What started off as a game becomes a journey of friendship, love, and personal growth; filled with all the ups-and-downs that will make and bind a family.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Started as a one-shot prompt fill, and people REALLY liked it, so accidental fic happened. "Can you do one where the whole spn family are having a battle on who can write the best destiel fanfic behind d+cs backs, until castiel finds out and outdoes them all? Smth really meta and cracky/sappy with many examples of fanfic? Pretty please!"

PLEASE NOTE that this fic is not actually all about characters writing fic, that's just the very beginning of it and how it gets STARTED.
“Alright, Moose, you ready?” a voice called.

Sam looked up from his file to see Jo slide into a chair in front of the enchanted mirror in the Roadhouse heaven. Grinning, he set his research aside as she straightened sheets of printed paper, brow raised in challenge.

“Hold on, Charlie is gonna wanna hear this. Charlie!”

She rolled her eyes. “There’s not a single coffee shop or truth curse to be found in this version. She won’t like it.”

“Sounds droll and out of character already,” Charlie quipped as she drifted into the bunker's library, grinning when she draped over Sam’s shoulder to wave. “Hi, Jo! Let me guess: hunt goes wrong, Cas gets hurt, Dean gets weepy, love confessions ensue?”

She snorted. “No, that sounds more like something Andy would write. Honestly. It’s like you don’t know me at all. My scenario has them as a totally BAMF power couple on the battlefield, corpses of their enemies everywhere, town saved, and people cheering.” She passed the papers through the frame, fingertips stopping right at the barrier between Heaven and Earth as he grabbed them. “I mean, if Dean and Cas are ever going to get together, it’s probably going to be in the euphoria of a battle won where one of them accidentally kisses the other thanks to raging endorphins and adrenaline.”

“I still say it should happen when one of them walks in on the other taking a shower!” a female voice called.

The mirror shook as Jo slapped her hand on the worn wood surface of the bar. “That’s because you are a pervert, Pamela! They deserve better than that!”

The sultry brunette slid into frame, arm snaking around her as she winked at Sam. “Well, I’m not saying they have to have sex right then. I’d allow, oh, ten minutes.”

Charlie chuckled and Sam dragged a hand over his face with a groan.

“Oh, God, guys. What have I said about my brother, sex, and nudity? We have rules for this.”

“Prude.”

Charlie tapped Jo’s story. “I love the way Dean grabs handfuls of Cas’ coat and yanks him forward. That’s beautiful and gives me joy.”

Relenting, Sam nodded, taking a moment to consider the absurdity of the hobby they’d all adopted, even if intended as harmless fun at each others' expense. Though, granted, the only people not in on the weekly competition were the two it had slowly come to revolve around.

Hazel eyes flicked to Jo's smug smirk on the other side of the mirror, looking so close and alive and there. Looking happy and healthy and whole. He thought maybe it was something they all needed. Jo, Ellen, Kevin, Pamela, all of them needed the people on Earth, that connection to when they were alive, the illusion they still were. Sam needed the balm it brought, the way it eased his sense of guilt seeing Jo grinning, dimples and all. It made their deaths less real. Made it hurt less.

He cleared his throat, handing the papers back. “Yeah, I like it, too. It sounds like something Dean would do-- once he finally reached a breaking point.” His mouth twisted. “I still think Cas doing
yoga after a run is more likely to initiate things. Eventually, Cas is GOING to notice the way
Dean’s eyes glaze over and his brain stops all functions involved in walking or avoiding furniture. I
mean, that is just my life right now.”

Pamela laughed and disappeared from view, calling back, “See? My story of passion giving way
seems all the more likely.”

“That’s not romantic,” groused Kevin, unceremoniously stepping into the frame and shoving his
own papers through.

Sam grinned at him, at the knowledge they wandered in and out of their own heavens to interact
with each other as they pleased. Even had the angels and reapers not arranged for them to do so--
and given them the enchanted mirrors to connect Heaven to Earth as a thank-you from Chuck-- he
still knew they would have done whatever they wanted anyway, sneaking from one heaven to
another through Ash's back alley system with complete disregard for angels trying to enforce
Heaven's rules.

It was nice to get to see the angels admit defeat and surrender. The hunters had so much fun
running the God Squad in circles and making them look incompetent and stupid, it was a wonder
they didn't concede sooner.

