell yet how useful it will be. I feel, again, like a spare part, rattling after them, loose in the machinery. I want to be of greater help – and today, down in that cave, I thought I saw... I don't know what I thought I saw. It was hard to think, especially when the water came in. It filled the caves quicker than I could have imagined and – strange. At first, I did not want to escape. I felt safe there, standing in the rising water and waiting for the sea.

The sea, again; always, the sea. Tonight, I am waiting in the quiet and the cold and the stillness, and I want to be clean, and it comes in, the sea. It comes in for me. It comes up my legs, slow and chill, and it wants to swallow me. It wants me. I want--

The recording cuts off. A new one beginning.

Dean and Sam think they have found what may be happening here. They think it comes back to the sea and the sea and the sea and the sea. And the sea. And I – what was I saying? I don't – Dean and Sam. They are working very hard. I wish I could be more helpful, but I know I'm not a real hunter. I do my best not to hold them back. I do my research, and I am silent in interviews unless called upon, because I am not good with other people, and I wait as I wait for the – I wait for the--

As they listen, the static buzz gets worse with every day Castiel records. His words grow more bleak. More repetitive.

Dean feels something like dread, like panic, tightening coldly in his chest.

The sea. The sea. I'm waiting for the - it swallows me. It comes up to my knees and it swallows me, the sea. I want to be clean, and the water is cold, and it comes in, it comes in to swallow me. The
sea. The sea. Sam is increasingly worried about this case, this goddess. Halia. Halia. He worries that what has its hold on the people of this town may have some hold over us. He has nothing to worry about, of course. Dean is the Righteous Man, and I am an Angel of the Lord. I am light and power and glory and I am – I am – waiting – no. I am--

There is something very wrong with Castiel.

The recording snaps, fizzes, and starts a new, louder. The white noise almost drowns Castiel out entirely.

I am waiting for the sea. I am waiting to be clean. The sea, it swallows me. It swallows me. It comes up to my thighs and it swallows me. The sea. The sea, it rises and swells and it pushes past me, over the stones and the trees and that petty, mortal concrete. It comes in. It takes everything, the sea, it comes and it takes back what rightfully belongs to it, and I am waiting to be clean.

Dean doesn't want to listen anymore. He feels as though he's going to be sick.

I am the sea. I am waiting for it to swallow me. It comes up to my waist and it swallows me, the sea, and I am waiting to be I am waiting to I am waiting to be clean. I am waiting, and there is the sea. There is the – the – the sea. I am the sea and it swallows me.

The static is near-deafening now. It sounds like the crash of waves.

“Christ,” Dean manages, voice strained. “I can't-- I can't listen to this. Turn it off.”

It comes up to my throat and it swallows me. The sea, the sea, it comes in and it takes and it takes, it comes up and it swallows me. The land that is mine, the sea. I am the sea and it swallows me. It is making me clean, and I take – I take what is mine. I take back my kingdom of dirt, of salt. Take it back to the sea. It takes me and its kingdom is complete. It comes up to my throat and it swallows me. It is making me clean. It is making me clean, the sea. I am waiting for the sea. It is making me clean.

“Turn it off,” Dean says, and he pushes himself back from the table hard enough that his chair is knocked over backwards. “Will you fucking turn it off? I don't wanna--”

The sea. The sea. It comes in and in, it comes in and I am waiting for it. I am waiting for it, I am
waiting for the sea. The sea. I am waiting to be clean.

Sam moves for the recorder, but Dean gets there first, snatches it off the table and hurls it hard. It cracks against the far wall with a noise that digs claws tight into the base of Dean's skin and he feels as though he is the thing shattering. He feels he can still hear it playing – the sea, the sea, the sea. He wants to claw the sound of it out of his head.

“Jesus,” Sam says, and Dean doesn't know if he's talking about him or Cas.

Dean scrubs a hand down over his face. “What the fuck is that, Sam? What the fuck is that?”

“I don't know.” Sam's voice is faint.

Something is clutching tighter and tighter inside Dean's chest until it feels like his ribs are being crushed, and he is trying to breathe steady. “Sam – we've gotta--”

“But we don't even know where he is,” Sam says. His eyes are still fixed on the space where the recorder used to be, his hand lying useless on the top of the kitchen table. “He could be anywhere, Dean. He could be--”

“Don't you say it,” Dean says, wheeling around, and he jabs his finger into Sam's face. “Don't you fucking dare, okay – we're gonna find him. We're gonna find him and we're gonna bring him back, and then we are gonna get the hell out of here.”

Sam looks up at him. “Yeah. Of course.” He pushes back his chair, and he gets up, and for a second he just looks at Dean – and Dean knows that he's probably just trying to be reassuring, thinking of something to say that will make all this better, but it isn't fucking working. Dean turns away from him and leads the way out.

As they drive, the rain begins to pound slowly heavier, fat, heavy droplets bouncing from the wind-shield. Dean turns the windscreen wipers on. The sky is turning thick with the promise of thunder.

They drive up the first road into Nineveh to see everyone battening down the hatches for the storm – lashing fishing boats to the jetty in tighter and tighter loops of ropes, slamming shutters closed and bringing everything inside. Dean pulls over onto the pavement the far side of the road from the
Pollock Cafe, and he gets out of the car.

He hammers on the door of the world's shittiest cafe, then tilts a hand over his eyes to peer through the glass at the darkness inside. Rain is already beginning to slant hard against the windows, and the wind off the water rattles through the thin plastic awning. “Hello?” he calls against the glass. “Hello – is there anyone in there? Have you seen our friend?”

Sam catches sight of a woman on the other side of the road, and takes a step back into the street. “Dean, look,” he says, and then hurries across the road to talk to her, while Dean continues banging on the cafe door.

“Hello? Open up, come on, please. Our friend is missing!” Dean knocks again, louder this time. “Hello?”

He glances back over his shoulder to see Sam – some fifteen feet past the old woman now, who continues on her way down the road, her head tucked down to her chin against the driving rain – as he runs down the road, jacket flapping open, in search of someone else to ask. Dean's heart is in his throat. Maggie warned them and warned them against these people being hostile if you pry too far, and now they don't want to know. They turn their backs, turns their collars up against the road, hurry on faster without saying a word.

“Sam,” he calls down the road. “Come on. He's not here.”

