Summary

"What about Castiel? He seems helpful... and dreamy."

Something about the comment just isn't sitting right, and Dean's jaw twitches. He stares at the wall in the dark, and at a quarter past four in the morning, it hits him.

"Asshole," Dean hisses under his breath, sitting up straight, "that sonofabitch kept publishing."

Notes

After Charlie's passing comment about Castiel seeming dreamy, I couldn't resist writing excerpts from Chuck's books.
The moderately crappy art included in some chapters is my own work--until someone else decides to draw a thing we're stuck with it. Please, someone draw a thing. I beg you.
/flops over onto ground
There was a glint in Charlie's eye, and Dean can't get it out of his head.

He's been trying to sleep for hours, tossing and turning on the mattress that's supposed to stop him from ever being so uncomfortable, and her voice echoes in his memory.

"What about Castiel? He seems helpful... and dreamy."

Something about the comment just isn't sitting right, and Dean's jaw twitches. He stares at the wall in the dark, and at a quarter past four in the morning, it hits him.

"Asshole," Dean hisses under his breath, sitting up straight, "that sonofabitch kept publishing."

He drags himself out of bed, shuffling down the hall in his socks, trying to keep quiet enough not to wake Sam.

It takes all the self control he has not to start yelling, because Chuck had promised. The books went up to him going to Hell, and then they stopped.

He promised.

"That goddamned sonofabitch asshole," Dean says to himself, picking up Sam's laptop from the library table.

Once he's back in his room, he pulls the door shut and hits the power button before getting back under the covers.

The start up chime is loud, and he shoves his pillow down over it, hoping the sound didn't travel. He has no desire at all for Sam to see these books. Not until he's checked them, anyway.

Because Charlie had that glint in her eye. And he has a feeling he knows exactly what she was getting at. His private thoughts, his very private, very pointedly repressed thoughts, written in Chuck Shurley's horrible, flowery goddamn--

"That asshole."

He pulls the pillow away and opens up the web browser.

For a moment, his fingers just hover. He wants to know for sure; he doesn't want to know at all. He swallows, nervous, and types, CARVER EDLUND SUPERNATURAL E-BOOKS. He hits search with more force than is necessary, and scrolls through the results.

A few minutes later, he wants to throw the laptop at the wall.

Clicking through pages of reviews and some kind of fansite with lists of sub-categories that he doesn't even want to think about, he tallies up the total number of books.

At least forty more have been published since Chuck had told them he'd stop.

Forty.

Dean feels his mouth go dry and pushes the laptop away, taking a moment to breathe before he pulls it back and goes about downloading them, one by one.
Glad that he can at least let the computer do the searching for him, he opens the first book and hits CTRL + F. He searches Castiel's name. The first instance is a scene, described in horrible, vivid detail, in which Pamela's eyes get burned out of her skull. He skips it, not wanting to read descriptions of the pain that Pamela experienced because of him, and reaches a scene near the very end of the book. With embarrassingly shaky fingers, he scrolls through, and reads.

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**LAZARUS RISING**

The roof above them rattled, shaking loose dust and insects from the rafters. Dean glanced upward, suddenly regretting the entire plan.

"Wishful thinking," he joked, deflecting his fear in the usual way, "but maybe it's just the wind."

Bobby's brow raised high under his blue cap. Though Dean didn't turn to see it, he was spooked, too. For a hunter as seasoned as Bobby, that didn't happen often, and he was about to tell Dean that wishing was for wells when above them, bulbs started bursting.

They both flinched at the sound of shattering glass, ducking their heads to protect their eyes. When they looked back up, the door burst wide open, and a figure strode through. At a passing glance, it was just a man, clad in an ill-fitting suit and a trench-coat; but he rolled into the barn like a thunderstorm.

Something in his walk was alien, his steps slow and calculated as though the limbs he used were unfamiliar to him, and he planned each movement consciously. He passed over each trap, through every protective circle and symbol that they had painted.

All the while, his eyes never left Dean.

Raw, crackling energy radiated from his gaze, striking something deep in Dean's bones as sparks rained down, and at once he felt that some part of himself knew this man, this creature, whatever he was. The feeling settled in his stomach like fear, roiling cold, and he gripped the gun in his hand.

Each round hit the target, and had the man been simply a man, he would have gone down with the first chestful of salt and iron buckshot. The fact that he was still standing didn't faze Dean, though. As the man reached him, Dean grasped the demon-killing knife behind his back.

"Who are you?"

His voice, while firm and demanding as ever, still betrayed the fear that plagued him. He knew this man; he feared what he would tell him.

The man, close now, looked him directly in the eye. His face was earnest, calm, and held the barest hint of pride as he responded;

"I'm the one who gripped you tight and raised you from perdition."
Any gratefulness Dean might have felt was immediately cancelled out by the fact that this being had left him in his grave. His mind flicked back to the moment when his eyes had opened, the burning in his chest as he sucked in his first breath, the panic that had come over him when he realized where he was.

He levelled the man with a glare.

“Yeah? Thanks for that,” he snarled, and lunged forward, driving the blade home.

Dean felt as it punctured the skin, cracked through ribs and pierced into the man's heart, buried deep.

The man, somehow, didn't. He didn't flinch, and he barely glanced down before yanking it out and dropping it to the floor.

The benevolent expression never left his face, even as he threw out one hand to stop Bobby from swinging at his head with an iron crowbar. The man raised two fingers to his forehead, barely making contact.

A moment later, Bobby was laying on the barn floor, unconscious, and the man turned back to Dean, giving him his full attention. Dean felt his palms sweat under the power of his gaze.

“We need to talk, Dean,” the man said, glancing back at Bobby before he amended the sentence, “alone.”

Dean, summoning the kind of cock-eyed bravery that Bobby would have admonished had he been conscious, completely ignored him. With a firm set jaw, he moved around the man to crouch down by Bobby's side, checking for a pulse.

The man looked at him with some interest.

“You're friend is alive,” he said, matter-of-factly, and glanced down at the nearby workbench, still littered with pages from the book that Dean and Bobby had used to summon him.

Satisfied that Bobby was indeed alive—a fact he had ascertained on his own, moments before the man had told him as much—Dean stared up at him.

“Who are you?”

“Castiel.”

“Yeah, I figured that much. I mean what are you?”

Castiel put down the page he had been looking at, and turned to face Dean fully.

“I'm an angel of the Lord.”

Dean clicks the little red x on the file, and it blinks out of existence. He lets out a relieved sigh. He knows it's probably a little premature.
There were literally sparks flying, he thinks, and barely suppresses his grimace.
The First Seed of Doubt

The next two books aren't remotely incriminating either, and he's almost ready to chalk up his moment of panic as a huge overreaction.

From the brief descriptions online, the final book in the series is about Sam forcing Lucifer into the pit, and he knows that his Castiel-related issues didn't really start until well after that. He's pretty sure. He hopes.

For a few brief moments, that hope gets to live.

Then he clicks on the book called It's The Great Pumpkin, Sam Winchester—and honestly, what was Chuck smoking when he titled that—and everything comes crashing down.

IT'S THE GREAT PUMPKIN, SAM WINCHESTER

It was, for the time being, over.

The new day was sunny and bright, and Dean, who had gone for a walk to clear his head of all that had happened, came to a little park near the motel. Lush trees swayed in the warm breeze, and as he sank down onto a nearby bench, he briefly closed his eyes, soaking in the calm.

Across the bike path, the towns children played, squealing and laughing as they climbed the jungle gym. They were alive because of him.

He and Sam had done the right thing, he was sure of it; yet still he had a heavy feeling in his gut. The seal had been broken.

He'd been sitting there all of five minutes when Castiel appeared beside him in a flurry of feathers—invisible though they were—and Dean, without turning, sensed him.

He wasn't quite sure when it had happened, but he had, at some point, become attuned to the angel. It was almost as though he sensed something kindred in his presence, some part of them connected.

Because of it, he simply knew when Castiel was near; felt it like a wave washing over him. He spoke before he turned.

“Let me guess; you're here for the I told you so.”

“No.”

“Well, good. 'Cause I'm really not interested.”

“I am not here to judge you, Dean.”

“Then why are you here?”
Castiel paused, considering the best way to word his reply. Dean, being Dean, interpreted the moment as hesitance, and swiftly cut him off.

“Our orders—”

“Yeah, you know, I've had about enough of these orders of yours.”

Castiel looked at him sternly, and spoke again, quickly so as to get the whole sentence out without Dean interrupting.

“Our orders were not to stop the summoning of Samhain, they were to do whatever you told us to do.”

Dean leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and frowned in confusion. He knew that he was right in this, and yet the idea of angels being sent to follow his command was absurd.

“Your orders were to follow my orders?”

“It was a test. To see how you would perform under... battlefield conditions, you might say.”

“It was a witch, not the Tet Offensive.”

Castiel smiled. It was tiny—something that would barely even register on a regular person's face—but on Castiel it somehow became something much bigger.

It unsettled something in Dean, put him on the defence.

“So I, uh, failed your test, huh? I get it. But you know what? If you were to wave that magic time-traveling wand of yours and we had to do it all over again, I'd make the same call.”

Castiel didn't respond, and Dean continued, determined to get a rise out of him, reckless as it was. The angel's calm demeanor was too much for him to handle.

“Cause see, I don't know what's gonna happen when these seals are broken. Hell, I don't even know what's gonna happen tomorrow. But what I do know is that this, here? These kids, the swings, the trees, all of it is still here because of my brother and me.”

“You misunderstand me, Dean,” Castiel said, “I'm not like you think. I was praying that you would choose to save the town.”

Something hopeful unfurled in Dean, at that, and he stubbornly ignored it.

He narrowed his eyes at Castiel.

“You were?”

“These people; they're all my father's creations. They're works of art.”

He sighed, staring out at the children, at the sunlight slanting through the treetops, mottled shadow scattered over green grass. Castiel saw all of it, and he thought it a thing of beauty. He wished he could make Dean understand that he saw it that way, that he wanted nothing more than to save it. He looked back at Dean, still watching him.
“And yet, even though you stopped Samhain, the seal was broken and we are one step closer to hell on Earth, for all creation. Now that's not an expression, Dean. It's literal. You of all people should appreciate what that means.”

Images of his years in Hell flashed through Dean's mind, and his fingers itched with the sense-memory of razorblades pressing into bloodslicked skin. Pain flickered over his face, and beside him, Castiel took a breath he didn't need, steeling himself for the risk he was about to take.

“Can I tell you something if you promise not to tell another soul?”

“Okay.”

“I'm not a... hammer as you say. I have questions. I have doubts,” he looked down, knowing that there was no turning back now, and not caring, “I don't know what is right and what is wrong any more, whether you passed or failed here. But in the coming months you will have more decisions to make. I don't envy the weight that is on your shoulders, Dean. I truly don’t.”

They shared a look, then, and something passed between them. It seemed to somehow signal the beginning of something; something important. Dean felt it, deep.

He shook it loose and looked out over the park, certain that he was imagining it. The creature—and he had to remind himself, again, that Castiel was indeed not human—may have smiled, but he couldn't turn into a friend.

Dean was sure of it. He didn't get friends; certainly not ones with superpowers.

When he looked back, the angel was gone.

He couldn't help but feel a little disappointed.

Dean remembers that conversation. Remembers replaying it over in his head for weeks. For a long time, he hadn't been sure that it was even true—was convinced that it was all a ploy, a way to trick him into opening up in return.

He'd had no idea of the kind of risk Castiel had taken in telling him, nor the level of trust that he had already placed in him, even then.

He wonders if Castiel ever regretted it.
Dean rubs his hands over his tired eyes and flicks through the next few books. When he reaches the one about the day he and Castiel had tracked down Raphael, he deliberately skips all the scenes in the brothel.

He doesn't want to know what went on with Chastity before Castiel offended her; the angel's suit had been more than a little rumpled when he'd emerged, and the thought of him kissing her is more than a little unpleasant to him now.

Part of him wishes he'd never taken him there.

FREE TO BE YOU AND ME

Stumbling out through the back door, Dean laughed to himself.

Beside him, Castiel stood, more dishevelled than usual, his tie askew, and looked around the empty alleyway before returning his gaze to Dean.

“What's so funny?”

Dean threw an arm over Castiel's shoulder.

“Oh, nothing,” Dean said, “it's been a long time since I laughed that hard.”

The angel smiled.

That's a good look on him, Dean thought to himself, and laughed a little louder.

Castiel, meanwhile, was thinking the same thing of Dean. He was relieved that he hadn't had to go through with anything in the bordello. If tonight was indeed going to be his last night on Earth, of existence, he couldn't think of any way he'd rather spend it than by Dean's side.

Somehow, Dean's presence was a comfort to him.

He briefly thought that he should have made it clearer, earlier, when he told him that he had been planning to sit quietly, that he meant sit quietly together.

He didn't think Dean would appreciate being told that, though.

“It's been more than a long time,” Dean amended after a moment, “Years.”

As he opened the door to the Impala, Dean wondered if he'd ever get to feel like this again, for real.
With someone who it was possible to feel like this with. With someone human.

He pushed the feeling down.

“I need a drink,” Dean says to himself, but he doesn't get up.

It's five in the morning now, the bunker is cold, and he doesn't want to risk waking Sam. For a few minutes, he just stares at the page, knowing that the feelings he has hadn't quite come out of nowhere after all.

They've been there for years, building slow, brick by brick.

He tries not to read into the parts about Castiel's inner thoughts, though. He really tries.

When he gets to the next book, though, that becomes a little difficult.

Chapter End Notes

I have a few more chapters already written, but I have to go to work! Ugh! Check back tomorrow :)  
~ Imogen
The laptop is getting a little too warm on his legs, and Dean shifts around in bed before pulling up the next file. It's called *The End*.

“Sounds promising,” Dean mutters to himself, and hits search.

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**THE END**

“I'll just—“

There was a click as Dean disconnected, and Castiel glanced at the cell phone in his hand. He sighed, lowering it, before finishing the sentence, despite the fact that Dean was no longer listening.

“—wait here then.”

He was restless, and if he didn't think Dean would end up mad with him, he would have ignored his request to wait a few hours. The very fact that he allowed Dean's opinion of him to dictate his actions should have been unsettling, to say the least, and Castiel wondered how he had managed to get to this point.

Castiel had been alive for more time than he could reasonably quantify, and he had never before allowed anything to sway him. Now, this man who he had known for a single year was influencing him without even trying.

He should have been scared by that. He wasn't.

Hours ticked by, and with every passing moment, the desire to stretch out his wings and fly toward Dean became stronger.

As he stood by the roadside, watching the occasional truck roar by, it occurred to him that lately, toward Dean was the only way he flew.

He smiled.

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Dean takes a deep breath and reads the scene three times, trying to convince himself that it doesn't mean anything. Castiel smiles all the time, he tells himself.

It's bullshit, of course, and he knows it.

With his heart racing, Dean searches for the next scene in the same book.
Even on the balcony, the air was heady with incense. The smell of sandalwood and cinnamon lifted, weaving out through the doorway and warming Dean from within. He ran his fingers through the beaded curtain before pulling it aside.

Leaning through, Dean saw Castiel, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the wide, open plan cabin. Sitting around him, four women watched with rapt attention as he spoke, and Dean caught the tail end of his speech as he stepped fully inside.

“...it's surprisingly physical.”

Dean raised his brow, wondering what Castiel could possibly have been talking about that would end in that particular string of words, when Castiel noticed him in the doorway. He glanced up with a smile, something like smugness in his expression as he turned back to the women.

“Um, excuse me, ladies. I think I need to confer with our—“

Castiel looked back at Dean with a wink.

“—fearless leader for a minute. Why not go get washed up for the orgy.”

If the word *orgy* falling so casually from Castiel's lips almost broke Dean's brain, it was lucky for him that he was so preoccupied that he didn't notice a number of other things in the room that would likely send him into a state of near-catatonia.

There was the leather jacket hanging on the rack by the door that was decidedly too big for Castiel yet the perfect size for him. The shoes, his size, too, by the bed. The general clutter of his own things scattered around the cabin that was not just the home of future Castiel, but him, too.

Dean noticed none of them; too focused on the idea of such things as Castiel and orgies existing in the same universe.

The group of women rose slowly, sauntering one by one out through the beaded curtain, a couple of them giving Dean forlorn and profoundly disappointed glances as they went.

“You're all so beautiful,” Castiel said, watching them leave, sparing a quick glance at Dean as if he wanted to gage his response.

Dean just stared at him, rendered mute by the bizarre situation, and Castiel rose from the rug.

As he stood, he let out a low noise, somewhere between a grunt and a moan. His loose-fitting yoga pants and pale blue shirt moved in soft waves while he stretched his arms, arching his back as he walked, catlike, toward the king size bed at the back of the room.

Dean finally found his words.

“What are you, a hippie?”

Castiel, his back still turned, sighed wearily, as if tired of the topic.

“I thought you'd gotten over trying to label me.”
Dean's eyes darted around the room, eyes still not registering all the evidence that pointed to an unquestionably different relationship with the man before him in the future, and shook his head.

“Cas, we've gotta talk.”

Castiel turned, then, and staggered away from him a little, suddenly thrown.

“Whoa,” he said, raking his eyes over Dean, “strange.”

“What?”

“You. Are not you. Not now you, anyway.”

“No!” Dean shook his head, then nodded, “Uh, yes. Exactly.”

“What year are you from?”

“2009.”

Narrowing his eyes, Castiel looked hard at him.

“Who did this to you? Was it Zachariah?”

“Yes.”

Castiel raised one finger to rub at his chin, scratching the stubble.

“Interesting,” he mused.

Incredulous, Dean raised his brow.

“Oh, yeah, it's friggin' fascinating. Now why don't you strap on your angel wings and fly me back to my page on the calendar.”

Castiel's face split into a bitter smile, and he turned away, laughing. Dean felt his stomach drop.

“I wish I could, just, uh... strap on my wings. But uh, I'm sorry. No dice.”

He laughed again.

“What are you, stoned?”

The laughter stopped, abruptly, and Dean got the distinct feeling that this was a sore topic as Castiel looked back at him to reply.

“Generally, yeah.”

His voice was pained, tight, and Dean stared at him.

“What happened to you?”

“Life,” he said, and with that one word, Dean knew that whatever had happened in this future, Castiel was broken.

He wanted to grab hold of his shoulders and shake the old Castiel loose; the sight of him
like this made Dean ache.

Castiel, ached, too.

Because the version of Dean in front of him was still a good man, still had hope, still had the ability to care. He missed this man, and the guilt that he felt for failing to keep him around, keep him happy, grew within his chest like a cancer.

At this point, Dean doesn't just want a drink. He wants to get drunk. Horribly, horribly, imbibed-the-entire-liquor-store *drunk*.

Because apparently, according to Chuck, he lived with Castiel in 2014.

He lived with Castiel in a single room cabin. A single room cabin with one big bed.

Dean blinks, staring at the screen. A lump is forming in his throat.

He never wrote the exact words, but it is clear that his future self and Castiel were a couple. Terrible, miserable, destructive and bitter, but definitely a couple.

It occurs to him now that with that smug expression, Castiel had been trying to bait him into an argument about all the women. He'd spent the night with Risa, after all.

He feels sick.

Masochist that he is, he keeps reading.

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**THE END**

One moment, Zachariah was advancing on him, a vein bulging out in his forehead as he shouted, and the next, Dean was standing on the side of the road.

He turned to see Castiel, bathed in the cool blue glow of the streetlight overhead.

“That was pretty nice timing, Cas.”

“We had an appointment,” Castiel said, as if it were obvious, and in that moment, Dean could have kissed him.

Leaning forward, he put a hand on Castiel's shoulder, squeezing firm.

“Don't ever change,” he said.

Castiel smiled at that, and it was nothing like it was in the future that Dean would not let happen.

This smile was fond and halcyon, and it spread warmth through Dean's chest just to see.

He didn't know it yet, of course, but that night by the roadside, with the scent of nearby
forest and petrichor rising from the rain-damp earth beneath their feet, something in him shifted to make a permanent space for Castiel.

He is shaking.

Seeing his own life on the page, seeing his own feelings and thoughts laid out so bare; it's overwhelming.

He can't read any more. It's too much. It's almost half past six in the morning, and his eyes are stinging.

Dean deletes every file, closes the laptop and climbs out of bed. He takes it back to the library, putting it back where he found it, and heads into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

Chuck never wrote it in so many words, but it was clear that at some point, Castiel felt the same as he does. Or maybe it's only true in that alternate version of the future that Zachariah sent him into.

Dean shakes his head, pressing the bridge of his nose between two fingers and breathing deeply.

He'll text Charlie. She'll help, he thinks. Give him the overview of the rest of the books, tell him if he's crazy for thinking... for thinking...

“God, what am I thinking?” he says to himself, leaning on the counter while the kettle boils.

Even if Castiel does think of him that way, he's missing.

*Then again, he thinks, maybe if this was all out in the open, it would make him stay when he comes back.*

Once the coffee is done, he walks back to his room and grabs his phone.

**Hey Charlie**

**What did you mean?**

The cursor blinks, and he stares at it, unsure how to continue.

**Hey Charlie.**

When you said Cas was dreamy

He shakes his head, and deletes it.

**Hey Charlie.**

**Me and Cas.**

**You read the books.**

**Am I crazy?**

He stares at it for a few minutes, and, deciding it it vague enough to get away with in case he chickens out when she replies, he hits send.
Charlie hasn’t replied. Thirty-five minutes have passed, and for the third time, Dean picks up his cell to check that the message actually sent. It did. He already knows it did.

He throws the phone back down on his bed and sits down, tapping his foot restlessly. After a few seconds, he stands up and walks through the bunker in search of more coffee. The kettle whistles.

*It's only seven in the morning*, he reasons, tipping more sugar than necessary into his mug, *she's probably asleep.*

Another half hour passes by time his phone chimes and he darts back into his room to pick it up, opening the message.

**That depends on what you mean.**

He growls out loud and drains the last of the lukewarm coffee from his mug before he fires back a snappy reply, too tired and stressed out to bother with civility.

**You know exactly what I mean.**

**Don't be cute.**

A few minutes pass, and as he walks back into the kitchen for his third cup, his cell chimes again, echoing off the tile.

**I can't just switch it off, Dean ;) How far did you read?**

Leaning against the counter, he rubs his hand over his face.

**Up to the one about 2014.**

She messages back almost instantly.

**Read My Bloody Valentine, then we'll talk. Lunch? I can come over today.**

There's a shuffling coming from down the hall as Sam pushes open his bedroom door and heads into the bathroom, and Dean goes back to his room, coffee in hand, to type a reply. No way in hell does he want to talk to Charlie about any of this while Sam's around; not yet, anyway.

Come to think of it, he's not entirely sure how he came to be talking to Charlie about it, even in the round-about, non-specific way he is. Frankly the more he thinks about it, the more it scares him. He is in no way ready for this conversation. But then, maybe he never will be.
To hell with it, he thinks, and starts writing a reply.

The fact that Charlie hasn't told him he's nuts already is almost definitely a good sign, and though he isn't one to get optimistic, he can't help the little seed of hopefulness that has sprung up.

I'll meet you at
the place we had
lunch in town.
Noon?

The message he gets back makes little to no sense, and he is still squinting at the most confusing exclamation he's ever seen—

Donkey Kong!

—when a second message comes through.

As in, you're on.
Like Donkey Kong
is on... also.
Noon is good.

Dean doesn't bother replying again; just gets dressed and walks into the library.

Sam, of course, is already sitting at the table, checking his email, and Dean frowns at the occupied laptop.

I really need to get one of those for myself, he thinks, not for the first time, and leans against the desk.

“Why are you up so early?”

Sam glances up, his hair still fluffed out on the sides, and yawns.

“Couldn't get back to sleep. You're not as quiet as you think you are.”

“Oh... my bad.”

“It's cool. What were you doing up all night, anyway?”

Dean moves away to run a finger over the edge of the scimitar on display by the bookshelf. He shrugs, non-committal.

“Nothing.”

Sam doesn't look convinced, but when Dean makes no other comment, turns back to the laptop, stifling another yawn.

“I could use a coffee, if there's any left,” he says, pointedly.

Dean's ready to tell him to go get it himself, but it gives him an excuse to leave the room, so he just nods and walks back into the kitchen. Depositing the mug onto the table in front of Sam, he clears his throat.

“Hey... I'm gonna head out for a while.”
“What's going on?”

“I, uh... there's some stuff I gotta take care of. No big.”

“What stuff?”

“We need... food and stuff.”

Sam narrows his eyes.

“You know you're a terrible liar.”

Dean ignores him; just grabs his keys and wallet from the table and climbs the stairs. Sam pushes his chair back, standing and taking a few steps after him.

“Dean!”

“See you later, Sammy.”

The front door swings open, and Dean slips out.

“Dean!”

The door slams behind him, and Sam is left in the bunker. He stares at the door for a moment, then heads back to the computer.

As he closes out of his email, he notices that the trash he's sure he emptied yesterday is suddenly full, and he opens it. Reading the file names, his brow raises high under his mop of unkempt hair.

“Huh,” he says.

Clicking restore all, Sam moves with the laptop to a comfortable chair in the corner of the library to read.
There's an internet cafe not far from where he's meeting Charlie for lunch. It's overpriced and the computers are outdated, but there's no way in hell he can bring himself to buy a physical copy of the book, so it's kind of his only option right now.

As Dean pushes open the swinging door, the bell tinkling quietly, he's glad to see that the cafe is largely empty. There are only two other customers, both sitting near the front, and one is deeply engrossed in a video game with a character he vaguely recognises from one of Charlie's t-shirts.

He raps roughly on the counter until the clerk walks out from the back room.

“Gimme an hour?” Dean says.

“Five dollars.”

Dean slides the cash over the counter, and the clerk clicks a few buttons on his computer before handing him a slip of paper with a password on it.

“Let me know if you need more time.”

Weaving through the desks, Dean heads to the back corner. He's self conscious about looking the book up in public, despite the fact that nobody else knows that the stories are about him. Even though nobody is paying him even the slightest bit of attention, he is tempted to turn the screen so they can't see.

It only takes him a few minutes for him to find a website where he can read the next book. Once he realizes what it is about, though, he nearly can't bring himself to.

Valentines day, 2010. The day they'd killed Famine.

He remembers that day too well; remembers wanting to call Castiel since the moment they arrived, but not quite knowing why. He remembers Sam falling off the wagon and gorging himself on demon blood.

He remembers the way Famine had looked at him and told him his soul was empty.

He doesn't want to remember any of it. But Charlie told him to read this one.

And surely she wouldn't tell him that if it were all bad.

He takes a deep breath to steel himself, trying not to get his hopes up, and searches Castiel's name.

Under the harsh glare of fluorescent light, Sam studied the remains of the couple. Two young lovers, reduced to nothing but a few parts in plastic containers.
The sight of the organs like lumps of raw meat in Tupperware turned Dean's stomach, and in an effort to stave off his growing nausea, he slid the heart across the table toward Sam.

“Hey,” he said, and Sam looked up, brow raised, expectant, “be my valentine?”

He smirked, and Sam just barely managed to stop from rolling his eyes, pushing it back. Dean began to put the lid back on when Sam twisted his head to the side, noticing a mark on the flesh.

“Whoa, whoa, wait a second,” he said, pulling it toward him before taking the lid off another box. He swivelled them around to look at both victims hearts, side by side.

“These hearts both have identical marks.”

As Dean leaned forward, looking at the symbols pressed into the hearts in the small town mortuary, Castiel was halfway across the country.
He stood on the shore of Lake Michigan, the soles of his shoes pressing into sand and snow, with his cell phone in his hands. He stared down at it, hard, willing it to ring.

He couldn't remember ever wanting anything so much as he wanted that cell phone to ring.

He wasn't quite sure why.

If it did ring, it usually meant that either Sam or Dean was in trouble, and yet, he wanted to see them.

Specifically, he wanted to see Dean. Or at least speak with him.
He'd already seen the Winchesters earlier that day—had flown to join them briefly in the Impala as they'd driven into a town on a case, mainly to make sure both were okay after their recent trip back to 1978—but ever since leaving them, he'd felt a strong compulsion to return. To be near Dean again.

It was all he wanted.

It was more than a little disconcerting.

He had, of course, been aware of the bond he shared with Dean for quite some time, but though he knew he cared deeply for him, and enjoyed being around him, it had never before caused him physical pain to be away.

Tonight, he felt the distance from Dean like a hook in his grace, digging in and pulling.

He had been fighting it. Certain that it was just residual worry after being unable to help the brothers when he'd flown them back in time, that he was still weakened and it was affecting his vessel as much as his grace.

But when the cell phone screen lit up blue, Dean's name appearing in bold black letters in the center, he felt a surge of something pure and holy in his borrowed chest.

He answered the call breathlessly, unable to get a word out before Dean spoke.

“Cas, it's Dean.”

“Do you need help? Where are you?”

“Yeah, room 31-c, basement level. St. James Medical—”

He beat his wings once, twice, three times in the space of half a second and found himself standing face to face with Dean in the mortuary.

“—Center.”

Dean stopped short, and Castiel met his eyes. He couldn't seem to look away. Just being there was a relief; it felt like coming home, like being able to breathe after holding on too long.

“I'm there now,” he said after a moment, somewhat pointlessly.

“Yeah, I get that.”

On the other side of the room, sitting at the examination table, Sam watched them both and shook his head. Neither of them noticed; both unable to look away from the other's gaze. When Dean made no move to end the call, Castiel narrowed his eyes infinitesimally.

“I'm gonna hang up... now.”

“Right.”

As they lowered their cell phones, Castiel could feel the blood rushing through Jimmy's veins, roaring in his head as the pulse in his chest raced.

His grace was, for lack of a better word, on fire.
With great effort, he stifled it.

Whatever was going on within him, it was not the time. He could deal with it later.

Right now, Dean needed his help.

As far as Castiel was concerned, that was all that mattered.

Already, Dean's hands are getting clammy. The thought that Castiel had wanted to be near him so badly, even then, set his heart thrumming in his chest like a wild thing, and he pauses to lean back from the desk.

He takes a few steadying breaths, tongue darting out to wet his lower lip, before diving back in.

There are still a few hours to kill, after all.
He skims over the rest of the mortuary scene; mostly it seems to be about the bodies, and when it isn't, it's about the way that he had been looking at Castiel.

He doesn't need a reminder; certainly not when it comes with the knowledge that apparently he had looked *wistful* and *longing*.

“Chuck, I don't care if you're already dead, I am going to *kill* you,“ he mutters under his breath, and skips ahead to the next scene.

The way he remembers it, that night had sucked. Castiel had spent the entire evening ignoring him, and then he'd been forced into a very uncomfortable bear hug by a very naked cherub.

Bracing himself for the worst, he lets out a breath and reads on.

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**MY BLOODY VALENTINE**

They could smell the roses before they'd even walked inside.

The restaurant had gone all out; flowers on every flat surface, dollar-store decorations hanging from the ceiling and walls in a haze of pink and red.

As Dean pulled open the door, holding it while Sam and Castiel walked through, the sound of soft jazz and chatter spilled out into the darkened parking lot.

A few women, dressed to the nines, sat dejectedly at the bar, and they looked over as the door swung closed.

Sam glanced at Dean with a smirk.

“Sure you want to cancel Christmas?“

Dean just rolled his eyes and pointed to an empty booth.

Maybe it was just because he was getting older, but somehow the idea of going home with someone he'd never see again just wasn't sitting well in his gut any more.

At some point, he'd started to wonder what it would be like to have somebody, permanently.

He didn't want a white picket fence, two-point-five kids and a Golden Retriever; nothing so cliché.

Just a *person* to come home to. Even without a home, he thought having someone like that would make him feel like he did.

He told himself it was a pipe dream, of course—there was no feasible way to be a hunter and have a normal life, after all—but it was still something he fantasized about from time to time.
The fantasy wasn't always the same.

Sometimes it was of lazy afternoons in a bright, airy house by a lake in Michigan, Lisa Braeden smiling at him with her arms around his waist.

Sometimes it was of laughing, loud and easy in an apartment in Missouri with Cassie Robinson, her teasing him relentlessly.

More often, though, it wasn't anyone or anywhere in particular—just an idea, a feeling of warmth, of home and light and love.

Apropos of nothing, his mind supplied him with the image of a roadside in the middle of the night, wet asphalt reflecting bright under the street lamps.

As they wove through the tables, Sam and Castiel in the lead, he remembered the feeling of home that had run through him on that road, and it wasn't until his eyes settled on the back of Castiel's head in front of him that he remembered when he had been on that road.

It was four months ago; the night he had come back from 2014, and Castiel had flown him to safety after Zachariah threatened to send him back.

A waitress hurried across his path, then, her arms loaded down with plates, and Dean was so distracted by his thoughts that he nearly walked into her.

He paused to let her pass, and by the time he reached the booth, the train of thought had been cut off, and Sam and Castiel were both sitting.

On the same side.

A flicker of something a little too close to jealousy flared up within him, and as he sank into the chair on the opposite side, he tried to catch Castiel's eye.

For once, the angel wasn't looking at him.

In fact, he appeared to be purposefully looking everywhere but Dean, and for reasons that he had still not quite grasped, it bothered him deeply.

As Dean cleared his throat, trying to snap out of whatever brand of weirdness had taken hold of him, Castiel fidgeted a little in his seat, staring up at the heart-shaped balloon by the window.

Since landing in the mortuary basement a little under an hour ago, he'd begun to feel like even this wasn't close enough.