Kevin jabbed a finger at the story he'd written. “Dean should do something totally cheesy and
cliché. Or Cas should. I’m versatile. Boom boxes and windows should be involved if Dean makes
the first move. Flowers if it’s Cas. Confusing human customs or something. Very You've Got Mail,
with Cas buying Dean flowers because he thinks they're a normal expression of affection between
people.”

Charlie abandoned her spot and pulled up a chair by his side. “I am so glad God's sister deemed me
important enough to bring back to life. Totally touched, actually, that I mean that much to you
guys-- and really glad I didn't have a grave to dig my way out of, not gonna lie.” He lifted an
eyebrow. She waved him off. "Dude. Talk about traumatic. I saw what it did to Buffy, and even
Dean attests it is no cakewalk. I don't like small spaces. A Charlie needs to be free." He snorted and
she settled back. "And though these Friday night writing competitions are fun, I still think if we’re
really serious about them getting together-" she faltered, lips pursed out and face scrunched before
she turned to him. "How did we even end up writing ways for Dean and Cas to get together? We
were competing to tell the most absurd stories about each other in an epic rendition of Lies or
Truth, and somehow we ended up... here."

He nodded toward the portal. "Ash wanted to break more of Heaven's rules just to see if he could,
found a way to connect to Earth's internet and discovered fanfiction about the Supernatural books."

Jo snorted with a grin. "Yeah, which led to dramatic readings of fans’ fics."

"Which led to more creative expression," Pamela added, casting her gaze off to the side, "before
Sam implemented rules."

Grinning, Jo tapped her nose and pointed. "We're all dead, so the stories drifted to y'all. Then, just
Dean and Cas after Ash got us copies of the books."

Sam glared. "Still hate all of you for that."

She grinned wider. "Only a little."

He relented with an eye roll and nod. "Only a little."
Part of his brain knew writing fic about each other wasn't healthy. It really wasn't. Not to mention, Dean would be pissed stories had shifted to focusing on him and Cas, however accidentally, but... despite the sense of guilt it brought, the sense of relief, the distraction from everything that had happened recently, Sam needed that, too. Needed it and clung to it as much as he did to the illusion their friends were alive and well, but in a different location.

He dropped his gaze, clenching his teeth on a swallow. It was only temporary. It was fun. They needed that. He needed that.

"And the great Think Tank of Ways Dean and Cas Could Get Together if They Weren't So Stubborn was born," sighed Charlie, head bobbing. "You know, we could actually even say this is Dean's fault, what with sneaking off to karaoke on weekends and thinking we don't know. Honestly, we should just talk to them. Individually, not together. 'Hey, True Love and a life right there. Go get it.' Or, if they really need something to help them along: we could go to Rowena. She'd probably help just for the laugh of it. Just a little magical nudge, y'know? Truth spell, passion potion-"

"Consent issues," Sam argued holding up a finger and flipping the page on Kevin’s story.

She relented. "Ex-nay on the kissing spell then, but a must tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth- that's bound to be fun!"

"Yeah, until Dean starts spilling secrets about things that aren’t fun and just end up hurting others to hear," Jo argued. "Trust me, there are plenty of things Mom and I don’t tell each other."

Her mother came into view, wiping her hands on a dishcloth. "Don’t I know it." She eyed Sam and Charlie. "Have you kids eaten? Do I need to fix you something?"

"No, we’re fine. Thank you."

She studied them for a moment longer before nodding. "Alright. Though, I agree with Kevin. Cas choosing some sort of custom he thinks is quaint and charming, though I’m thinking less flowers and more Cas being a bird, y’know, coming in and handing Dean a, uh…" she blew out a breath, eyes darting back and forth as she considered, "like, a piece of titanium quartz or bismuth. I think he’d probably like those best."

Brows drawing together, Sam shook his head. "Why a bird? And why stones?"

"Mating rituals," Charlie chirped, bumping their shoulders.

Jo turned her head. "Mom. No verbal entries." She pointed to something out of frame. "It’s the rule right under the one about no sex or nudity due to Sam’s delicate sensibilities."

Rolling her eyes, Ellen left for the pool table and Pamela. "I’m a hunter, not a writer. Killing things and running this place are what I’m good at."

Turning back, Jo patted the bar. "C’mon Sam. Who wins the pickles this week?"