Sam comes jogging back across the road, and he even glances each way to be sure the first road through Nineveh hasn't abruptly turned into the interstate. “We should check the church,” he says, but Dean is shaking his head before the words are even out of Sam's mouth.

“No, he's not there,” Dean says, and he pulls open the car door to get back in.

Sam's voice is muffled through the outside. “What? How come?” He walks around the front of the car.

Dean opens his mouth but can't say it. Because he isn't clean. He takes a deep breath, and as Sam opens the far door to get in, Dean just says bluntly, “He isn't. I know it.”

He pulls a three-point turn and points the car in the direction of the caves, with the rain growing
heavier above them all the while. It rattles against the glass and metal like the chatter of teeth. The sky is darkening, clouds swirled tightly together like a clenched fist. He drives faster.

Dean pulls the car over into the clearing between the pines, and doesn't even slow down long enough to turn the engine off. He leaves it idling and throws the door wide open as he runs across to the top of the narrow stone staircase down to the caves. “Cas?” he yells, and he braces a hand over his eyes against the rain that whirls off the water below. He can see the steps fade into the dark, and below that, the sea is churning black and angry. There is no sign of the caves beneath waves; there is certainly no sign of Castiel.

Sam's voice rings out somewhere behind him: “Cas? You there?”

Dean glances back to see Sam scouting the nearby trees, the woodland surrounding Morgan Pinheiro's abandoned car, but Dean knows that Castiel won't be there. Castiel needs to be near the sea. If he is anywhere, he's down by the water.

He flips up the collar of his jacket against the rain and is about to start the climb down when a hand snatches at his elbow.

“He's down there somewhere – by the water,” Dean tells him. “I know it. We gotta look, Sam, even if it's just for a second.”

Sam shakes his head, stubborn. “No way. It's high tide down there, and it's getting higher. That's crazy.”

Dean throws one last look at the water, watches froth and spit violently against the rocks, and then he lets himself be dragged away.

They wander through the woods, calling Cas, Cas, where the hell are you like a litany until Dean is soaked through to the shivering point, and Sam catches Dean's arm.

“He's not here,” Sam says, raising his voice over the rain. His words are punctuated by a distant rumble of thunder; Dean counts three, four, five, before the lightning snaps hot and white through the dark clouds.
Dean gets back into the car, slams the door shut behind him. For a moment he just sits there, feeling the cold, slimy trickle of rain water over his skin and pooling on his good leather seats. His hands are tight, unmoving, on the steering wheel, the skin over his knuckles taut and white.

In the passenger seat, Sam looks over. “Dean,” he says.

Dean turns the key in the ignition.

They drive hard for the salt church, Dean white-knuckling the miles between them as they rattle over pot-holes, as the rain comes roaring against the windows almost faster than he can pump the windshield wipers. Nineveh is comes up ahead of them, its low buildings cut out as indistinct grey squares through the darkness of the storm, the fishing boats thrashing violently in their quayside beds, furled-away sails snapping against rain-dark wood. Dean is slowing as he approaches, trying to keep the muddy tires from hydroplaning in this weather, when, out of nowhere, Sam says, “I think I know why she doesn't want me.”

“What?”

“You said I was immune.” Sam’s voice is barely audible over the rain and the engine. “I mean, if this thing works off sin, like we think it does, I've sinned more than most.”

The Impala jerks lopsidedly as one wheel strays near the gutter; Dean yanks at the wheel to right their course. “Sammy, what the hell are you--”

“I'm not human,” Sam says.

Dean looks up sharply, but for a moment he can only stare at his brother, mouth half-open. It's so ridiculous he doesn't know what to say. “Sam,” he manages.

“It's the only thing that makes sense,” Sam goes on. “This thing, Halia or whatever – she's been getting to you, she's been getting to Cas... and what, she's just – ignoring me? Seriously?”

“Maybe she is,” Dean says obstinately, and he turns his eyes back to the road.
Sam snorts, derisive. “Yeah, okay. Or maybe she just doesn't even know I'm here. Because she works her vengeance on mortal men – you read it same as I did. Mortal men. And I'm--”

“You're what?” Dean demands. “Go on, Sam. Fucking say it. But I swear to God, I will--”

“I'm an abomination, Dean,” Sam interrupts. He turns in his chair, and even only in Dean's peripheral vision, he is full of fire and righteous fury. “You wanna try to tell me that I'm not, that's fine – but you know I'm right. I'm more demon than I've ever been anything else, and for once in my life, for the first time... that's actually a good thing.”

“Jesus, are you actually listening to yourself?” Dean snaps.

“Dean, it's okay,” Sam says, and in his voice, between the bratty little brother who never listens and the darkness that has followed them like a shadow, there is something that is quiet and earnest and sure. “Because if I'm immune, I can keep going. No matter what comes our way, it can't get at me if it doesn't even know I exist.”

Some small part of Dean wants to laugh. Trust Sam to be able to find a silver fucking lining to being a monster. He's chock-full of demon blood and as far from being pure as ever, and somehow in spite of everything he's an optimist. It makes Dean's heart ache and ache, and so he clenches his hands tighter on the steering wheel and says nothing.

“So what I'm saying is whatever is coming... I can handle it.” Sam takes a deep breath. “I'm not saying that you can't, okay, I'm just saying that if this does go sideways on us, you gotta let me take care of it.”

Dean doesn't know what to say. They're speeding fast along the road that sweeps up towards Route 1 now, and with Sam two seconds from making some kind of speech on equal rights for demons, and with Castiel missing in the storm somewhere, Dean's gut is twisting. He doesn't say anything; he just accelerates.

It's another ten minutes' drive before they come off the main road to wind and twist down to the gravel on which the salt church sits, and by then the sky is thick with thunder, churning darkly in loose, slow circles, and late afternoon feels like midnight. They slam out of the car, leaving it thundering with the rain against the metal, and they burst through the church doors to find it pitch-black inside to match the swelling bruise of the storm overhead. Sam pauses in the doorway, fumbles for his phone to get a flashlight up on screen, but Dean barges straight in. It isn't the dark
he's afraid of.

He makes his way straight for the altar, climbing past the altar in two quick steps, and he calls out Castiel's name. It echoes off the walls and the flagstones, ringing back at Dean louder and louder until his skull is ringing with *Cas, Cas, Cas*, and he is stood there in the dark with rain dripping from his fingertips, from the end of his nose. He drops to a crouch behind the altar and gropes out blindly for the pit of prayer stones, his fingernails scratching over the floor, and then he finds a hard edge where the flagstones drop away and he plunges his hand into cold water.