Some part of his grace was thrumming, humming with static energy, and the need to reach out and touch was almost overwhelming.

It was taking all of his self control to stop from lunging across the table. He wasn't even sure what it was that he wanted to do; only that he wanted to be nearer, closer.

He felt that it would be marginally easier if he didn't look, didn't listen. So, with his eyes fixed on the gently swaying balloon, he tried to let Jimmy's subconscious cloud over his own.
While Sam and Dean placed their orders with a tired-looking waitress, Castiel remained silent, ignoring their voices and listening instead to the needs of his vessel.

The more he let Jimmy feel, the more he seemed to crave red meat. Staring at a steak on a neighboring table, he wondered if it was too late to order something for himself.

He was about to ask when the waitress returned, delivering a chicken salad to Sam, and a bacon cheeseburger to Dean.

His mouth began to water immediately.

“So, what,” Dean said to him, flipping his burger open, “you just happen to know he likes the cosmo's at this place?”

Unable to ignore him any longer, Castiel responded, though he still tried not to look. He felt ridiculous doing it, but he didn't trust himself.

“This place is a nexus of human reproduction. It's exactly the kind of—”

He paused, staring at Dean’s plate as Dean squeezed ketchup all over the patty. For a second, he lost his train of thought.

“—of garden that cupid will come to—”

Briefly, he allowed his eyes to flick back up to Dean, and immediately regretted it. He felt another hunger within him bloom.

“—to pollinate.”

Glancing away again, Castiel heard his own words echoing in his head. The restaurant was full to the brim of couples in love, many of them unable to keep their hands off of one another, and as he gazed at them, quite suddenly, he understood fully what it was that he wanted.

He wanted to be near Dean, but more than that he wanted Dean to want him near, too.

He wanted to touch him, to be touched by him, to feel his breath and his pulse and his fingertips. He wanted to be one with him. To lay with him. To be loved by him, as he loved Dean.

He wanted nothing more than to stay by his side always, Heaven be damned, and the realization that he had been so swayed from his home all for this man who he felt certain could never return such sentimentmade Castiel's borrowed heart ache with fear and sorrow.

It was too much, much too much, and for the rest of the evening, he let Jimmy's subconscious take full rein.

By the time Dean stops reading, he's so caught up in the words, so immeasurably hopeful, that he forgets the way things are now.

When he realizes, his throat seizes up.

Because Castiel is gone. He left.
Even if he still feels this way, he is out of reach.

Dean stares at the screen in front of him, his eyes unfocused, and wishes he could have known this before. Wishes he had grown a pair at some point over the last few years and told Castiel, let him know somehow.

Maybe he could have stopped him from leaving in the first place if he'd known.

Numb, Dean closes out of the web browser and logs off. There's over an hour before he has to meet Charlie, but he can't read any more. He doesn't have to. It's pointless.

The bell over the door tinkles as he leaves.
Just Go With It, Winchester

It's only eleven when he steps out into the mild April sun; still an hour until he has to make his way over to the diner to meet Charlie.

A part of him wants to bail, regrets ever asking her what she meant.

It's worse, now. Harder than before, because now he knows how close he was, knows that Castiel, somehow, against all odds, loves him.

He wants to laugh. He wants to cry. His throat is seizing up as his body tries to do both, simultaneously, and he feels strangers staring as he walks down the pavement. He pays them no attention; just walks, on and on, until he reaches a park.

It's pretty crappy, as parks go; all dried up grass and spindly trees, one rusted swing set that no decent parent would let their kid go near, and a tiny, reed-edged pond.

He sits down on the patchy grass by the water, feels stones dig in to his hands, and tilts his head upward.

“Cas,” he starts, then huffs out a weak laugh when he realizes he doesn’t have a clue what to say.

He raises his hand to scrub at his jaw as he gathers his thoughts. They scramble, skitter around his head, an infinite number of contradictory thoughts overlapping and drowning each other out, of just say it, and don't tell him, and this is pointless, and he's fine, and he might be dead.

Soon enough, it's just two;

*He's fine.*

    *He's dead.*

*He's fine.*

    *He's dead.*

It's endless, a loop, and he can't get out of it, can only try to find out one way or the other. He exhales.

“Cas, I don’t know if you can still hear me, man, but you're always telling me to have more faith. So this... I'm trying, okay?”

He laughs again, pulls a dried up weed from the earth by his side. Picks it apart, staining his fingertips green.

“You need to come back,” he pauses; amends, “come home.”

A breeze rustles through the reeds at the pond's edge, and for a split second, he thinks the sound is wings.

When he realizes, his heart clenches in his chest and he closes his eyes.
“I, uh... look. There's some stuff we need to talk about. Stuff about you and me. Stuff we should have talked about a while ago, probably,” he bites down on the inside of his cheek, hating that even this feels like too much of an admission, wishing it were easier.

“I just... I can't do it like this. You need to be here first. I need you to be here. I want you to be here.”

He looks up again, knowing he needs to start heading back toward the diner, and sighs.

For a long time, he's silent. He tells himself he isn't waiting, but it's a lie. Of course he's waiting. He's always waiting.

He doesn't speak again until he's back on his feet, eyes downcast as though he's afraid to meet the eyes that aren't even there.

“Just... let me know you're okay,” he says, forcing the words out, ”the other stuff, it doesn't matter so much. I mean, I don't know if you even... it was a long time ago, right? Just come back. Call. Something.”

He scans the empty park for some sign that Castiel is there.

“I'm here, Cas,” he says, “whenever you're ready, I'm waiting.”

There's no answer, of course, and he drops the torn up leaves to the ground and grinds them down with the toe of his boot.

While he walks the few blocks to meet Charlie, he tells himself it's just a bad time; that Castiel will come back eventually.

He tries to believe it.

He really tries.

The diner is packed; the lunch crowd filling every table, and though it's not quite twelve yet, Charlie is already there.

Dean sees her shirt before he sees her—bright yellow with what he's pretty sure is the face of a Pokemon taking up the entire front—and he shakes his head with a laugh as he walks toward her.

She's sitting in a booth near the kitchen, furiously typing something into her cell. She doesn't notice him until he slips into the seat opposite her.

“Your majesty,” he says, and she jumps, nearly dropping her phone.

“Holy crap,” she says, catching her breath, “did you freaking shadowmeld or something?”

He laughs as she hits send and shoves the cell into her backpack.

“Not my fault you weren't paying attention.”

“Touché.”

Drumming her fingers on on the table in front of her, she eyes Dean seriously.
“So,” she says, after a moment, “Did you read it?”

Suddenly, Dean's mouth has gone dry.

“Yeah,” he replies, reaching for the glass of water on his side of the table and downing the whole thing in one go.

He knows what's coming, now, and he wants off the ride.

She's going to ask him how he feels about it.

He isn't sure what exactly he was expecting if it wasn't to discuss his feelings, but now that the moment is upon him, he kind of wants to high-tail it outta here.

She's going to tell him to go for it, and he can't. Castiel is gone. He's probably dead, his brain supplies, again, and he yanks the menu out from under Charlie's bag, opening it and obscuring her from his view.

“You reckon they'll still do pancakes?” he asks, voice rough, “I could go for pancakes.”

Purple fingernails appear over the top of the menu, pulling it down, and Charlie ducks her head, trying to make him meet her eyes.

“Dean,” she says, “if you're not, you know, ready to talk about this it's okay.”

She waits for him to look at her before she continues.

“We can talk about other things. Bizarre murders, viscera, apocalypses... You know,” she waves a hand in the air, shrugging vaguely, “light stuff.”

He laughs, and she grins at him from across the table.

“But,” she says, “if you're just... if you're still worried that you're reading too far into it, then let me tell you, flat out, you're not.”

Charlie reaches across the table to squeeze his forearm.

“He loves you. No doubt in my mind.”

Dean lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding, and nods, lips pursed.

“Yeah,” he says, “I know. I know he does.”

“You know that's a good thing, right?”

There's that battle again, his face trying to contort into a smile even though he feels like crying. He doesn't trust his voice not to waver, and he hates it.

He scrubs roughly at his eyes and nods.

A waitress arrives at the table, then, her notepad flipped open, and Charlie smiles up at her.

“We'll both have the pancakes, side of bacon,” she says, before the waitress can even ask, “and coffee.”

The waitress scribbles down the order and is gone within seconds, and Charlie turns back to Dean.
He's still looking down, trying desperately to stop from falling apart, and she remembers what he'd said when she mentioned Castiel to him the first time.

“Dean... when was the last time you saw him?”

“March 20th,” he answers, without hesitation, and he can't even find it in himself to be embarrassed that he doesn't have to think about it. Charlie knows. She understands him, probably better than he understands himself, considering how much insight Chuck apparently had into his subconscious.

“What happened?” she asks, gently, and Dean stares down at his hands, trying to figure out where to start.

He thinks for a long time, and Charlie mistakes his silence for reluctance.

“Hey, forget it,” she says, “none of my business.”

“No,” Dean says, reaching out for the glass and turning it distractedly in his hands, “no I should, you know. Talk about it. It's just... well. You know me. Words aren't really my thing.”

“It's okay.”

For a while, neither of them say anything. Dean tries to figure out where to start, and Charlie waits. It isn't until the waitress has come and gone, leaving them with plates of pancakes and fresh coffee, that Dean finds his voice.

“He, uh...” Dean stops to clear his throat, pulling his mug of coffee closer, “since he got outta Purgatory, he'd been weird. We hadn't seen or heard from him in almost two months. Then he turned up when we were hunting down the second half of the demon tablet... but he wasn't himself.”

Charlie nods, hands closed around her mug, and Dean's eyes glaze a little as he remembers.

“He was being controlled by this other angel, Naomi,” he spits the name out like it burns, “she uh... she made him... she tried to force him kill me. He nearly did, too.”

“Oh my god.”

“Yeah. Anyway, he was... he was about to, you know.” Dean raises one hand as if gripping a knife, then lowers it to rub at his brow, “to do it. But then he... he didn't.”

Dean's jaw twitches as he stares into the middle distance, remembering.

“He snapped out of it. Healed me, told me she'd been controlling him, then took the tablet and left.”

“How'd he snap out of it?”

“I uh... I don't know for sure.”

Dean's eyes flicker down, and Charlie knows the look. She leans forward again.

“You have an idea, though.”

A sad smile crosses Dean's face, briefly.

“Yeah,” he says, “I told him we were family. That I needed him. That's when he dropped the knife. I thought he was going to stay, but...”
Dean waves his hands in the air vaguely; *he left.*

“And that was a month ago. No word since.”

“Have you called him?”

“Yeah. Been prayin’ every damn day. He's not answering,” his eyes tighten as he looks out the window, “I don't know if it's because he doesn't want to answer or because he can't. Honestly, I don't know which scares me more.”

For a moment, Charlie just looks at him. Then she slides out of her side of the booth and into Deans.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm hugging you,” she says, wrapping her arms around his middle, and squeezing tight, “you need a hug, so just go with it, Winchester.”

Dean hugs her back, his chin on the top of her head, hair tickling under his nose.

“Yeah,” he says, “I guess so.”
Chapter Notes

tw for this chapter: torture, violence
(no worse than is on the show, really, but worth mentioning just in case)

Barely twenty minutes after Dean’s suspicious exit, Sam is reading.
He starts at the beginning.

LAZARUS RISING

The first day was all black.
The taste of ash, of metal and blood settled thick in his mouth, seeped into his skin, and it stung.
Each breath burned, so he stopped breathing. It made no difference.
Soon, there were things moving, bright flashes of teeth and eyes in the smoke, but they didn’t get close enough to touch. They just circled. Taunted. Teased.
Dean could hear them sharpening their blades.
Could hear them singing. Hey Jude.
The song was tainted within a week, and his few sweet memories of a time before the fire were stained.
In his head, his mothers face warped and became the faces around him, stretched and pallid, sickly white skin stretched over bony cheeks and hollow eyes.
It over a year before they moved any closer.
When the first razor nicked into the soft skin of his cheek, just beneath his eye, he cried out with relief.
“Mom,” he said, and the demon laughed, “you found me.”
Weeks went by in a haze, just the wet sound of falling flesh mingling with his own voice as he sang.
She’d stop, he told himself, if he showed her he remembered the song.
Then, one day, the demon stopped slicing.
It brought it’s face close to his to look him right in the eye, and it’s slack skin was streaked with his blood. It licked it’s lips and smiled as it sank long fingers into his open chest, yanking hard on his fractured ribs.
“Mom, no! Please!”

The demon’s eyes shone bright, and at once, any belief that this was Mary was gone.

He thrashed, tried to get away, and it laughed.

“You black-eyed bastard, what did you do to her? Where is she?”

Three years down.

Another passed, slow, and the demon came to him as Sam. Blaming him. Burning him.

Another, and it came as John, disappointed and furious. He didn't use a blade; just his wild-flashing eyes and his rough hands, striking, crunching, breaking.

After that, it stopped, and he was alone, strung up in the dark, in the quiet.

Every now and then, he caught the sound of half-mumbled singing, *hey Jude, don't make it bad*, and flinched before he realized the voice was his own.

It left him long enough to crave the pain, just desperate enough to want to stop being alone at any cost.

It started offering him a way out after the first nine years had passed.

He took up the razor after thirty.

Once he did, he relished in the feeling of it sinking into unbroken skin, in the sound of gurgling lungs as they tried to breathe through the holes he’d singed into their throats, their chests, their cheeks.

When they looked at him too much, he took their eyes.

When they wouldn't look at him, he took their eyelids.

Somewhere at his core, he knew he should be disgusted. He *was* disgusted.

He imagined his own face where their faces were, and that made it easier.

For ten years, he tore into the other souls as though they were shadows of himself.

The light, when it finally came, was terrifying, and he dropped the rusted speculum to step forward. He raised his hand to touch it, to feel it burn, to destroy himself completely.

Instead, it just reached back, pressed warm and soothing against his freezing skin, and told him it was okay.

He was safe.

He was saved.

Sam closes the file, face pale. He can feel bile rising in his throat.

He remembers the way Dean was when he first came back, and regrets having asked him to talk about it so many times. He can't believe he was as well-adjusted as he was.
Still, he thinks, *that can't have been what made him run off.*

He sorts the rest of the files by date accessed and selects the most recent; a book called *The End,* and hopes it will be less torture-porn than the last one.

The first few pages don't offer much--just Dean having a stilted phone conversation--and he scrolls through to a random page. Reading about Dean's time in 2014, he gets caught up in the details that his brother never bothered to tell him, and finds himself so immersed in the story that he reads further than he'd planned. When he reaches the part about Castiel, about the cabin he and Dean shared in that timeline, his heart sinks.

Without bothering to read further, he shuts the laptop screen.

*This is bad,* he thinks, and pulls out his cell to text Charlie, *this is really bad.*

As he types out a message, he glances toward the ceiling.

“If you're still around, Cas, now would be a great time to get your ass back here.”
When Charlie finally pulls away, moving back to her side of the booth, Dean smiles at her gratefully. He remembers, back when he and Sam had first met her, saying she was like the little sister he never wanted.

Lucky for him, she'd shown up in their lives again anyway.

He wonders if this will become a thing, now; pancakes with Charlie, catching up over coffee. Just hanging out.

A proper, normal friendship. He figures he's probably overdue for one of those.

“So, I've got an idea,” she says, before he gets much of a chance to think about what that might be like, “eat your pancakes.”

Dean narrows his eyes.

“That's your idea?”

Charlie's fork is raised halfway to her mouth, and she stops to point it at him.


“Yeesh, bossy.”

He pulls his plate forward anyway, and she doesn't stop pointing her fork at him until he's chewing. Once she's satisfied that he's eating, she sits back in her seat and takes a bite.

“Oh, yes,” she says through a mouthful, “I was thinking, what if we track down Carver Edlund? I mean, if he's a prophet, maybe he's seen where Castiel is. It's worth a shot, right?”

She grins, and she looks so proud of the idea, so hopeful that Dean almost doesn't have the heart to tell her; but it's unavoidable.

“Chuck's dead,” he says, “I'm pretty sure, anyway. Cas said there's only one prophet at a time, and Kevin got tapped in last year.”

“And he's missing, too, right?”

Picking up his mug, Dean huffs.

“Wouldn't be my luck if he wasn't.”

Charlie's face falls. For a few minutes, they eat in silence, just the sound of cutlery on china and the idle chatter of the other patrons in the background. She's halfway through a sip of coffee when her brow furrows.

“Wait,” she lowers her mug slowly, “so you think Chuck died a year ago?”

Dean nods, thinking back, and scratches his lower lip.

“Probably getting closer to two, now, come to think of it.”
She shakes her head, leaning forward.

“But there was a new book released last month.”

“What was it about? Which year?”

“I don't know... I'm not caught up yet, there's like a million of those books. Last one I read was about you asking Death to free Sam and Adam's souls from the cage. When did that happen?”

“Two... three years ago. There's more after that?”

“Yeah. There's like eight I haven't read. Do you think his publisher might have more?”

“Maybe.”

“Okay, well lets head back to the Batcave and I can see if I can break into their servers. There might be something we can use.”

“You've got your laptop, can't you do it from here?”

“The Internet here sucks.”

“Your place, then?”

“I kind of... abandoned it.”

“Since yesterday? Why?”

Charlie shrugs, as if trying to write it off as unimportant, but Dean stares her down and she caves.

“It's crawling with gross Nightmare McPantsuit vibes,” she says, “I felt like I was being watched as soon as I got home, so I packed up and checked into a motel down town. A crappy motel with crappy wifi. What's wrong with your place?”

Turning his now-empty mug around in his hands, Dean refuses to look up.

“Nothing. It's just... Sam's home,” Dean says, “And he's not, I mean... he doesn't know about—”

He waves his hand vaguely in the air, and Charlie bites down on the inside of her cheek.

“Um...”

Dean looks up, then, brow furrowed.

“Um? Um what?” he asks, “What um?”

“He, um...” Charlie grimaces, her shoulders lifting as her voice becomes more like a squeak than anything else, “He knows?”

There's a rising panic in Dean's chest.

“What do you mean he knows? He knows what?”

Instead of answering, Charlie digs her cell phone out of her pocket and opens her recent messages. There's a conversation with Sam that ended around the same time that Dean arrived, and she shoves it across the table into his hands.
“Here,” she says, “read.”

Dean drags his eyes away from Charlie's nervous face, and looks at the bright screen.

Dean looks up at Charlie, wide eyed.

“You are. Fight me on this. I dare you.”

“Wait,” he says, “He's talking like he... like...”

“Uhuh,” she replies.

He looks back at the phone.

Dean looks up at Charlie, wide eyed.

“Wait,” he says, “He's talking like he... like...”

“How about you?”

“He read the Carver Edlund books. I think he's having a Cas related meltdown.”

He reads on his phone.

“He read the Carver Edlund books. I think he's having a Cas related meltdown.”

Dean looks back up at Charlie, wide eyed.

“Wait,” he says, “He's talking like he... like...”

“How about you?”

“He read the Carver Edlund books. I think he's having a Cas related meltdown.”

Dean looks back down at the phone.

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“You are. Fight me on this. I dare you.”

“Wait,” he says, “He's talking like he... like...”

“Uhuh,” she replies.

He looks back at the phone.
Glancing up, stares at Charlie.

“*In denial?* He thinks I'm in *denial?* When has he even tried to-- he never even--”

“Breathe, Dean.”

He puts the phone down and covers his face. His voice comes out muffled.

“Has he known this whole time?”

“Pretty much ever since Castiel got out of Purgatory.”

Dean’s fingers split apart, and he looks through them at Charlie.

“Wait,” he drops his hands to the table, “how do you know *that*?”

Her face pales, and she grimaces again, wishing she had a slightly better filter.

“Crap,” she mutters.
“Is this... is this like... a thing you two have been discussing behind my back?”

Charlie chews uncomfortably on one purple thumbnail.

“No, not really. He just... he may have mentioned something while you were in the bathroom the other day. Before we went shopping for my FBI outfit.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked if you'd ever mentioned Castiel to me, and wanted me to try to get you to talk about him.”

“What did he say, exactly?”

Charlie's thumbnail is wearing down at one edge, and she pulls it away from her mouth, tucking both arms around her chest defensively.

“Is this what it feels like to be on your bad side? Because I don't like it.”

“Charlie.”

“Ugh, okay. He said that he thought there might have been something going on between you and Cas, and that he'd tried to subtly hint that he was cool with it, but you didn't get it.”

Dean blanched.

“I'm that transparent?”

Charlie shook her head.

“Are you kidding me? If you were playing this any closer to the chest it'd be behind you. But who knows you better than Sam?”

“Yeah... I guess.”

“Anyway, he said you were basically torturing yourself over Cas being gone again, and he was worried that you were bottling it all up because you didn't think you could talk to him about it,” she says, pressing her finger into the spilled sugar on the table top, "I guess he thought you might be more comfortable talking to me, since I'm y'know... not your brother.”

“So you manipulated me.”

Charlie frowned.

“You make it sound so skeevy.”

“That's because it is.”

Charlie looks down guiltily.

“Sorry,” she says, "I honestly didn't expect you to tell me any of this. Not yet, anyway. Neither did Sam. We thought... we thought you'd just vent a little. I didn't... the last thing I wanted to do was force you out, Dean. I--"

“You didn't,” Dean says, holding up his hands, "but calling him dreamy wasn't exactly subtle.”

“Are you going to try and tell me he's not?” she raises her eyebrows at him, and he figures she has a
point, "he seems like a sweetheart. Also a total badass."

Dean glares, though his heart isn't in it.

“You do know saying nice things about him isn't going to help you right now, right?”

“Oh, and that Dean character!” Charlie fake-swoons, clutching at her chest, “what a hunky manly... man.”

“Nice try.”

Charlie grins at him and gets up, throwing a few bills onto the table.

“Well, let's see if I can track down more books.”

Slipping her arms through the straps of her backpack, she looks down at him seriously.

“We'll find him, Dean.”

With a sigh, Dean nods and pushes away his plate.

“Fine,” he says, standing, “but I'm still pissed.”

She shrugs and walks ahead of him toward the door.

“I don't blame you.”

[below are the text messages from this chapter for those unable to view them as images]

**image one**

FROM: Sam
RECIEVED: 11:06am
Hey Charlie. Is Dean with you?

FROM: Charlie
SENT: 11:07am
I'm meeting him for lunch in an hour. Why?

FROM: Sam
RECIEVED: 11:13am
He read the Carver Edlund books. I think he's having a Cas related meltdown.

**image two**

FROM: Charlie
SENT: 11:31am
Did you talk to him about it?

FROM: Sam
RECIEVED: 11:38am
No. I've tried a couple of times but I think he's still in denial.
Curiosity, as it turns out, is unavoidable.

Finally able to relax a little after hearing back from Charlie, Sam wanders into the kitchen to make himself a sandwich, planning to go through another couple of boxes from one of the storage rooms while he eats.

The whole time he's slicing, his mind keeps wandering back to the laptop.

Everything that has happened over the last couple of years, everything Dean has stubbornly refused to talk about; it's all just there.

Waiting to be read.

And more than that, he realizes, because Bobby is in those books. And Ellen, Jo, Ash. Maybe flashbacks to their parents; hundreds of moments he never experienced, things he didn't understand because his entire life has been spent with people who just plain won't open up and share when they need help, when they want something, when they need to.

It doesn't take long for him to convince himself.

He returns to his chair, balances his sandwich on the arm, and opens the first file he sees to a random page.

---

TWO MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

In the back of the van, a stray bullet rolled noisily across the floor.

His plan to trick Lucifer into the cage was rattling around in his head, and though he believed it would work, Dean's lack of faith in his ability to do it was chipping away at his resolve.

Memories of that message, over a year ago, now, crawled to the forefront of his mind. You're a monster, Sam, Dean had said, and though it was in the past, though the demon blood was long out of

Lifted

Chapter Summary

Just a special shout out to n00b, who mentioned this voicemail in their comment on Chapter 10. I wouldn't have thought to include it had you not mentioned it, so thank you! I hope you enjoy :)

(I'm almost finished on the next two chapters... give me a couple of hours. I just thought I'd post this to tide you over while I finish them off!)

~ Imogen
his system, it boiled down to Dean not trusting him.

And if Dean didn't trust him, maybe he was wrong.

He had to know he wasn't crazy for thinking it might work. Sam cleared his throat and glanced over his shoulder at Castiel.

“So, hey... Cas?” he said, “I uh, I have an idea I wanted to run past you.”

“Yes?”

Bobby, his hands tight on the wheel, looked over at Sam with a frown. His eyes narrowed.

“Didn't we already—”

“I just want to see what he thinks,” Sam said, cutting him off, and Bobby grunted, pressing his lips together.

He returned his eyes to the road and pulled down the brim of his cap against the wind that rushed in through the open window. For a moment, Sam watched him guiltily, knowing that Bobby wasn't happy that he was still considering this.

Castiel looked between them, sensing the tension in the air.

“What is it, Sam?”

Twisting in his seat, Sam explained the plan; from the Big Yes to the swan dive, and Castiel listened closely, nodding.

Throughout, Bobby remained mostly silent, save for the occasional displeased huff. Sam tried to ignore it.

Once he was finished, Castiel tilted his head back for a long moment, considering the details.

“'Yes' to Lucifer, then jump in the hole,” he said, thoughtful, “it's an interesting plan.”

Unable to focus, Sam closes the file.

The message, the one that had been on his mind as they'd driven toward the Niveus warehouse all those years ago, still hurts.

He remembers the sick feeling in his stomach as he'd listened to it, the way his limbs had gone lactic, his throat had closed up.

He doubts Dean has thought about it since; there's just been too much going on, and Sam sure as Hell never brought it up.

Still, he wonders if Dean had regretted it. If he'd really meant it.

He stares at the screen for a long time, cracks his knuckles, lets out a long breath through his teeth.

Finally, though, he clicks the find icon, selects search all documents, and types in VOICEMAIL. There are upward of 50 results.
He backspaces and his fingers hover over the keys, before he types in his own voicemail message.
*It's Sam. Leave me a message.*

There are three results this time; *Lucifer Rising, Changing Channels* and *Abandon All Hope*. He glances at the synopses for each, and makes a mental note to *never* read *Abandon All Hope*.

It might have been years ago, but there's no way he can relive that day, read about Ellen and Jo's last moments and keep himself together.

He deletes the file completely and empties the trash.

*Changing Channels* might hold some useful insight, he thinks—though if he's being honest, he just wants written proof that Dean has a huge crush on Dr. Sexy for future ribbing fodder—so he keeps it open in the background while he opens up the file he wants.

---

**LUCIFER RISING**

Heaven wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Dean, having spent the entire day confined to Zachariah's glorified holding cell, was getting more than a little restless.

The place was too lush, too glossy, too *nice*.

With the gold-framed paintings, silver platters and opulent carpets, it was as though he'd stumbled into some rich guy's living room.

Everything seemed like it was trying too hard to be pleasant. As though there were something unimaginably shady happening just outside, just out of reach, and the beautiful room was a hologram, an Angel-made mirage created to keep him in check.

Even the lights were too soft, too warm with false comfort.

What it really felt like was that he was being forced to feel at home. His skin crawled.

It had been hours since Zachariah had delivered what Dean was pretty sure was supposed to be a pep-talk and promptly disappeared, and since then, he'd been pacing the room, stewing.

He didn't trust Zachariah, and he hadn't missed the guilty expression on Castiel's face before he'd left, either.

The implications of that weren't good.

In the pit of his gut, he felt the distinct possibility that he might not be getting out of here in one piece.

“Ah, screw it,” he said, flipping open his cell.

If something happened, he didn't want to die without Sam at least knowing he was sorry. He owed him that, at least.

He dialled, pacing again, and a high-pitched beep came down the line.
“It's Sam. Leave me a message.”

“Hey, it's me. Uh...” he trailed off, cleared his throat as he weighed his words, wishing he'd thought this through a little better before he'd dialled, “look. I'll just get right to it. I'm still pissed—and I owe you a serious beat-down, but... I shouldn't have said what I said.”

Just getting that far was a weight lifted, but he pressed on anyway.

“You know, I'm not Dad. We're brothers, you know. We're family. And, uh... no matter how bad it gets, that doesn't change.”

He paused, took a breath.

“Sammy, I'm sorry.”

The voicemail beep cut his last word in half, but he figured Sam would get it.

Flipping his cell shut, he looked around the room, and tried to figure a way out.

Maybe, he thought, Castiel would help him despite his orders.

It wouldn't be the first time.

Sam squints at the screen, his brow furrowed, and reads the passage twice. He knows he never got that message. Knows it for a fact.

He scrolls forward until he sees the words listen to me, you bloodsucking freak, and realizes with a pang that it was Zachariah who left the message. Zachariah, manipulating them the same way he always did, playing off their insecurities, their fears.

Sam's head spins and he wonders how many other misunderstandings have been eating at him, eating at Dean, at Cas, at everybody.

The hurt he's been holding for years finally lifts.
Outside in the street, the breeze is lifting. It whips dust up into the air around them, and as their feet crunch across unfinished pavement, a low rumble of thunder rolls in from the horizon.

Dean looks to the sky. The first few drops of rain are cool against his skin.

A few paces ahead of him, Charlie picks up her pace, heading toward her car.

It stands out in the parking lot; a bright yellow beacon in a sea of gray, and Dean is struck by just how fitting that is.

She's a breath of fresh air, he thinks, and maybe it's just the fact that he's tired, or maybe it's because out of the very short list of friends that he has, she's the only one not currently MIA, but he decides he doesn't much like the idea of her leaving after they've finished hunting down Chuck's other books.

“So,” he says, slowing to veer off to where he parked on the other side of the lot, “where's this motel you're staying at?”

Charlie stops and turns to face him, her shoulders sinking as she sighs.

“Dean, I thought we'd gotten past that. Sam isn't going to—”

“Whoa, Charlie,” he holds up his hands, “I know. We're still going.”

The rain is starting to pick up, and Charlie wipes the drops from her forehead as she looks up at him, fixing him with what he thinks is meant to be a stern glare.

“Damn right we are,” she says.

Dean's pretty sure he's seen a cat look more threatening. He suppresses his smirk.

“I was just thinking, if you're gonna be staying in town, you're more than welcome to crash at the bunker until you know what you want to do,” he shrugs, glancing toward the Impala, “You know. If you want. Up to you.”

“What?”

He shrugs again like it's no big deal. She doesn't need to know that he wants her there; that he's pretty sure the whole track-down-the-books-to-track-down-Cas thing isn't going to lead anywhere but Disappointment City, and that he could use some company beyond an increasingly under-the-weather brother that he honestly doesn't know how to take care of.

“I mean, it's not the ritz,” he says, “but there's plenty of room and it's better than you forking out all your hard-pilfered cash for a shitty room in some fleabag motel every night.”

“Shouldn't you run it past Sam first?”

Scoffing, Dean shakes his head.

“Are you kidding? He'll be psyched. Besides, I'm the oldest. Pretty sure that makes me the one with veto privileges.”

Charlie chews on the inside of her lip, looking back toward her car, deliberating. After a moment she
looks back and points east.

“It's a couple blocks over,” she says, “on Robertson. Sunflower Motel. Big yellow sign. Can't miss it.”

“Alright. I'll meet you there in a few.”

She grins wide, and Dean can't help but return it as she adjusts the backpack on her shoulders.

“Deal.”

As she walks away, heading for her car, Dean shakes his keys in his hand and pulls out his cell. She has a point, afterall—it's probably a good idea to at least let Sam know they'll be having company.

Besides, he figures this way he won't have to deal with Sam's soul-searching eyes over all this Castiel stuff. It'll be like a band-aid, he tells himself. One pull. Right off.

The phone rings six times before Sam picks up, and he's coughing.

“You sound like crap,” Dean says in place of a greeting, and Sam half-laugh before it turns into another wet cough, followed closely by an awful hawking sound that he really could have done without hearing.


Dean rolls his eyes; Sam knows damn well he wasn't at the store.

“No,” he says, “I was with Charlie. But you knew that already.”

“Uh, yeah...”

“So, uh...” Dean's mouth is going dry already, and he presses his fingers against his eyes, tries to let the sound of rain hitting the roof calm him the way it used to when he was a just a kid, half-asleep in the back seat on a long drive, Sam snoring against his shoulder, “she told me what you said about... about me and Cas.”

“Oh,” Sam says, and Dean exhales again before he goes on.

“Let's just... let's not make a whole big thing of it, okay? Literally nothing has changed. He's still gone, and even if he wasn't I don't know—”

“Dean.”

“—what I'd even say to him. Probably nothing. I mean it's just—”

“Dean.”

“Yeah?”

“What happened to not making a whole big thing of it?”

“Wow, thanks. Real nice. It's not like I'm basically coming out to you here or anything.”

“You just said—!” Sam sighs on the other end of the line, and Dean can hear him shaking his head in irritation, “forget it. I'm just saying, it's fine. Like you said, nothing's changed. Thanks for telling me though.”
He pauses, and Dean waits for him to go on.

“Just... I'm here if you do need to talk about stuff. I know you hate to ask for help, but talking it out can make a difference.”

Dean almost points out that that's exactly what he was just doing when Sam cut him off, but he figures it's not worth the argument.

“Thanks, Sammy,” he says, instead.

“Don't mention it,” Sam says, and there's the distinct sound of the fridge opening in the background, “but uh... while you're out, we're out of pretty much everything. So if you get a chance to actually go to the store...?”

“Yeah, no problem, we're heading back in a few.”

“We?”