"Me, obviously," Kevin told her. "Homage to classic romantic films is art."

"More like cliché and unoriginal."

"Oh wow, violence and carnage in the life of a Winchester? Not like they do that every day."

Sam held up a hand. "Well, wait. Where is everybody else? Are only four people competing this
week?” His eyes flicked past her, searching for the other familiar faces to their weekly meetings.

Charlie held out her tablet to him. “Crowley emailed me his.”

“Did we find out how he knew about this to begin with?” he questioned, side-eyeing the content she displayed. "Did we search for bugs?" She nodded and he waved defeat with a heavy sigh. "What did he write?"

“It’s hilarious, actually, and terribly embarrassing for Dean. Angst and manpain lead to heavy drinking, which leads to blubbery confessions in the parking lot when Cas comes to check on him, followed by Dean throwing up all over Cas’ shoes.” One of her well-sculpted eyebrows arched high. “To be honest, I think he’s jealous. It has to be why his stories always end in them disgracing themselves in front of the other.”

“Crowley pining for my brother is one of the more disturbing concepts in the universe.” He shuddered with revulsion. “What about Sarah? She always plays.”

Jo waved dismissively. “She apparently has gotten competitive due to never winning, so she’s squirreled herself away, determined to write the ultimate romantic confession. I’m thinking 2005 Pride and Prejudice chase-through-the-rain-to-confess-my-feelings epicness.”

“If you combined that with yours,” Charlie interjected, pointing, “I’d pay some serious money to see that.”

“And Ash? Is he still not playing?”

“I’ve explained several times that an algorithm does not qualify.”

“Didn’t Andy want to play?” Sam questioned, eyes shifting to the far corner where Andy was swearing at an ancient arcade game with singular focus.

Both Jo and Kevin made faces and looked away. “He’s disqualified this week. He broke rule number one.”

His mouth fell open. “He wrote them--" he choked and got louder, "You wrote them having sex?!”

Andy full-body flinched, swears cut off as he hunched and tapped buttons with more fervor.

“I LOVED IT!” the psychic called out as she took her shot at the pool table.

Jo and Kevin gave him identical flat stares, tones deadpan, “She loved it.”

“That is all manner of horrifying, so moving right along… I mean, even though she didn’t write it, I like the idea of Cas finding things he wants to give Dean and then having to explain he got it from a bird mating ritual.”

“No! It doesn’t count, Sam! She didn’t write it down.”

“Yes, that’s not fair.”

“I vote for Jo’s,” Charlie said. “I mean, as much as I love the idea of Dean asking Cas for a coffee date on some crisp fall day? Kissing on a battlefield surrounded by corpses while people cheer them on? There isn’t a downside to that!”

“But boom boxes and windows!”
“It’s just not very original, Kev, sorry. Even Dean knows it’s cliché.”

“It’s *classic*.”

Raising a hand to rest her cheek on, Jo grinned. “So do I win the fried pickles again?”

Sam narrowed his eyes at her. “I think you’re cheating somehow. You’ve won almost every week.”

Her lips stretched wider, flashing dimples. “I’m just competitive and good at what I do, whether it's humiliating Ash by reliving hunts gone wrong, or imagining ways endorphins and victory can lead to heavy making out— which I *can* attest to.”

Ellen slid the small plate of steaming pickles in front of her daughter with a roll of her eyes. “She only wins because I never write my stories down. I think half of those belong to me,” she insisted, snatching one of the fried slices to pop into her mouth.

“Am I disqualified from trying?” a voice asked.

Ellen choked violently on her pickle, the rest of them whipping their heads toward the speaker.

Casting shy glances at them with a downcast gaze, Castiel stood by the archway, toying idly with the belt of his trench coat.

“What?” someone asked. Sam thought it might be him.

Color rose high on the angel’s cheeks and he cast his eyes off to the side. “I mean, I wouldn’t be very good, but… if you were to help me, I might be able to come up with the best theoretical scenario for…” Cas struggled for a moment, mouth open with no sound. He swallowed and tried again, tongue darting across his lips, “Confessing to feelings for Dean? F-for the game you’re playing, o-of course.”

The stunned silence stretched, every mouth hanging open before they were a sudden flurry of activity and enthusiasm.

“Yes!”

“Of course!”