“Fuck,” he exclaims, and he recoils away, just as Sam comes up behind him with a flashlight.

“What is it?” Sam says, and then stops beside him as the white beam of his flashlight pans slowly over the floor to the prayer stones' pit. “What the--”

The pit is filled almost to the brim with water now, cold and dark that laps lightly at the edges, always seeming only millimetres from spilling out onto the church floor, and Dean realises that the pit must be connected to the ocean – high tide. As the harsh light of Sam's flashlight flickers and twists on the water, refracting, Dean can see a faint glimmer of the rocks underneath the water, but first his eye is caught by something else.

There is a bloody hand print on the flagstone beside the pit, whose fingers trail thinner and messy away on the stone.

Dean is not any kind of forensics expert, but it looks like Castiel's.

Sam and Dean are silent as they look, the hush almost a buzz in the air around them, the heavy walls of the church reducing the storm outside to no more than a threatening whisper. Dean pushes his hands into the water again. He doesn't know what he's looking for until he finds it – amongst all the perfect, smooth, round pebbles assembled in the pit, there is one different. A sharp, flat, jagged piece of slate. Dean pulls it out.

“This is from our beach,” he says, and as he shakes the water off to hold it under the beam of Sam's flashlight, he sees that the words written onto it are crudely scratched with something blunt, barely legible.

*I will be clean. I will be clean. Lord, I have forsaken you, but I will have my absolution and I will be clean.*
There is a small shard of something pale and ragged, embedded into the stone. Part of a fingernail, Dean realises, and he feels nausea lift coldly in his gut.

“Oh, fuck,” Sam says, his voice strangled and sick.

Dean understands, now, the bloody hand print, and as Sam lifts his flashlight over the altar and traces its dim glow over the rest of the church, he sees – a hand print emblazoned faintly on the wall, a dark bloody hand curled over the top of a pew.

Distantly, Dean thinks he might puke.

“Well, he's not here anymore,” Sam says at last, with a strange, strained note to his voice like he's trying to pretend that everything's not fucked. He reaches out awkwardly to rub a hand over Dean's shoulder, and jerks his head towards the door. “Come on. We're not gonna find him here. Let's take a look around outside.”

Dean doesn't think he can speak to answer, but he nods, and he follows Sam out.

They skirt the edges of the church, Sam tilting the beam of his flashlight into corners and potholes for anything they might have missed – nothing. They check the sea wall, where the water, at high tide, rolls hard and white against the stones – again, nothing. Then, as they look around, Dean catches sight of something out of the corner of his eye, something that winks brightly in the distance.

He turns to look. “Hey, what the--” He cuts himself off.

There is nothing there.

He stands completely still, eyes narrowed as he scans the sky, because he can't be imagining this. This is real. He's awake. He is here, and he's not dreaming, and there was something bright and flickering in the sky.

“What?” Sam asks, coming to stand behind him, and then Dean sees it again.
A small white light, barely more than a pinprick in the sky—something that glows brighter and brighter until it warps the dark around it with a yellowish haze, and then, as abruptly as it came, it is gone again.

“Did you see that?” Dean says.

Under his breath, Sam mutters, “What the hell—” but Dean reaches out blindly for Sam's arm and holds his sleeves, makes him quiet. He stares through the dark, and he waits.

There is nothing but the dark, the sound of the waves as they crash and murmur against the sea wall, and Dean holds his breath—and then the light comes again, brightening whitely in the sky before it disappears again, and Dean knows.

“Sam,” Dean says. “It's the lighthouse.”

Sam's mouth opens. “That's not—” he starts, and then trails off. “How can that be possible?”

Dean reaches out blindly, his hand groping for Sam, and he catches hold of his jacket. “Come on,” he says, his voice a croak. “We've gotta go. Now.”

They run back to the car, and Dean gets to the driver's seat first. The rain is hammering down hard now, Dean's hair slick to his scalp, and it turns the wind-shield slimy and blurred, no matter how fast Dean sticks the wipers on. He doesn't care; he pulls out backwards, and he drives fast for home. He can barely breathe, his chest clenched with panic, everything flashing and flashing in his head—give me my absolution, I want to be clean; the bloodied handprint on the church floor; the white beam of the lighthouse brightening, winking it, slowly coming back; I want to be clean--

Dean turns the wheel, his hands gliding smooth over the leather and tracing the careful outline of salt rune. He follows its curve, the jagged line cutting through the middle, the twisting sigil in the centre. He outlines its circle with his thumb, and the car rattles hard through a ditch at the roadside that jerks Dean wildly in his seat, and they swerve.

“Dean, what the fuck are you doing?” Sam yells, hands flying out to the bench and the ceiling as though to hold himself in the car, even as Dean pumps the brake frantically and tries to correct their course.
“I'm sorry, I'm sorry, okay, I just got a little distracted,” Dean bursts out, and Sam lifts his head from his far side.

“By what?” Sam demands, and he raises his flashlight to pan over Dean and the cave wall.

“Not – fuck, Jesus, no--” Dean shakes his head. “Not this, not you – it's – Sam, it's Sam--”

“Dean, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Not you, not this--” Dean stumbles backwards away from him, throwing his arms out to keep Sam back – he can't touch anything, he can't get involved here. It's not real. It's not fucking real. “I'm driving the car, okay, I can't fucking be here--”

“Driving the – Dean, listen to yourself.”

Dean jerks violently away as Sam tries to reach for him. “Don't – don't fucking touch me. This isn't real. Jesus - no, okay, I know what I'm talking about, Sam – please, just fucking trust me, okay, this isn't real.”

“Not real? Dean--”

“It's not real, okay? None of this is real – I'm driving the car, I'm looking for Cas--”

“Cas is right here,” Sam says, his voice slow, as though trying not to spook Dean, and he turns away to indicate, but Dean doesn't follow his hand to see.

“I'm not listening,” Dean says, and it's childish, but he goes to put his hands over his ears. “I'm not listening, okay – I just need to get back to the car, I just need to wake up. I need to fucking wake up, right fucking now--”

In the gloom in front of him, Dean can see Sam coming closer, face twisted with concern, and then, in spite of all Dean's efforts to stay away, to not let Sam ground him in this reality – not reality, no,
because this isn't fucking real, it's not – Sam's hands are wrapped around Dean's wrists to try and wrestle his arms down, to uncover his ears, and Dean jerks away from him – straight into Castiel.