“Oh... yeah. That's what I was actually calling for. I kind of invited Charlie to move in for a while.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“That cool with you?”

“Yeah. I'll start clearing out one of the other rooms.”

Even as he says it, he starts coughing again, and Dean starts the engine.

“Right, because you're in great shape for heavy lifting. Just leave it. We'll take care of the room when we get back. Just... watch TV or something.”

“Yeah, good plan.”

Dean ends the call as he pulls out of the parking lot.

He follows the road to the end of the block, then heads east until he hits Robertson. It takes less than five minutes, and Charlie's leaning against the trunk of her car, cell phone in hand. She looks up as Dean parks beside her and pushes off, heading back toward her room.

“My car's kinda low on space,” she calls over her shoulder, “the rest'll fit in the back of the Batmobile though.”

There's only two boxes left, but they're heavy as hell, and Dean hefts the first one up with a grunt.

“Jesus. What's in these?”

“DVD's,” she says, picking up the second box, “and books, mainly. A few comics, but most of those are in my car.”

They all fit in the back seat. Once everything's loaded, Dean cracks his knuckles.

“Right,” he says, “you go on ahead. Sam's expecting you. I need to stop for a few things, but I won't be far behind.”

For a brief moment, she eyes him suspiciously, and as he pulls open the driver's side door, Dean rolls his eyes.
“Food, Charlie. I need to buy food. I'm not going to bail with all your crap in my car.”

“You'd better not,” she says, climbing into her own car and pointing at him for emphasis, “there's a first edition Wonder Woman in there.”

As he drives away, he thinks how easy it was to ask Charlie to stay, and wishes he'd been able to ask Castiel when he'd had the chance.
Comfortable in his chair, Sam reads with a smirk on his face.

After finishing *Lucifer Rising* and taking a walk up and down the block—sick or not, he wasn't feeling too bad this morning, and despite his brother's insistence that he just relax, he's not about to let himself get lazy—he'd opened up *Changing Channels*.

He's considering taking notes for future reference.

---

Dean turned, glancing over his shoulder, and froze.

“It's him.”

His voice was almost a whisper, eyes growing wide in awe as he stared at a dark-haired man at the end of the hall.

“Who?”

“It's him,” Dean repeated, still staring, his mouth twitching into a shy grin as the man in question walked toward them up the busy hall, almost in slow motion, “It's Dr. Sexy.”

Sam looked at him in confusion.

It was no secret that Dean had a certain passion for TV and film—his daily speech often contained more pop-culture references than your average copy of Rolling Stone Magazine, after all—but the fact that his interests branched out from the John Winchester-approved catalogue of Acceptable Shows For Men was something he played pretty close to the chest.

Despite his earlier protests to the contrary, Dean was possibly one of the medical drama's biggest fans.

He hid it surprisingly well, considering the close quarters he and Sam lived in, but it had long ago stopped being a case of watching it because it happened to be on. Truth be told, in recent years, the show had graduated into something edging closer to an obsession comparable to his teenage fixation on Star Trek, down to the heated arguments with strangers (though now online, rather than in line at Blockbuster) over the characters, and a burning desire to attend conventions that his transient and low-funded lifestyle forced him to experience second-hand through videos on Youtube.

It had started in 2008.

 Barely a month after Castiel raised him from Hell, he had been targeted by a Buruburu on a hunt in Rock Ridge, Colorado.

Even after it had been destroyed—dragged behind the Impala at the end of an iron chain until it was destroyed by its own fear—the effects of the ghost sickness it had infected him with had lingered, and because they didn't have any other leads just yet, Dean had decided they should take a day off.
Sam wasn't difficult to convince; they were only a short drive out of Florissant, a tiny town of 104 people which boasted a massive deposit of fossilised prehistoric insects and plantlife, and while they were checking in to their motel in Rock Ridge, Dean had seen him eyeing the advertising leaflet pinned to the noticeboard.

So Sam had taken the Impala early that morning, wanting to hike through the petrified forest before the park attracted too many people, and Dean was taking advantage of the rare opportunity to do absolutely nothing.

Around noon, in the tiny room at the Bluebird Motel, he leaned back on his bed with a bowl of microwave popcorn on his lap and switched on the TV.

As he'd expected, there was nothing on, and he'd spent ten minutes flicking between stations before he'd finally settled on something featuring a sparky young woman shouting passionately about something or other as a man in a doctor's coat and a pair of cowboy boots stood guiltily in her bedroom doorway.

It was only a few seconds before the couple were tangled together, tearing at each others clothes.

“That'll do,” Dean had said to himself, and dumped the remote down on the bed.

A half hour later, he was sitting up on the very edge of the mattress, leaning forward, engrossed in the story, and unable to tell whether he had a bit of a crush on the hot-tempered woman—who he now knew was Dr. Piccolo—or the man in the cowboy boots—Dr. Palmer—or, as he suspected was most likely, some confusing combination of both.

Now, standing in the busy hallway of Seattle Mercy Hospital, with Dr. Palmer striding purposefully toward them, Dean briefly entertained the idea of questioning him in private.

Sam snorts out a laugh.

He's been reading for close to forty-five minutes, and it's already proven to be a goldmine for blackmail material.

He's pretty sure he's going to be able to win every argument over where to get dinner for at least the next year with this in his arsenal.

Now, it's mid-afternoon, and his cell is ringing, and wanting to finish reading the paragraph without interruption, he carries the laptop with him as he makes his way over to the table where he left it.

Somehow, walking twelve feet indoors is less agreeable to his lungs than a half-mile outside in the dusty Kansas air, and he's coughing uncontrollably by the time he answers the call.

“You sound like crap,” Dean says, and Sam laughs.

At least, he tries to; but the sound gets caught somewhere in his throat, and he walks into the bathroom to spit into the sink.

“Ugh,” he says, turning the faucet and watching bloody water swirl down the drain, “Understatement.”

Looking at his pallid reflection, he wipes a damp wash cloth over his face. He feels like he might keel over.
This sickness that's slowly been getting worse as the trials have gone on has a tendency to wash over him in waves, and apparently the tide has chosen this particular moment to come in.

Waiting for it to retreat doesn't get easier, no matter how many times he's dealt with it.

“But it'll pass,” he says, mostly to himself.

Dean doesn't say anything, and Sam leans heavily against the sink.

“What's up?” he asks, half-wanting Dean to admit to what he's been doing all morning despite the fact that he knows he never will, just so they won't have to talk about his health, “You still at the store?”

“No. I was with Charlie.”

Sam's glad he's already leaning against the sink, because he wasn't expecting that at all.

“But you knew that already,” Dean adds.

He blinks at his reflection, not entirely sure where to go from here; and certainly not when his head is spinning and he's fighting off the urge to be sick.

He's tried enough times to get Dean to talk about stuff, but he's so used to being brushed off that he doesn't actually have a game plan for the actual conversation.

“Oh, yeah...”

He can feel the awkwardness already. It's almost enough to drown out his nausea. But not quite. He swallows and presses his hand against his throat.

“So, uh...” Dean flounders on the other end of the line, and Sam hears him drumming his fingers on something, “she told me what you said about... about me and Cas.”

“Oh.”

Sam presses the heel of his hand against his temple, trying to gather his thoughts, because this is important, and he knows he needs to say something, but his whole body is aching, and he can feel bile rising.

*Bad timing, awful, awful timing, he thinks, keep it together.*

“Let's just... let's not make a whole big thing of it, okay?” Dean says, and Sam recognises the tone. Dean's nervous. Worried that Sam is somehow bothered by this. Sam tries to breathe, tries to subdue the need to be sick so that he can get a whole sentence out, but before he gets a chance his non-response seems to have sent Dean into a rambly panic.

He just wishes he could open his mouth without having to worry about losing his lunch.

Sam takes another breath and closes his eyes against the bright bathroom lights. Steadies himself as much as he can.

“Literally nothing has changed,” Dean goes on, “he's still gone, and even if he wasn't I don't know —”

“Dean.”
Dean doesn't hear him; either that or he's so caught up in what he's saying that he doesn't want to pause.

“—what I'd even say to him. Probably nothing. I mean it's just—“

“Dean,” Sam repeats, louder, and Dean stops speaking.

Over the phone, Sam hears him take in a deep breath before he answers.

“Yeah?”

“What happened to not making a whole big thing of it?”

“Wow, thanks. Real nice. It's not like I'm basically coming out to you here or anything.”

“You just said—!” Sam sighs, shaking his head, trying to clear the fog of his headache, swallowing against the bile that keeps threatening to expel itself from his stomach, “forget it. I'm just saying, it's fine. Like you said, nothing's changed.”

He pauses, making his way out of the bathroom toward the kitchen, desperate for something cold, something to wash the taste of blood and acid from his mouth.

“Thanks for telling me though,” he says, and he hopes Dean understands how glad he is that he's finally done it. How proud he is of him. It's not something he'll ever be able to say out loud without getting glared at, so he has to take it on faith that Dean gets it.

“Just...” he pauses in the kitchen doorway, legs threatening to give out on him, and leans against the frame for a second, “I'm here if you do need to talk about stuff. I know you hate it, but it helps sometimes.”

“Thanks, Sammy.”

“Don't mention it.”

He crosses the room, then, and opens the fridge.

Looking back out at him from the mostly empty shelves are three beers, a half block of cheddar and a three-quarters-empty bottle of what he's pretty sure is flat Sarsaparilla.

“But uh... while you're out, we're out of pretty much everything. So if you get a chance to actually go to the store...?”

“Yeah, no problem,” Dean says, “we're heading back in a few.”

“We?”

For a brief, mildly delirium-driven moment, Sam thinks Castiel has come back. That Dean had prayed to him, had told him how he felt, and he'd returned.

“Oh... yeah. That's what I was actually calling for. I kind of invited Charlie to move in for a while.”

“Oh,” Sam nods, then remembers Dean can't see him, “okay.”

“That cool with you?”

“Yeah.”
He can feel that familiar rasp coming back into his throat again. He clears his throat.

“I'll start clearing out—” he coughs again, the second wave hitting with slightly less intensity than the first, and leans back against the counter with closed eyes, “—one of the other rooms.”

“Right,” Dean says, voice laced with sarcasm, “because you're in great shape for heavy lifting. Just leave it. We'll take care of the room when we get back. Just... watch TV or something.”

“Yeah,” Sam says, wiping his brow, “good plan.”

He lowers his phone, finally letting himself cough as much as he needs to, and sinks down onto the floor by the counter. He stays there a long time, just breathing, trying not to panic because he's getting worse, and waits for it to pass.
At some point, Sam passes out. When he wakes, it's to the sound of his cellphone blaring, buzzing across the floor by his face.

He stares at the caller ID vaguely for a few seconds, not even registering the name, before he realizes he should press answer.

“Hello?”

“Sam? It's Charlie. Are you home?”

“Yeah,” he blinks again, rubbing at his eyes, and sits up slowly.

“I've been knocking for like five minutes.”

His brain finally catches up to what's going on, and he pushes himself to his feet.

“Crap! Sorry. I fell asleep. I'll be right up.”

Getting up the stairs takes a little more effort than he wants to admit, and when he pulls the door open, Charlie's smile fades immediately.

“Whoa, Sam,” she says, “are you okay?”

“Just half-asleep,” he says, and tries on an easy smile.

It feels forced, and from the look on her face it's probably pretty clear to her, too. He clears his throat and looks past her, toward her car.

“You have stuff to bring in?”

“Just everything I own,” she pauses, looking him over, “I'll bring it down though. You look like you're going to drop.”

“I'm fine,” Sam frowns, walking past her toward the car, and she sighs, hurrying after him.

Together they carry her bags and boxes back to the bunker, and Sam knows that she is deliberately passing him all the lighter stuff. He knows he should just admit how sick he actually feels, but he knows that if he tells Charlie, she'll tell Dean, and then he'll never hear the end of it.

It doesn't take them too long; but by the time they're making their final trip down the stairs, Sam's sweating so much that he's beginning to think Dean's mother-henning would have been worth it.

He all but collapses into a chair at the table.

Charlie blows at a stray strand of hair as she puts down the last box, and glances over at him.

“So,” she says, “I don't really know why we're pretending you're in perfect health right now, but can we not?”

Sam, breathing heavily, leans against the table.

“It's only—” he coughs into his elbow until his eyes water, and eventually catches his breath enough
to finish, “—it's temporary. I'll be fine in a few minutes. Promise.”

“Okay,” she says, “just... if you're as tired as you look, you don't have to stay up on my account. I've got a whole bunch of computer stuff I have to do, so I'll be fine if you need to crash for a while.”

“Computer stuff?”

“Yeah. How much did Dean tell you?”

“...about what? You coming to stay with us, or that he knew that I knew?”

Crouching down to open the box, Charlie pulls out a mess of cables, a mouse, and a keyboard.

“I'm going to help you guys find Castiel,” she says, dumping them down on the table in front of him, before heading back to the box to take out the CPU, “hopefully.”
By the time Dean gets back to the bunker, his arms weighed down with four bags full of groceries, Charlie and Sam are staring at a rapidly flickering computer screen.

“Any luck?”

Sam, watching over Charlies shoulder as she types, glances up at Dean's voice, but Charlie doesn't look away from the screen.

“Just... got started,” she says, distracted, “but it shouldn't be too hard to get into their server. Half an hour, tops.”

Stepping down from the staircase, Dean walks over and dumps the bags on the table, rifling through them until he finds the bottle of juice he'd picked up for Sam. The label says something about added vitamins and immunity boosters, and though he knows it's probably all snake oil and Sam's sickness isn't exactly your run of the mill flu, anyway, he figures it can't hurt.

He holds the bottle out to Sam, shaking it to get his attention.

“Drink up, Patient Zero,” he says, and leans down to look at Charlie's screen.

He counts himself lucky that Charlie knows what she's doing.

Her fingers move too fast for him to even know what's going on, but there's a lot of clicking and a lot of letters and numbers flashing up in the black window, so he assumes it's impressive work.

“Aweome,” he says, and sees the corner of her mouth stretch up to the side.

“I am the master commander,” she replies.

Dean snorts out a laugh.

“You're an idiot.”

Sam's busy wrinkling his nose at the smell of the juice, and rather than stick around to watch him gagging on the supposedly healthy blend of beets, oranges and wheatgrass, Dean takes the rest of the bags into the kitchen.

He's still busy putting things away when he hears Sam walk to the doorway, and he braces himself for the incoming discussion that the phone call was supposed to stop from happening.

“Dean?”

“How're you feeling, Sammy?”

“Same, pretty much.”

Dean can feel him waiting, eyes boring into the back of his head, and he avoids turning around for as long as is reasonably possible. When Sam clears his throat behind him, he's forced to cave, and he carefully arranges his face into the most casual expression he can manage.

“What's up?” he says, arms crossed.
“I, uh...” Sam fidgets a little, scratching at his palm, the nervous habit hard to quit, “don't be pissed, but I read some of the books.”

Dean feels his neck growing hot, and clenches his jaw, willing himself not to show embarrassment.

“Okay,” he says, and impresses himself with how even he keeps his voice, “and?”

“And, I uh... remember when I...” he shakes his head, “of course you do. The day I killed Lilith, you called me from the Angel's green room.”

Dean nods.

“I remember.”

“Yeah. Well, I never got that message.”

Sam swallows, looking around the kitchen, and Dean uncrosses his arms.

“So, I guess I just... wanted to say thanks. It's pretty overdue, but I thought... I don't know. Just thanks.”

Dean smiles, looking down.

“Yeah, no problem Sammy.”

Sam taps on the door frame and turns to leave, and Dean resumes putting food in the fridge.

“Oh,” Sam says, pausing, “I almost forgot. There's a Doctor Sexy convention next month. In case you still wanted to ask him where he got his sexy boots.”

The orange narrowly misses his head.
Dean's still in the kitchen, getting started on dinner, when Charlie's voice echoes through the bunker.

“Dean! Sam!”

He dumps the knife in the sink and runs into the war room, hands dripping with tomato juice.

“You find something?”

She's standing, staring at the screen with a grin, and Dean hurries around the table to look.

“I haven't found any new manuscripts yet,” she says, “but this is the publishers payroll information. Last time I checked, dead people don't need advances.”

She points at a highlighted line on the screen.

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“I could be wrong,” she says, “but I'm pretty sure that means book one-twenty-four. So far, they've released one hundred and twenty three. Which means someone is getting paid ahead of time for a new one.”

Sam's jaw drops, and he looks at Dean.

“Chuck's alive?”

Dean shakes his head in disbelief.

“Well it's either that or someone with Heaven on speed dial is writing them for him.”

Charlie cracks her knuckles and opens a new window.

“Just give me an hour or two to commit a couple more federal crimes,” she says, “and I'll have an address.”

“Charlie, I take it back. You are definitely the master—”

Dean's cell starts ringing, and he wipes the tomato juice on his shirt before digging it out of his pocket.

“—commander.”

The number isn't familiar. He presses answer.

“Hello?”
There's a pause and the sound of paper shuffling.

“Dean?”

Dean pulls the phone away from his ear to put it on speaker, and holds it out flat.

“Who's asking?”

“It's, uh... it's me.”

Sam is staring at the phone with a frown; he knows the voice, but can't quite place it.

“Me who?” Dean asks, and there's another pause while the person on the other end of the line takes in a breath.

“Chuck?” the voice says, as if he isn't even sure himself.

Dean can just about picture the grimace on his face. He looks up at Sam and Charlie.

“You're alive?” Sam blurts out, leaning toward the phone.

“Hi, Sam. And, uh... technically, yeah.”

“Technically?” Dean repeats, “What in the hell is that supposed to mean?”

There's more shuffling paper and the sound of a creaking chair before Chuck replies, and he sounds tired. Harried.

“It's... it's kind of a long story. I uh... look, you were going to find me anyway, I just... I thought you might be a little less inclined to break my nose if I saved you the trouble of looking.”

“Don't be so sure.”

Chuck sighs, resigned, before he speaks again.

“You're looking for Cas, right?”

Dean feels his neck prickle, and his tongue darts out over his suddenly bone-dry lower lip.

“Yeah,” Dean says, “where is he? Is he okay?

“He's fine,” Chuck says, “...ish. I can't tell you where he's hiding right now, but I saw--”

“You can, you sonofa—”

“He's on the run from the angels, Dean. I can't see his position right now. But he's okay. And like I was saying, I—”

“Can he hear me?”

“What?”

“When I pray to him,” Dean says through gritted teeth, “Can he hear me?”

“Yeah. He can. I think... I think it helps.”

A weight in Dean's chest lifts a little at that; not much, but it's a start.
“Okay. Good. Okay,” he nods, swallows against the hopeful feeling that he doesn't quite trust yet, “is he... when will he be able to stop? What can we do?”

“I don't know, but like I was trying to tell you. I saw something... he can't stop running yet, but you're going to see him, for a little while, anyway. I mean, it isn't for long, maybe five minutes. Ten tops. But if you--”

“Just spit it out, Chuck.”

“There's a Biggerson's not far from you.”

“There's a Biggerson's not far from everyone.”

“I know, right? That place is like a plague. But uh... the one in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Just past the state line.”

“Yeah, I know it.”

“He'll be there.”

Dean's stomach flips, and he stubbornly refuses to let himself enjoy it. Not yet. His mouth is a hard line.

“When?” he asks.

“When you are.”

Closing his eyes, Dean squeezes the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He exhales.

“So, what, I need to go there and pray to him, or--?”

“No!” Chuck yells, like he's worried Dean's about to royally screw something up, “No. Don't do that. What I saw... He's... surprised to see you.”

A terrified little part of Dean wants to ask good surprised or bad surprised, but he quashes it along with the hope. He's going regardless.

“Just go there, sit down, order two cups of coffee,” Chuck says, “and he'll be there.”

“Two cups of coffee?”

“He's been drinking it. Black, two sugars. Not sweetener.”

Sam and Charlie look at each other with raised brows at that, and Dean narrows his eyes at the phone.

“Okay? Thanks for the tip, I guess.”

“You're welcome.”

“Oh, and Chuck?”

“Yeah?”

“Once all this is settled--”
“You're going to kill me,” he sighs, “I know.”

“Just so we're clear.”

“Crystal.”

Dean ends the call and dumps his cell on the table, leaning with both hands on the back of a chair. He heaves out a breath before turning to look at Sam and Charlie. They both stare at him, silent.

“Well,” he says, after a moment, “looks like I'm going to Biggerson's.”
Support

Charlie is grinning wide enough to split, and Dean tries not to look at her for fear he'll grin back.

As it is, he can already feel the corners of his mouth tugging upward, and he's still too damn pessimistic to let himself smile. Until he's there, until he can see Castiel right in front of him, he can't let himself relax—as much as he might want to.

Sam, leaning against the other side of the table, clears his throat.

"Are you gonna go right now?"

Dean figures it'll take him maybe half an hour to make the drive up to Red Cloud, so if he leaves now—a quick glance at his watch tells him it's a quarter to eight—there'll still be a few hours before Biggerson's closes at eleven. He nods.

"No time like the present."

He makes a beeline for the kitchen to grab his keys, and Charlie trails behind him. He's picking up his wallet when she speaks from her place in the doorway.

"Aren't you going to change?"

He turns around to pull a face at her as he tucks it into the back pocket of his jeans.

"No. Why would I?"

She gestures at the front of his shirt.

"You're all tomato-goopy."

Looking down, he realizes she has a point.

Little yellow seeds are stuck to the khaki fabric of his shirt, and he picks them off with the edge of a fingernail. They leave behind a slimy residue.

"Awesome," he says, dumping the keys back on the counter before making his way back out through the bunker toward his room, pulling the shirt off on the way.

Once he's in his room, though, staring into his chest of drawers at the few clean shirts he owns, he can't decide which to wear.

It's ridiculous—he knows it is—but somehow, with all the insight that Chuck's books have given him into Castiel's feelings about him, the prospect of seeing him has made him about as jittery and self-conscious as he was back in seventh grade shop class when he's flat out asked Ashley Castillo, do you like me?

Of course, he's not planning on asking. Even if he were, he already knows the answer, and it's not like, but love. Hell if that doesn't make the nerves even worse.

So now, Dean's standing in front of the bathroom mirror, holding up two shirts against his chest like a goddamned idiot.

There's no real difference between them—both are plaid, both are about a month away from being
reborn as grease-rags for the Impala—but suddenly the question of which looks better seems incredibly important.

There’s a knock at the half-open door, and Sam sticks his head through the gap.

“Hey, I was wondering—” Sam's laugh cuts his words short when he sees Dean, “uh... what are you doing?”

Glaring at his reflection, Dean throws the yellow shirt on the floor as he pulls on the blue one, blatantly ignoring his brother’s second question.

“You were wondering what?” he says, rolling up the cuffs to his elbows and looking himself over.

Shaking his head, Sam smirks and pushes the door fully open to lean against the frame.

“Okay. So, uh... probably a stupid question,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck, “but do you want me to come with?”

Dean adjusts his collar, frowns, and pulls the shirt off.

“Don't you still have research to do?” he asks instead of flat out saying no, and Sam nods as Dean leans down to pick up the yellow shirt.

He shakes off the residual floor dust before slipping it on, and Sam has to force himself not to roll his eyes.

“Dean,” Sam says, “I uh... you do realize Cas literally wears the same thing every day, right?”

“I'm not— shut up Sam.”

Sam's laugh echoes as he walks away down the hall, and if it weren't for the fact that it quickly descends into a fit of coughing, Dean would seriously consider tracking down that orange to pelt at his head again.

When he emerges from the bathroom five minutes later, he's back in the blue shirt.

Sam looks up from the table, purses his lips, and returns his focus to the book he has open before him.

“Shut up, Sam.”

“I didn't say anything!”

Dean levels him with a look.

“I didn't!”

Self-consciously, Dean adjusts his collar, and looks up at a low whistle.

Charlie's making her way out of the kitchen, holding out his keys, and she gives him an encouraging wink.

“Lookin' sharp, Winchester.”

The keys rattle when she drops them into his hand.
“Thanks, kiddo,” he says, pocketing his cell.

“You're gonna knock that angel on his feathery ass,” she calls after him as he quickly ascends the stairs, and at the top, he pauses to point down at his smirking brother.

“You might wanna take some pointers from Charlie on how to be supportive.”

Charlie's laughter and Sam's indignant, “I was being supportive!” is cut off by the closing door.
It Won't Be Long

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The drive up to Red Cloud takes longer than he'd hoped.

US-281 is, for the most part, clear. But the brief, heavy rain that had come earlier in the day has made the surface slippery, and halfway to Nebraska, the flashing lights of an emergency crew bring Dean to a stop. A truck lays on it's side, it's cargo—more cans of soup than Dean has seen in his entire life—spilled all over the road.

Waiting to be given the all clear, Dean drums his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, cursing under his breath.

As if a month wasn't long enough to have waited, he's being forced to sit here and watch as a burly, moustached trucker scratches his junk and surveys the damage his toppled semi-trailer has inflicted on the highway.

Worst of all, it gives him time to think, and that's the last thing he needs right now. He just wants to get there, to walk in to the restaurant, sit down, order the damn coffee and hear that shift in the air that signifies Castiel's arrival.

His head is full of everything that could go wrong, and it's all because Chuck had told him not to pray.

He can't help but wonder; what if it's because he doesn't want to see me?

As much as he might dislike Chuck right now, he doesn't have such a low opinion of the guy to think that he wouldn't have mentioned that. But, still... he has been praying near constantly over the last few weeks, and he's heard nothing.

It's not completely impossible, as much as he might hope otherwise.

He can't stop picturing that blank stare Castiel had given him back at Lucifer's crypt.

His fear that somehow Naomi has taken hold of Castiel's mind again puts a chill into his bones, but the only other scenario his imagination manages to conjure up is arguably even worse; Castiel in complete control of himself, telling Dean in his blunt manner that things have changed since those books were written, that any feelings he did have were a lapse, an unpleasant phase, and should be forgotten.

His stomach is rolling, now. His throat tense.

“Come on, come on,” he mutters, staring at the slow-moving clean up crew, and leans forward to knock his head against the steering wheel.

When he finally brings the Impala to a stop in the Biggerson's parking lot, almost an hour after leaving Lebanon, he's psyched himself out so much that he's a little unwilling to get out of the car.

It's fine, he thinks, Chuck said five minutes. Maybe even ten. He wants to see you.

The thought falls flat in his head.
“This is pathetic,” he says under his breath.

Even so, it still takes another moment and a few deep breaths before he manages to climb out into the cool evening air.

The smell of rain still lingers, and his feet kick up water as he makes his way inside.

The Red Cloud restaurant is smaller than most Biggerson's, though the layout is exactly the same, and when he sits down in a booth by the window, a teenage waiter hurries over to ask what he wants.

“Coffee,” he says, looking around the other tables for any sign of that familiar tan coat, “two cups. I'm meeting someone.”

“D'ya want creamer?”

“No thanks.”

“Anything else?”

Dean's nervous as a kid on a first date, and his palms are sweating. He wipes them on the sleeves of his shirt.

*Should have gone with the yellow*, he thinks.

The waiter clears his throat, and Dean looks up.

“Uh, no, thanks,” he says, “Just the coffee for now.”

“No problem.”

The kid walks away, shoving the notepad roughly into his back pocket, and Dean drums his fingers impatiently on the table.

More than an hour later, Castiel still hasn't turned up.

Dean's had his coffee refilled three times already, and he isn't sure if the jittery feeling in his chest is a result of too much caffeine or panic that he's not going to show up at all.

The waiter is watching him, giving him that goddamn look—the one that says, *awkward, someone stood this guy up*—and as he walks back up to the table, Dean is tempted to crawl underneath it to save himself the embarrassment.

“You ready to order, or...?”

Dean clears his throat and slides his cup back across the table.

“Just another refill,” he says, then points at the other cup, still full and now cold, “and if you could freshen that one up, that'd be great.”

Glancing over his shoulder toward the kitchen, the waiter flicks his pen against his open notepad.

“Uh, sorry, sir, but you'll need to order something...”

Dean presses his eyes closed and sighs.
“A slice of whatever pie you have.”

“We've got Apple or Pecan.”

“Surprise me.”

The waiter clicks his pen and bustles off toward the kitchen, and Dean wills himself not to pray. He's been scared to even think about Castiel since he sat down, just in case that constituted praying, but the longer he's been waiting, the harder it's become.

Staring up at the ceiling, he tells himself to just be patient. Chuck didn't say he'd turn up instantly, after all.

At twenty to eleven, he's still on his own, and he's barely touched the pie.

The few other patrons have long since left, and with a little over fifteen minutes until closing time, he can feel the kitchen staff and two waiters waiting for him to leave so they can pack up and go home.

The six cups of coffee are sloshing around in his stomach every time he moves in his seat, and unable to ignore it any longer he gets up to head to the bathroom. It isn't until he's walking back a couple of minutes later that he sees him, sitting at a tiny table in the centre of the room, palms flat against the surface. Dean stops, his mouth opening a couple of times before any sound manages to come out.

“Cas?”

At the sound of Dean's voice, Castiel is on his feet, turning, his eyes wide.

*There's the surprise,* Dean thinks, and wonders briefly if Chuck hadn't noticed the way it was colored by relief, or if he had and just neglected to mention it.

“Dean,” he says, his hands tensing, “I'm sorry, I—”

Dean recognises the movement in his shoulders, as though on some other plane he's stretching his wings, readying himself for flight.

Dean's chest clenches at the sight.

“Don't,” he says, moving quickly toward him, “just... don't. Not yet. We have a few minutes, right?”

A little reluctantly, Castiel nods, still staring, and Dean points over at his booth, waiting until Castiel sits down before he speaks again.

He gestures toward the nearest cup.

“That's yours,” he says, “might be kinda cold by now, though. Two sugars, right?”

“I—"

Castiel looks down at the coffee in confusion, then back up at Dean.

“How did you find me?”

“Chuck.”

His eyes narrow infinitesimally.
“The prophet?”

“Yeah. Apparently not as dead as we thought.”

Dean shifts in his seat, not entirely sure what to say now that he's finally got Castiel's attention.

Across the restaurant, someone clears their throat, and Dean looks up to see the two waiters hovering around the register.

*Screw 'em*, Dean thinks.

He looks back at Castiel. He looks haunted, harried, tired. There's one deep wrinkle in the space between his eyebrows, dark circles under his eyes. His hair is dirty, matted flat against his forehead.

Dean's fingers twitch on the tabletop with the urge to reach across and fix it.

“Are you okay?” he asks, instead, wishing he could think of something better, but truth be told he doesn't even know what he's thinking right now.

He's been waiting for this moment for a month; more than that, really, considering how long he'd been waiting the last time, and he doesn't think that one day—that one long, *horrible* day—counts.

Point is, half the time when he'd thought about seeing Castiel again, he'd been planning to yell at him. The other half, he'd been so shit-scared that he'd be seriously hurt, or dead, that the thoughts did nothing but devolve into deeply humiliating, panicked prayers that he muttered into his pillow until he eventually fell asleep.

So right now, with Castiel alive, if a little worse for wear, and sitting across from him with relief written all over his face, *are you okay* is about the best he can do.

“I'm... yes. I think so,” he replies, “I'm sorry I haven't been... returning your calls.”

“You could hear me, though, right?”

“Yes. I... it's a long story. There's angels hunting me.”

Castiel fidgets, looking around the restaurant uneasily.

“I really shouldn't be with you now, Dean. If they find me I won't be strong enough to protect—”

“I don't care. This is long overdue, Cas.”

“What is?”

“This... I don't know, man. Just,” Dean gestures vaguely between them, “*this.*”

Castiel looks down at the coffee as though it might hold the answers.

“Oh.”

The sound of a cash register opening is jarringly loud, echoing through the empty restaurant, and Dean sighs heavily.

“They're going to kick us out any second,” he says, leaning his elbows on the table, “can we just... I don't know. Is there somewhere we can go? Somewhere they won't be able to track us for a little while?”
“I don’t...” Castiel looks back up, shaking his head, and his eyes are tight, “Dean, they could be here any moment. It's too risky. If I bring you with me, they'll know. I wish I could, but—”

“I get it. Too dangerous,” Dean nods, swallowing against the lump in his throat, “I just... when do you think you'll be safe? Let me help, Cas. Just tell me what you need and I'll do it.”

“Give me your phone.”

“What?”

“If I have a phone I can at least... I can call. I can't stay, not yet. But I can call.”

He looks around, and Dean sees that tension in his shoulders again.

“They're close, aren't they?”

Castiel nods.

“Dean, I'm sorry.”

His voice wavers, and Dean's pretty sure this is what it feels like to break into pieces.

“I know,” standing up, he holds out his cell as Castiel rises to take it from him, slipping it into his trench coat pocket, “just... promise you'll call.”

“I will,” he says, tilting his head forward to meet Dean's eyes, “I promise.”

He's about to disappear when Dean steps forward to wrap his arms around him. He breathes in deeply, feels his heart pounding hard as Castiel lifts his arms to squeeze back.

With his chin pressing against Castiel's shoulder, he tells himself it's temporary.

“It won't be long,” he murmurs aloud, and Castiel pulls back to look at him, just barely smiling, and it's enough, Dean thinks, for now, it's enough.

He smiles back.

“It won't be long,” Castiel agrees, raising one hand briefly to curl his fingers against Dean's cheek before he flies.

The void he leaves is big enough that Dean wonders if maybe the Chrysler building was too small a comparison.