“Get him a chair!”

“Just take a shower with the door open!”

“Pamela, *no*! You don’t get to help!”

"Just trying to speed things up."

Settling into a new chair so Cas could take his seat, Sam wiped a hand over his face, shaking his head. “Okay, we’re happy to help, but… how did you know we were doing this?”

Face still encompassed in a blush, Cas kept his gaze focused on twisting the belt of his coat. “I am an angel and you were discussing me. Apparently, this means enough to all of you that it kept coming through in snatches, almost like a prayer. I thought… well, if the rules allowed it, I might take part. And if you were to assist me, I might have a chance at, uh…” Words failed him again, so he clamped his lips shut and jerked his shoulders.

“Absolutely, Cas, of course! Yeah, just, uh… Charlie? You wanna take notes or make a list?”
She saluted. “On it!”

“Do… all of you have to be pressed so close?” Cas questioned, casting a wary glance at the occupants of Heaven, all half-piled on top of each other in order to be part of the conversation. “It’s a little unnerving.”

He watched as they smacked and shoved and pushed each other until the portal wasn’t quite so crowded. Cas only looked away when Sam touched his elbow.

The hunter smiled, warm and soft. “So, of tonight’s stories… did you have an idea you liked best?”

Inhaling a deep breath, Cas let it out slowly before straightening with resolve, head lifting. “I liked the idea of the stone or pebble ritual. Of giving him a gift of some importance.”

Smile widening, Sam gave a nod. “It’s a start. What else?”

To Be Continued

Please be kind and leave a comment! Hearing from readers is what spurred this to get expanded on, after all. Comments are SUPER important and so very, very appreciated.
Chair scraping the wood floor, Cas plopped down with a scowl.

Sam stilled in his notes. “...So, how did it go?”

Cas sat there with distance gaze, jaw jutted to the side and finger tapping against one of the lore books Sam had been researching for Garth. The angel's irritation had him bite back the request for Cas' help with the complicated texts and translations.

Far off gaze sharpening, Castiel shoved to his feet. “This isn’t going to work, Sam. It’s too forward and obvious. He’s going to question it.”

“The stone? It’s just a gift you left for him.”

The angel glared. “According to the ritual, I just proposed. No, Sam. This is- he’s going to figure it out, then he is going to freak out, and I am going to have ruined this with nothing more than a rock-”

Sam scrambled to grab his sleeve or the hem of his coat as he turned to retrieve the present he’d left in Dean's room for him to find. “Cas, Cas, wait!” Castiel's glare dropped the fingers curled in his trench coat and then up to Sam's face. He swallowed, letting go and gesturing the chair.

“You’re overthinking it. Sit back down for a minute.”

Snorting out a breath, he did so, arms folded. “I don’t know why I let you talk me into this. It’s a terrible idea.”

He rolled his eyes just as Charlie came in cradling tea and eyeing them with curiosity.

“First, you asked for our help. Second, you are panicking. It’s just a gift. Something you found you thought he’d like. It’s not a big deal, and bird customs aside, humans love to collect things, be it nick-nacks or stones or occult lore,” he joked, motioning to the library.

Tucked into her chair, Charlie pointed to Sam. “We really like them when they’re gifts given for no other reason than someone thought of us and thought we’d like them. I’ve got a collection of odds-and-ends chess pieces of glass and stone. Hobbies and collecting things are a human quirk.”

“And it’s not like you’re putting him on the spot. It’s just a simple gift. We’re starting small here; this is probably going to take a while.”

“Wooing him?” asked Cas, one brow swept high in sardonic challenge.

Sam froze. For a moment, it was someone else looking back at him, Lucifer giving him the same irritated expression while wearing Cas' face. Rubbing at the scar on his palm, he shoved it away, forced it down, made himself see Cas who was still giving him an impatient look.

For someone on a mission to win Dean's heart, Sam thought he could be less sarcastic about it.

“Dean’s never been courted,” Sam began, “or had someone invest in him like you’re going to have
to. This is not an overnight venture.”

“The epic saga of Dean and Castiel,” Charlie sighed. “He’s gonna come up with a million different reasons or excuses for your actions before he ever accepts the right one. And even then you may have to be point-blank.”

Wincing, Sam added, “We’re just, uh, greasing the gears first.”