“Cas,” Dean says, and Christ, he's so fucking worried about him that for a second he forgets. All the breath rushes out of him in one burst of relief, and he takes Castiel's face in his hands. “Fuck. Oh my god, Cas. Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, Dean,” Castiel says – that's his voice, yes, that's the rough, sandpaper way he says Dean's name, that's the way his mouth moves when he talks. It's so familiar. Castiel's hand comes to curl around Dean's forearm, and it is warm and reassuring. “What's wrong?”

“Fuck – it's so fucking hard to explain, I can't--”

“Tell us,” Castiel says.

“It's just that--” Dean squeezes his eyes closed, and he can feel panic tighten in his chest until he can barely breathe through it, and he counts to five, counts to ten, one two three and he's still here. He is here. “You're not real, and I'm not – I'm somewhere else. I'm driving the Impala, we're looking for Cas, and the lighthouse – the lighthouse is on, and I need to wake up--”

“Dean, listen to me,” Castiel says, his tone gentle. His hand comes up, a light and calming touch to the side of his neck; his fingers rub carefully through the back of Dean's hair. “It's Monday--”

“It's Friday. It's Friday, you've been AWOL for like a whole fucking day and--”

“It's Monday. I'm here. This morning we hung curtains. Then we came down to check on the salt rune again – Sam has some tests he wanted to try out down here. We asked you, in the car--”

“I'm in the car, I'm in the car right fucking now, I need to wake--”

“In the car,” Castiel repeats himself, voice louder this time, and firm, but patient, “we asked you if you were going to be okay coming down here after what happened last time. Seeing what you say you saw, almost getting trapped – it was difficult for you.”
Sam steps forwards, and he rubs a hand down over Dean's back, comforting between his shoulder-blades. “Come on, Dean. Think. Why the hell would the lighthouse be on? That thing hasn't worked since World War One.”

“Cas fixed it,” Dean says.

“I have no idea how to fix a lighthouse,” Castiel says.

“You know everything. You were stationed – you don't know how to use a microwave, but you--”

“I promise you I don't know how to repair a lighthouse, and I'm not going anywhere.”

Dean breathes shallowly, in and out. He has his hands in the front of Castiel's shirt, clenched so tight that the skin over his knuckles is stretched thin and white. “This is real,” he says, hesitantly, and he can hear that his voice is broken and small.

“I promise you,” Castiel says. His hand moves up from Dean's neck to cup the edge of his jaw, smoothing his thumb along Dean's cheek. “We can go back home. We don't have to come back down here if you don't want to.”

Dean thinks he might cry. He is so confused and scared and his head is spinning, and the panic jittering violently inside his chest like a trapped bird is getting no less violent, and he curls his hands into Castiel's clothes, desperate to hold onto something.

“This is real,” he says, barely audible. “This is real. This is--”

Sam screams, “Dean!” and the car flips over.

The world is turned to strange silence, even where Dean knows there ought to be the screeching of metal, the engine roaring out of control, the deafening crash – and then the next thing he knows, he is half-slumped upside down with heavy, slick mud creeping in through the shattered windows as the Impala sinks into the dirt. There is a pounding all through Dean's skull, an ache beating behind his eyes, and he can feel blood trickling through into his hair.
“Sam,” he manages, voice hoarse, and he tries gingerly to move. Everything hurts, and he is so badly winded that every breath feels like his chest is being crushed, but there is nothing so bad that he can’t move – nothing broken. He twists his head over, and feels sharp pain electrocute up through his shoulders and neck, and he gasps. “ Sammy?”

“I'm here.” Sam’s voice comes through croaky and wheezing. “I'm - fuck – I'm okay, I think.”

Dean lets all his breath out in one burning burst. “Fuck. That's – that's real good, Sam. Can you get out?”

Sam coughs. “Yeah, I think so.”

Dean fumbles for his seatbelt, and winces as he slowly tries to twist himself out of the wreckage. There is glass slicing up his forearms, and his jeans snag on metal, and for one moment his foot gets trapped beneath the steering wheel, and then with one last heave he is crawling out into thick mud.

It's raining harder than ever now, roaring around them, drumming violently on the underside of the Impala. It slants sharp and stinging into his face, and he can hear it shaking through the pines either side of the road like a rattling engine. The road is fast turning to thick sludge, and as Dean staggers up to his feet he feels it - pain spiralling hotly up from his kneecap. Dean gasps, and drags himself upright, trying to take the weight off his bad leg, and all the while the storm thunders around them. Dean can hardly see Sam as more than a silhouette on the far side of the car – and fuck, his car.

Some few hundred yards away, a harsh white light cuts through the dark, wheels, then disappears. They're maybe five hundred yards from the house now.

They run, half-blind and staggering, hands curled into each other's clothes as they slip and sprint up the slope, along the driveway. Up ahead, the lighthouse juts sharply upright, the lantern room cut out glinting like a broken shard of the glass every time the beacon comes around. The air is rent with metal screeching, the dull grinding of gears. Up on the balcony, there is a figure.

Dean staggers up the curving staircase, hand tight on the rail to drag himself up, and at he reaches the summit, there is Castiel, a dim shape in the darkness.

The lighthouse beacon wheels again, with a crunching of metal and gears, and its harsh white light
swells over them, picking Castiel out as a silhouette. He has his arms outstretched wide at his sides, blood-stained hands turned out to the sea. He is wearing his trenchcoat.

Dean leans heavily against the door frame of the lantern room, pain radiating up in a slow pulse from his knee. “Cas,” he says, and his voice is lost by the roaring of metal, the sound of the sea below, the wind in his ears. He tries again, louder. “Cas!”

Castiel doesn't react. He is completely oblivious, and Dean can tell by the high set of his shoulders, the rigid way he holds his bloodied hands out, that he is gone again. He has been hollowed, and Dean doesn't know who or what is left inside that body now, but he has to believe there's room enough for Cas to fit back in.

The rain chatters hard against the metal, bouncing off the broken glass of the lantern room's windows, and as the lighthouse beacon wheels around and around with a grating, rusty roar, its harsh light catches in the water on his skin, his wet hair, and casts him all in silver. His trenchcoat snaps around his body in the wind, belt whipping at his bare feet, dark with blood. The beacon continues its rotation, and Castiel is lost in the dark.