Chapter End Notes

Wow I made /myself/ cry with this one. Sorry. This isn't over, though. Just bear with me. Much like Chuck, I'm a cruel and capricious god who likes to make good characters suffer horribly before I let them be okay.
Each Biggerson's is exactly the same.

The same striped brown velour cushions in the same window-side booths; the same white ceramic mugs; the same ill-fitting maroon shirts on a never-ending parade of tired teenage waiters.

He's been doing this for weeks—flitting from one identical building to the next, just barely keeping ahead of Naomi's ever-watchful eye—and he has the distinct feeling that given the time and resources he'd be able to construct an entirely new restaurant purely from memory.

Some days the other angels are fast, and he is forced to move on within minutes of landing.

Others, he spends hours sitting in booths, on barstools, at small, round tables draining cup after cup of sweet, black coffee.

No matter if he is moving or not, every day, without fail, he has heard Dean's prayers as they lift through the ether to settle warm against his grace.

He thinks about the prayers whenever his resolve begins to waver. Whenever the exhaustion starts to feel like too much, his mission hopeless, his plan feeble, he replays them in his mind, holds onto them like a lifeline.

He remembers the gruff where the hell are you's, the quiet please be okay's, the hopeful we'd really love to see you's. He remembers the prayers that had no words, only feelings. Prayers that came to him late at night; soft, nebulous things the color of Dean's soul.

He hoards those prayers closest of all.

Throughout his weeks on the run, he has taken solace in the knowledge that Dean's faith in him has not gone, even after Naomi's attempt to destroy it.

Somehow, though, after spending a few minutes in Dean's company in Red Cloud, it stops being a comfort. It's not enough to simply know.

Now, more than ever, he wants to go back. He wants to go home.

He hadn't even realized he had one until he started missing it, and now it's unavoidable. A constant itch in his core, pulling uncomfortably. It reminds him vaguely of the stitches in his chest all those years ago when he'd awoken, graceless and lost in a New Orleans hospital, and he wonders at how it can be that such a short time can feel so long.

After he leaves Red Cloud, he flies first to Atlanta, then to Phoenix, to Clearwater. He feels the angels, still far too close, and moves on to Bozeman, keeps flying through Fresno, Spokane, Salt Lake City and Rhode Island.

In Tulsa, a woman eating pancakes at the counter sees him appear and drops her fork onto her plate with a clatter, maple syrup splashing up onto her shirt.

“Apologies,” he says, inclining his head, and she stares at him with her mouth half open.
He moves on before she can reply.

St. Louis, Corpus Christi, Odessa and Cleveland all go by in a dizzy blur, a haze of brown seats and bright banners.

He pauses for a moment in Roswell, listening as best he can over the constant hum of the tablet, and hears nothing.

To be safe, he keeps moving, flying on to Fargo, Boulder, Portland, Baltimore, Flagstaff, Charlotte.

Finally certain he's lost the angels, if only temporarily, he lands in a 24 hour restaurant in Peoria, Illinois and sits down by the window. It's raining, and the windowpane is spattered with heavy drops, blown sideways by the wind.

In his pocket, he feels the weight of Dean's phone, heavy against his leg, and fishes it out.

It's different to the last cell he used—only one button, from what he can tell—and he turns it in his hands before pressing the button. The screen illuminates, and he is relieved to see that the many brightly colored icons are clearly labelled by function.

His finger hovers over them as he reads; phone, messages, mail, photos, camera, contacts, maps. He moves back to contacts and presses it with the pad of his index finger. After a moment, though, he thinks perhaps it is too soon to call Sam's number. Despite the distance he has travelled, only a half hour has passed, and he has no idea how far Dean had to drive back to Sam.

He resolves to wait until Dean prays to him. Or an hour. Whichever comes first.

Instead, he looks back over the other options and, curiosity getting the better of him, selects photos.

There are hundreds, and he scrolls through them one by one; Sam and Dean smiling while a red-haired woman stands between them, her arms hooked over their shoulders as she presses a kiss to Sam's temple; the same woman holding up a scimitar, glaring at the camera, though due to the laughter in her eyes she looks more comical than menacing; Dean sitting on the opposite side of a diner booth, face exasperated as he reaches toward the camera; Dean moments earlier, gazing out the diner window, apparently unaware of the picture being taken. Before that, there are many photos of scenery. A wide river, bending around a fallen tree. A long, straight road flanked by tall pines. There's pictures of Sam, the first couple too blurry with movement to make out, then one of him fast asleep against the window in the passenger seat of the Impala with a paper napkin folded into a hat and balanced on his head. A trio of teenagers, two girls and a boy, sitting around a kitchen table with Sam, talking. The Impala, sparkling clean. The Impala, covered in snow and mud and leaves. A pin-board covered with translations and symbols, the prophet Kevin standing in front of it giving a wide smile and a thumbs up. A wide room lined with bookshelves; the scimitar from the earlier photo sitting on display on a low cabinet. Sam, squinting in bright sun with his face covered in a strange pattern of red and white paint, his hair tied back away from his face.

Castiel flicks through a couple more pictures, and stops, his heart in his throat.

Because there's a picture of him—and another, and another, and another, all taken in a row—sitting on the end of a hotel bed with a remote control in his hand. He's smiling at the television, eyes crinkled up at the corners and shoulders relaxed. Happy, even.

He remembers that night; in a time before he had realized he was under Naomi's control, and supposes that he was, in a way.

Dean never told him he took these pictures, he realizes, because he took them for himself. He
wonders if there are others, taken over the years without him knowing, and feels warmth unfurling in his stomach at the possibility.

He's still staring at the photograph when he hears footsteps slow beside him, and he turns to find a kind-eyed waitress with flyaway hair smiling down at him.

“Can I get you anything, hon?”

The phone is warm in his hand, and with Dean on his mind, he finds it easy to smile back.

“Apple pie,” he says, “and a cup of coffee.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the long wait— but rest assured that there's more to come before the weekend is over.
If anyone would like to illustrate any chapters of this story, please come leave me a message in my tumblr askbox. My username there is the same as here :) ~ Imogen
Forty-five minutes after Castiel flew, Dean is sitting in silence in the Biggerson's parking lot, reluctant to go home.

Chuck might have told him he'd only get a few minutes, but a little part of him—a part he had tried in vain to stifle—had still hoped, desperately hoped, that he might be able to convince Castiel to come with him. To come home.

Now, he's cursing that part of himself for making him feel like shit.

He's imagining walking into the bunker to find Sam and Charlie waiting for him.

They'll ask him how did it go? and he'll have to explain to them that he barely said anything, that seeing Cas did nothing but make him miss the guy even more, and they'll look at him with pity. He can't handle that right now. He doesn't want pity, doesn't want condolences or sympathy or anything.

He just wants Cas. Here.

He realizes with a sinking feeling in his stomach that he still doesn't know what Castiel is even doing; why he's running, what he's done with the tablet, whether there's someone helping him. He thinks of what Samandriel told him; that there are still some angels who are on his side. He hopes Castiel knows that. Hopes that he's found them, that he's got some back up, some support while Dean is unable to help him.

Rain falls in through his open window, and he lets the cool water settle against his forearm as he closes his eyes and prays. Not to Castiel, this time, but to God, to whoever will listen. Prays that he'll be okay, that he's not alone, that he'll ask for help if he needs it.

The drops get bigger, icy against his skin, and he winds the window up.

He knows he should leave. Go home and deal with the pensive stares of his brother and the sister he never had, tell them he's fine, that Castiel promised to call. Pretend that he's okay with that. Fake it with a smile, like Frank had told him years ago.

Somehow, Dean doubts they'd buy it.

So, in an effort to it off for as long as humanly possible, he pulls open the glove compartment to sift through the cassettes, searching for a soundtrack to his misery.

Nothing feels right. AC/DC, Metallica and Motörhead are all too agressive and impersonal; Led Zeppelin is too focused on sex; Black Sabbath too focused on death.

He switches to the radio.

At first, it offers little help; jangly, saccharine indie on one station, trashy '80s synth-pop on another. As the static fades in and out and back again, he starts to feel like he might sit here forever.

Eventually, though, the soulful voice of Otis Redding fills the car, and Dean turns up the volume to drown out the rain. He regrets the decision immediately. The lyrics are too close, too fitting, and they
settle in his chest like a lead weight.

His heart, his hands, his legs all ache with it. With something akin to loss, to love, and he tries not to read to heavily into the fact that the two feelings are so inextricably entwined in his head.

As much as he wants to, he can't seem to switch the song off. Just stares unseeing through the rain pouring over the windscreen and *feels*.

In a way, he thinks, he's almost glad they didn't get to talk about it.

It would have been rushed, and deep down he knows he doesn't want that.

When they do finally address this thing between them he wants to have time and, preferably, no agitated wait staff hovering nearby. Despite years of refusing to talk, he finds himself not only willing but determined to say everything; to catalogue the reasons, to put into words the feeling that roils in his gut, his chest, his soul until there is no doubt in Castiel's mind about how much he needs him. *Wants* him.

What he wants to say deserves better than a few rushed minutes over luke-warm coffee.

He wants hours, days, months, years. Wants a lifetime.

But then again, he thinks about the feeling of Castiel's fingers against his cheek, trailing over the side of his jaw, grazing feather-light over his stubble, and he wishes he'd just blurted it out. Started that lifetime *now*.

He wishes he'd taken the touch as proof that Castiel still feels the same, proof that he understands what Dean had meant when he'd gestured between them and said *this*.

Better yet, he wishes that he'd mirrored the action; touched Castiel's face as he'd touched Dean's, moved closer until their toes touched, leaned in—

Sighing heavily, Dean rests his forehead against the steering wheel and wonders how long *not long* is going to be.

He finds his hand rising to his cheek in a vague approximation of Castiel's touch.

*Should have just said* I love you, he thinks, *nice and simple*.

Huffing out a miserable laugh, he sits up straight and rubs his palms hard over his eyes.

“Fuck my life,” he mutters, and wonders how he got here.

So helpless, so far gone.

It's not until a few minutes later, when he finally starts the ignition and puts the car in reverse that glances in the rearview and notices the gas station across the road, it's neon signs glowing bright against the pitch-black Nebraska sky.

Though really, it isn't the gas station that gets his attention.

It's what stands in front of it in an island of yellow light on the roadside that fills him with what he's pretty sure can only be described as reckless abandon, and he pulls out of the parking lot a little faster than necessary before rolling to a stop beside it.

The heavy rain soaks him to the bone in the few seconds it takes for him to run from the car, and he
shakes water from his hair as he squeezes into the graffiti-covered phone booth. Pulling the door closed behind him, he wipes the rain from his eyes and digs around in his pocket for change.

When he dials, he realizes his hands are shaking.

Even he isn't delusional enough to convince himself that it's just from the cold.

Chapter End Notes

The song that plays on the radio is Otis Redding's Gone Again
He slips on the final number, fingers still damp from the rain, and the first ring only lasts a split second before it's cut off with a click. For a moment he thinks he's misdialed. There's just static, rushing like water, and he can't tell if it's silence on the other end or a dropped line or a failure to connect to anything in the first place.

Rain keeps thundering down, a deluge on the fiberglass roof, leaking through, and he presses the reciever harder against his ear, just in case.

“Hello?” he says.

There's an intake of breath on the other end, short and sharp.

“Dean?”

It's tinny and too far away, but it's still Cas' voice; he'd recognise it anywhere.

In the beginning he thought it gravel-rough and grating. Now, he thinks the sound is closer to a loveworn record, crackling warm.

Even one syllable, distorted as it is by distance, takes his quaking nerves and stills them.

“Yeah,” he smiles into the reciever, “it's me.”

There's a pause, and Dean hears nothing but rain whipping against the glass of the phone booth, water getting kicked up by a fast-moving car zipping by on the street outside.

“I wanted to stay,” Castiel says, as sincere as Dean's ever heard him, and something in his voice makes Dean's chest ache with need.

“It's okay. I just...”

Dean closes his eyes.

“You wanted to talk,” Castiel says, then pauses, swallows audibly, “about you and I.”

It's the closest either of them have come to flat out saying it aloud, and for a few seconds, Dean is afraid to acknowledge it at all. It's a knee jerk reaction, something instilled deep, a remenant of the man his father raised him to be, and with more effort than he wants it to take, he pushes past it.

“Yeah,” Dean breathes, and even that much lifts a weight off his chest, “it's been... I mean, I've tried to... when I've prayed...”

Dean lets his head thud back against the side of the booth, dragging his lip between his teeth and exhaling slowly. A reckless little part of him just wants to blurt out what he's feeling, just let the words come cascading, consequences be damned, in the hope that they'll blindside Castiel so much that he won't be able to help himself from just coming back. I wanted to kiss you tonight, he'd say, and Castiel would appear out of thin air, right here in the phone booth. I've loved you for so long,
he'd say, and Castiel would press him up against the cool glass, wide-eyed and breathless, and his lips—

A peal of thunder, much closer now, pulls him out of his head. He sighs.

“I really don't want to do this over the phone, Cas.”

“Nor do I.”

There's the clink of a spoon on china in the background, and Dean pictures him stirring sugar into coffee. Imagines him in the kitchen at the bunker, sitting at the counter while Dean makes breakfast, smiling at him over his mug. It's going to drive him crazy, he thinks, waiting for Castiel to come back. Since leaving Biggerson's, it's been one fantasy after another, and he's sure he hasn't daydreamed this much since he was a teenager. Admittedly, most of the things he's been imagining have been considerably less pornographic and far more romantic than anything his teenage mind would ever have occupied itself with, but by sheer frequency and feel-good factor, these have already blown the old ones out of the water.

“It was good seeing you tonight,” Castiel goes on, “after your prayers today, it was more difficult than usual to stop myself from returning. I think... I think I needed it. You, I mean. Your company.”

Right now, Dean can relate. It's never easier to feel the distance than when you're stuck talking to someone on a payphone when they should be with you. Watching as lightning splits the heavy cloud, he wonders where Castiel is now. If he can see the same sky. Love seems to have turned him into a sap, and he can't even find it in himself to be embarrassed by the thought that if he and Castiel are watching the same lightning strike, perhaps they aren't really apart at all.

“I wish I were still there.”

“Then come back,” the words slip out of their own accord, and Dean just counts himself lucky that it wasn't a different three, “you don't have to do this alone.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Why?”

The question is colored with a million others, and Castiel, whether through some angelic hearing or just his knowledge of Dean's tone, seems to hear the underlying hurt, loud and clear.

“This isn't about trust, Dean,” he says, hitting the nail right on the head, “I trust you with my life. The tablet won't let me have help.”

“It's controlling you?”

“No, it's... when anyone else gets close to it, anyone who might have some use for it, regardless of their intent, it...”

He trails off, and Dean waits.

“It burns,” he says, finally, though from his tone Dean suspects it's an understatement, “it resonates with power. It's a warning. I fear that if I don't keep moving it will explode.”

“If it's so dangerous, then maybe you should let it. Not when you're holding on to it, obviously, but...”
“I'd considered it.”

“And?”

“Without being entirely certain that it would work, it's far too risky. Not to mention the explosion could potentially be catastrophic. I won't be responsible for any more…” he pauses, takes a breath, “I can't allow that to happen.”

A memory of a motel room in Oklahoma comes flooding back, a memory of Castiel with shaking voice and downcast eyes, telling him of the devesation in Heaven, of the guilt that plagued him. Dean wants to let him know it's okay, that nothing like that will happen again, that he won't let it. But it's futile. He knows first hand that guilt that big only gets bigger the more people tell you it's okay; forgiveness that feels undeserved doing nothing but highlight the fact that you're sure you're not worth it. He'll still try, of course, when Castiel is back. Make him see that he's worth everything. But for now, Dean decides it's better not to dwell.

“So what's the plan?” he asks.

“As yet, there isn't one. I've been hoping a solution would come to me.”

“Do you think there might be something written on the tablet that could help?”

“Perhaps... but I can't read it, and I can't bring it to a prophet,” Castiel says. There's a crackling on the line, “hold on.”

A high-pitched whine sounds, followed by buzzing, and Dean holds the receiver away from his ear. It goes on for close to two minutes before Castiel speaks again, a little out of breath.

“Sorry about that. They were getting close again. I had to fly through six more towns to lose them.”

“How often do you have to do that?”

“It varies, but anywhere from four hundred to a thousand times a day.”

“Jesus. You've been doing this the whole time you've been gone?”

“Yes.”

“I'm sorry, Cas.”

“For what?”

“You must be exhausted.”

“I was, but I feel much better now. Particularly now. It's not the same as being with you, but... I had been hoping you'd call,” Castiel pauses, and when he speaks again, he sounds almost shy, “Your voice is remarkably soothing.”

Dean smiles, warmth spreading up his neck and his cheeks as all uncertainty about Castiel's understanding flies out the window. There's no doubt in his mind that it was an attempt at flirtation.

“Glad I could help,” Dean says, wishing he could do more, and he's about to say as much when a robotic voice announces that he needs to deposit more coins.

“Hey, the payphone's nearly out of time,” he shoves in his last quarter to buy an extra minute, “I'll call you when I get home.”
Realizing how pathetic it sounds, he clears his throat and clarifies.

“You'll, uh... you'll need my new number.”

“Okay.”

It's not entirely the reason, but Dean figures Castiel probably knows that already. He's not sure why he's even trying to pretend to be nonchalant about it. It's a stupid game, really. Both of them know exactly what they want to say, and Dean has a sneaking suspicion that his attempt at being subtle in his prayers this morning was a complete failure. He wouldn't be surprised if Castiel could actually hear him right now, the way his thoughts were so intensely focused in his direction.

*Should have just kissed him when I had the chance,* Dean thinks to himself again.

He's about to say goodbye when an idea flickers into existence.

“Do you know how to work the camera on my phone?”

“I... yes.” Castiel clears his throat a little awkwardly, and Dean fights the urge to ask what he's been taking pictures of to make him sound like that.

“Chuck's number is in my cell. If you send him a picture of the tablet, do you think he could work off that?”

There's silence for a few seconds, and Dean's ready to repeat the question when Castiel speaks.

“Dean.”

“Yeah?”

“You're a genius.”

Dean laughs. Before he can respond, “That's what I keep telling people,” the timer runs out.

For a guy whose call just got cut short during a thunderstorm, he's pretty optimistic. He grins the whole drive back to Lebanon.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry for the long wait; I've been sick, and on top of that there's been some drama in my family that's been taking up a lot of my mental energy this past week. I'm nearly finished the next chapter, so it shouldn't be long before that's up. I hope you're all still enjoying this, and thank you for the comments. Just knowing that you guys are reading really helps. <3
~ Imogen
Sam and Charlie are waiting when he gets back.

Or technically, Charlie is. Sam is passed out, one arm stretched across the table in front of him, face down and drooling. Charlie holds one finger up to her lips as he walks in the door and points toward the kitchen.

“So?” she asks quietly as soon as they are both inside, “did you see him?”

Dean half smiles, tilting his head down.

“Yeah,” he says, and Charlie punches the air, “not for long. But... yeah.”

“And?”

“And what?”

She rolls her eyes, pulling out a stool to sit down at the counter and gesturing for him to do the same as if it's her kitchen they're talking in. Dean complies.

“And did you talk? About the whole...” she wriggles her hands around, “feelings thing.”

“Not really,” Dean says, and when her face falls he feels compelled to explain himself, “not that I didn't want to. But he's on the run. So... you know. Bad timing.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah. He looked good,” Dean says, eyes crinkling as he remembers Castiel's flattened hair, “tired, but good.”

The way Charlie's looking at him, he's pretty sure he's embarrassing himself, but he can't bring himself to care. He smiles back, and Charlie grins wider, stretching her arms out over the counter with a yawn before resting her chin in her hands.

“Do you know when he'll be back?”

“No, but he has my phone now so—”
Charlie blanches.

“Uh...”

She abruptly sits up straight, eyes going wide, and Dean stares at her.

“What?”

“You gave him your cell?” she asks, little more than a whisper, “how long ago was that exactly?”

“Why?”

“I maybe texted you... fifteen minutes ago.”

“Where's your phone?”

Charlie's eyes flick involuntarily back out into the library, and she shakes her head. Dean is already hurrying through the door toward the table. She ducks under his arm and runs, grabbing the cell off the table a split second before he can pick it up. She holds it away from him.

“Please don't be mad.”

She looks like she might cry. It isn't exactly calming him down. He snatches the phone from her hand and opens the recent messages, reading as he walks back toward the kitchen.
Dean laughs, handing back the phone, and Charlie takes it warily.

“It might as well be encrypted,” he says, and she frowns for a second, looking at the texts, before she lets out an exasperated breath and sits back down.

“Duh,” she says to herself, “obviously. Cas not getting trivia stuff is like, the third most common joke in the books. Sorry, I forgot.”

“What's the first?”

“Hmm?”

“The first most common joke? Is it Sam's gas? It's Sam's gas, right?”
Charlie pulls a face.

“Most common joke is you missing out on pie.”

“Me missing out on pie is a joke?”

“Yeah.”

“I don't see how that's funny.”

“You wouldn't,” she says, yawning, “Anyway. Now that that's settled, you can give me the scoop.”

“The scoop?” Dean repeats with a raised brow, "who are you, Lois Lane?"

"Sure," she says, "I'd look hot in a blazer."

"How's that ego coming along?"

"Swimmingly," Charlie smirks, before leaning over the counter, her expression shifting back to serious, "but seriously, if I'm being nosy, just say so."

Ordinarily, he'd take the out, but there's something buzzing warm in his chest, and he finds that talking about it is actually tempting. He kind of wants a second opinion. What the hell, he thinks, and clears his throat.

“We, uh... we didn't have long. Like, a few minutes. Five, tops.”

"Did he say where he's been?"

"No, just that there were angels tracking him and he had to keep moving."

"That sucks," she says, genuine concern in her furrowed brow, and Dean nods.

"He asked how I found him, I told him, he said the angels were coming, and..." Dean's mouth ticks up at the side as he remembers Castiel's hand on his cheek, and he bites the inside of his lip before he goes on, "and then he left, and—"

“Wait.”

“What?”

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“That,” she points at his face, her eyes narrowed, "little pause."

Dean glances away.

“He like... touched my face kind of.”

He shrugs, like it's no big deal, picking at the counter top. He spent a good chunk of the drive back with a stupid grin on his face just thinking about it, but Charlie doesn't need to know that. There are some things, he thinks, too cheesy to tell her.

“Touched your face how?”
“Like, you know... with his hand.”

“Show me.”

“Like,” Dean lifts his hand to his own cheek and drops it again, and Charlie wrinkles her brow. “Okay, that tells me absolutely nothing. Do it on me how he did it.”

She hops up, standing in front of him.

“What?”

“I'll be you, you be Cas,” she pulls a stern face and squares her shoulders in what Dean assumes is meant to be an imitation of him, and drops her voice to a gruff rumble, “go.”

“Are you twelve?”

“Yep,” she says, dropping out of her terrible impersonation to smirk at him, “come on. How were you standing?”

With a sigh, he stands and reaches out, grabbing her by the shoulders and maneuvering her around until she's facing him head on from a couple of feet away. She looks down at the scant space between them, then up again.

“Really?”

“What?”

“Wow. I mean it's in the books and everything, but I just assumed Chuck had a really bad sense of distan—”

Catching sight of the look on Dean's face, Charlie cuts herself off, pressing her lips together.

“You done?”

Lips still sealed, she nods.

With a sigh, he lifts his hand to replicate Castiel's touch against her cheek, curling his fingers in the space before her ear, grazing over her jawline. It feels awkward and weird, and he's about to drop his hand when Charlie bursts out laughing.

“Oh my God,” she says, covering her mouth as if trying to physically hold the laughter in, “sorry. Just. God damn.”

Dean scowls at her, crossing his arms and stepping back.

“No, seriously Dean,” she fans her face, presses the back of her hand against her cheeks, “I thought you said he touched your face.”

“He did.”

“That was not touching.”

“What the hell else do you call it?”

“Uh, maybe fondling? Caressing? Making sweet, sweet face love?”
Dean wrinkles his nose.

“Yeah, okay, maybe not that last one. But I mean, I very nearly leaned in just then, and as cute as you are you're really not my type.”

“You want the rest of the story now, or are you planning on mocking me some more?”

“There’s more? I thought you said he left?”

“He did. I called him a little while after, and he's going to get in touch with Chuck to see if he's seen anything useful on the tablet. Told him I'd call back when I got home," he says, "Speaking of... you mind if I use your phone?”

“Go for it.”

“Thanks.”

She hands it over, and Dean scrolls through the contacts, tapping on Handmaiden. His finger hovers over the number, and he smiles at Charlie, waiting for her to leave. She smiles back. Sits down.

“Well, go on,” she says, chin in her hands.

“I'm not calling with an audience, Charlie.”

"Damn," she says, though she's still grinning, "I hoped I'd get to see you all flustered."

"I don't get flustered."

Charlie nods, but it doesn't look like she believes him. Dean frowns at her. Taking in his expression, Charlie darts in to squeeze him briefly around the waist.

"I'm just teasing, Dean," she says quietly before she leaves, “I'm really glad you found him.”

“Thanks, Charlie.”
There are limits, Castiel finds, to what his grace is capable of influencing.

With very little effort, he can stitch flesh and bone back together until it's whole and clean and healthy. He can slip between the fabric of space and time, follow the ebb and flow of the universe as easily as a sailor can navigate the Atlantic. He can restore his vessel back to its original state, right down to the chemical compounds of Jimmy's underarm deodorant and the crumbs in his coat pockets.

No matter how hard he tries, though, he can't seem to will away the blood and gore that has found its way into the crevices of the angel tablet.

It's like a mirror, and every attempt he makes just bounces back against him.

So, in the harsh fluroescent glare of a Biggerson's bathroom somewhere west of Rockland, he washes the Word of God with ocean breeze hand soap. It doesn't smell like any ocean breeze he's ever encountered. He doesn't like it.

As he scrubs at the stone, the bulb above him buzzes and flickers, and though he knows the difference between angelic interference and an electrical fault, he feels fear. It crawls up his arms, itching under his skin. It's not an unfamiliar emotion, but it's still so much more than he was ever meant to feel, and it makes his breath come short and shallow. He is afraid that the prophet won't be able to find anything. He is afraid that he will never find a solution. That he will be alone, fleeing forever, never getting another moment to just be.

Most of all, he is afraid that while he keeps moving from city to city, town to town, time will pass quickly and leave nothing for him at the end. His minds eye supplies the image of a black car abandoned, rusted on a roadside, it's owner and his brother swept away to a Heaven he cannot return to, and he feels his heart clench.

With one hand on the counter, watching dirty pink bubbles spiral down the drain, he takes a deep breath. He needs to calm down. He thinks of Dean's prayers, remembers bronze-tinted light wrapping warm around his grace and calling him home, and soon he can breathe again. He can breathe, though he shouldn't need to.

He's not sure precisely when that particular need started, but he's spent the past few years scrambling down the slippery slope toward humanity, and he suspects that at this point if he were to take the final plunge and fall, much would stay the same.

He's been tempted, more than once, to throw caution to the wind and let it happen. To tumble down to Earth; trade his wings for a true heartbeat, his halo for sleep, for dreams. Sometimes, he thinks of letting his grace go, letting it plunge deep into a forest floor to grow into something lush and green and beautiful.

The only thing that's stopped him is the uncertainty about whether he would be allowed to remain in the vessel he has come to call his body, or sent as a new soul to be born a human child. If he'd wanted it sooner, he could have asked Anna, even Joshua in his garden. But Anna is dead, and the thought of going to Joshua after everything he's done leaves a bitter ache in his chest. The risk that
he'd be someone new is too great.

With a bitter sigh, he returns to scrubbing.

The tablet is almost completely clean when it begins to burn against his fingertips, and before the other angels can lock on his location he flies quickly to indistinguishable bathrooms in San Diego, Boston, Missoula, Cheyenne, Wichita and Palm Beach before settling in Jackson, Tennessee. The tablet is still clutched in his wet hands, and he turns on the new faucet, rinsing the last of the blood away.

After drying it with a wad of paper towel, he pulls out Dean's cell.

The first picture he takes is partially obscured by a fuzzy pink shape that may or may not be his thumb, and in trying again he taps an icon on the screen by mistake and ends up with a photograph of himself frowning in concentration.

His third attempt is considerably more fruitful, and satisfied that it's the best he's going to get, he sends Chuck the message before pushing the tablet back through his skin with a twinge of discomfort.
The phone rings seconds later, and he presses answer.

“Can you read it?”

“You're not Dean,” Chuck replies, and Castiel stops himself from saying *obviously*, opting instead to explain.

“Dean gave me his phone.”

There's a brief pause before Chuck speaks again.

“Castiel? Is that you?” he sounds worried, and Castiel wonders if he still thinks himself responsible for everything they've all been through, despite being told he is simply a conduit for the gospel, “Are you okay?”
“Yes. Can you—”

“Read it? Yeah. I mean, I think so. It might take a few days, but I'm pretty sure I'll be able to work it out with my, uh... insight.”

“What insight?”

“It's kind of a long story?” Chuck says, voice ticking up at the end as if he's asking a question, and Castiel squints toward the phone as if Chuck can see him, “actually, it's a really long story. I've seen some serious crap these last few years.”

“We all thought you were dead,” Castiel tells him.

“Well. Like I said—”

“It's a long story.”

“Yeah.”

Castiel has a sinking feeling that Chuck is itching to tell his long story, and to deter him, he speaks quickly.

“You need to begin translation immediately.”

“I doubt I'll get much done tonight.”

“Where are you?”

“On a bus heading out out of Denver.”

“Is that safe?”

“Not really. But I'll be arriving in Lebanon first thing in the morning, so...”

“Lebanon?”

“The town, not the country. Place where Sam and Dean have been living. It's warded against pretty much everything, and I saw myself in their kitchen so I'm gonna end up there whether I go by choice or not,” Chuck says, resigned, “visions, man. They're a raging pain in the ass.”

Despite never having had one himself, Castiel has no doubt that it's true. He's about to say as much when the tablet begins to grow hot, buzzing painfully against his ribs. Barely ten minutes have passed since he landed here.

“I need to fly again,” he tells Chuck, rubbing at his midsection though he knows it makes no difference to the uncomfortable feeling, “good luck.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Castiel slips the phone back into his coat pocket before he flies.

After three minutes and nine more Biggerson's, Castiel finds himself in Bozeman, Montana, and realizes that he has a problem.

There's a stain on the floor to the left of the pie bar, it's shape vaguely reminiscent of the Rosette Nebula, and he recognizes it. He's been here before. More than once, he thinks. He glances around
and sees the chipped corner of the booth at the back of the restaurant, the bobble-headed novelty pen on the edge of the cash register, the framed photograph of a smiling blonde woman on the wall, her name signed in illegible silver letters across the background and knows that it's not identical. None of the restaurants are, not really. Not when you get to know the tiny differences. He's been in every one of the locations enough times now to recognise them at a glance, and when he feels the other angels closing in on him again he has no doubt that they have, too.

He flies on immediately, keeps on flying until he's dizzy with it, the pain of the burning tablet the only thing stopping him from losing focus, and when it finally cools he lands in Waimea, Hawaii.

With trembling limbs he sinks into a booth by the window and presses his eyes shut and waits.

[below are the text messages from this chapter for those unable to view them as images]

FROM: Castiel
SENT: 2:30am
Need translation before this explodes. Work quickly, prophet.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry for the long wait, there's been more drama and general crappiness that has stopped me from writing as much as I'd like. That said, I should have finished the next two chapters before the end of the week (they're 3/4 written now) and after that we'll be entering fluff territory.
Dean waits until he hears Charlie's chair scrape across the war room floor; until he hears her speaking in hushed tones to a half-woken Sam, before he hits call.

Castiel answers immediately, as if he'd been waiting, and Dean remembers reading about him standing on the shore of Lake Michigan willing his cell to ring. It sets something fluttering in his chest to think he might have been doing the same thing again, and he can help but smile.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Cas.”

“Dean?” Castiel asks, as if confused by the voice he's hearing.

“You expecting someone else?”

“The screen said The Queen is calling.”

With a laugh, Dean sinks down onto a stool at the counter.

“This is Charlie's cell.”

“Oh,” Castiel says, pausing briefly, “I thought you were going to call from your new phone so I'd have the number.”

Dean blanches. In all his eagerness to call Castiel, he'd forgotten what his excuse had been. He knows there's a spare cell lying around in the bunker somewhere, but he has no idea what the number is.

“Right,” he says, clearing his throat, “I thought you were going to call from your new phone so I'd have the number.”

Dean blanches. In all his eagerness to call Castiel, he'd forgotten what his excuse had been. He knows there's a spare cell lying around in the bunker somewhere, but he has no idea what the number is.

“Right,” he says, clearing his throat, “yeah. Uh... I haven't, uh... I mean I didn't get one yet. But I said I'd call when I got home, so—”

“I'm glad you did.”

There's warmth, sincerity, in Castiel's voice, and Dean relaxes, smiling down at the counter top. He thinks about saying me too, but he's pretty sure that's obvious.

“Did you get in touch with Chuck?” he asks instead.

“Yes. He seemed fairly confident that he'd be able to decode the tablet, and he's on his way to you as we speak.”

“Good. He'll be safer here.”

It takes a lot of self control to not mention that Castiel would probably be safer here, too, but he manages to stop himself. It's pointless to even suggest it. No matter how much warding they put up, the risk of the other angels tracking him is too great, and he knows Castiel would never agree to it if there's even the slightest chance that he would be putting them in harms way.