He didn’t think angels could get migraines, but from the pinched expression and the way Cas rubbed his forehead, Sam was starting to reconsider. And yeah, it was a tricky venture, for sure. Dad’s obstacle courses, which were tantamount to boot camp for kids, were easier than this reckless endeavor. But for all the years of pining while getting nowhere, direct action was clearly needed.

And Cas asked them for help.

“This is still a terrible idea.”

Sam shrugged and turned back to his notes. “Well then, just don’t do it.”

Cas’ fingers tightened on the arms of his chair, gaze snapping to Sam. Fear, want, and indecision warred in his eyes.

"But, I..." He licked his lip. "I just don't want to ruin this."

“We're not going to let you,” Sam assured. "This is a plan you agreed to; it's time to see it through."

Cas rubbed his temples. He definitely had a migraine.

“I regret so many life choices right now. All of them. I regret all of them.”

Charlie snorted and choked on her tea, coughing and red-faced as it went down wrong.

“Hey, Sam?” Dean called.

Sam gave Cas’ shoulder a brief squeeze. “In the library!”

He watched his brother round the corner and mount the steps studying something cupped in his hands. “You find this while cataloging the archives?”

“Ah, I actually haven’t started that yet,” he admitted, making Dean look up to level him a flat look. “Garth and Jody both needed help working cases, and then I got busy with some cross-referencing for my own project. Why? What’d’ja find?”

Dean held up a brilliant stone that looked like sunlight bursting over clouds. It earned an “Oh wow” from Charlie before she scrambled for a closer look.

Pushing his lips out, Sam shook his head. “I’ve never seen it before.”

Beneath the table, his knee pressed insistently into Castiel's.

A kick followed when that proved too subtle.

“It’s from me,” Cas admitted, voice rough and strained. Dean looked at him. Sam could see the blush rising above Cas' collar as he cleared his throat. “I saw it and thought you might like it, so…” He gestured vaguely, making Sam bite back a grin.
“This… this is amazing,” Dean breathed, green eyes dropping to study it again. “It looks like it would have come from a star or something.”

Cas huffed a laugh. “Mexico, actually. It’s a Sunset Opal or Mexican Fire Opal.”

Brows drawn together, Dean’s gaze jerked up. “You’re just giving it to me? It has to be valuable.”

“...I only care if it holds value for you.”

“Yes, I-” blinking, he looked down, “this is possibly the coolest thing I’ve ever seen. It literally looks like the sky. Thank you.”

Cas smiled. “You’re welcome, Dean.”

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With Dean busied in the garage for the evening, an emergency meeting was called, and despite his earlier success, Cas was again regretting his current course of action.

Both those in the library and the deceased group of friends on the other side of the mirror were bickering and joking loudly with each other, seating themselves at a couple of tables pushed together and occasionally throwing out advice or tips Cas would write down in his journal, but generally not getting anywhere.

If there was something he’d learned once coming to Earth, it was that there was never enough Tylenol for the headaches hunters could cause.

Sarah shoved herself up from where she’d been slump with her head in her arms, hair wild as she slapped the tabletop. “All I’m saying is you couldn’t have waited another week to start trying to win Dean over? My story would have won!” She swept an arm out. “It would have put you all to shame, you understand? To. Shame. All that time and effort was wasted.”
His own story rolled up in his hand, Andy pointed to Sarah in agreement. “She’s got a point, and I
don’t see why trying to get Cas and Dean together means we have to stop competing with each
other.”

Sam scowled. "Aren't you disqualified this week?"

Andy gesticulated in a way that conveyed nothing, before waving his papers. "I felt guilty and
wrote a new one. Or we could start writing original fiction. I'm down for that, too."

“You're still disqualified for the week,” Jo said, reaching out and then straightening his papers on
the tabletop. “The competition could be useful. They might give us scenarios Cas could use.”

Sarah pointed at her. “What she said. I’m going get mine. I worked too hard on it.”

At the end of the table, Ash was sulkily nursing a beer and looking even more put out than Cas. “If
you all’d listened to me earlier, those two would be nearing their wedding date by now.”

“Ash, we told you: science and math cannot possibly--”

“Science and math can predict anything! As. I. Have. Proven.”

Ellen rolled her eyes and threw a dishrag at him. “If we wanted to cut out the romance and go for
the most efficient method, Cas could just follow Pamela's advice and show up naked or something.
We’re doing this the old-fashioned way.”