“Cas, please step back,” Dean says. “Please – come on, come back here. Get away from the edge. Cas?”

He wants to step out onto the balcony, to grab him and drag him back, but every time the beacon swings, that old balcony judders threateningly, and Dean can see Castiel's bare feet right on the edge, his toes in free air, and he knows that all Castiel has to do is adjust his weight only slightly, and he'll fall. Dean knows he doesn't have the gentlest touch; it would be the easiest thing in the world to accidentally tip Castiel over. He clings to the door-frame instead, and he tries to remember how to breathe.

“Okay, Cas? Just take a step back, alright, just come here, where it's--”

The beacon swings, and the whole balcony pitches. Dean watches Castiel wobble, his outstretched arms tilting a little to compensate, and the fabric of his trenchcoat snags around the backs of his knees, pulls at him sharply.

“Cas,” Dean bursts out, panic seizing in his chest. “Fuck – Cas – Cas, please, I'm begging you, okay, don't do this.” He can feel his words unplugging some kind of flood-gate, and every little thing he's ever been scared of is coming out now, because all of it – the terror of pushing Cas away, of telling Cas how he feels and being rejected, being abandoned – none of it means anything if he loses him anyway. “Don't do this, alright, come back to me. I can't – I can't lose you again.
Alright? I can't lose you, Cas, I--” His voice cracks. “Fuck, Cas. I fucking love you, okay. I love you, just – please, come back here.”

Slowly, Castiel turns, but he staggers, falls, and as Dean lunges forwards to catch him, Castiel's hands fly up. Dean gets his arms tight around Castiel's waist, clings on to keep him steady, and there is Castiel, face mere inches from Dean's, mouth open. Castiel's elbows are partially pinned between them, hands up in the air, and as he goes limp in Dean's arms and allows himself to be held, one hand comes forwards. He passes a bloody hand over Dean's face, to cup the edge of his jaw, brush over his ear – and his thumb sweeps a slow, wet mark over Dean's forehead.

“Here, I got you,” Dean says, voice low and reassuring. He can feel the blood sticking to his skin. “It's okay. I got you, right? We're fine.”

Castiel tilts forwards and kisses him, his mouth open, wet, and shuddering – but it's okay, now. The lighthouse rocks beneath their feet, the sea thrashing darkly below with the hot white beacon swinging to catch on the water.
“We're leaving,” Dean says, as soon as Castiel is safely back inside the lantern room. He raises his voice over the roar of the metal swinging, his face scrunched up against the blinding glare every time the beacon comes around. He has Castiel's arm slung around his neck to keep him upright. “Right now – fuck the case, alright? I'm packing our bags and we are out of here tonight.”

Sam nods gravely. “Sounds good to me.” His voice is near enough drowned out by the roar of the storm around him, the lighthouse beacon grinding metal on metal as it turns.

Outside the storm is picking up to fever pitch, hissing in through the broken windows and rattling the metal frames so that the whole room is shaking. For a second, Dean plays with the thought that they should try to turn the beacon off, but he wouldn't know where to start. It still seems improbable that it's on at all.

Sam gets Castiel's other arm and together they help him down the rickety metal steps, doing their best to ignore the lighthouse howling around them, the stairs rattling, the very walls vibrating every time Dean puts a hand down to steady them. It's a testament to how gone Castiel is that he doesn't complain at being manhandled around like he can't take care of himself. It clenches tight in Dean's throat until he feels he could choke on it, and he tries not to think.

Dean has pain throbbing up from his kneecap when he crashed the car, and there is an ache at the back of his neck and shoulders where he's probably got pretty bad whiplash, and there is blood on the side of his face, but he holds himself together just a little longer. He and Sam stagger up the path with Castiel, slipping in the mud, tripping over loose stones and tree-roots being washed up by the rainfall to snag their feet. The rain roars hard all around them, snapping off the pines with a sound like gunfire, and their path is only lit by the harsh white shock of the lighthouse beacon as it comes screeching around and around.
It feels like an age before they break out onto the driveway, and then the house is in sight, the yellow light through the rain-sleek windows casting a dim glow on their route through the ragged front yard, full of flat tires and too-long grass and discarded garbage.

As they near the door, they slow, and Sam extricates himself carefully from Castiel so that he can get the door open. Castiel wobbles, his knees going underneath him, and his hand comes up clutching at the collar of Dean's shirt, mutilated fingers smearing blood over his throat.

At last, Sam manages to get the door open, and they stagger together into the dry. Dean clings to Castiel, keeping his weight upright until he can get him close enough to the kitchen table that he can ease up. Castiel sags against the table, hands splayed across the wood as he tries to support himself, and Dean can see blood ooze out between his fingers. Dean is staring at the mangled tatter of his hands, fingernails torn off bleeding, edges ragged, and he feels as though he can't breathe.

Sam leaves Castiel with Dean, and goes to the kitchen, digging through the cupboard under the sink for the first-aid kit that he always keeps on hand. “Just hold tight, Cas, okay? You sit down – I'm gonna get something for your hands and then we can--”

“Sammy,” Dean interrupts, and his voice is a little strangled. “I'm gonna go.”

Sam looks up. “What? Where?”

Dean wants to say that he can't look at Castiel when he's like this – white-eyed, staring, mouth slack like he's been hollowed and his skin is seconds from collapsing inwards. He wants to say that he doesn't trust himself for a second and the longer he goes without waking up three days ago, back on the couch with the sun on his eyes, the more he is convinced he's overdue for it. He swallows around the beating of his heart in his throat, and he says, “Maggie's. I'll see if we can borrow her truck, get out of here now.”

Sam's hands become still in their rummaging. “What about the car?”

Dean hates himself even as the words come out of his mouth. “We'll leave her,” he says. “I can always come back to get my baby later, but we gotta get out of here now.” He looks right at Sam. “You said to me if shit goes sideways, you can handle it.”

Sam swallows. He sits back on his heels, and his hands drifts somewhere, distracted, between his body and the cupboard. His fingers are in fists; he's trying to figure out whether he needs to get
ready to fight. “Yeah. I did.”

Dean forces himself to say it even when every bone in his body says, *don't leave Sam here alone.* It is so deeply engrained in him, keeping Sam close, that the idea of leaving him behind feels wrong on countless levels. He makes himself breathe. “So you stay here. You pack up all our stuff ready to roll out the second I get back, you hold down the fort for whatever might be coming – at least until I get back.”