Castiel sighs, and Dean hears the rustle of fabric as though he's slouching, slumping forward in his seat. The mental image is unsettling. The idea of Castiel being tired at all is unsettling.

“You still doing okay, Cas?”
“For now. But I need you and Sam to help me with something, if you can.”

“Yeah, whatever you need. I'll get Sam... just a sec.”

Dean walks out into the war room, where Charlie is sitting at her computer and Sam is leaning from beside her, reading something on the screen. They both look up when he enters, and Dean taps a button on the cellphone.

“Alright, Cas, you're on speaker.”

“Hello.”

Sam and Charlie respond at once; Sam's voice still a little rough from his earlier coughing fit, Charlie's uncharacteristically shy.

“How's it going, Cas?”

“Hiya.”

“I'm well,” Castiel replies to Sam before asking; “who else is there?”

“That would be Charlie,” Dean tells him.

“The Queen?”

“Wow, I like you already,” Charlie says, grinning at the phone, and Dean rolls his eyes.

“It's just a nickname, Cas.”

“Oh.”

“Don't listen to him,” Charlie says, still grinning, “I'm definitely royalty.”

Sam snorts out a laugh, and Charlie fixes him with a look, challenging him to deny it. He holds up his hands in surrender.

“Yeah, definitely royalty, Cas,” he agrees, and Charlie crosses her arms, smirking.

“Damn right.”

“So,” Dean says over them, “crib notes; Cas has the angel tablet and he's gotta keep moving or it's gonna blow. He's basically the bus from Speed.”

At the mention of exploding, Sam and Charlie end up with matching expressions of concern on their faces. Castiel meanwhile, his voice hollowed by distance, asks quizzically, “What do you mean, I'm a bus?”

“It's a—forget it,” Dean says, rubbing at his forehead, “what do you need us to do?”

“I'm running out of Biggerson's.”

“Come again?”

“My evasion technique has been working so far because each restaurant is basically identical. But there are slight differences. The views from the windows, the number of tables—”

“Wait, what evasion technique?” Sam asks.
“It's a little complex,” Castiel says, pausing to think of a way to explain it, “Are you at all familiar with the work of Erwin Schrödinger?”

“The physicist from Austria?” Sam asks.

“That's the guy with the dead-not-dead cat, right?” Charlie asks, though from her tone it sounds like she already knows.

“Yes,” Castiel says, and Dean narrows his eyes first at Sam and Charlie, then at the cell phone, because apparently everyone but him studies physics for fun.

“So you know random Austrian physicists but you've never heard of Speed?” Dean asks, incredulous, “That's it. When you get back, you've got some holes that seriously need filling.”

Charlie snorts into her hand and Sam turns beet red with repressed laughter. Dean flushes, rolling his eyes.

“That's not... you know what I meant.”

On the other end of the line, Castiel is oblivious. Dean is relieved.

“So you understand the basic theory?”

“Yeah,” Sam says, wiping silent tears from his eyes.

“I am the cat. Biggerson's is the box.”

“You're alive and dead?” Charlie asks, resting her elbows on the table and frowning.

“More like everywhere and nowhere, but that's the basic idea.”

Sam's nodding as he figures it out, and he leans closer to the phone, clearing his throat.

“Okay, so... The more familiar you and the other angels are becoming with each location, the less it's working because it's no longer an identical room but a similar one?”

“Essentially, yes. What I need is for you to find me a new box, so to speak. Someplace with many locations that all look alike.”

“Can't you just keep appearing here and stare at the wall?” Dean suggests, knowing how pathetic it sounds but barely caring.

He pointedly ignores the judgemental look he gets from Sam.

“I don't think that would work,” Castiel says carefully, and Dean sighs.

“I figured.”

“Though obviously I'd rather be there,” Castiel adds after a moment.

“Yeah, I know.”

There's a brief, slightly awkward silence, and Sam coughs into the crook of his elbow. Dean can't tell if it's from discomfort or his trial sickness, and he's about to make another, probably useless suggestion, when Charlie speaks.
“I’ve got an idea,” she says, raising her hand as if she's in a classroom, and Dean looks away from the phone to see her hopeful expression. “How about cinemas? I mean, there's got to be tens of thousands of them all over the world, and even if they're run by different companies, they all look pretty much the same.”

“Plus it's dark, so anything that is different will take a lot longer to notice,” Sam adds, sitting up straighter in his seat, “I think she's onto something, Cas.”

“I think so, too. Thank you, Charlie.”

“Hey, however I can help,” she grins, and Dean claps her on the shoulder.

“You know Cas, I wouldn't have even found you tonight if it wasn't for Charlie.”

“Then I owe you a great deal more gratitude,” Castiel tells Charlie.

Dean kisses the top of her head, and she squirms away, embarrassed.

“Jeez, guys, quit it,” Charlie says, going bright red and sinking down into her seat. Dean shoves her shoulder, laughing.

“I'll need to fly again shortly,” Castiel announces, “Sam, Charlie, if you don't mind I'd like to speak privately to Dean first.”

“Sure, no problem,” Sam says, waggling his eyebrows at Dean, and Charlie suppresses her laughter, “look after yourself, Cas.”

“That's the idea.”

Dean glares at both of them, though his heart isn't in it, and switches speaker off before walking back into the kitchen.

“What's up?”

“I was looking through the photos on your phone earlier.”

For a few seconds, Dean's eyes go wide, and he tries to remember if there are any pictures on there he wouldn't want Castiel seeing—he knows for certain there were a few photos on his old cell that he definitely would not have wanted him to see—but he's been practically celibate since they got back from Purgatory, and he's pretty sure his cellphone camera roll reflects that. The panic barely has a chance to kick in before Castiel goes on.

“You took pictures of me in Oklahoma,” he says, though it sounds a little like a question, and Dean holds his breath waiting for the rest of it.

Castiel seems to be waiting too. They are both silent for far too long.

“Dean? Are you still there?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I'm here.”

“Why did you take those pictures?”

Rubbing at the back of his neck, Dean shrugs uncomfortably.

“Y'know,” he says, though he's almost positive he's going to need to explain it, “just in case.”
“In case what?”

“In case something happened. In case you left again.”

“I did leave again.”

“Yeah.”

“But having the pictures made up for it?”

“Not really,” Dean admits with a miserable laugh, “looking at them hurt like a bitch.”

“Oh.”

“Still glad I had ’em though. Was nice to see you even if I couldn't see you, you know?”

As absurd as it seems, Dean's sure he can hear Castiel smiling.

“It's like when I think about your prayers,” he says, understanding.

“You think about my prayers?”

“Of course. Every day. Dean, I—” Castiel stops, and Dean pictures him looking into the middle distance, the way he does when there's something coming through on angel radio. When he speaks again, he sounds dismayed. “I have to go.”

“I'll send you a message when I have the new number.”

“Goodbye, Dean.”

Dean doesn't like how final that sounds, and he almost says something when Castiel adds; “I'll see you soon.”

After he ends the call, the silence in the kitchen is overwhelming. He makes his way out into the library to find the spare phone. As he goes, he sends out a quiet prayer.

*Soon isn't soon enough.*
Dean isn’t used to smiling in the morning. Most days—if he even manages to sleep—he wakes with the dawn, and with the sun his worry rises. He spends the first few moments of consciousness with a crease in his brow and a nervous, angry feeling in his gut. If he’s lucky his morning coffee will do away with one or the other, but never both.

Today, though, Dean sleeps until well after noon, his dreams uninterrupted and warm, and when he wakes a sense of calm settles over him like a blanket. He doesn’t move for a few minutes, just stares up at the ceiling, tries to hold on to the unfamiliar feeling.

He’s already been awake a few minutes when he leans out of bed to pick up his replacement cell, and finds it blinking with a new message, received over two hours ago. When he reads it, his smile grows wider.
He taps out a reply—telling Castiel that the man in front of him was probably a pimp—before climbing out of bed and making his way to the bathroom, leaving the phone on his desk. Sam and Charlie are talking quietly in the war room, too engrossed in their conversation to notice him walk by, so when he finds the bathroom door closed Dean just assumes Charlie is in the habit of closing doors and doesn't hesitate to shove it open.

It gets halfway before it collides with something solid. Or, he quickly realizes at the harsh gasp of pain from the other side, someone.

Carefully, Dean pushes it fully open and is greeted by the sight of Chuck, clutching at his bloody face and grimacing in pain.

“Ughhh! Whaddahell, Deab?” he groans, fingers pressing gingerly against the bridge of his nose, “you brog my node.”

“Crap, sorry,” Dean moves past him, grabbing a wad of toilet paper and shoving it into Chuck's hands, “didn't know you were here.”

Glaring at Dean as though he'd smacked him with the door on purpose, Chuck presses the paper against his nose, checking constantly to see if it's stopped bleeding. It doesn't take too long, and
Dean's ready with a damp towel.

“It's probably not broken.”

Chuck takes the towel without comment and steps in front of the mirror, continuing to glare at Dean’s reflection as he cleans his face. When Dean checks for breaks in the bone he flinches, and his scowl grows more pronounced.

“It's fine,” Dean tells him, stepping back and clapping him good-naturedly on the shoulder, “just a blood nose.”

Chuck doesn't look convinced.

“Id dudn' feel fibe,” he says thickly, and Dean rolls his eyes.

“Give it five minutes.”

Before Chuck can argue, Dean ushers him out of the bathroom and closes the door.

When he makes his way out into the war room shortly after, Chuck's still glowering, but Sam and Charlie look up with matching smirks. Sam shakes his head, and Dean gets the distinct impression that Chuck has been doing more than a little whining over his minor injury.

“Sorry about your face, Chuck,” Dean says sincerely, and when Chuck glances up from the print out of the angel tablet he adds; “your nose, too.”

“Good one,” Chuck replies darkly, turning back to his work.

Dean laughs, heading for the kitchen.

“Anyone want coffee?”

The general consensus is yes, so Dean sets about brewing a whole pot. He carries it out just as Sam starts coughing again.

“You doin' okay, Sammy?”

Sam nods, one hand pressed over his mouth as he tries to stop coughing, and his eyes water with the effort. When it subsides, he takes a huge gulp of coffee. Clears his throat.

“Fine,” he croaks, but the word barely makes it out before he's coughing again, and he has to excuse himself to the bathroom to empty his lungs.

Dean watches him go with a frown before turning to Chuck.

“Please tell me you've seen something about whatever he's got.”

Chuck fidgets in his seat.

“Nothing you don't already know.”

“Well, any ideas about who would know something? He's getting worse.”

As if to punctuate this, a particularly loud cough echoes down the hall, followed by a miserable groan. Chuck just shrugs.
“Maybe there'll be something on the tablet?”

“Maybe,” Dean says, sinking down into a chair beside Charlie, who's frowning in thought, “you got another idea, Charlie?”

“I was just thinking... how about Missouri?” Charlie looks to Chuck in question, “She's still kicking, right?”

Dean raises his brow. He'd all but forgotten about the psychic, and immediately feels guilty. Last time they'd seen her, they'd promised to keep in touch. That was more than seven years ago.

“Yeah, I think so. I mean, I haven't seen her up here for years,” Chuck taps his temple, “but I tend to feel it when one of the characters—uh... When one of the people I wrote about dies.”

He looks sheepishly at Dean, whose eyes are narrowed at him, knuckles flexing against the table top.

“Characters?”

“You already hit me in the face once today,” Chuck points out, leaning away, “doing it again would be redundant.”

“Yeah, but see that was an accident,” Dean says, smiling with all the warmth of a shark, “which means I didn't get any satisfaction from it.”

Chuck grimaces, shuffling further away, “Can we talk about Missouri again?”

“It's worth a shot, right?” Charlie asks them both, hopeful, and Dean lets a relieved-looking Chuck off the hook. He nods to himself.

“It won't hurt. Might as well see what she can see.”

“What who can see?”

They all look up to see Sam, pale and exhausted, walking slowly into the room.

“We're thinking Missouri might be able to tell what's wrong with you,” Dean says, standing and stretching out his arms, “y'know. Besides the obvious.”

Sam shoots him a pissy look, and Dean grins.

“What say you, little brother? You think you're up for a road trip?”

Dean pats his pockets, looking for his keys.

“What, right now?”

“Time's a wastin', Sammy.”

“It'll take us like four hours to get to Lawrence. Probably closer to six because we'll need to stop every time I have to cough up a lung.”

“So what?”

“So we can't just turn up at Missouri's house unannounced at 9pm.”

“Nine isn't exactly late.”
“Dean, she's like sixty-five years old. She'll probably be asleep. We'll go in the morning.”

“But we need to—”

“Can you go argue about this someplace else?” Chuck asks, and they both look down at him, incredulous.

Charlie laughs aloud at the looks on their faces, and Chuck turns his frown toward her.

“Fine,” Dean says, throwing his hands up in surrender and heading for the hallway, “we'll go in the morning. Charlie, you wanna come help me clear the rest of the junk out of your room?”

“Sure,” she says, standing up and linking her elbow around Sam's, “c'mon Treebeard, you can supervise.”

“I told you Charlie, I'll come to the convention but I'm not dressing as—”

“Yes,” she says firmly, dragging all six feet four inches of him along beside her as she walks out of the room, “you are.”

[below are the text messages from this chapter for those unable to view them as images]

FROM: Dean
SENT: 3:24am
Nice pic! Now I'll know it's you when you call.

FROM: Dean
SENT: 3:24am
If you call, I mean. I get it if you can't. Just look after yourself, ok?

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 3:35am
I will.

FROM: Dean
SENT: 3:35am
Good. I'm gonna crash. Night, Cas.

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 3:35am
Goodnight, Dean.

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 11:19am
I'm in Auckland. The man in front of me has a picture of an Impala on his phone. It is bright green. You'd hate it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry it's been taking so long for me to update. There's still been a lot of drama in
the world of me, and on top of it all I have just moved house (back with my parents oh nooooo) so it's been tough trying to find time/privacy to write.

That said, I'm almost done with the outlines/dialogue of the last few chapters, and am in the process of editing the next two, which means the whole thing should be finished this month. Thank you so much to everyone who has commented or left kudos; you have no idea how much it means to me to see that you are still enjoying this fic. Provided I don't experience any further setbacks, I'll have another new chapter for you all before the end of the week <3

~ Imogen
The rest of the afternoon passes slow.

The closet in the room they’d given Charlie is, like every other inch of space in the bunker, filled with boxes stacked as high as the ceiling. They drag them down, transferring everything down into the storage room downstairs, and eventually the rising dust that shifts with everything they move proves too much for Sam’s lungs. He leaves, coughing and groaning, and Dean stares after him with a crease in his brow.

“He'll be okay,” Charlie says, and Dean turns to see her watching him from the other side of the room.

He nods, lifting another box and waiting for Charlie to follow him.

“Yeah, I hope so.”

Downstairs, both put down their boxes and shuffle things around to make space on the overcrowded shelves. As Charlie drags a carved wooden chest out of the way, saying something about the many real-world applications of her mad Tetris skills, Dean’s phone buzzes. He digs it out of his pocket and grins at the message, tapping out a reply.

“You're like a pair of teenagers,” Charlie says with a smirk, crouching down to look more closely at the chest. Curious, she opens it and pulls out a black cloth drawstring bag, it's contents rattling loud.

“Shut up,” Dean tells her, still distracted by his cell phone.

“Where's the fun in—holy crap.”

Dean looks up from his cell and sees Charlie staring into the bag with her mouth hanging open.

“What is it?”

“There's a freaking skeleton in here.”

Dean steps forward to glance over her shoulder. The bones are old—ancient he thinks—and he wonders why they aren't stored properly. It can't be a good thing.

“Yep,” he says, taking the bag and pulling it closed, “probably not a great idea to go opening this stuff without checking the label first, though.”

Putting it back in the chest, he checks the markings on the lid, breathing out a sigh of relief when he confirms that it isn’t a curse box.

“Noted,” Charlie says, dusting off her hands on her jeans and looking over the rest of the boxes, “but I definitely want to be here when you do a full inventory.”

“Deal.”

“Awesome.”
By the time they're done, Sam's ordered pizza, and they sit around the library to eat. Chuck rubs his red-rimmed eyes, pushing a stack of translations across the table to make space for the food.

“How's it going so far?” Sam asks him, wiping greasy fingers on a paper napkin before picking up his beer.

“It’s all sounding pretty familiar.”

“Familiar?” Sam frowns in confusion, while Dean asks through a mouthful, “How?”

“Uh... well, I mean,” Chuck takes a bite of his pizza, chewing while he thinks about the question, “the language, you know? I've seen it in my head.”

“Right,” Sam nods, “anything good?”

“Nothing solid yet.”

They eat in silence after that, and Dean reads over Chucks notes—or attempts to. Considering the guy's supposed to be a writer, Chuck could stand to learn how to use a pen.
“You ever consider a career in medicine?” Dean asks him when they’re done, handing the papers back. Unsurprisingly, Chuck ignores the question. He gets back to work, smearing half-dried ink across the page and squinting at the picture of the tablet.

He’s still working on it near midnight, when the others all shuffle off to bed.

In the morning, Dean wakes before his alarm and shuffles out into the kitchen. Chuck is nowhere to be seen, but Sam and Charlie are sitting at the counter. Sam pushes a mug of coffee toward him before he can ask.

“Mornin’,” Dean says, taking a sip, and Charlie stretches, yawning, “you guys been up long?”
“‘Bout half an hour,” Sam says, echoing Charlies yawn, “Chuck woke both of us up looking for someplace to sleep. He's in my room, now.”

Dean grunts in reply, pulling open the cupboard to find something to eat, but he's anxious to get moving and can't decide what he wants.

“You wanna grab breakfast on the road?” he asks over his shoulder.

“Sure. I already gave Charlie a run down of all the wards and stuff, so I'm ready when you are.”

“Gimme five minutes.”

“Meet you at the car.”

They've been driving for close to an hour when Dean's cell chimes from his pocket and he digs it out, steering one-handed as he unlocks the screen.

“Watch the road,” Sam says, snatching it out of his hand, and Dean glares at him.

“What's it say?”

Sam snorts with laughter and shakes his head.

“It's from Cas,” he says, as if Dean thought it would be anyone else, “he says he accidentally stole a guy's popcorn when he flew out of New Delhi.”

“Accidentally? How is that even possible?”

“No idea.”

“Ask him.”

Sam shakes his head and types out Dean's question. A few seconds later a reply comes through, and he laughs again. Dean glances across.

“The guy dropped something under his seat and asked Cas to hold his popcorn while he looked for it,” Sam says, grinning, “he flew before he realized it was still in his hands.”

The phone chimes again and Sam bursts out with another laugh.

“He says he likes popcorn.”

Dean grins across at him.

“Tell him he clearly has good taste,” he says with a wink, and Sam pulls a face at him, shoving the cell into the center console.

“I'm not flirting with Cas for you.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Reply to him next time we stop.”

Sam puts the phone in the glove compartment and turns up the volume on the radio, tapping his fingers to the beat of the Bon Jovi cassette they've been listening to since they left Lebanon. The atmosphere is good, and for a while Dean can almost pretend that Sam is fine, that they are just out
on the road like old times, heading toward the next hunt. Then Sam starts coughing again, and the illusion shatters. Dean pulls into a gas station off the highway.

It isn't until they're only a few miles out of Lawrence that Dean starts to worry about what Missouri is going to say about the seven years without contact.

"You think she's gonna be pissed?" he asks, glancing over at Sam, who's been dozing with his head against the window.

"Hmm?"

"Missouri. You know she's gonna know we've both been dead since she saw us last," Dean says, grip tightening on the wheel, "she's gonna be pissed."

Sam shrugs, yawning, and scratches at his jaw.

"Not much we can do about it if she is."

"We should bring her something."

"Like what? I don't think Hallmark makes sorry we didn't tell you we died cards."

Dean snorts, shaking his head.

"Flowers?" he suggests, though it seems like a stupid idea the second he says it aloud.

"She'll just hit us over the head with them."

"Good point," Dean says, thinking again for a moment, "Pie?"

"Are you sure this isn't just about you wanting pie?"

"No."

His stomach, traitor that it is, rumbles loudly as if on cue, and Sam raises his brow.

"Shut up," Dean says, "everyone likes pie."

There's a mall not far from Missouri's house, and while Sam waits in the parking lot, Dean heads inside, seeking out a bakery. He's on his way back to the car, thinking that he needs to introduce Castiel to the joys of pecan pie, when his cell rings. When he sees the name on the caller ID his stomach swoops low.

"Hey Cas, what's up?"

"Dean, where are you?"

"Mall in Lawrence... why? Where are you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I... it's possible that this cinema is in the same mall."

Dean's eyes go wide, and he looks around for a sign. As soon as he sees it he's running, feet slapping loud against the tile. His voice is distorted by his breath when he speaks again.

"I'm coming now. Which movie is it?"

"How would I know that?"
“Well, what's on the screen?”

“A bearded man with a glowing circle on his chest.”

“Don't go anywhere.”

He hangs up.

Barely five minutes later, he runs into the theatre and pauses at the bottom of the stairs, scanning the crowd. He catches Castiel's eye and waves for him to come down. Castiel does.

They stand in the dark exit hall, illuminated by a green and white sign over the door, and Dean takes a moment to catch his breath.

“What are you doing here?” Castiel asks him.

Dean holds up a plastic bag with a white cardboard box inside.

“Pie run,” he grins, “What are the odds we'd be in the same mall?”

“Around one in two hundred thousand six hundred and seventy four, though I expect it's actually a great deal less likely, considering that this happened to be one of the times I've been able to stay more than a few seconds, which usually only happens every eight or ninth—” Castiel sees the slightly dazed expression on Dean's face and stops, shaking his head, “that was a rhetorical question, wasn't it?”

“Yeah, but don't let that stop you,” Dean laughs, leaning back against the wall, “man it's good to see you.”

“And you—” Castiel glances down at the floor with a furrowed brow and sighs, “The tablet is starting to burn again.”

Dean's heart sinks.

“Shit.”

“We still have maybe three or four minutes.”

“Have to make 'em count, then.”

Looking back up, there's the barest hint of a smile on Castiel's lips.

“We will.”

Chapter End Notes

Phew, just made it! I'm going to be away for a week, so there'll be no update until the 27th. It's gonna be a fluffy one, so hopefully you'll think it's worth the wait :)
As always, thank you for your kudos and comments--they really do help keep me motivated.
~ Imogen
Castiel, standing in the dark hallway beside the movie theater, watches Dean watching him and wonders if he was too subtle.

It's been seventeen seconds since he'd made his attempt at flirtation, and despite the way Dean's tongue had darted out over his lip when Castiel spoke, despite the pulse that is now visible and thrumming fast in his throat, Dean hasn't moved. Hasn't even said anything.

Castiel might be fairly new to this, but he had been certain that his smile was adequately seductive. Now he's not so sure, because time is ticking down and Dean is just standing there.

They've been skirting the issue these last few days, acknowledging the presence of their feelings for each other without addressing them directly, and Castiel is tired of it. He regrets their last meeting, regrets the hesitance that stopped him from taking one more step. He regrets each phone conversation they've had since then, each message that could have been colored with love but wasn't for fear; pointless, enervating fear.

And he knows that his fear was pointless, knows because he knows that Dean feels this way too, and he has known since the morning Dean prayed to him from a park in Lebanon, since the fractured, desperate prayers that continued that entire day, building, building to a crescendo that came to an abrupt and jarring halt the moment Dean had found him in Red Cloud.

When he leaves here—in two minutes, forty-two seconds, maybe three if he really pushes it—it could be the last time he ever sees him. It's always a possibility, really, but with the awful, clenching ache of the tablet against his rib cage and the angels so close on his trail, he knows that the odds of capture, of death, are considerably higher than usual.

Even if he manages to keep ahead of the angels for long enough to finally rid himself of the burden of God's word, he knows that it could be weeks, or months, or years before he is free to fly to Dean's side. The chance of accidentally landing in the same town, even the same state as Dean a third time is incredibly low.

It's this knowledge that makes him try again.

“I hoped we'd have time to talk properly,” he says carefully, edging a half-step forward into Dean's space, “about this. About us.”

To Castiel's amazement, Dean looks surprised, as if despite every hint, every barely veiled confession, he still doesn't quite believe that Castiel feels as he does.

“Me too,” Dean says after a pause, and he's quiet, so much quieter than usual, barely audible over the sound of music playing loud over the cinema speakers.

As he takes in Dean's eyes with their soft-creased corners, his full lips, so close, Castiel wonders at how something so simple as Dean looking at him can set his entire body humming like a struck bell. It's strange, he thinks, that in a little over nine million years of existence, he can't remember ever being so nervous as he is right now. He takes an unsteady breath.
“But neither of us are very good at talking,” he says, looking at Dean meaningfully, and Dean's eyes narrow in confusion. He inches closer still, sees Dean's throat bob, his tongue darting out over his lips.

“So, if you're amenable,” he goes on, voice dipping low as he raises a hand to rest in the center of Dean's chest, “I think we should just—”

Before he can finish, Dean finally, finally, gets it. He drops the bag he'd been carrying and brings his hand to settle over Castiel's, fingers curling together as he leans in to close the few inches between them.

His lips are firm but slow-moving, and Castiel all but forgets the tablet buzzing beneath his skin because this is electricity.

Dean's hands find their way to his face, holding him, tilting his head to better claim his mouth, and warm, calloused thumbs move against Castiel's cheeks, smoothing down. His heart, the heart he shouldn't even have, pounds hard because everything he has needed, wanted, craved; everything is here, everything is now.

Soon, too soon, the tablet burns within him painfully, and he pulls away, regretting it immediately, but Dean just drags him back in, pleading silently with hands and lips. Castiel can't help but give in.

With a sound he wasn't aware he was capable of making, he grips Dean's shirt and pushes him back against the wall, parting his lips to the wet press of Dean's tongue, and the taste of something sweet, of powdered sugar and pastry, slips into his mouth as fingers move back to thread through his hair. While his own hands roam, feeling warm skin through worn cotton, everything fades away until there's nothing in the world but Dean and touch and breath and breathlessness and want and please and more, and he wonders at how he can still feel such longing when Dean is right here, pressed against him and perfect.

But the tablet is insistent, and with a regret far greater than he could have anticipated he moves to press his lips softly against the corner of Dean's mouth, an apology before he speaks.

“I have to leave,” he says quietly against his cheek, Dean's fingers still moving in his hair, stroking slow down to his nape, and he feels Dean nod even as his arms pull him closer, cheek to cheek, stubble scratching.

Dean sighs, squeezing him tightly for a moment before reluctantly letting go, and Castiel wants so much to stay that it's like a physical ache. But he can't. He knows he can't.

“I'll call you,” he says roughly, stepping back.

Dean's amused grin at that is entirely unexpected, but Castiel has no time to ask for an explanation before the tablet flares with new intensity, and he reaches out, smoothing a hand over Dean's cheek one last time, committing the warmth of him to memory before he flies.

The last thing he feels before he spreads his wings is Dean turning his face to press his lips firmly against his palm. He soars.

There's a few minutes after Castiel disappears when Dean's lips still tingle with the feel of him, the
taste of him, and he walks back toward the parking lot in a daze.

_I kissed Cas_, he keeps thinking giddily.

He's not entirely sure when his brain turned completely into mush, but he'd be willing to bet that it was at some point between being shoved against the wall and feeling a whimper roll through Castiel's chest almost as much as he heard it.

_Cas kissed me_, he thinks, and grins down at his shoes.

When he gets back to the car, Sam is asleep, his face pressed against the window. He wakes with a jolt when Dean yanks the door, and he blinks, startled until he seems to remember where he is.

He takes one look at Dean's face, and frowns.

“You look weird,” he says.

“Says the guy with a ladies hairdo.”

Sam shoots a pissy look at him, and Dean laughs as he turns the key, the engine roaring to life. A half-second later the radio clicks on, and REO Speedwagon starts playing right on cue. Dean's mouth lifts up at one side, and he turns up the volume before leaning one hand against Sam's headrest and looking over his shoulder as he backs out of the parking space. Sam stares between him and the speakers.

“Seriously? _I Can't Fight This Feeling_?”

“What? It's a classic,” Dean says defensively, and Sam's eyes narrow with suspicion.

“Why're you so chipper?”

As he shifts into drive, Dean glances over at him. He can't hide his grin. He kind of doesn't want to. With a shrug, he flicks on the indicator to turn out onto the main road.

“I saw Cas,” he says simply.

Sam's eyes widen, and he looks back toward the parking lot as if he's expecting him to be standing there waving.

“What? Where?”

Dean digs a ticket stub out of his jacket pocket, and Sam takes it, smoothing out the creases.

“The twelve-thirty showing of Iron Man 3?” he looks over at Dean with a raised brow, “he just happened to be here?”

“Yep.”

“Wow. What are the odds?” Sam says in disbelief, shaking his head, “how was he?”

“One in two hundred thousand,” Dean tells him, still smiling like an idiot, “give or take. And he's good. He's really... he's really good.”

Sam gives him an odd look until something seems to click.

“Wait,” he says, a smirk spreading across his face, “did something actually _happen_? Did you finally
talk about—"

“Nah.”

Even though it's only half a lie, he's pretty sure Sam doesn't buy it. Still, he stops asking questions, and that leaves Dean free to think about how right it felt to have Castiel in his arms. He thinks about telling him so in a prayer, briefly wondering if it really counts as a chick flick moment if he doesn't actually say it out loud, before deciding he doesn't even care either way. Castiel sure as hell isn't going to judge him for being sappy, so why should he?

I've wanted to do that forever, Cas, he prays, then, with an adrenaline-fueled bout of honesty adds; it felt like coming home. I miss you already.

He barely holds in his nervous laughter once the prayer is out there, and barely thirty seconds later he feels his cell phone buzz in his pocket. Despite wanting desperately to read it right now this second, he decides to save it for later. Something to look forward to, he thinks.

Just as the song is finishing, crossfading out to the over-excited voice of a radio DJ, Sam pulls him out of his daydreams.

“Uh, Dean?”

“Hmm?” he replies vaguely, slowing to a stop at a red light and glancing over at his brother.

“Where's the pie?”

“It's right--”

He's halfway through gesturing toward the empty back seat before he realizes, empty back seat. After that it takes a few seconds until he works out where the pie is, and with a furious blush creeping up his neck, he quickly checks the rearview and swings the car around in a wide U-turn, headed back toward the mall.

“I think I dropped it in the cinema,” he mutters, and Sam smirks at him from the passenger seat.

“You think?”

Dean shrugs; in his periphery, he sees Sam trying not to laugh.

“But nothing happened, right?” he says, and Dean's face grows infinitely redder.

Sam bursts out laughing, and Dean shoots him an embarrassed glare.

“Keep laughing, Sammy, and I'll tell you in graphic detail what Cas' tongue feels like.”

Sam shuts up pretty quick, after that. Dean just wishes his blush were as cooperative.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed this chapter! Yay, kissing! Schmoopy kissing! <3
~ Imogen
The pie-retrieval detour only sets them back half an hour. A few minutes before three they pull up opposite Missouri's house, a modest white craftsman with a wide front porch, and they climb from the car, stretching. It's on a quiet street that backs onto woodland, and the silver maple leaves rustle in the breeze as Dean makes his way toward the house.

Sam hesitates by the open passenger door, a wrinkle in his brow, and Dean stops to look back at him.

“What is it?”

He shuffles, half opening his mouth and clamping it shut again.

“Spit it out, Sam.”

“Look, just... don't get your hopes up, okay? It's a long shot that she'll even be able to tell what's wrong with me, so—”

“How about we save the defeatist crap for after we've eaten pie?”

With a defeated nod, Sam shuts the door and crosses the street, glancing at Dean as he passes.

“I thought the pie was for Missouri.”

“I thought the pie was for Missouri,” Dean parrots back, pulling a face, and Sam rolls his eyes, laughing as they head up the path.

They're halfway up the porch steps when Missouri pulls open the door, and they both stop in their tracks. She's just as unimpressed as they'd expected her to be, and how a five-foot-six woman in a cardigan can manage to look so damn imposing is a mystery Dean doesn't think he'll ever solve.

“Long time no see,” he says with a grin, and she narrows her eyes at him before her gaze flickers down to the box in his hand.

“If you know what's good for you,” she says, voice clipped as she steps aside to let them in, “that'll be pecan.”

“Like we'd forget.”

“Hmmph.”

As soon as Dean's through the door, Missouri's gaze settles on Sam and all the ire in her eyes is replaced with concern.

“Oh, my,” she murmurs, pulling the door closed after him, “what have you gotten yourself into?”

“We were kind of hoping you could help with that.”

She reaches out to his face as if checking his temperature and shakes her head.
“You're tangled up with somethin' real nasty,” she says quietly, stepping away and leading the way to the kitchen, “come on, come sit down. We'll see if we can sort it out.”

Missouri's house is warm, in every sense of the word. Neat but well lived-in, and she has the heater on, despite the mild, late April weather. Both Sam and Dean are peeling off their jackets before they've finished walking down the hall.

*What is it with old people and not using the air-con*, Dean thinks, and Missouri turns to level him with a stern glare. He gulps.

“Sorry,” he says.

Once they're all seated in her tiny kitchen, they fill her in over slices of pie and home made sweet tea. With her picking half the story out of their heads before they've finished telling it, seven years worth of catch up barely takes an hour, and as she refills their glasses from the pitcher, she lets out an apologetic sigh.

“Boys, I'm sorry, but if an angel can't help you, what makes you think I can?”

“Wishful thinking?” Dean says, ignoring the *told you so* on Sam's face and the sinking feeling in his gut.