Sam nods. Worry is pressing a thin crease between his eyebrows. “Yeah. I will.”

“And you keep an eye on him.” Dean points at Castiel. “Do not let him out of your sight, you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you. But--” Sam hesitates. “Dean, are you gonna be okay?”

Dean's knee is agonising underneath his weight; he has a headache that pounds for attention so fiercely he thinks he might puke, and he's still not entirely convinced he's not gonna wake up in ten minutes, still on the couch, all bathed in sunlight. He looks at Sam's face, starting to crumple with concern, and Dean thinks there's no good way to say that.

“I'll be fine,” he says. He turns from Sam, touches a hand to Castiel's arm. “I'll be back in a half hour, tops. Okay?”

Castiel's eyes slide past Dean to an indistinct point in some middle distance, and he breathes slow.

Dean looks back at Sam. “Half an hour,” he says again. “I'm gonna be back.”

“Yes,” Sam says, and he gives another short nod.

Dean flips up the collar of his jacket, and he takes a deep breath before he heads back out into the storm.

The rain is whipped into a frenzy, catching in his eyelashes until his vision blurs and he can hardly see, stinging at his face. Dean breaks into a jog as he hits the main road, then pushes himself a
painful, lopsided run, his knee almost buckling beneath him with every other step. Underfoot, the road is turning to sludge, the rain lashing down hard around him, cold water sliding under the collar of his jacket to trace icy fingers the length of his spine.

He runs, and he checks his watch – a great crack spiderwebbing across the glass so that the hands can't be seen clearly, so fuck only knows how long he's been gone already – and tries to breathe through the pain.

God, he should have been running with Sam all these mornings, his breath coming in short, sharp bursts already, but it is too late for wishful thinking – too late to wish he had better stamina; too late to wish he'd tried to help Castiel sooner before this spell worked its way under his skin; too late to wish he'd had the fucking guts to let Sam die and let this all be over; too late to wish he'd never met Castiel at all, never dragged him out of the sky and into the dirt; too late – Dean's foot skids out from underneath him.

He lands flat on his ass in a puddle that soaks mud and dirty water up through his jeans. “Fuck,” he bursts out. “Jesus fucking–”

He can see the car up ahead.

The Impala is half-sunk into the mud already, the engine smoking faintly in slow white coils. The bonnet is crushed, and one wheel has been ripped off its axel.

“Aw, baby,” Dean despairs as he comes up on it, and he passes a hand over the scratched-up paintwork. He takes a second to get rid of anything incriminating, squeezing his head and one arm through the broken window to drag out his box of fifty-plus fake IDs, his pistol, the old book on the exorcisms that Sam keeps in the dashboard, with the rain all the while drumming deafeningly on the underside of the car overhead. The trunk is locked tight, and Dean figures that'll do for now. He gets up, tucks everything under his arms, and he continues limping down the first road.

It's just over two miles to Maggie's from the point, and already his clothes are heavy and cold with the rainwater, and he is exhausted to the bone.

The sky above him churns dark and thunderous, rumbling distantly, Dean's upwards vision haloed by the crowns of the pine trees jutting sharply to the clouds. He has no idea of the time, but he can tell that it's already been more than half an hour, and he hasn't yet made it a mile. The rain falls hard, slanting into Dean's face, and he takes a deep, slow breath and he digs deep for the courage to start running again.
It takes just over an hour to get to Maggie's place, and by the time Dean comes staggering to her crooked white sign, he is soaked to the skin and gasping. He is near blinded with pain, his vision spotting whitely in front of his eyes, and a feeling curls in his gut that rests somewhere between nausea and the pixellated fuzziness of being moments from collapse. He swallows it down, blinks rainwater from his eyelashes. Sam's book is curled, the box of fake IDs is slippery under Dean's arm and nearly falls. The pistol is cold in back of his jeans.

Dean staggers up the path, mud-caked boots sliding wildly, and the first thing he notices is that the pick-up is nowhere to be seen.

“Maggie?” he calls out as he drags himself up towards the house. The porch steps are almost steeper than he can bear, but he reaches the door, and at last he sags heavily against it. “Maggie, you in?” He hammers his fist hard on the wood, yells out again. “Maggie! Fuck.”

Dean fumbles in his pocket for his cell phone, but he already knows what he'll find – and sure enough, there is a crack punched into the screen, and can see water welling up behind the glass.

“Shit. Shit.” He goes to the side window and shields his eyes with a hand up against the glass, peering in. “Maggie? Jesus, please. Maggie, come on, where the hell are you?” He takes his hand away, presses his wet forehead to the glass, and shuts his eyes. It's another two miles to Nineveh from here, and he doesn't he can make it. His knee has worsened from a dull ache to keenly painful throbbing, and he thinks he can feel something moving inside his kneecap. He wants to sit down. He wants to stop running. He wants to be safe.

Maggie's pick-up isn't here – that much was immediately obvious. But in a house this far out from the rest of the world, there's no way that it's Maggie's only vehicle.

With teeth gritted and jaw clenched tight, Dean climbs down from the porch. Around the side of the house is a barn, metal-roofed and rattling in the rain. Mercifully, it's unlocked, and inside, there is a small blue car – a Ford Fiesta, about ten years old, and in garbage condition, but if it's still running, Dean doesn't give a shit if he's driving Barbie's fucking station wagon.

He jimmys the door open, tears at the dash to hotwire it, his fingers slippery and shaking. It takes four tries, but thank fucking Christ and hallelujah, the car starts. Not much gas in the tank, but enough.

Dean swings out of the car and quickly rummages through a nearby workbench until he finds a
scrap of paper and blotchy pencil stub – **EMERGENCY. BORROWED CAR, WILL RETURN. DEAN** – and then he gets in and guns the engine.

The road back is rough, the tiny car's suspension shot to shit so that Dean feels every bump and pothole juddering up through his entire skeleton. Overhead, thin lines of pale white sunlight come struggling through the cloud cover, the hazy sunburst near-dazzling against the storm. Up ahead, the sharp white beam of the lighthouse wheels slowly and cuts through the dark.

The car's frantically pumping windshield-wipers start to squeak on the glass; Dean clicks the wiper speed down a setting. The rain has eased off slightly to an arrhythmic drumming, no longer vibrating through the whole car as it veers and swerves in the mud all the way back. Dean lets his breath out. He keeps his foot on the acceleration.

When Dean finally pulls into the drive, he leaves the car running and gets out. “Sam, Cas,” he calls out, and he staggers, breathing ragged, towards the house.

The door to the cabin is open.

Dean goes in. “Sam?”

Nothing is packed, and Sam and Castiel are nowhere to be seen.

Dean's bag of Costco cleaning products has been pulled out of the cupboard and then abandoned in the middle of the kitchen floor. The dining table is still cluttered with books of lore.

“Goddamnit,” Dean mutters. “Sam? Cas – where the hell are you?”

He steps further into the room, and something crunches under his boot with a sharp, brittle sound.

Dean stops and tentatively raises his foot. On the ground, tangled all around Dean's muddy footprint, are Castiel's windchimes. One shell is now shattered into ugly curving shards.

Dean lifts his head, looks towards the window where it used to hang. The window is open. There is a handprint on the glass.
Dean moves towards the window. He exhales, his breath fogging the print into sharper clarity, and then, through the glass, his eyes catch on two silhouettes on the beach.

He heads back out into the quietly receding storm – past the blue car idling, the lighthouse thundering, the whispering sea at the foot of the cliffs. The cold wind off the water snatches at him, clings to the wet of his hair and his clothes, makes him shiver.

Dean picks his way down, limping heavily with pain firing sharply up through his thighs every time he has to lift one foot particularly high over a fallen log or stone. The rain is drizzling now, chattering on the wood.

As he clears the trees and breaks out onto the beach, he slows, and then comes to a halt. He can see Sam and Castiel clearly now, and he realises he saw the silhouettes wrong. They aren't standing. They sit together, side by side, or pressed close to keep warm against the wind as it whips off the water, their legs stretched out in front of them.

Dean walks towards them, unsteady on the stones.

There is Sam, sat back with his legs out in front of him; he leans partially against Castiel's chest in lazy closeness. There is Castiel behind, feet tucked underneath his ass. One hand is loose against the shingle. They look comfortably at ease.

“Where the hell have you guys been? Jesus, I've been--”

Dean stops.

Something dark spills away from them, tracing a slowly curving route down towards the water. It stains the stone, leaving a mottled brown crust.

He sees now: Sam's throat is darkly stained. His shirt is wet. It's so confusing, so incongruous, that it takes Dean a moment to put it together. He sees the line through the skin, the gaping slash through flesh and muscle, and he can only think, this is for the case. This is an experiment of some kind, to prove a hypothesis about Halia.
“Cas,” he says, and his voice comes out hoarse. He hears himself as though from down the line of a badly-wired telephone, through miles of static. The sea is rushing in his ears. “Sam – what--”

Dean takes another, faltering step towards them, and then at last his knee buckles, and he goes down inelegantly to kneel on the shingle. He lands on his hands. Barely registers the sting of pain as he slices his palm on jagged shingle. He has his hands in blood.

He breathes. He doesn't know what else to do.

The blood is slow-moving, almost congealed. The liquid of it has mostly drained away, leaving a thick and heavy congealed sludge that oozes up between Dean's fingers.

Dean feels something turn over his stomach, and then there is vomit pitching up into his throat, but he swallows it down. He has the sour, sharp taste of it on his tongue, and he breathes ragged.

Sam has been dead for some time.

Dean can't make himself look. He knows that he needs to, but he can't pull himself up. He can't move. He just kneels there, on his hands and knees, covered in the thick, cold stew of his brother's blood, and he doesn't think about the stiff curl of Sam's fingers, the backwards tilt of his head as though he is breathing deeply, inhaling the salty air.

Slowly Dean's arms start to shake, elbows locked and wobbling, and he pushes himself upright to sit heavily back on his heels. He lifts his head and he looks.

Sam's eyes are half-lidded, his lips slack, blue-tinged. The wound starts at the hinge of his jaw, deep and messy, and then narrows to a sliver as it sweeps down through jugular, carotid, windpipe. Dean can see bone. There is blood, dark, just inside his mouth, and there is Castiel just behind him, legs skewed out inelegantly to one side where he went down with Sam. The hem of his jeans has ridden up a little, exposing the hard white bone of his ankle through the skin. Castiel is still breathing.

Dean sits back on his heels, hands reaching out for Sam without thinking, and he says, “What have you done?”

His voice is impossibly small, quiet. It is lost in the noise of the sea.
He has no idea how long he kneels there, unable to move, but he is distantly aware that his boots are wet with seawater now, the tide creeping in again to rinse all this away. It laps and lulls, a murmur at Dean's back that fills his ears like white noise. He is struggling to breathe.

His jacket and jeans are heavy with the spray soaking into the fabric; it presses tight and cold against his skin, and he can feel shivers tracing a slow, lazy route up the length of his spine.

He kneels there in Sam's blood, hands frozen where they curl into his wet, dark shirt, and in a voice that comes out as a hoarse croak, he says, “This isn't real.”

The pain in his knee, that sharp and aching tether to reality, is gone. He is whole, and here Sam is with his throat slashed wide open, and Castiel, still breathing, more dead somehow than his brother – but it's not real. Dean breathes, dragging in a long, shaky breath, and he steadies himself. “This isn't real.” The words are barely recognisable.

Castiel's mouth is slack, his lips chapped and grey; his breath rattles faintly in his throat like a stuck pipe. There is a splash of dark blood across one cheek, a smear over the corner of his mouth. His eyes, the same murky grey-blue as the water, are hollow. His hands are stiffly curled against the stone.

“This isn't real.” Dean says again, louder now, and his voice cracks. He has his hands at Sam's face now, one cupped at the edge of his jaw, one cupping the fragile base of his skull. Dean's thumb brushes into the wide point of the open wound. Sam's skin is cold and beginning to mottle.

Dean breathes, in and out. In. Sea water is heavy in his socks, plastering his jeans to his calves. He feels that it is cold as though through someone else's body. The sound of the waves has built to a quiet buzz within his ears. It shushes and crackles. It closes in on him.

“This isn't real.” Dean's voice is low. His fingers flex experimentally on Sam's jaw. He exhales. “This--”

Behind Sam, Castiel breathes, sweet and slow.