She shakes her head again, frowning.

“I'm sorry, Sam.”

Sam nods, staring down at the crumbs on his empty plate, and Dean tries not to worry too much. It's futile. After a few moments of silence, Missouri drums her fingers across the table and speaks.

“I don't know how much good it'd do, but I know a few powerful cleansing rituals...”

“Can't hurt, right?” Dean says.

Leaning across the table, Missouri pats Sam's wrist.

“Come on,” she says, standing, “we'll need some things from the garden.”

Missouri's garden is a tangled mess of color and everything her house isn't. Twisted vines and overgrown shrubs crowd out over the edges of every flower bed, spilling onto the cracked brick path that spirals to the center, and she carries a basket at her elbow, pointing toward various plants.

“Give me a few of the Spanish bugloss flowers,” she tells Dean, gesturing toward a fuzzy-leaved plant with bright blue flowers, “four or five should do.”

Dean pulls them free and drops them into her basket as she scans the garden with narrowed eyes, tapping absently at her lower lip with her index finger until she sees what she needs.

“A handful of leaves from the lemon beebrush,” she points, waiting for Dean to stoop to pick them before turning to his brother, “and Sam, we'll need the tap root from the ferula—the tall one there with the yellow flowers. Just pull the whole thing up. Mind you don't break it, we'll need the whole thing.”

By the time they have everything the basket is overflowing, and they make their way back inside. Missouri has Dean drag the coffee table out of her living room and clear up some space while she goes about grinding the ferula root with a mortar and pestle. Sam is sent into her well organised
pantry with a list of dried herbs to collect.

Even after they've prepared everything, the rituals take a few hours to complete. Despite the seriousness of the situation, both Sam and Dean find it difficult to get through them without laughing. The third ritual in particular involves Sam standing on one leg at the center of a salt circle, humming—one long, sustained note that Missouri tells him he needs to hold until she's finished with the smudge stick. They have to start over three times, and even then, it's only the fear of Missouri slapping them upside the head that keeps them from losing it.

It's well after eight in the evening when they're finally done, and Sam's face is brighter, his cheeks a little more pink. Dean decides to believe it's because of the rituals and not the excessive heating in Missouri's house.

They thank her, ready to start the long drive back to Lebanon, and she tells them not to be ridiculous.

“I won't have you two driving all hours of the night.”

“It's really fine—”

“My guest room isn't just for show,” she says firmly, “now make yourselves useful and get the spare blankets from the hall cupboard. I'd say I hope you both like meatloaf, but I know you do, and we'd be having it regardless.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Dean says, and Sam snickers until she shoots him a look.

“Being sick don't give you a free pass to be a wiseass, Sam Winchester.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Sam replies, and Dean presses his lips together, suppressing his laugh as he makes his way to the hall closet.

It isn't until he's pulling back the hideous floral print quilt on Missouri's sofa a few hours later that he remembers that he never checked his messages, and he pads quietly back to the kitchen, grabbing his jacket from where it's hanging on the back of a chair. Down the hall he can hear Sam snoring in the spare room, though he only went to bed a few minutes ago, and counts it as a good sign that he's sleeping so easily.

He waits until he's back in the living room, warm beneath the blankets, before unlocking his cell. The blue-tinted screen lights up the room.

15 NEW MESSAGES. 19 MISSED CALLS.

“Holy crap,” he mutters, tapping on the message icon.

Three texts are from Charlie. Twelve are from Castiel. He opens the ones from Charlie first.
He quickly shoots off a reply, telling her they're both fine, and opens up the messages from Castiel. After regaining his higher brain function, lost completely on reading the second message, he finds that Charlie's description of Castiel sounding freaked wasn't an exaggeration.
We should have done that years ago.  
2:05pm

I can still taste your lips on mine.  
2:05pm

That was inappropriate. I apologize.  
2:37pm

Forget I said it.  
2:59pm

Dean?  
3:44pm

I made you uncomfortable please just tell me.  
4:20pm
He's off the sofa and slipping out the front door before he's finished reading them. The phone barely rings once before Castiel answers.

“Dean? Where are you? I'll be there in—”

“Cas, Cas, calm down. Everything's fine.”

“You weren't answering.”

“My cell was in my jacket and I didn't see it until now. Been helping Missouri with some rituals to help Sam.”

“So you're not hurt?”

“No, I'm fine. We're both fine.”

“I thought...” Castiel lets out a breath, “this has been very stressful.”

“I can see that,” he says with a smile, sinking down onto the porch swing, “but I'm okay. Really.
Sorry I had you so worried, man.”

“So you don't regret what happened?”

Dean's eyes widen, shocked that Castiel even has to ask.

“Are you kidding me?”

“It's a serious question.”

“Cas. If you didn't have to leave when you did, I'd still be kissing you.”

He's surprised at his own honesty. Feels his cheeks growing warm.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

For a moment Castiel doesn't speak, and only the sound of his breath echoes down the line. It's soothing in a way Dean can't quite work out, and he closes his eyes, leaning back as he pushes his feet against the ground, the swing swaying slow.

“Dean?”

“Mm?”

“This has possibly made things harder.”

Not dirty talk, Dean tells himself, and huffs out a laugh.

“How?”

“Being away. I want... I just want.”

Or maybe it was. His mouth ticks up at one side, tongue darting out to wet his lips, and he remembers the feeling of Castiel doing that. It feels like weeks ago.

“Yeah, me too,” he says, deciding it would almost definitely be worth the potential confusion if he were to try a little light dirty talk of his own, “Hey, Cas, what are—”

The screen door behind him flies open, and Dean practically jumps out of his skin when Missouri, wrapped in a fuzzy yellow robe, storms outside.

“I don't know what kind of house you think this is, Dean, but as happy as I am that you've found someone I will not abide you having phone sex on my front porch.”

Dean's mouth falls open, mortified.

“I wasn't—”

“You were thinking about it.”

“Missouri,” Dean hisses, eyes wide as he tries to cover his cell phone's mouthpiece, “shut up.”

“Dean?”

Holding up one hand to stop Missouri from saying anything else, Dean gulps and uncovers the
phone. He clears his throat.

“I uh... Missouri needs me to help her with something. I'll call you in the morning, Cas.”

“Okay. Good night, Dean.”

“Night.”

Dean ends the call and glares at Missouri.

“Seriously, what the hell?” he asks, and she just arches her brow.

“Don't even try to tell me you weren't about to ask that boy what he was wearing—the answer to which by the way, I know you already know.”

“I wasn't going to—”

“It's late,” she says, cutting him off and holding open the door, “and if you want waffles in the morning you'd best let me get some shut eye. Go on, scoot.”

Glowering, Dean makes his way back inside, trying not to think the things he's thinking. He fails, and receives a light slap to the back of the head for his trouble. He sighs.

“Night, Missouri.”

“Just try to keep the loud thinking g-rated.”

She disappears down the hall, socks shushing over the carpet, and Dean falls back on the sofa and slips under the covers. His cell buzzes as he lays down, and again a moment later, and he replies with a lopsided grin, heart pounding hard. The reply comes through almost instantly.
The decidedly not g-rated thoughts come unbidden after that, and at the sound of Missouri pointedly clearing her throat down the hall, Dean presses his face into the pillow and laughs.

[below are the text messages from this chapter for those unable to view them as images]

**image one**

FROM: Charlie  
RECEIVED: 11:47am  
How’s the patient doing so far?

FROM: Dean  
SENT: 11:55am  
He’s ok. Should be there by 2.

FROM: Charlie  
RECEIVED: 1:36pm
Just so you know, Chuck may be dead by the time you get back. There's no monsters or anything, I'm just seriously considering strangling him to death.

FROM: Charlie
RECEIVED: 7:22pm
Dude I just got a call from Castiel, he thinks you're hurt or something?? He sounded really freaked.

Answer your phone.

FROM: Charlie
RECEIVED: 8:47pm
 Seriously are you okay? Sam isn't picking up either. Call me.

images two & three

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 2:05pm
We should have done that years ago.

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 2:05pm
I can still taste your lips on mine.

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 2:37pm
That was inappropriate. I apologize.

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 2:59pm
Forget I said it.

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 3:44pm
Dean?

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 4:20pm
If I made you uncomfortable please just tell me.

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 6:50pm
Dean? Why aren't you answering?

FROM: Cas
RECEIVED: 7:37pm
Sam isn't answering his phone either, are you okay?

FROM: Cas
Please just tell me you're okay.

FROM: Cas
RECIEVED: 10:01pm
Dean where are you?

FROM: Cas
RECIEVED: 10:43pm
Are you hurt?

FROM: Cas
RECIEVED: 11:19pm
I can't find you. Please answer.

I'd rather wait until we are together anyway.

If that's something you'd be interested in.

If Chuck doesn't find something soon I'm going to lose my damn mind.

I take it that's a yes. Pleasant dreams, Dean.

I've been scrambling to finish writing my DCBB, which has to be done by the 15th, so this (along with my other fics) has taken the back seat for the last week or so. There won't be another update for this until after then--possibly a little longer, due to GISHWHES taking place that same week. Please be patient, and know that it's only because I'm writing a Dean & Cas big bang that there's a slight delay. Hope you're all having a good week :)}
They get back to Lebanon around midday the next day, and Charlie opens the door with an expression like she's seriously considering violence and no longer cares who the victim is.

Dean stops abruptly on the stoop, and Sam walks right into him.

“What's with the—” Dean starts to ask, pointing at her face, and she turns to go down the stairs.

“Chuck is an ass,” she announces.

Chuck, at the table in a faded blue bathrobe, his work spread out before him, pushes his glasses back on his nose and looks up at her.

“I'm sitting right here,” he says, clearly wounded, and she huffs out a breath.

“Doesn't make it less true. You're lucky I know you're just stressed, or I'd probably not like you too much.”

“Thanks?”

“You're welcome, you dick.”

She walks right past him, headed for the TV room, and Sam raises his brow as he glances down at Chuck.

“What'd you do?”

“I may have been a little bit sexist? Maybe?”

Charlie whirls back around before she reaches the door and levels the prophet with a glare that has all three men flinching.

“Maybe?”

He raises his hands in surrender.

“Okay, so I was really sexist.”

“He was text book sexist,” she says angrily, “like, the first thing you'd think of as an example of sexism? He did it. Twice. And the second time was in the process of supposedly apologizing for the first time. He's lucky I didn't kick him in the nads.”

Chuck instinctively crosses an arm over his crotch and angles away from her, and Sam lets out a low bark of laughter.

“Leave my nads out of it.”

“Ass,” she mutters, still glaring, and walks out through the door.

She's barely been gone three seconds when Chuck relaxes his posture and speaks again, too loud.
“It wasn't even that bad. She's probably just on her—” he starts, and she appears back in the doorway to cut him off before he has a chance to finish.

“Think very carefully about the rest of that sentence, Chuck Shurley,” she says, somehow managing to narrow her eyes even further as she points the remote control threateningly at his head, “very. Fucking. Carefully.”

Chuck clamps his mouth shut, and Sam coughs, though it sounds as though it's more related to intense discomfort than his sickness.

“Okay!” Dean says, clapping his hands together, “not that I'm not enjoying the awkward, but how about we change topics now?”

“Good plan,” Sam says, heading for the kitchen, “anyone want a beer?”

The resounding yes follows him through the door, and Dean sinks down into a chair opposite Chuck. He pulls the closest stack of notes toward himself, leafing through them until Sam returns with four beers, plonking them down onto the table. Charlie picks one up, twisting off the lid with more force than necessary.

“So,” Dean says brightly, grabbing his own bottle, “how's the translation coming along? Find anything yet?”

“I think... maybe,” Chuck eyes Charlie warily, evidently still a little worried about retribution, and Dean bites his lip to stop from laughing, “the tablet can't be destroyed, but it can be returned to someplace safe.”

“Where?” Sam asks him, looking over the papers on the table with a frown, and Chuck points upward.

“Heaven.”

“*Heaven*?” Dean repeats dubiously, lowering his beer, “how is anywhere in Heaven gonna be safe from angels?”

“Here, look,” Chuck digs through the nearest pile of notes, pulling out a sheet and handing it over.

Dean skims over the messy scrawl, Sam and Charlie leaning in to read over his shoulder, and when he gets to the bottom he clicks his tongue a few times, nodding, before dumping the paper back on the table and drumming his knuckles over it.

“Yeah,” he says, pushing it back toward Chuck, “I have no idea what any of this means.”

“Ditto,” says Charlie, and with a glance at Sam's impressive sturgeon face, it's clear to Dean that it's not just the two of them.

Rolling his eyes, Chuck takes the paper and turns it around.

“Okay, so this,” he says, pointing at a scribbled, ink-smeared symbol near the top of the page, “means *Seraphim*, which is a kind of—”

“Angel, right,” Dean says, waving his hand, “same kind as Cas.”

“Yeah,” Chuck nods, moving to point out another collection of symbols, surrounded by what appears to be a series of nonsense words, “and this is... basically, there's a place in Heaven called the
superi murus which is pretty much like a wall that surrounds the Garden.”

“Right...”

Chuck puts down the paper, scratching at his beard as he explains.

“It acts as a sort of barrier to prevent anyone from getting inside if they aren't of what the tablet calls pure intent. I think it's what stopped Zachariah from being able to follow you two into the Garden when you spoke with Joshua.”

“So... what? The tablet can be hidden in the garden, and nobody can get to it if they want to use it?”

“Basically.”

“So what's that got to do with a Seraph?”

“Um... well. I'm still working this part out, so don't... like, I could be wrong.”

“Chuck.”

“I think... from what I can tell... Cas won't be able to get into the Garden with the tablet by just zapping in there. Even just taking the tablet to Heaven could be catastrophic. It's got too much power.”

“So what's the trick?” Charlie asks, twisting her head to look at the symbols as if she thinks she'll be able understand them from a slightly different angle.

“It says a Seraphim has to receive God's blessing to carry it through.”

Dean snorts.

"Which basically puts us back to square one, because if God gave a crap he would have turned up years ago," he says, and Chuck shakes his head vigorously.

"No, no, there's a way."  Dean nods.

Sam raises his brow; Dean is still too dubious for surprise.

"How?" Sam asks.

“I...” Chuck hesitates, his eyes darting away, “I don't know yet.”

“But you've got an idea.”

“Yes. I do. But I'd rather know for sure first.”

“Why?”

“I don't want to unnecessarily worry you?” he says weakly, and Dean can tell it's bad, whatever it is, “I've just got one more line to translate for context, and then I'll know for sure.”

Briefly, Dean considers trying to make Chuck spit it out, but somehow he doesn't think he wants to know. Until it's real, until it's unavoidable fact, he can wait. One look at Sam and Charlie is enough to confirm they're thinking the same thing.

“I'll be done tomorrow morning at the latest,” Chuck tells him, and Dean nods.
“Okay,” he says, pushing back to his feet, “then I guess we'll leave you to it.”

Chuck attempts a smile, but it falls so flat that Dean can't help but wonder just how bad it looks. The rest of the afternoon passes in tense silence that’s only broken by Sam's increasingly frequent coughing fits and the canned laughter of a sitcom that none of them are really watching.

With his cell in his hand, Dean sits and waits, and sends more pointless text messages to Castiel than he thinks he's ever sent anyone. Castiel answers every last one. It doesn't help much, but it helps.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the long delay! The DCBB, combined with GISHWHES and super long inventory week hours at work all ended up being right on top of each other, so this took me a lot longer than I'd hoped. We're on the home stretch now, though! Thanks for sticking with me though the accidental hiatus :)
[also, sorry about the lack of Dean/Cas interaction in this chapter--there were a couple of plotty things that needed to be taken care of here, and the next is a long one from Cas' perspective, so hopefully that will make up for it! Will be up by the 1st of September.]
[UPDATE! Sorry I'm running a little behind--I planned to post the new chapter before heading to work today, but I ran out of time due to family commitments. Will have to finish editing when I get home & will post it then. Likely about twelve hours from now. Sorry to keep you all waiting.]
Castiel regrets flying.

Since leaving Dean in Lawrence, wide-eyed and flushed in the dark hall of the cinema, he's flown from city to city with a buzzing, anticipatory feeling in his stomach that has nothing to do with the angel tablet. He feels set alight, breathless and dazed, and as he replays the memory of Dean pressed against him, lips stuttering against his own, he calculates the odds of his capture if he were to fly back.

The risk is, of course, far too great.

During his brief conversation with Dean later that night, cut short by the psychic, Castiel identified the source of the feeling. Found the name for it. It unfurled at his realisation, stronger for his understanding, and while Dean slept on Missouri's sofa, it chased him all over the world.

Now, in every country, in every cinema, he becomes more and more aware of the insistent desire to go back, to keep touching Dean, to keep kissing him. He's sure he'd be able to ignore it, except that suddenly there are couples everywhere. Perhaps they were always there. Castiel isn't sure how he's never noticed them before, but he certainly sees them now, their hands together on shared armrests, thumbs stroking softly, their lips sealed against lovers lips, on cheeks, on necks.

Envy is a new feeling, and as he glares at a woman tucking her girlfriends hair behind her ear before kissing her on the nose, he thinks he could do without it.

He counts himself lucky that his angelic nature still allows him some modicum of self control. Were he human, he expects he'd be having a far more difficult time holding back.

The next day, he expects it to fade into memory, but the feeling only grows. It's an itch unscratched, a nagging plea for now, now, now, and he can't address it, can't seem to stop it. Somehow, each text message he recieves from Dean does nothing but make it worse.

By mid-morning he feels as though he's going to combust, and then, a little after noon, something changes. He still feels the want, but on top of it is the feeling of prayer, Dean's soul curling through the ether to weave into his grace.

It's not a prayer of words, but the subconscious kind, and Dean's soul is a nervous, stuttering thing unlike Castiel has felt since they found eachother in Red Cloud. Something is wrong, something is bothering him, but whatever it is he isn't talking about it. Castiel shouldn't be surprised.

He wants to ask what it is, what happened, but he knows from past experience that trying to force anything out of Dean is the best way to make him avoid the topic with even greater assiduity than before.

So he ignores it. Replies to every message, attempts humor and succeeds more than once. Dean sends him a photograph of the red-haired woman from the pictures on his phone—Charlie, he learns —dramatically sneaking up behind Sam with a gleam in her eye and a pair of hair clippers in her hand, and shortly after, another, considerably blurry photo of Sam chasing her through the bunker.

Through it all, he feels the current of Dean's soul pushing and pulling at his grace in a strange dance
of fear and longing; feels his own longing push right back.

At around seven in the evening he lands in a busy cinema in Washington midway through the coming attractions, and realizes with sudden clarity that he has a loophole. The fact that he didn't think of it sooner is appalling. His phone is in his hand without a moments delay, and the dial tone echoes to the high ceiling only once before Dean picks up.

“Cas?”

“Are you doing anything right now?”

“Nope, just finished dinner. Why?”

“If there were a way to resume what we were doing in the cinema—”

“Yes.”

Dean's voice is eager, and Castiel feels his face splitting into a smile at the sound of it, warmth pooling low in his stomach.

“Where are you?” Dean asks, “is it far?”

“Seattle.”

“The Impala's good, Cas, but she ain't that good.”

“I had no idea,” Castiel says dryly, and Dean huffs through the phone, “are you at home?”

“You said it was too dangerous for you to come here.”

“I know.”

“Then how—”

“Go to bed.”

“Uh...”

There's a surge in Dean's soul, the fear dissipating briefly to be overwhelmed by want. Castiel feels it from miles away, pressing at his grace. He smiles.

“It wouldn't be the first time I've visited your dreams, Dean.”

“My—you're... wait. Do you mean—”

There's the sound of shuffling, footsteps and a closing door, before Dean speaks again in a loud whisper.

“Are you seriously going to drop into my head just to kiss me?”

“That's the general idea, yes. Though I don't think of it as just.”

On the other end of the line, Dean clears his throat.

“Won't... I mean, if you're in my head, won't that mean you're here? They could find you, couldn't they?”
“I will remain here. I'll merely be temporarily projecting my consciousness into yours.”

“That's pretty kinky, Cas.”

“Go to sleep, Dean.”

Dean laughs.

“Yeah, well, that's gonna take a while.”

“Why?” he asks with a frown, sounding a little more whiny and complaintive than he'd anticipated, and he almost hears Dean's eye roll.

“What d'you mean, why? You got me thinkin' about Lawrence, and now I'm all...” Dean trails off.

“Aroused?” Castiel supplies.

A woman sitting in the next seat looks over at him with a pinched expression as Dean huffs out a pitiful laugh.

“You make it sound so formal.”

“I almost said concupiscent,” Castiel tells him with a smirk.

“Jesus.”

“Or if you'd prefer I was crude,” he adds, lowering his voice to avoid the ire of the woman beside him, “I believe horny is the colloquial term.”

“God, stop,” Dean half groans, before cutting himself off with a laugh, "where are you even getting this crap?"

"My understanding of linguistics is not a new development, Dean. Just because I'd generally sooner say fornicate than fuck doesn't mean I'm unaware of the words existence."

“Talking like that really isn't helping the situation, Cas.”

“You are, then?”

“Obviously,” Dean says, voice colored with something that makes Castiel bite down on the inside of his cheek, and after a pause hesitantly adds; “are you?”

“Since Lawrence.”

There's a brief pause, and when Dean speaks again he's completely serious.

“I'm going to sleep now.”

“See you soon.”

It takes four hours, seventeen minutes and thirty-six seconds for Dean to fall asleep, and Castiel has just settled into a seat near the back of a busy Perth cinema when he feels the shift in Dean's soul, feels it slipping down, tumbling into the ether, and he lets himself go.

He finds Dean in a clearing, tall grass swaying as high as his waist in the warm sun, and he's walking fast toward the treeline, anxiously looking around as if he's lost something.
“Hello, Dean.”

Dean turns on his heel, and it seems to take a few seconds for him to realize, to remember that this is a dream. When he does, Castiel sees it in the way his face shifts.

“I was looking for you,” Dean says, gesturing around, “forgot it was a dream, but I was looking anyway.”

“I'll take that as a compliment.”

Dean's mouth ticks up at one side as he walks toward him, skimming fingertips through the seeds.

“Did I take long?” Dean asks, “felt like I was lying there for hours.”

“It's a little after eleven. You fell asleep less than a second ago.”

“Hate to break it to you, Cas, but I think your internal clock is busted.”

“Time doesn't work the same in dreams. Out there it's been a tenth of a second since you lost consciousness.”

Coming to a stop a few feet in front of him, Dean's brows raise.

“Really?”

Castiel nods, and turns his head to listen to the sound of running water nearby. Reaching out, he takes hold of Dean's hand, ignoring the embarrassed expression on his face and pulling him toward the source.

“You taking me to makeout point, Cas?”

Castiel has no idea if makeout point is a real place, but he can guess it's function. He looks levelly at Dean, still walking, and squeezes his hand.

“Yes.”

It does the trick; Dean's wisecracking grin is immediately replaced by a kind of stunned wonder, lips parting around a silent oh, and Castiel smirks.

The water isn't far, though whether it's because it was like that before or because Dean wanted to get there faster, Castiel can't be sure. They step into the treeline, then back out, and at once the sun is setting.

A stream curves through the trees, leading to a cascading fall, and below in the valley thousands of lights blink on in the dusk. When he glances over at Dean, Castiel sees his ears have turned red, a deep blush creeping down his neck, and he can't help but stop walking, pulling Dean toward him as he turns to press his lips to that warm skin.

“I guess my subconscious is a romantic idiot,” Dean whispers into his hair, and Castiel smiles against him, pressing a kiss to the line of his jaw before pulling back to look at him.

“It's nice,” he says, relishing the way Dean ducks his head, “and surely you realize it's not just your subconscious. I'm fairly certain you've always been a romantic.”

“Shuddup,” Dean mutters, but he's grinning, and Castiel catches his hand again as they walk along the stream to settle at the end, looking out over the valley.
The air smells of summer, of warm earth and fresh water, and sitting side by side on soft grass at the waters edge, Castiel looks down at their still linked hands. Their fingers are woven together, warm, and Castiel runs his thumb over Dean's the way he'd wanted to earlier. Something in the gesture makes Dean look back at him, blinking slow, lazily, and his free hand moves to Castiel's face, stroking below his ear as he leans in to kiss him again.

The sound Dean makes, a soft exhalation, makes Castiel's limbs weak and heavy, and he all but drags him down as he falls back. Looking up at Dean, braced over him on one elbow, almost a silhouette against the swirling gold and pink of the sky, Castiel is more aware of the heart in his chest than he's ever been.

When Dean leans down, each pulse pumps hard, and it carries the love he feels through his veins, to his hands, his lips, his fingertips. He presses it into Dean's skin with fervor.

Dean pulls at his hand, letting it settle at his hip as Castiel leans upward, then slides his own hands under Castiel's coat to skim over his waist, around his back to pull him closer. Soon, Castiel is kneeling over him, trailing fingers through his hair as he pushes him down, one leg hooked between Dean's thighs as he moves on instinct. The first roll of his hips takes them both by surprise; the second, even more. The low current of pleasure rolls through him like ripples on a lake, out and out and out from the center, and with his eyes closed he lets out a quiet, involuntary moan against Dean's open mouth.

He does it again, and Dean's hands close over his shoulders, pushing him back, up, away.

“Wait, wait,” Dean breathes, voice thick, thumbs rubbing soft through Castiel's coat, “just... fuck. I can't believe I'm saying this, but... we should... I don't—this isn't real, Cas. I want it to be real.”

“You want to stop?”

“No. This,” Dean says, leaning up to kiss him soft, “is okay. More than okay. But anything else, I think... I don't want it to be a dream. I want it to—”

Somewhere far away, an insistent thump, thump, thump is echoing, and Dean turns his face toward it in confusion.

“What's that noise?”

“You're waking,” Castiel tells him, turning his face back, “just let me—one more.”

Castiel kisses him deep, pressing him down in the grass as the world around them flickers and fades. He doesn't stop until the last possible moment, and then he sucks in a deep breath, fully within his vessel, his consciousness and his grace whole again in the cinema in Perth.

He looks around at the people still watching the film intently, none the wiser that the man in the tan coat had been on another plane of existence for the past fifty-two seconds. He's glad that none of them noticed the vacant look in his eyes. It would have been awkward to explain once he returned, and he'd rather not make a habit of disappearing while large crowds are watching him. It would make staying off the radar considerably more difficult, for one thing.

Letting out a contented sigh, he rolls his neck, still feeling the phantom touch of Dean's hands on him, and he flies to Brussels, to Quebec, to Hong Kong. When he lands in a theater in Queens fourteen seconds later, he smells blood before his wings have even settled.

It's everywhere, soaked into thick maroon carpet, running down the glass window of the projector room. The beam slices through it, casting a terrible sunset haze over the screen where a twenty-foot
couple kiss in black and white.

In the front row there's a man and woman in their fifties, dressed in their Sunday best; he's hunched forward and bleeding into the popcorn. She's staring blankly up at the screen, mouth slack, eyes empty but for the love scene reflected.

This happened while he was with Dean, he realizes. Castiel's stomach turns. The tablet pulses hot.

When he looks away, eyes scanning over the other victims—thirty-four of them, he counts—he sees Esper and Ion standing on the stairs.

Castiel flexes his wings to fly, but they're ready. Within a millisecond, he feels the cold press of Ion's blade at his throat, and the tablet shudders, shaking at his core.

“Don't bother,” Esper says, stepping down to his level, “you'll never—”

Before he can finish, Castiel takes hold of Ion's wrist, twisting the blade out of his grip, and in one swift movement he turns to bring the blade down to bury in his brothers side. Ion's eyes light up as he falls, wings scorching, the acrid smell of burnt feathers mingling with blood.

Castiel pushes down the guilt threatening to resurface. This isn't like the other times, he tells himself.

Pulling the blade free, he turns back to face Esper, backing away up the stairs.

“You killed these people?” he asks, stepping forward, and Esper raises his hands in prostration.

“Brother—”

“Why?”

Esper's eyes flicker over the bodies, splayed in the theater seats, before coming back to settle on Castiel. He lifts his chin in defiance.

“We did what we had to do.”

“They were innocents, Esper.”

“And they will be rewarded in Heaven for their sacrifice,” a sharp voice cuts through the theater, “which is more than I can say for you.”

Naomi's heels make a wet, tacky sound as she walks across the blood-drenched carpet, watching Castiel with an expression that seems to suggest she's won. The tablet is burning, and as Naomi advances, he braces for the fight that's coming and decides that if this is indeed is last night on Earth, he's happy he spent it with Dean.

Chapter End Notes

Wow sorry, I kind of got you all nice and cosy and smoochy before ripping the rug out from under you and punching you in the soul. A dick move on my part, I'll admit. I promise there'll be a happy ending though, so hopefully you'll forgive me. <3

The next chapter is a long one, and it's taken longer than I anticipated to get it done. It
will be up by the 21st--sorry for the long delay. I plan to have the entire story finished before Season 9 kicks off, though.

[P.S. Thank you so much for all the comments, kudos and bookmarks! It really means a lot to me when you take the time to let me know what you think. I plan to reply to all the comments, too--they stacked up when I wasn't paying attention though, so it might take a little bit to get through.]
One moment he's being pressed down into soft grass, Castiel a warm, solid weight above him; the next he's staring up at the ceiling of his bedroom, clutching at air. It makes the room feel colder than it is, the absence. He sighs into the dark.

For a few seconds he just lays there, feeling. There's an ache in his chest spreading out to his fingertips, tingling with desire, and he wants to go back. Wants to lay on the grass under that dusky sky, to feel the scratch of stubble catching—but the thumping that had made it's way into his dreams still echoes, and with a groan he throws off his sheets, climbing out of bed to open the door. On the other side, Charlie, her hand raised to knock again, stumbles back, startled.

“What is this, payback?” Dean asks moodily, blinking in the too-bright hallway and rubbing at his eyes, “I already said I was sorry about the whole fairy thing.”

“Chuck finished translating,” she says.

Dean doesn't wait to ask more questions.

He's halfway out the door before Charlie makes a strangled sound, and her hand closes around his arm, stopping him.

“Um...”

She lets go immediately, stepping back and crossing her arms over her chest, hands tucked firmly beneath her elbows. The expression on her face is caught somewhere between tamped-down laughter and utter mortification, and he looks at her in question. She avoids eye contact, choosing instead to stare at the wall.

“So... I, um... I don't wanna tell you how to live your life or anything, but you might... uh,” she presses her lips together, glancing back at him briefly and pointing vaguely downward, “you might wanna put on some pants?”

Dean, still a little dazed from being woken, takes far too long to figure out what she's saying, but as soon as he realizes that the evidence of his very pleasant dream is pressing against the front of his boxers, he learns the true meaning of embarassment. He angles an arm to cover himself.

“Uh. Right.”

Charlie is still looking pointedly at the wall, her face so red it clashes with her hair.

“Yep.”

“I'll...” gesturing vaguely into his room with his free hand, Dean shuffles backward, “thanks.”

“Uuhh.”

The door clicks shut after him, and with a greater sense of embarrassment than he thinks he's ever felt before, he listens as Charlie heads back up the hall, laughing.

Humiliation does wonders. Once she's gone, it only takes a few minutes of glaring in the general
direction of his crotch before the problem fades. He dresses quickly, sending a text to Castiel to let him know they'll soon have news, before walking up to the library.

Chuck hasn't moved from the table since Dean left.

The table's surface is completely covered in notes, now, each one messier than the last, and while Chuck leans back in his chair, scrubbing tiredly at his eyes, Sam sits beside him, scrutinising his work. Charlie, sitting with her chin resting against her hands in the seat opposite, is chewing on a thumbnail, and she smirks at Dean when she sees him. He points at her threateningly as he makes his way across the room.

“Not a word,” he says, ignoring Sam's quizzical expression, and she mimes a lock over her mouth, lips pressed tightly shut to keep from bursting into a fit of laughter.

Dean rolls his eyes at her before pulling up a chair.

“So,” he says, clearing his throat before pulling over the nearest stack of papers, “what's the verdict?”

As he twists his head in an attempt to decipher Chuck's illegible handwriting, Chuck reaches out to turn it the right way up, tapping on a series of still impossible to read sentences.

“Well, for one, it turns out we don't so much need God to bless a Seraphim as we need a Seraphim blessed by God,” he says, and Dean frowns, glancing at his brother for help.

When Sam just shrugs, Dean turns back to Chuck.

“You've already lost me.”

“Okay, listen,” Chuck slips his glasses on, picking up a notepad to read aloud, “Only a Seraphim blessed by God at the moment of his making can return the word to the Garden. At the crossing of Superi Murus he will encounter flame and sword and wrath, and fear not, for where other angels are weapons, he is the Shield that protects Heaven from itself.”

Glancing up, Chuck looks at Dean as if there's been some massive revelation, and Dean raises his hands, turning to the others. They seem just as stumped, and Chuck narrows his eyes as if they're all being deliberately dense.

“Castiel's name literally means Shield of God,” he says, and Dean nods in understanding before it hits him what that really means. His hands tense on the table.

“Are you telling me this is more destiny crap? Because seriously, Chuck, you can shove that—”

“It's not destiny,” Chuck says defensively, “there are other angels who could potentially have acted as the Shield, considering their roles as protectors—Lahabiel, Raguel, Sachiel, to name a few—but who knows if they're even around anymore.”

“What makes you so sure Cas was blessed by God, though?” Dean asks, “I mean, he's kind of had a shitty run of luck these last few years. Doesn't really scream 'blessed' to me.”

“He's been resurrected like three times,” Sam points out, “if that isn't a sign that the big guy likes him, I don't know what is.”

“That's kind of what I figured,” Chuck says, “also, uh... there's more.”

There's a brittle edge to Chuck's voice, and everyone waits for him to go on. He doesn't.
“Any day now would be great,” Dean says after thirty seconds of silence, and Chuck rubs the back of his neck.

“Remember how I didn't want to worry you unnecessarily?” he scrunches up his nose, glancing at Dean uncomfortably, and it does nothing to make Dean's suddenly rolling stomach settle.

“Just spit it out, Chuck,” he says, and with a sigh, Chuck nods, dragging a finger down the page until he reaches the next part.

“On the day of the Shield's final flight the grace of God shall coalesce, and at the crossing He shall rise; the wings, the grace and vessel alike shall be purified in the singular light of God; and with his light the Word shall know the safety of the Garden.”

“So God's coming out of hiding?” Sam asks, his brow raised.

“Why exactly does God need coalescing?” Charlie asks at the same time.

“What do you mean, final flight?” Dean says over both of them, though he doesn't particularly want to know the answer.

Chuck just shakes his head.

“I'm not gonna lie to you—it could mean what it sounds like,” he says to Dean first, wincing a little at the look he gets, “but then again, the whole thing is so convoluted that he might be fine. As for God returning—yeah, it kind of sounds like it, and I have no idea why he's in need of joining back together. Though if he's somehow split into pieces right now that'd explain why he was impossible to find when Castiel was looking for him.”

“He might be fine?” Dean asks, voice pitched low, and Chuck flinches.

“Just the messenger,” he says, hands up in placation.

Dean forces a breath out through his nose and stands, not that he's planning on going anywhere.

It doesn't escape his notice that he should be a little more concerned about God's comeback tour, but all he can focus on is that from what Chuck is saying, there's a strong possibility that Castiel isn't going to make it out. Might be fine isn't quite good enough, as far as reassurances go. Then again, they don't really have any other options. His fists clench, jaw tight.

“What else does it say?” Charlie asks, glancing up at him and not-so-subtly trying to steer the conversation to a less stressful topic. He's pretty sure he'd be grateful if he weren't so worried.

“About getting into the garden? Nothing. But there's other stuff about closing Heaven and controlling angels, so I'm guessing that's what Naomi wants it for.”

“Alright,” Dean says, staring down at the table without really seeing it, “I'm gonna go call Cas.”

“Now?” Sam asks.

“I told him I'd call when we knew,” he says with a shrug, aiming for nonchalant and failing horribly, “and now we know.”
He walks out before Sam can respond, heading up the stairs toward the bunker door, ignoring the looks of pity being cast his way.

It's not as though he hasn't been prepared for this. He's been waiting, if he's being honest, for bad news. It's always just around the corner, and whenever something good happens it has a habit of turning up right after.

Considering the fact that finally kissing Castiel is pretty much the best thing that has happened to him all year, he's been expecting something particularly horrible. Might be fine definitely qualifies.

As he walks heavily away from the bunker and into the cool dark, the chirping of crickets is silenced by his footsteps. Fumbling his cell out of his pocket, he stares down at the blue-white glow of the screen with his thumb hovering over the call button, thinking. Stalling.

A day. They got one day. Maybe they'll get more, but he's too cynical to let himself hope for it. Still.

“He might be fine,” he tells himself under his breath, and wishes he had the capacity to believe it.

He's still staring at his phone, psyching himself up to make the call, when he hears the creak of the door and footsteps crunching across the gravel behind him.

“Dean?”

Letting out a breath, he looks over his shoulder to see Sam looking at him with furrowed brow, his hands in his pockets.

“I haven't called him yet,” Dean says, looking back at the phone to avoid the look Sam's giving him, “give me a minute.”

“Just, uh... I figured you'd be stalling. Thought you might want some moral support.”

“Oh,” Dean's more surprised at that than he should be, really, and he kind of feels like an asshole for wanting Sam to leave him to make the call alone.

Miraculously, though, it only takes Sam a couple of seconds looking at Dean's deer-in-the-headlights expression to work it out for himself.

“But, uh... if you wanted privacy...”


“Tell Cas good luck for me.”

“He doesn't need it,” Dean says, hoping that his own false confidence will somehow manage to trick the clenching feeling in his chest as well as Sam, “he's blessed, remember?”

“Yeah,” Sam laughs, though it doesn't reach his eyes, “I guess so.”

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With every step Naomi takes toward him, the tablet burns hotter, and it's all Castiel can do to keep breathing.

Dimly, in the seconds after her arrival, he's aware of a buzz at his hip, the cell phone alerting him to a message, but he's directing everything he has on watching Naomi's every move, focusing on shutting out the pain building within as he grips Ion's blade tightly in his fist.
In Naomi's left hand Castiel sees the long, narrow point of a needle as it slips down from her sleeve. Crafted from the same bright metal as the blade she carries in her right, it rings with holy power, and she taps it with her forefinger as she approaches. Castiel fights the urge to back away, not wanting her to think he's afraid, though he expects she already assumes it.

She'd be right to. He's terrified.

That needle, what it has done to him—the memories flood back with startling clarity. There were weeks spent strapped into a chair, tethered to his vessel by a power much greater than his own; weeks and weeks of pain as the needle found the corners of his vessels eye, pressing, digging through, deep into his true form and twisting at his core until he was forced to follow, to obey. That needle was used to manipulate him, to force his hand, to kill Samandriel, to try to kill Dean. At the onset of the memory of Dean on the ground, pleading and bloody, clutching helplessly at his sleeve, Castiel takes his fear and sharpens it. He turns it in on itself until it becomes fury, righteous and consuming, and he aims it directly back at Naomi.

She stops in her approach, faltering, and Castiel tamps down on the little flash of pride that comes with knowing she can sense his anger, that she is swayed by it.

“I can put everything right,” she says, eyes wide and honest, and if he didn't have the memory of her weeks, months of torture, he might actually believe her.

“You won't.”

Behind Naomi, Esper scoffs.

“He's a lost cause,” he says to Naomi, though his gaze never leaves Castiel.

“Do you even remember what it was like?” she asks, ignoring Esper as if she truly believes that Castiel has forgotten, as if she thinks there's still a chance to fix him, “We were unified, Castiel. We were content. Now it's just endless fighting, battle after battle, grace being spilled at every turn. Let me fix it.”

“How?” Castiel asks, hoping to at least keep her talking for long enough to formulate some sort of plan.

With two of them against him, especially while he's in this level of pain, there's little chance that he'll be able to fight them both off. Killing Ion had been a stroke of luck, and the chance of another is unlikely.

“There are instructions on the tablet that would allow me to return all the angels to the way we were,” Naomi tells him, voice colored with pride, “I can do it. I know I can. I can fix everything.”

“You would take away our free will.”

“We weren't built for free will. You're proof enough of that.”

He shakes his head.

“Heaven is in chaos, Castiel,” she says, trying to convince him to give in, “because of what you did. I gave you the opportunity to fix it, but you chose to betray us.”

“And this?” Castiel asks, raising his blade to point toward the bodies that surround them, “how is this not a betrayal? Killing the innocent, killing humans for your own gain—you're no better than Lucifer.”
This gets a rise out of her, but he can't bring himself to regret it, even as she advances.

"The blood of these people is on your hands," Naomi snarls, moving forward again in her anger, "not mine. Take me to the tablet, and I might still spare you."

The pain flares at her approach, sharp, splitting him within.

"You'll never find it."

His voice is tight, strained with the pain he's trying so hard to ignore, and she pauses in her step, tilting her head to look at him with interest.

"It's close," she says, and he flinches involuntarily when the tablet pulses, even hotter than before, electric, "I can sense it resonating."

He opens his mouth to respond as she moves closer still, but the sound that comes out is barely more than a grunt of pain. Her eyes widen infinitesimally.

"You're carrying it," she says, eyes traveling up and down him as though she can see straight through his skin, "aren't you?"

"No," he replies, too fast, and she smiles.

Castiel thinks her like a shark, and she's just tasted blood in the water.

Her hand closes around his throat before he has a chance to move, the needle ignored in favor of the blade which she slashes over his wrist, making him drop his weapon before pressing the point against his sternum. If it weren't for the vicious rush of fire, of agony pulsing, pulsing hard within his stomach, he'd have stopped her. At least from disarming him. But the pain is too great, and he's barely standing, now. She holds him up by the neck, fingers digging in.

Esper, still standing on the stairs, watches on with a kind of detached interest, and Castiel wishes he were someone else. Anyone else. One of the few angels still on his side, if any are even alive.

"If you won't give me the tablet, I'll take it by force," Naomi says, voice steady, cold, calculated, "I've already shown you more mercy than you deserve."

Dragging his eyes back to settle on her, he swallows around the building taste of blood in his mouth, feeling his insides shaking apart with the heat of the tablet.

"You can feel it's resistance," he forces out through the still-building pain, through the tight hold on his throat, "can't you? Your intentions may be good, but you are wrong, Naomi. What you want to do is dangerous. You have to understand—ahh!"

The blade presses harder at his chest, digging in, and his eyes squeeze shut at the feeling until he feels the cell phone buzzing against his side again, ringing now, and the knowledge that he's got someone waiting for him is enough to give him strength. Winning this fight might be just shy of impossible, but he's sure as Hell not going to lay down and take it. Musterling all his strength, he forces his eyes open, and with a glance at Esper, he sees his chance.

"Now, Esper!" he shouts, and Esper's eyes widen in confusion.

It's a desperate attempt, but it works. Naomi glances back at Esper, convinced that somehow Castiel had twisted him to his side before her arrival, and for a split second her grip loosens at his throat. Castiel reaches up to pull the blade from her hand before he flies.
He can feel them both right behind him, flying close, but he's got the advantage of almost a full two seconds, and it's enough. While he moves swiftly from desert to mountain to sea, searching out the emptiest places he knows of, he lets the respite from the tablet's pain give him the strength he needs to heal. It's in the brief moment that he finds himself somewhere over the Gulf of Mexico, just south of Louisiana, that his memory is jogged by the sight of boats on the water, and he knows what he needs to do.

With a dark kind of relief he adjusts his grip on the blade in his hand, and as he pulls open the front of his shirt, he finds himself wishing he had something else to do it with. Allowing the blood of his vessel to be drawn by Naomi's blade feels wrong, even like this.

The first cut stings more than he remembers. The second, more so. He suspects it's because last time he used a blade of steel; now, it's a blade that's capable of killing him. He pushes the thought down and keeps going, carving lines as he flies.

When he finally makes his landing in the center of Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia, his feet crunching against the ground, he has enough time to take in a breath, to taste the salt on the air, before they land. He wastes no time in slamming his palm down against the banishing sigil.

Blood seals with blood, and for a split second he has the satisfaction of seeing Naomi's furious expression before he feels himself pulled swiftly through the ether in a flash of white.

It hurts, but with full control of his Grace and his connection to Heaven strong, he at least retains consciousness when he lands hard on a stony beach. The stones dig in to his back uncomfortably, but he doesn't move. Just takes a few seconds to listen, to look to the sky and get his bearings. Judging by the vegetation that lines the cliff face behind him and the position of the rising sun, he ascertains that he is somewhere in the south of Greece—anything more specific than that is beyond him right now.

It will be a few hours before he can fly again—but the same goes for the others, and he's hopeful that he'll be able to hide himself before Naomi or Esper have enough power to contact any of the other angels working for them in Heaven.

Breathing heavily, he reaches out to pick up the cell phone from where it lays between two rocks, having fallen from his pocket on landing. He's relieved to find it undamaged, and when he slides his thumb across the lock there are four messages and three missed calls.

When he tries to call back, he gets nothing but an out-of-service tri-tone, and he lets out a huff through his nose, listening to the crash of waves for a couple of seconds before pushing himself to his feet.

He tastes blood on his lips, and he wipes it away with the inside of his coat before he buttons his shirt, leaving the tie hanging limp around his neck.

There's a town not far away, a few street lights still on as the sun rises, and he starts toward it, shoes slipping on the stones. It's not long before he finds a pay phone on a quiet street corner, and after reading the instructions for making reverse-charge calls he dials.

When Dean finally answers, the line crackling with distance, Castiel leans heavily against the side of the booth and lets out a sigh of relief.

“Hello, Dean,” he says, closing his eyes, “it's very good to hear your voice.”
This is a few days late and I suck and I'm so so sorry. I seriously feel awful for taking so long. I hope you'll all forgive me. Next one coming soon. Much sooner than this one was.
<3
In the dark street outside the bunker, Dean paces, cell phone pressed hard to his ear. His palm is sweating. He switches hands and wipes it against his jeans.

It's the fourth time he's tried to call since Sam went back inside, and this time, it doesn't even ring—just goes straight to his own voicemail recording, unchanged since Castiel took the phone. When the high-pitched beep sounds, he comes to a stop beside the Impala and leans heavily against the hood, fingers pressing against cold metal.

“Cas, seriously dude, call me back,” he says, eyes pressed tightly closed, “startin' to get kinda worried here.”

Ending the call, he pushes away from the car, looking toward the bunker. The cool air is chilling against the nervous sweat at the back of his neck, and he wonders if he should wait in the library. But the others are waiting for him, waiting for news. He knows that if the words Cas isn't answering have to pass through his lips, he's probably not going to be able to hold himself together. He barely is now.

Digging his keys from his pocket, he unlocks the Impala, slipping into the drivers seat and breathing in the familiar smell of home that lingers within. Normally, this would be enough to settle his nerves. Tonight, though, his foot taps restlessly as he stares at his cell phone, waiting.

A side effect of everything he's seen in his life as a hunter is a near limitless pool of horrors to draw from when he's worried, and now every twisted torture he's ever seen rushes into his mind. Faceless angels, holding him down, cutting into him. He remembers the metal crown, digging into Samandiriel's skull, and sees Castiel in his place. Remembers the look of detached ruthlessness in Castiel's eyes that night at the crypt, a twisted remnant of himself, and knows that whatever the angels are capable of, it's likely worse than Crowley.

He tastes bile and pushes it down. He might be fine, he thinks, staring at the silent phone, he might be fine.

He's moments away from giving in and calling a fifth time when it rings, and in his haste to answer, the phone slips from his hand.

“Shit,” he mutters, reaching under the seat, and when he finally presses it to his ear, he hears a robotic voice.

“...to accept charges. Press two to decline. Press three to repeat.”

He presses one, and few seconds pass before there's the click and static of connection.

“Cas?” he asks, a little breathless, as a distant sigh comes down the line, “is that you?”

“Hello, Dean. It's very good to hear your voice.”

Castiel sounds exhausted, but he's there. He's alive. Dean's shoulders sag in relief.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and Castiel swallows audibly before he answers.
“I am now,” he says tiredly, “Naomi caught up with me.”

“Are you hurt? Did she—”

“She tried. She failed. I’m fine,” Castiel pauses, “I am in Greece, though. And temporarily grounded.”

Dean tenses, Chuck's words about the final flight coming back to haunt him.

“That doesn't sound like fine to me, Cas,” he says.

“It's nothing serious. I just need a couple of hours to... recharge, I suppose is the best way to put it.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. She'll be incapacitated for as long as I am, and I intend to conceal myself until I'm able to fly again.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“You're already doing it.”

“Yeah?”

“I told you,” Castiel says, a smile in his tone, “it's very good to hear your voice.”

“Sweet talker.”

Castiel hums in amusement, and Dean grins, relaxing a little more because he does sound okay. He might be fine.

“So is there somewhere nearby that you can hide out?” he asks.

“I passed an empty lighthouse on the way into this town. It should suffice. I'll need to go there shortly, just to be safe.”

“Okay,” Dean says, rubbing his hand over his jaw before diving right in, “I guess I should let you know before then, uh... Chuck finished translating the tablet.”

“What did it say?”

“Basically that the tablet can't be destroyed, but it can be hidden. Catch is, you have to go... you have to—”

“I have to return to Heaven,” Castiel guesses, and Dean nods miserably before he remembers that Castiel can't see him.

“Yeah,” he says, voice a little tight, and there's a loaded moment before Castiel speaks again.

“What do I have to do?”

Reluctantly, Dean repeats everything Chuck told him, forcing himself to sound confident that Castiel will be okay. He knows it's useless. The helplessness seeps through into his voice, and he wishes he were better at faking it when it counts. It's not like lying to the cops, to a family of civilians, to a witness. This is the kind of lying he's always sucked at; the veneer of everything's fine that has been getting thinner and thinner every time he's used it, chipped away to nothing. By the time he gets to
the part about God's return, his voice sounds brittle and he knows it, but Castiel just breathes out a calm, “Okay,” and Dean frowns.

“Okay?” he asks, dubious.

“Well, no. Not really. It doesn't sound like things are going to end particularly well for me, and obviously I'd rather just about anything than go through Heaven, but... it's what needs to be done. So I'll do it.”

It's what Dean should have expected, he thinks, and he smiles sadly, staring out the window.

“Sometimes I think you're too good for your own good, Cas.”

The comment is met with silence. Silence that stretches out, out, out, and Dean gets the feeling that if they were in the same place right now, Castiel's eyes would be on his. He'd have his face tilted to the side, studying Dean as if trying to solve a puzzle, and Dean feels a spreading warmth in his gut at the thought.

“Stop trying to figure me out,” he says after a moment, “I mean exactly what I said.”

“I wasn't—”

“Yeah you were. I bet you've got that constipated look on your face and everything.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Castiel tells him, and Dean laughs, because he can hear the frown deepen in Castiel's tone.

“Sure you don't.”

Castiel huffs, and something in the exasperated sound makes Dean ache. It's a little pathetic, a little desperate, but he can't stop himself from asking.

“Cas... is there... can you come here? When you can fly again. Before you take the tablet back.”

“If I could... but Dean, I don't want to lead them to you,” Castiel says, pained, before adding firmly, “I won't.”

“Then... if I go wait in a cinema, how fast can you fly to all of them?”

“Dean—”

“Yeah, I know,” he rubs his palm through his hair, “figured it was worth asking, though. Just in case.”

In case last flight really means last flight. In case Castiel doesn't come back this time. In case Dean doesn't get another chance to say everything he wants to say, to let Castiel know how much he means. Just in case.

He remembers the regret, every time he thought Castiel was gone for good, and it's like a lead weight in his stomach.

Fuck it, he thinks, and takes a deep breath, lets the feel of the steering wheel below his fingers anchor him.

“You...” he presses his eyes closed, shaking his head slightly.
For the past few days he's been on a roller coaster climbing, his pulse the click-click-click of its wheels, echoing through his bones, and now, now, he's hit the crest with his eyes closed. Distantly he knows he's been anticipating the fall all along; it makes no difference.

“You know I love you, right?”

The second the words have left his mouth, Dean feels his stomach drop, right on cue, and there's an intake of breath on the other end of the line, and a pause, and for one desperate second, Dean wants to take it back. Wants to reach through the receiver and catch hold of the words. But it's done, they're out, and all he can do is wait.

“I know,” Castiel says, and Dean can't help but laugh, leaning his head back against the seat as he rubs a hand over his chin, “it's mutual.”

For a moment, Dean just stares up at the roof, lets the knowledge that it's true wash over him.

“Why didn't I say that sooner?” he asks himself out loud, and Castiel huffs out a laugh on the other end of the line.

“I can't speak for you, but on my end I'd blame it entirely on cowardice.”

Dean laughs again, and it hurts, it hurts so much worse than before.

“This is literally the worst timing in the world, you know that?” he says, feeling the lump forming in his throat, “we could've... fuck, Cas, we could have had years.”

“We will,” Castiel says firmly, leaving no room for argument, and hell if that doesn't make Dean love him more, “I'll make sure of it.”

Somehow, Dean believes him. Against all odds, he always comes back.

“I should fly to Heaven as soon as I'm able,” he goes on, “the tablet is becoming... difficult to ignore.”

“Okay. Good luck, Cas.”

“I don't need luck,” Castiel tells him, voice warm despite the pain that lies beneath it, impossible to drown out completely, “I have you.”

The lighthouse, Castiel realizes when he returns to it, is not merely empty but long abandoned.

It stands at the edge of a cliff face not far from where he landed, built of pale brick, crumbling around the doorway, and weeds press up against the side that faces land. Under the bite of salt air and seaweed is a smell of rot, of decay, that lingers whenever the wind slows, and it only takes Castiel a moment to trace it's source back to the bats that have taken up residence on the circular balcony above.

He counts himself lucky that it's as derelict as it is—if nobody is maintaining the building, he isn't likely to be interrupted. Still, Castiel pauses briefly to make sure he's alone before he lets Naomi's blade slip from his sleeve. The last thing he needs is to have human law enforcement asking him questions when he's unable to fly away or influence them. With a glance around, he sees no signs of
life beyond the birds, and returns his attention to the chain woven through the handles of the door. Driving his blade between the links, he twists until the chain snaps and falls to the ground with a clink, before pushing inside, into the musty damp.

To his left, a staircase twists upward, and as the door clicks shut behind him, blocking out the steady roar of waves crashing below, he takes a few steps toward it, looking up to where the dim light of dawn creeps down around the curved wall. The soft orange glow of dawn filters down into the main room, and he continues his inspection in the dim light. There isn't much to look at. A tangled mass of old rope is piled in one corner, frayed at the end and green with algae, and a table takes up the middle of the room. Only one chair remains at it's side, but the legs are spindly, and he thinks that if he were to sit down the whole thing would splinter and collapse. A few empty cans and liquor bottles litter the floor, cigarette butts pressed flat around them, and the wall on one side is covered in scrawled names and crude drawings of genitalia.

The chain on the door came later, he thinks. Why anyone bothered is beyond him.

The last place he looks is the cupboard beneath the stairs, but it contains nothing but a ratty mop, stiff with age.

He wasn't really expecting there to be anything to paint the walls, but had been hopeful, and he frowns in displeasure at the thought of having to use his blood. The angel blade hurts, the feel of it sharp and biting, and while it alone would be bearable, the tablet burning behind his ribs is enough pain to deal with.

As soon as he was away from Naomi, it had faded, but now it's slowly coming back, building, a furnace within, and he finds himself thinking of stars, of God. His long-absent father, returning only to see his final flight. Final flight. The words are stuck, replaying in his mind, and he ignores them as best he can. However little he thinks of God, however much his faith has been shaken, he can't believe that He would let him die now. A year ago, yes. But now—now he's doing what's right. Truly right. His Father, surely, would not bring him back so many times just to take his life from him when he's finally getting it right.

Drawing the blade over his hand, he waits until blood wells in his cupped palm and dips his fingers into it, bringing them up to the door. He forms the sigil swiftly before crossing the room and painting it again on the opposite wall. All up the stairs, every few feet, he adds another, another, another until the smell of his blood is thick and tinny, overpowering in the cramped space. He's thankful that even drained of his power, his grace still heals his body enough to continue functioning despite how much blood has been spilled.

Upstairs in the lantern room, windows surrounding him on all sides, finally satisfied with the sigils, he sits with his back against the massive light. Cobwebs hang from the ceiling, thick along the white metal frames that separate the windows. He watches the spiders weave and tries not to think of traps, of angels waiting for him, ready to drag him back to that room in Naomi's part of Heaven to squeeze the will from him.

Whatever happens, he tells himself, it will be over soon.

Closing his eyes, he leans his head back against the glass and for the first time in years he prays not for forgiveness, but strength.
Chuck, leaning one elbow on the table, reads over his notes with a furrowed brow, and he looks up briefly when Sam comes back into the library.

“Find something new?” Sam asks him hopefully, taking a seat.

“Nothing useful.”

*Sounds about right,* Sam thinks, sagging back against his chair as he pushes his hair back from his face. The whole situation is a mess. He's not sure why he ever would have expected anything different. The look on Dean's face outside had reminded him of the one he'd worn that night in Salina, before Castiel had truly returned from Purgatory, when Dean thought he'd seen him out in the rain. He'd looked haunted, lost, small. Outside, psyching himself up to make that call, he'd looked the same.

“How's Dean?” Charlie asks through a yawn, as if she can read his mind, and Sam just shakes his head.

“He was stalling. Think he's finally calling now, though.”

“Good.”

“Hmm,” Sam agrees, nodding.

The thing is though, even if the conversation goes well and Castiel flies off to Heaven to take the tablet to safety, Dean's going to be a wreck when he comes back inside. He's going to be scared and angry and miserable until Castiel gets back, and it's anyones guess which will be the dominant emotion. All Sam knows is that there's not going to be any point trying to talk to him about it.

If his insides weren't 90% caffeine right now, Sam would just suggest that they all go to sleep.

Let Dean come back to a quiet bunker, let him slam the drawers in the kitchen and pace the halls until he wears himself out and falls asleep in the library. It's not healthy, but it's how Dean deals, and Sam knows better by now than to try and force him to open up. Every time he's tried in the past, it's lead to Dean closing off more and more, and he's learned his lesson. Let Dean come to you. It's not fool proof, but it's a hell of a lot better than the alternative.

Leaving him to it would be the best option. But he's had four cups of coffee in the past two hours, and Chuck is running on so little sleep that he doesn't even seem tired any more. It's not looking likely.

If Castiel goes to the Garden and doesn't come back. Every time the angel has disappeared, every time he's died, he's seen it chip away at Dean a little more, the loss digging a little deeper.

The thought of seeing his brother grieve Castiel again—especially now—makes him ache.

“You've got insight, right?” he asks Chuck suddenly, earning himself a startled expression, “about Dean?”

“I guess. Yeah,” Chuck's brow lowers into a frown, “I know stuff about him that you don't, but I'm not telling you about it. He'd literally kill me.”

Chuck looks deadly serious, and Sam decides that he really doesn't want know.

“That's not what I meant.”
“What, then?”

“I’m just thinking, if something happens. If Cas... if something goes wrong. I’m worried, you know? He’s not exactly the poster boy for healthy grieving, and—”

Sam cuts himself off with a frown, looking at Chuck in confusion. His eyes have glazed over, his mouth slack, and though he’s still holding the notepad in one hand his grip is loose.

“Chuck?”

Abruptly, he stands, his chair skittering back over the ground with a clatter, and Charlie, half asleep on the other side of the table, jerks to attention with wide eyes.

“Hey, Chuck?” Sam repeats, standing and reaching out to grasp his shoulder, “Chuck, you okay?”

There’s no response. Chuck just stares, vacant, and Sam takes a step back from him, looking over at Charlie.

“You think we’ve been pushing him too hard?”

Before she can answer, Chuck drops the notepad, turns, and walks across the room, limbs stiff and awkward as a marionette.

“This can’t be good,” Sam mutters, following him slowly.

“He can’t be possessed, right?” Charlie asks in a loud whisper, edging around the table as she watches Chuck warily, “I mean, the bunker's pretty well guarded on that front... right?”

“Right,” Sam says, watching as Chuck shuffles out of the library and comes to a stop in the war room.

Pressing the tips of his fingers against the map table, he moves his lips silently.

“What’s he saying?” Charlie asks, edging closer, and Sam catches hold of her arm to stop her.

“I don’t know. You wanna go back to the library and grab the holy water off the shelf near the scimitar?”

“Yeah, okay.”

She walks back, watching Chuck the whole time, and when she returns she's carrying not only the holy water but a silver dagger and the salt shaker from the kitchen.

“Figured it wouldn't hurt,” she says with a shrug, holding the lot out, and Sam takes them from her, moving slowly toward Chuck.

“Guess we're about to find out.”

In the lighthouse, the hours pass slowly.

Castiel feels his grace returning like the tide, edging in only to pull away again. Knowing what needs
to be done and being unable to do it leaves him agitated, and without even the ability to listen to prayer, he's left only with his thoughts, his fears. With each passing minute, they become more irrational, somehow heightened by the pain of the tablet.

It's infinitely more frustrating than he could have expected.

In total, three hours, seven minutes and forty-two seconds pass before his Grace is restored. He doesn't let a second go to waste.

The Heaven he favors, the eternal Tuesday, is his usual destination, and he flies there swiftly, settling in the open meadow and hoping the tablet will show him the way to the ever-elusive Garden.

The man to whom this Heaven belongs is still here, still smiling in his red sweater as he watches his kite soar in the warm sun, but it's different now. Tainted. Castiel hasn't been here since the war, since he took to the skies and rained down his wrath on Raphael's followers, and the sight of lush grass brings back dark memories of wings upon wings upon wings, black burnt into endless green.

How could I ever be the Shield? he wonders, suddenly terrified that Chuck had been wrong, that this is a suicide mission and he won't even manage to keep the tablet safe.

When he breathes in, he thinks he catches the smell of ash thick in the air. Though perhaps that's just the guilt talking.

A few seconds pass before he collects himself, calms himself enough to move on, but by then he can feel his brothers, his sisters, clamouring through the ether to find him. They sense him here, and he has no chance to move before they land, caging him in with wings spread wide. The atmosphere itself seems to quake with their presence, their anger, and though some are constrained to their vessels as he is, many more are in their true forms. As he looks upon them, standing tall and terrible, great shining wheels of fire and bronze and stone, wings pointed, some of light and of cloud, others of crystal, he feels the tablet surge within him with an unimaginable heat that brings him to his knees. It makes the blood of his vessel boil, and he digs his fingers into the ground as the taste of burned flesh fills his mouth. He has the distinct feeling that if he doesn't move immediately, it's going to be too late. Too late. Too—

You know I love you, right?

The memory is quiet, barely there, but he takes hold of it even as he feels his six wings scorching, tastes blood and ash and fire on his tongue, and with great effort he pushes back to his feet, staggers forward; tries to let the magnetic pull of the tablet direct him toward the Garden.

We could have had years.

We will. I'll make sure of it.

He seeks the Garden, but his grace is a forest burning. His vision is blurred, blown out to white, all white, and he can barely see where he's going as he moves, weighed down too much by pain to fly. In the bright, the bright, there's a flurry of movement, dark shapes, that he knows, recognises as his siblings.

They're speaking to him, but he can't understand them. Can't even hear them, not really.

Their voices are just noise, now, ringing loud; their bodies merely flame, licking at his heels, at his eyes, vessel and true form alike. When they touch him, clutch at him, try to pull him back, the heat of the tablet overtakes him.
You know I love you, right?

With each halting step forward, dragging himself toward the single point of quiet, of shade, of peace that must be the Garden, has to be the Garden, he feels their many limbs slipping against him, catching. They scream. Then again, they could be shouting.

You know I love you, right?

The air grows thick as molasses, and it hurts to breathe, to step, to stop. He keeps moving. He keeps moving. He keeps moving.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter got insanely out of hand. I'm talking nearly 9000 words out of hand. As a result, I've split it in two and will post the second half tomorrow night, and then in a couple of days, the final chapter shall follow.

Hope everyone's still enjoying this, and thanks for sticking with me :)

You know I love you, right?
When Dean makes his way back into the bunker, he finds Charlie and Sam in the middle of the war room, staring at Chuck. His hair is dripping wet, rivulets running down into his eyes and through a patch of salt, crusted thick on the side of his mouth.

“Uh... everything okay?” he asks, hopping down from the final step.

Sam looks at him with a pinched expression.

“I have no freakin' clue.”

“He's been like this for like twenty minutes,” Charlie says as Dean comes to a stop beside her. This, apparently, is staring at the map table and muttering to himself. Whatever he's saying, it's too quiet to hear, and for all Dean knows it might not even be words. He stares at him for a long moment before looking back at his brother.

“Why didn't you come get me?”

“And tell you what?” Sam asks, “Chuck's gone guano and really likes the table?”

“Good point,” Dean says, looking the prophet up and down before pointing at his soaked hair, “I'm guessing that's holy water?”

Sam nods.

“It made no difference. Didn't react to salt or iron or silver, either,” Sam hesitates, glancing quickly at Dean before fixing his sights back on Chuck, “did you speak to Cas?”

“Yeah. He's heading upstairs in a couple hours.”

“Are you o—”

“Any idea what he's saying?” Dean asks, cutting Sam off.

It's not avoidance, he thinks, because there are more important things to worry about right now than how he's feeling. The fact that he wouldn't want to talk about it anyway is irrelevant.

Leaning his ear toward Chuck, he listens to the muttered words.

“Oiad ds vran lit oiad ooanoan ol oiad,” Chuck drones, each syllable falling heavy as a stone from his mouth, “g-chis-ge ol iadpil, od gemeganza noasmi nostoah obza.”

There's something familiar in the tone, in the cadence of the words, and Dean frowns.

“Enochian?” he asks, glancing back over his shoulder, and Sam shrugs.

“Could be.”

As he listens, Chuck repeats the same phrases, over and over, and Dean straightens up, looking him
over. His eyes are glassy, staring off into some place the rest of them can't see, and Dean waves a hand in front of his eyes. It's about as useless as he expected it to be.

Looking down at the surface of the table, he sees where Chuck's fingers have formed a loose circle, and his stomach sinks.

“Has he been doing that the whole time?”

“What?”

“Pointing right at the middle of the country. Or, y'know,” he gestures around the room, “here.”

Stepping closer, Sam furrows his brow.

“Crap,” he mutters, “yeah. I didn't even notice.”

“Well that isn't ominous at all.”

“Maybe it's a coincidence?” Charlie says hopefully.

The words have barely left her mouth when there's a heavy thud above them, and Chuck's head snaps up, making her jerk back with a yelp.

“Maybe not,” Dean says, staring up at the bunker door as the sound repeats, louder, “anyone order a pizza?”