Dean closes his eyes.
“This isn't real,” he says, and the sound of his voice is gone. His lips move in silence, and he can feel the way his tongue shifts against his teeth, the roof of his mouth – *this isn't real* – tap of the tongue against incisors – *this* – the backwards curl of his lips to make room for the vowel – *isn't* – and the quiet is pressing in on him.

Dean reels slowly back, onto his heels first, and then onto his feet as he stands, and as he straightens, he tips his head back. He opens his mouth, and he inhales. The air is full of salt and blood, and he has the sea at his back. It whispers to him, in a silence that is otherwise complete, vibrating in his skull. The water washes up over his feet, crashes low at his heels and then hisses out fast over the shingle as far as it can before the tide calls it back.

He opens his eyes.

Dean gets a hand around Castiel's throat, and he uses it to haul Castiel upright, his bare feet dragging over the stone.

Sam goes limp without Castiel at his back, his head lolling back sharply to expose the hot yellowish glint of bone and muscle at the hinge of his jaw, and he crumples sideways, but Dean doesn't notice. He keeps one hand locked around Castiel's throat, and the other he slides around his waist, holding him close as though to kiss him, and he holds him up like this.

Castiel's breath comes shorter, wheezes out, but he remains unresponsive, his eyes glazed and vacant. Underneath Dean's fingers, Castiel's pulse flutters, slow and measured. He is calm. That's good.

As they near the spray and crash of the waves, Castiel's eyelashes flicker. Dean holds him up, and he walks backwards with him, at a slow, clumsy pace, towards the water. They don't have far to go – the sea is coming in to meet them.

The water rushes icy over Dean's feet, filling his boots and making him heavy, slow. He walks as though through a dream, Castiel's empty body pressed flush to his. Dean can feel the strength of him, the sharpness of his hipbones over his jeans, the solidity of his chest and back. He breathes in Dean's ear; under Dean's hand, his ribcage expands with each inhalation. Contracts. Dean drags him further.

The sea rolls and rolls, catching against Dean's legs, his knees; it snags Castiel's pants and makes him unwieldy. The silence builds inside Dean's skull to a finely thrumming thing, beating just slightly out of time with his own pulse. His mouth is dry, and he can feel his heartbeat in his tongue, hot and slow. Dean takes them deeper.
There is so much blood – on Castiel's face, sprayed into his hair, along the line of his throat and all over the front of his shirt. On his hands. On Dean's hands – it is on him, too, now, and soaking into the cracks of his skin. Blood, he knows, does not wash off easy. It's okay, though. He is going to be clean.

Slowly, the sea climbs higher, and the water soaks through Dean's knees, up his thighs. It catches in Castiel's trenchcoat, dragging him down with the waves. Dean can feel the silence fizz under his skin, shaky and wild, and it jars him, knocking his vision slightly askew. Dean thinks he might be shaking. He lets out a long exhalation without sound, the hush pressing in on him, and Castiel is boneless in his arms, and Dean kisses his slack, cold lips.

Unresponsive, Castiel breathes coolly over Dean's lips.

Then Dean pushes him under.

Castiel's eyes are wide open, vacant, fixed on a false point in some middle distance. His mouth is open, his hands drifting loosely by his sides, and Dean is lost in the silence that trembles and roars inside his head and drowns out all else, and he is shaking now, until everything is seen as though through a television not hooked up quite right – crackling, with a shudder that pitches the sea and sky sideways – and Dean exhales slow, and calm, through his teeth, as he holds Castiel down, and then Castiel blinks.

The sea washes over him, slowly dyed pink and then murky red as the water teases away the blood stained to his face and body. Bubbles filter up from his nose and mouth as Castiel exhales.

He meets Dean's eyes.

Dean holds him tight, and he feels the first involuntary jerk of Castiel's ribs as he struggles not to breathe. Castiel's chest pulses, just once, and then again. One of his hands twitches towards Dean. The world is gone still and quiet, and Castiel's body shudders under the swell of the surf. He jerks again. One arm spasms. His fingers are curling and uncurling reflexively. He reaches for Dean, and his mouth opens.

Dean says, “Come on, sweetheart. You're doing so well.”

He watches the first mouthful of water that Castiel gasps in. Then the second. His chest buck
desperately, and his hands find Dean at last, curling tightly around his wrist with nails digging in hard enough to draw blood, and Castiel inhales a third time. The water is clouded with blood now, Castiel's face half-lost in it, but Dean doesn't need to see anymore as Castiel begins to convulse.

The water is heavy around Dean's knees and thighs, and his arms are beginning to ache from holding him under, especially as Castiel spasms wildly, chest and shoulders pitching out of control beneath the water. He seizes, back arching, mouth open beneath the water, head tipped back to expose the long line of his throat as it swells, distorts, and then, at last, Castiel is still.

Dean lets his arms go slack.

Castiel's body catches the water. He sways and he pulses, the waves washing over him. His eyes are still open, bloodshot and colourless. They follow Dean wherever he goes.

There is an itch across Dean's knuckles, of blood and of salt. He straightens up, and slowly he exhales. He hadn't realised he was holding his breath.

He wades clumsily backwards out of the water, never taking his eyes once off the body that slowly rocks and sways with the water. His clothes are heavy, pressing on him, dragging him down. He reaches a point where the water is shallow enough to walk almost normally, and gravity takes him by surprise. He is caught out by his own feet, and he falls down backwards to sit on his ass on the dark slate, his legs still half in water.

Dean can't find the strength or sense to move. He sits there, the sea soaking through the ass of his jeans and weighing down his jacket, and he has his hands useless between his thighs. He looks out at the water. He watches that trenchcoat-clad body bob on the surf.

The static buzz and hush is dimming inside Dean's skull. The thing he hears first is the waves, their slow and lazy whisper and crash against the stones. Then, gradually, he is aware of the high noise of the wind, slicing towards him off the bay, and somewhere in the near distance, the harsh caw of seabirds. There is a dull ache in one knee. Dean can hear himself breathe.

“'This isn't real,'” he says, and his own voice, small and unsure, comes back to him, clear as anything.

His heart is beating fast, his breath laboured and heavy, but as he sits there, he becomes calm. He breathes slow and even, and he looks at his hands. The blood engraved into the whorls and
callouses of his palms.

The water creeps higher, seeping into his jeans and soaking the him of his flannel. Castiel's body floats slowly further away, the ends of his coat billowing with slow, eerie grace, and Dean waits to wake up. The turn of the tide is a slow, unsudden thing.

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