Chuck hesitates for a second, as though waiting for the walk command to kick in, and heads for the stairs.

“Charlie, stay back,” Sam says as he grabs the silver knife from the table, walking after Chuck warily.

“Uhuh,” she says, walking right after him.

All three of them keep a safe distance as Chuck slowly ascends the stairs.

His eyes are vacant, feet dragging so heavily it's a wonder he doesn't face-plant. When he gets to the door he fumbles for the lock, pulling it roughly open, letting the light of the bunker spill out into the night.

Dean isn't sure what he was expecting to see on the other side. It sure as hell wasn't this.

“Kevin?” he says, and gets nothing in reply.

He's filthy and ragged, and his face is as blank as Chuck's. In one hand, he holds a fist full of ripe-smelling dirt, and before anyone has a chance to say anything else, he and Chuck push back into the bunker, heading down the stairs, side by side, speaking in tandem. Sam stares after them.

“Uh... guys?” he calls out.

If they hear him, they don't show it.

“Should we be stopping them?” Charlie asks, pressing back against the railing as they pass before loudly adding, “christo.”

Nothing happens. Sam and Dean both look at her with raised brows as they follow the prophets.
“Thought it was worth a try,” she shrugs.

“We already knew they weren't demons.”

“Well, could we just, like... bop them over the head or something?” Charlie suggests, and Dean glances over at her as they descend the final steps into the war room.

“They're not field mice, Charlie.”

“I'm open to other suggestions.”

Kevin pauses to place the pile of dirt on the map table, and they all watch as he digs into the pockets of his sweater for more. Handful after handful is added until his pockets are empty, and he presses it down, spreading it over the surface in a long line.

“Doing a little gardening?” Dean asks.

As soon as the dirt is in place, Kevin straightens up, and he and Chuck resume walking, up through the library and down the hall, down the stairs and straight to the storage room. It's dark, cramped with all the extra junk from Charlie's room, and without turning on the light they walk right in, weaving through stacked boxes.

Sam flicks the switch, bathing the room in a yellow glow.

“Starting to get kind of nervous, guys,” Charlie says quietly, edging her way into the room.

“I told you to stay back.”

“Pfft, right.”

As they watch, Chuck and Kevin move with slow purpose to pull open crates and drawers. The first thing they take out is a glittering stone about the size of a walnut, and Dean crosses the room to take the label card from the box they took it from.

“The Hope Diamond,” he reads, and Sam scrambles through the room to see for himself, pulling the card from Dean's hand, “rude.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“What, does that mean something to you?”

“For one thing,” Sam says, reading the label closely, “it's meant to be in the Smithsonian—not in our basement. And it's cursed, supposedly, which is probably why it's here.”

“Uh, guys?” Charlie says from behind them, and they look up to see Chuck holding the bag full of bones that she'd found a few days ago while Kevin picks up a jar full of crystals.

With the jar and the Hope Diamond clutched in one hand, Kevin walks to the far shelf, opening a glass-lidded display case to take out an ancient blade. Dean recognizes it from weeks ago, from a half-finished attempt at taking inventory of the bunker's many weapons.

“And now they've got a jar of glitter—”

“They're calcite crystals,” Charlie reads over Kevin's shoulder.

“—the Spear of Destiny and a skeleton,” he finishes, looking between Sam and Charlie with raised
hands, “any ideas?”

“Early Halloween?” Sam quips.

“Every day is early Halloween for you,” Charlie points out.

Apparently finished raiding the room, Chuck and Kevin shuffle out into the hallway, heading back upstairs, and Dean follows behind with Sam and Charlie. It’s not until they reach the war room that Sam speaks again.

“Diamonds are pure carbon,” he says thoughtfully to himself, “calcite is near pure calcium.”

“You got a subscription to Gemstones Weekly that I don't know about, Sammy?”

Sam ignores him, watching as Chuck and Kevin pile everything onto the edge of the map table before walking to the bookshelf and taking down a vial of holy water. He glances across at Charlie, listing things off on his fingers.

“Carbon, calcium, phosphorous in the bones, hydrogen and oxygen in the water, and that dirt smells a lot like fertilizer, so that's probably nitrogen... Charlie, is it just me, or—”

“Nope, not just you.”

“Well it's definitely not me,” Dean says, “so someone wanna help a guy out?”

 Those are the six most common elements that make up a human body,” Sam says, eyes back on Kevin and Chuck, who are spreading the bones out on the table.

“So, what... you think they're making a dude?”

“Kinda looks like it,” Charlie says, “maybe we should reconsider my bop them on the head plan.”

“Yeah, but if it's just the ingredients for a person,” Dean says, watching as they arrange the ribs, “then what do they need the Spear of Desti—oh, shit.”

Frankly, Dean's embarrassed it took him this long to figure it out, but it's been a stressful few hours.

“What?” Sam asks.

"Whose blood was spilled by the Spear of Destiny, Sam?” Dean asks pointedly.

“Ohio, crap,” Sam says, eyes widening, and it takes Charlie a second to catch on.

When she does, she makes a choked sound, backing away from the table.

“He shall rise,” Dean quotes.

“He shall rise,” Chuck and Kevin echo, and all three flinch.

“No way,” Charlie says, shaking her head emphatically, “here?”

“He shall rise,” Chuck and Kevin repeat in reply, and Dean shudders involuntarily when they slip back into Enochian, “Oiad ip torzv.”

“Now that's just creepy.”

With the bones laid out, the diamond sparkling beneath the ribs like a crystal heart, shards of calcite
and droplets of holy water sprinkled from top to bottom, they stop.

“It looks like a 3D Ed Hardy tshirt,” Charlie says quietly, pulling a face, and Dean snorts out a laugh beside her.

Sam gives them both a withering look, as if trying to remind them that this is a serious situation, and Dean wipes the smirk off his face. It's not like he doesn't know that things are likely to get pretty damn hairy soon, but if he hadn't learned how to laugh in the face of horrible shit he'd have gone off the deep end years ago.

Kevin takes up the Spear of Destiny, holding it over the bones, but he doesn't put it back down. From the opposite side of the table, Chuck reaches over and grasps it, and with both hands on the hilt, they speak louder.

“Loncho saanir ol saga,” they intone in unison, voices echoing through the room as they plunge the blade down, driving it through the surface of the table, “Oiad ip torzv.”

For the first time since Kevin arrived, they fall silent. The moment hangs. It's with an audible gasp for air that they snap back to reality, blinking groggily.

Kevin staggers to the side, trembling, and Sam grabs hold of his arms before he can fall.

“Whoa, hey—you alright?”

“Sam?” Kevin asks, looking around the room in a daze which turns into panic, “I'm alive?”

“Why wouldn't you be?”

“I was...” he trails off, looking at Chuck, “I mean, they said it was only temporary, but...”

He shakes his head, blinking as if looking into bright light.

“They didn't say much else,” Chuck agrees, sinking into a chair, and Dean holds up his hands.

“Oh, seriously. Anyone feel like sharing with the class?”

“It's a long—”

“Cliff's notes, then,” Dean says impatiently.

“I don't know about him,” Kevin says, pointing at Chuck, as he sits down opposite him, “but I was... I got... I don't know. Spirited away.”

“By who?”

“Angels. They wouldn't tell me their names, or what they wanted... they just said that I was in Heaven but it was temporary, and that when I was returned to Earth, it would all...”

He trails off again, noticing the skeleton on the table.

“It will all come to you,” Chuck says dully, his eyes fixed on the bones, “they told me the same thing.”

“Then they dropped me in the woods,” Kevin adds, staring at the dirt under his fingernails, “and then I walked... I don't even know how long.”
“Any idea what you're supposed to do now?” Dean asks, and Kevin presses his lips tightly together as Chuck answers through a nervous gulp.

“Yeah,” he says, reaching out toward the blade where it's sticking out of the skeleton and dragging his thumb over the edge, “we need to put the final pieces of God back together. And to do that... to do that, I have to die.”

Moving through Heaven is slow. Glacial.

Time seems to slow almost to a stop, dragging out, and Castiel's thoughts feel just as sluggish. It's been years. He's sure of it. Years. He thinks of Earth, of all that he's certain he's missed, and tries to take solace in the thought that if he's right, the Winchesters will be resting in the fields of Heaven now. Even if he takes a thousand years more to get to the Garden, they'll be at peace.

Pressing on, each inch feels like a mile, and the sound of angels is a never-ending roar in his head. It's deafening, the light around him blinding.

The pressure, the heat at his center, burning him from within and without, builds. Builds on and on and on, and he's thought he's reached the zenith more times than should be possible only to feel it increase again. He feels as though he's going to be crushed, obliterated completely. At this point, so long as the tablet were to go with him, he isn't sure he'd mind.

More time passes than he can comprehend, and he tries to remember what he's doing this for. Why he's here. Who the voice in his head—you know I love you, right?—belongs to. It's the only thing that he can hear over the sound of the angels behind him.

It takes him a decade to remember, and another to remember a face; cheeks scattered with as many freckles as the green eyes, sandy hair, a smile—no, a smirk. A grin. The feel of warm hands, gentle hands that have seen too many battles.

“Dean,” he says, his voice a raw croak, and somewhere close behind him, he senses the fury of his brothers and sisters.

They try again to snatch at him, but are only buffeted away by the heat of the tablet.

He sees Superi Murus ahead, a wall of shadow shifting, rippling, and remembers his purpose. Beyond it, the Garden awaits him, and he's close. So close.

But there's a dread building in him at the sight of that wall, a deeply-ingrained fear of passing through it, and God isn't there.

He should be. At the crossing He shall rise, the tablet had said, and this was it. This was the crossing, and he was so, so close.

I'm not the Shield, he thinks helplessly, how could I have been so prideful?

There's no holy light, no safety awaiting him, but it's too late to stop. He's come this far. He has to try. Even as he feels his wings being torn apart by flame, his grace clawing uselessly within him, trying desperately to hold him together, he presses on through the pain, through the fear.
It's what is right, he thinks, if nothing else I must do what is right.

The bunker is quiet enough for Dean to hear every pulse of his own heart. Chuck and Kevin have offered no further explanation, and in the drawn out silence, Dean, Sam and Charlie have all been staring at them, waiting for Chucks comment to make sense. Dean finds his voice eventually. He squints at Chuck.

“Come again?”

“I mean... technically it could be either of us,” Chuck says, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, “since we both have a part. But I'll do it, I mean—”

“Back up a second. You both have a part? Of what?”

“Of God,” Kevin says quietly, but the words come stilted, like they're threatening to catch in his throat.

Dean sits down heavily, and dimly he registers Sam and Charlie doing the same. With the five of them crowded around the table, it's like the worlds most disturbing family dinner, complete with skeletal centerpiece.

“How do you—what?” Sam manages, and Chuck shrugs.

“He's telling me,” he says, tapping on his temple, “I can hear Him.”

“Since when?”

“About fifty seconds ago,” Chuck says, and Kevin gulps.

“I don't hear anything,” Kevin says, tongue darting nervously out over his lips, “but... um. I see... there's... I can see him.”

“Where?” Sam asks, looking around as if he thinks he's going to catch a glimpse.

“In my head. It's hard to explain.”

“And one of you...”

“Has to die,” Chuck says, voice hollow, “we're the last living prophets. The others were all killed before their time, and their... the pieces of God they carried have already rejoined.”

“So you're like Holy Horcruxes?” Charlie asks, before hurriedly adding, “not that I'm comparing God to Voldemort, but—”

“He says, kind of, yeah.”

“God said 'kind of, yeah?'” Dean asks dubiously, “isn't that a little casual?”

“He's been on a leave of absence,” Chuck says vaguely, eyes slipping a little out of focus.

“Oh, well then.”
“For the last few millenia, he’s been split into thousands of pieces, each one held within the soul of a potential prophet,” Chuck says, staring down into the middle distance, and Dean realises he’s listening.

Charlie, at his side, fidgets in her seat, staring at Chuck in awe, and Dean pats her shoulder reassuringly. He doubts it does much.

“Every time a prophet died,” Chuck goes on, “another part of God passed into the ether and joined the rest. We were born into the final generation, and now... now there’s only three parts left. One in the ether, one in Kevin—”

“—and one in Chuck,” Kevin says, seamlessly picking up where Chuck left off, the same faraway look in his eyes, “when one of us dies, our piece will join with God's grace in the ether, and then it will—”

“—seek out the final part. God will coalesce within the body of the final prophet—”

“—and only when God is one—”

“—will he be able to give form—”

“—to the vessel prepared for him—”

“—and return to Heaven,” Chuck finishes, and shakes his head, letting out a breath, “that felt weird.”

“Yeah,” Kevin agrees, his face a little pale, forehead damp, “I think I'm gonna hurl.”

Chuck doesn't look much better, but he's shaking a little less, and Dean thinks it's the first time he's seen him look so focused.

“You'll be okay,” Chuck tells Kevin, before turning to Sam and gesturing toward the silver blade still in his hand, “let's get this over with.”

“Whoa, hold on a minute,” Dean says, getting to his feet.

“He's right, Chuck,” Sam says firmly, “we're not just going to stab you.”

Sighing, Chuck leans heavily against the table.

“Either you do it or I do, but I'm thinking you'll have a better shot at... at making it quick.”

“I think I'm gonna hurl,” Charlie mutters.

The thing is, as much as he wishes there was another way, Dean knows Chuck is right. The tablet had said it, after all; the grace of God shall coalesce. With his light the Word shall know the safety of the Garden.

It sucks, just like this kind of thing always does, but it's got to be one of them. Chuck or Kevin. Dean's just relieved that Chuck is volunteering, because if he and Kevin both refused, they'd all be screwed. He sighs.

“You sure about this?” he asks, and Sam looks at him sharply.

“Dean.”

“God has to be there when Cas gets to the Garden,” Dean reminds him, and he tries not to think too
hard about where Castiel is now, if he's flown yet or if he's still waiting, “if He's not, the tablet's gonna end up in the wrong hands. I don't want to kill Chuck any more than you do, but do you really want to take a risk on the whole planet getting taken out in the blastwave if we don't?”

Reluctantly, Sam agrees, and Chuck actually seems to relax.

“So you'll do it?” he asks, and Dean nods once, holding out his hand for the knife.

“Charlie,” he says, feeling the cold silver in his hand, “you might want to clear out for this.”

Before she leaves the room, Charlie pulls Chuck into a tight hug.

“It was good to know you,” she says quietly, “even if you are kind of a pain in the ass.”

“You, too,” he says, and she grins through her tears, squeezing him once more before letting go.

As much as he tries not to think about it, Dean has killed a lot of people in his life. Most of them had been monsters with a few monstrous humans thrown in, but though he knows he can physically get the job done, it doesn't make this any easier. If he didn't already hate God, the fact that he's essentially forcing him to do this would do the trick.

Chuck is sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, Kevin at his side, and he's ready. Waiting.

He's oddly calm, and though it makes sense in a way—he know's he's going to Heaven after this, afterall—it's still disturbing. Nobody should look so zen when they're less than five minutes away from being stabbed.

Kevin is nowhere near as collected. About thirty seconds ago he'd reached out and taken hold of Chuck's hand, and Chuck had let him. Shortly after, Kevin had thrown Dean a look as if to challenge him to say something about it. As if he would. Whatever comfort the kid can get right now, he's all for it.

“So,” Dean says, swallowing around the lump in his throat, “what's he saying?”

“He's saying—” Kevin pauses, squeezing Chuck's hand, “he's saying it's time.”

Dean wants to say something. Apologise for what he's about to do. But there's no words that will make this okay, and Chuck is ready, resigned to it. He settles for briefly squeezing his shoulder as he kneels on the ground in front of him before settling the blade at his chest.

“Are you ready?”

“Oi ol zen,” Chuck murmurs to himself before drawing in a breath and letting it out slowly through his nose, “niis oiad gigipah ol oiad olani dlvgar ol.”

He nods once, opening his eyes to look at Dean with a weary smile.

“Do it now.”

Dean wants to look away. He doesn't want to see the light go out of Chuck's eyes, but it wouldn't be right, he thinks, to not be fully present for this.
As he pushes forward, drives the blade in, he sees his pupils dilate, sees Chuck's mouth fall open, sees blood trickle from his lips when he coughs and jerks, sees his free hand coming up to clutch helplessly, involuntarily at the hilt of the blade buried in his chest.

Setting his jaw, Dean refuses to look away until after Chuck has slumped down against the wall, until his mouth has fallen slack, his eyes clouded. Kevin is breathing heavily, shaking beside him, and Dean thinks he's crying until Sam speaks.

“I think it's happening,” he says thickly, his voice startling Dean, and with a look over at Kevin he sees something like a white fog, glowing bright, twisting through him.

It's only a couple of seconds before the fog disappears, and then Kevin is standing—no, being pulled to his feet by something unseen. It's as though there's a string attached to the top of his head, and he's being yanked firmly upwards. He moves toward the table.

“Loncho saanir ol saga,” he says, looking down at the bones, and his voice sounds all wrong, layered somehow, as if it's not just one but many.

For a moment nothing happens, but then his arms fly out to the sides as light explodes from him, and Dean barely covers his eyes in time. Beneath the ringing sound of grace, he can hear glass shattering in the library. When it's all over, silence descends like a shroud.

He cracks open his eyes, lowering his arm, and sees Kevin crouching by the table with his head in his hands, and standing nearby, Sam already watching him warily, is a man.

At least, Dean's pretty sure he's a man, though he isn't certain he'd be able to describe him if he tried.

“Guys?” Charlie calls cautiously from the other room, “is everyone okay?”

“Yeah,” Sam calls back, his eyes never leaving the man at the end of the table, “we're good.”

The man is difficult to look at—as though he's a little too bright, a little out of focus, a little not there—and Dean's eyes struggle to make sense of him. The bones are still there on the table, along with everything else, but they seem slightly unfocused, too, like they've lost their essence. The sight is unsettling, and it plants a confusing kind of panic in his chest. But then he looks up, and Dean's fear gives way to anger.

His hands tense at his sides.

“How was the vacation?” he asks coldly.

Sam shoots him a warning look, but Dean can already feel the vitriol rising, and he's powerless against it as he walks right up and drives his fist directly into the man's face.

He doesn't even flinch. In fact, Dean's hand passes clean through him, and he overbalances, falling flat on the floor. All he gets in return for it is a look of pity.

So yeah, maybe trying to break God's nose wasn't the best plan of action, but the way Dean sees it, the guy had it coming. Least he could have done is let the punch connect.

He leans down, touching Kevin's head briefly, and the last remaining Prophet lets out a sob, looking up just in time to see God smile before he disappears.

He doesn't make a sound.
Castiel can't feel his wings any more. Can barely feel his body but for the pressure on it, and if not for the insistent pull of the tablet, he doubts he'd be able to continue.

When the voice comes, a soft susurrus settling in his mind, he is struck by a vivid image of space, of time. The universe around him remains exactly the same, but what had seemed exceedingly bright now appears to be endless velvet dark, stretching out and out on all sides, and in the distance, resplendent as the sun in comparison, he sees it. A light. A mere pinprick, but bright, so bright, and he moves again, more surely, more focused, faster than before.

“Ol g-chis-ge ne oiad ds blans oadriax” the voice says when he nears it, “Ol nenni ol vgear. Ol g-chis-ge ne.”

At his center, Castiel feels something give way, and he sees, at last he truly sees. His vessels eyes run, tears running down his cheeks, and they feel like ice against his burning skin.

_To behold Him is to weep_, he thinks.

God is a shining thing, glowing, effulgent, incandescent, cascading down, edges rippling as oil on water, a figure in the fog. Castiel moves toward him like a moth to a flame.

“Ol g-chis-ge ne,” God repeats, drawing him in, and Castiel follows the sound, moves through the burning air and slips out of the dark.

When he reaches the garden, it is bright. Far brighter than anything was before, and as he feels himself distintegrate, feels the tablet inside splinter, pulled apart and reformed in the presence of his Father, he smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

“Oiad ds vran lit oiad ooanoan ol Oiad g-chis-ge ol iad pil, od gemeganza noasmi nustoah obza.”
They who see with the eye of God are of him, and will be as one

“Oiad ip torzv.”
God shall arise.

“Loncho saanir ol saga, Oiad ip torzv.”
All parts made whole, God shall arise.

“Oi ol zen. Niis oiad gigipah ol Oiad olani dlvgar ol.”
This is my sacrifice. I give myself for the living breath of God.”

“Loncho saanir ol saga.”
All parts made whole.

“Ol g-chis-ge ne oiad ds blans oadriax. Ol nenni ol vgear. ol g-chis-ge ne.”
You are the shield of heaven. You have strength. You are blessed.

(tikaboo.com used as reference for all Enochian dialogue)
There's a moment, between one and the next, when nothing means anything. Castiel is neither a being of light nor a man of flesh—he is memory, and sensation, and nothing more. Time stretches, impossibly thin, and Castiel feels the light of God run through him like an electric current.

“Is the tablet safe?” he asks aloud, and the sound of his voice startles him, strangely solid in the spinning void.

He shuts his mouth firmly, and his teeth click together, and yes, yes he has teeth, a face, a solid form. Reaching within he finds that the tablet is gone, nothing but a hollow space where it had been pressed, and he becomes aware of the body he claimed, little by little. His grace feels distant, unreachable as his wings, burned in the crossing.

“It is.”

He breathes out in relief, comforted in the knowledge that it had been worth it, and opens his eyes.

The Garden is bathed in snow. It reflects bright where it has fallen in mounds around colorful flowers, and it takes him a moment to understand why he recognises it. He'd been somewhere similar, years ago, when asking for guidance. For a sign.

*It's beautiful,* he thinks.

“That is the point,” God says, and Castiel turns toward the voice.

God stands before him, and he looks like a man, bathed in light. It's disconcerting. He shakes it off, and is surprised to feel his wings snap back into being. In the midst of the Garden, he thinks himself like a tree in the spring, his grace coming back to him bud by bud, leaf by leaf.

“It's over, Castiel,” God tells him, “your work is done.”

“No.”

The light around God flickers.

“No?”

“I... forgive me, please, Father. I know it was to be my final flight, but please, just give me more time, just one hour; I only—” Castiel starts, panicked, but he's silenced with a bright roll of something that might be laughter, shimmering around God in waves.

“You're free, Castiel.”

“Free,” Castiel repeats cautiously, fearful of the hope that's blooming within him with his grace.

“It seems a great many of my words have been misinterpreted,” God tells him patiently, “this was your final flight as the Shield; not *entirely.*”

“I'm free.”
“You have earned it.”

“I don't... what am I supposed to do?”

“You may return to Earth if you wish, or remain in Heaven. You may choose to fall or remain an angel. Your will is entirely your own. I will not intervene again.”

Castiel hesitates. With all the time that he felt pass while he fought to reach the Garden, he fears that he has been gone too long, that all that waits for him on Earth is a grave.

“How long has it been?”

“A week.”

Relief sinks into his very bones.

“Thank you, Father,” he says, and he feels that rumble again, rolling across Heaven.

“You may go now, Castiel.”

Castiel flies.

Dean has barely slept. He knows it isn't helping.

“You need to at least try,” Sam tells him from the doorway, and in answer, he gets up, crosses the room, and closes the door in his brother's face.

It only takes a couple of seconds for him to feel like shit about it, and he lets out a sigh, pulling it back open. Sam's still there, a crease between his eyes.

“I'm just worried,” he goes on, as if he didn't even notice the door shut, “we all are.”

It's been almost a week since God made a guest appearence in the bunker, and while Sam has been better since—a side effect of being touched by holy light, they think—Dean has been a mess.

Castiel hasn't come back.

The first day, they'd all gone out into the woods to give Chuck a proper send off, and digging the grave had taken up most of the daylight hours. Digging was hard work, exhausting on it's own, and with the added weight of Chuck's sacrifice, it gave him no room for thinking.

His mind had been occupied fully, and it stayed that way until nightfall, until they'd covered Chuck's body in salt and given it over to flame, until they'd all said their thanks and their goodbyes, and the last of the dirt had been shovelled back in.

After, though, as the four of them had trudged back to the bunker in silence, the nagging fear at the back of his mind had taken form. Still, at that point, while he'd been worried, it had been easy to tell himself that it was too soon to expect Castiel to be back. It hadn't even been twenty four hours.

But then, before he knew it, it had been. Then thirty hours. Then forty-eight. Time kept passing and they hadn't heard a thing.
Now, it's been just shy of a week, and he's still gone.

All day, he's felt the looks of pity settling on him, and he hates it. He wants to tell them that he's not worried. That it's fine. That Castiel is just making sure everything is properly squared away in Heaven, and that he'll be back in no time.

He wants to tell them all of that, but they'd see through it. He's worried sick.

"You think he's..." he starts, then clenches his jaw, looking back into his room, "you think there's still a chance?"

"I don't know," Sam says honestly, and Dean kind of wishes he'd lie to him, give him some false optimism for a change.

"Yeah."

"Get some sleep, okay?"

"Yeah. I will."

On the side of a tree-lined road in Lebanon, Kansas, Castiel lands, and takes the cell from his pocket. His hands are shaking as he unlocks the screen.

It's late, a little after eleven in the evening, but he doubts Dean is asleep. The line only rings twice before Dean picks up.

"Cas?"

He has a split second to savor the sound before he is struck sharply from behind, and the phone is knocked from his hand, skittering over asphalt. Turning, he sees Esper, and feels a chill. Behind him, there are others—Haxiel, Jarushiel, Malach, all holding blades—and with them, Naomi stands with fury in her eyes.

"God has forgiven you your sins," she says, stalking closer, "we have not."

"You blaspheme," Castiel tells her.

Distantly, he can hear Dean shouting through the phone, and his eyes dart toward it.

"He doesn't care, Castiel," Naomi says bitterly, and he frowns, looking at her in confusion.

"What are you talking about?"

"At least before we didn't know," she says, "now He's back, and He doesn't want us."

"That isn't true."

"Isn't it? He spoke through Joshua, and do you know what he told us? He told us that we need not remain in Heaven."

Her voice is shaking, though whether it is with rage or sadness Castiel cannot tell, and he looks at her
with pity.

“Sister, don’t you see? It is a gift.”

“No! He has forsaken us and called it freedom,” she shouts, and Castiel sees the tears in her eyes, hears the pain in her voice, and he hates it, hates that he feels the need to comfort her even as she advances, “and it's because of you.”

“Naomi, please,” Castiel says, holding up his hands in placation, “don't do this. I don't want to fight.”

“Nor do I. I only want retribution.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

Letting the blade drop from his sleeve, Castiel casts one last glance toward the cell phone, and hopes that wherever Dean is, he doesn't have to hear him die.

Dean's been driving for a full minute before he notices Sam in the passenger seat, and he nearly jerks the car off the road when he catches sight of movement in the back. Apparently this is a family affair.

He hadn't even noticed them follow him out of the bunker.

“You shouldn't have come,” he says sharply, “we've only got the one angel blade.”

“There's still holy oil in the trunk. And besides,” Sam says, angling a thumb over his shoulder, “they wouldn't listen.”

Looking at Charlie and Kevin in the rearview, Dean narrows his eyes.

“You're staying in the car.”

He ignores the eyeroll he receives, and sets his sights back on the road ahead.

The call had come shortly after he'd given in and crawled into bed, and once he heard the sound a struggle on the other end, it had only taken a couple of minutes to pinpoint the location of Castiel using the cell phone's GPS.

Castiel was less than five minutes drive away if he stuck to the speed limit. Naturally, he's been driving at nearly double, and already he can see the flash of a tan coat ahead, the glint of blades in the moonlight.

He slams on the brakes at the last possible moment, barreling out of the car with a blade in his hand, and jumps right into the fray. Two angels beside Castiel are still standing, and one of them he recognizes as Naomi. He launches himself at her, aiming for the neck, but is knocked aside by the other angel, stumbling down the embankment by the road and tripping over a third already laying there, his wings burned into the earth.

“Look out,” Castiel shouts from the road, twisting to slash his blade toward Naomi, and Dean turns just in time to see the angel who knocked him down moving swiftly toward him.

He ducks, avoiding her blade by millimeters, and swings his arm up to drive his own home. It works
between her ribs, sending flashes of bright blue-white through her eyes, and he pulls it out only to
strike it upward, through her jaw, just to be safe.

He smells burnt feathers when she drops, but doesn't spare another glance; just scrambles up to the
road to see Sam with a bottle in his hand and a lighter in the other, watching Castiel and Naomi fight
and waiting for an opening.

In the end, he doesn't need it. There's an awful second when he's sure Naomi has won, but then
Castiel spins, thrusting his blade up through her chest, directly through the heart. She flares bright,
falling to the ground, and Castiel stares down at her empty vessel, the smell of ash rising from the
wings burnt into the asphalt.

Sam slumps back against the hood as Kevin and Charlie climb out from the back, smiling with relief,
and Dean grins right back at them before making his way toward Castiel.

He's halfway to him when he sees it; a glint of silver-white, seeping from Castiel's stomach.

For a second, Dean is confused; he doesn't know what he's looking at. Then Castiel looks down,
brow furrowed, and his mouth splits open. Dean drops his blade.

Blue-white seeps out around the wound, from his mouth, his eyes, and Dean's running, running,
desperate, but his feet feel too slow, and when he reaches Castiel, he's already on his knees, chest
heaving.

"No, no, no Cas, hold on, you'll be okay," Dean rambles, suddenly on the ground beside him, "just
hold on for me. Cas? No, no Cas, Cas!"

His hands sink into tan cloth, fingers dig into shaking shoulders, and he hears Castiel suck in a
breath, shuddering, before he coughs. Castiel's hands lift up, then, to clutch at his collar, scrambling
for purchase, and he stares at Dean, determined.

"Dean," he rasps, and there's blood in his mouth, seeping between each tooth, and some distant part
of Deans mind thinks his teeth look too white amongst all that red, "Dean, I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about, Cas. You're gonna be fine," Dean hears himself saying through a tight
smile, "just hold on okay?"

He can feel it now, the buzz, the ringing of grace, seeping out of Castiel's every pore with his blood.
Behind him he hears the others call out, hears their feet slapping on bitumen as they hurry toward
him, but he doesn't look, can't look away from Castiel. Not now.

He presses his fingers against the wound, tries to stem the bleeding, the draining grace, but it's not
working. The wound might not have been enough to kill him instantly, but it's deep. Castiel heaves.
Dean can feel the rattle and rasp of fluid in his lungs every time he breathes in, can feel it like it's his
own pain, his own life fading. He aches, right down to his soul, and that's when he remembers.
Another day, years ago, when Bobby had given him the strength he needed to recover, to bring him
and Sam back from the past.

"Touch my soul," he says, and Castiel's eyes go wide. He shakes his head.

"Too... Too dangerous. Too much."

"Dammit, Cas, do it!"

He grabs Castiel's hand and presses it hard against his chest.
"Do it! I am not going to lose you now, do you hear me? So you either do this and heal, or I'm storming... Wherever it is angels go when they die and dragging you back myself."

"I--you'll be... hurt."

Castiel stares up at him, eyes pleading, as if begging him not to make him do this, risk this, but Dean can't deal with that right now.

"I'll be hurt if you fucking die!" Dean shouts, and Castiel flinches at the noise.

Something in Dean breaks, and he lowers his voice, drops his forehead to lean against Castiel's.

“I need you to be okay,” he murmurs, “Please, Cas. Plea--"

He doesn't get the last word out; Castiel's hand is sinking into his chest, and he's on fire. His soul lights up like a beacon.

It's agonizing, exquisitely painful, like a slow-spreading heat that crawls through his veins, through his chest, and every molecule expands to bursting. He feels split in two, like his cells are breaking apart.

Distantly, he figures that's what is happening; he's giving away part of himself, it's being torn from him.

When Castiel finally pulls away, his breath coming heavy, forehead slick with sweat, Dean slumps forward against him, his eyes closed, face pressed against the collar of Castiel's shirt.

"Tell me it worked," he says against his neck, and his voice is wrecked, thick, "please tell me it worked."

"It worked," Castiel replies, a low rumble beside his ear, and Dean could cry from relief.

Instead he laughs, squeezing his arms more tightly around him, face pressing down into the hollow of Castiel's throat. He can feel Castiel's pulse under his lips, and it's so easy to press them harder against it, to move up, pressing over and over against cool skin, stubble, tasting the salt of his sweat, or tears, or both, and it's not a kiss, it's benediction, it's relief, it's gratitude and love, and they all come so naturally when it comes to Castiel that Dean just keeps giving. And when he lifts his face, feels Castiel's breath ghosts over his lips before he even knows he's so close, Castiel gives right back. His hands are on Castiel's face, pushing up, back into his damp hair, and he doesn't care that they've got an audience, doesn't even care if those goddamn books become best sellers, because this, right now, is his.

"I thought I lost you," he says, repeats with each second spared for breath, "I thought I lost you."

"Never," Castiel replies.

He says it like it's the simplest thing in the world. Right now, as Castiel kisses him in the dirt on the side of a road in Lebanon, Dean thinks maybe it is.

Chapter End Notes

Wow. It's over. I don't know how to feel about this D:
Thank you so much to everyone who stuck with this story over the past few months--without your continued support I would never have moved beyond the first chapters. Everyone who has left a comment or a simple kudos has helped me in ways I can't begin to explain, and I love you all for it.

<3

(ps: I hope you aren't mad at me for killing Chuck, though it /is/ in the title, so you can't have been too shocked!)
(pps: Come visit me on tumblr and let me know what you thought, or just say hi--there's a link on my ao3 profile.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!