Sarah scurried back in and Pamela plucked the story from her fingers as soon as she was seated,
eagerly reading over it.

“So we’re agreed the fic challenge continues?” Charlie asked. Sam looked over to see her hiding
behind the tablet displaying her entry. His flat look made her straighten. “Don’t you give me that!
It’s fun, okay? And I think we’ve all earned as much happy as we can manage! I got stabbed by a
one-armed Nazi! The universe owes me some happy!”

He held up his hands. “Alright, alright, I yield. Sheesh. Okay with you, Cas? Okay. Any useable
ideas for what to do next?”

Charlie turned her tablet. “Well, Crowley is sulking and says this is all bound to end in tragedy and
heartbreak. Cas, he’s sending you preemptive chocolates and offering a shoulder to cry on while he
tells you ‘I told you so’.” She flicked the screen with a sneer. “He is so jealous it’s disgusting.”

“…you don’t think it’s bound to end badly... do you?”

She looked up with a start as silence cut off all conversation like air sucked from the room. He
looked at them in alarm.

Stricken, Sam laid a hand on the tan fabric of Cas’ trenchcoat. “Cas… Dean loves you.” Blue eyes
played over earnest features. “He loves you and hates himself. He doesn’t trust himself to love
someone, and doesn’t think himself worth having… basically anything, but especially something
or someone that makes him happy. He doesn’t trust it to last, so he shoves it all down and tells
himself it’s not there and that he could never have it anyway. You are going to tear down his walls
a brick at a time until the only thing holding him back is himself. Until he has no more excuses or
fear.” Hazel eyes flicked to their friends. “And we’re gonna help you do it.”

He held stiff, reading the microexpressions on his face and having to trust Sam had enough faith
and conviction for the two of them. He gave a slow nod. “What do we do next then?”
“Use the love languages, like acts of service. Start doing little things for him,” Pam said.

“Like what?”

“Like, if he has a morning routine: already have his coffee fixed and waiting for him, but casual-like. As if you were already up fixing your own, so you went ahead and poured his, too. Be thoughtful and considerate.”

“I say you should go on a date to the park.” Andrew pointed to the fic being passed around the table. “Feed some ducks, eat some food, take a nap on a blanket.”

“Little early for that, and there aren’t any parks around here, but we can definitely use it. Cas, sound like something you’d like to try?” He nodded. “Charlie, add it to the list.”

"You're gonna have to reinforce the family unit," Ash stated. Sam looked at him. Despite looking petulant, he continued, "If Dean starts to feel most of his time is occupied with Cas, he'll try to compensate and pull away in order to not abandon you and Charlie. You need to start planning to spend more time together as a family unit, even just spending time as brothers."

Sam looked to Charlie, frowning before she bobbed her head and jotted down a note. Tapping her finger, Pamela clicked her tongue. “Sarah’s story is really cute. Getting ahead of itself, but we could definitely use it.”

Sarah snatched the papers, eyes darting over it. “What is it too soon for? Everything in here is adorable!”

“Hand-holding, for starters.”

Rolling her eyes, she handed off the fic to Ellen. “Accidental hand-holding, Pam.” At the looks of confusion, she clarified, “They're at a festival. Cas gets excited by something, while Dean is distracted by something else and only half-listening. Cas grabs Dean by the hand, dragging him along with him. Then afterward, the hand-holding just... sort of continues.” She grinned, cheeks pink as her whole face scrunched. “With lots of blushing and shy glances. It’s so cute.”

Sam rapped his knuckles on the table. “That's too far ahead. We need out next steps. Baby steps.”

“You should just seduce him,” Pamela interjected. "Closed door, hands in hair, mouth on his, clothes dropping, name screaming, the whole nine. Make your intentions known."

“Pamela!”

“I am just trying to save time!” she exclaimed, throwing up her hands. "You could be a little more appreciative."

Sam sighed and turned to Cas. “To Ash’s point, we’ll plan a movie night or something soon so we can all hang out. Meanwhile, you start getting more personal with Dean, hanging out with him outside of a case or research, okay?”

Cas nodded, then looked at Charlie when she nudged him.

“Why don’t you get a bottle of water and go check on Dean in the garage. See how car maintenance is coming.”

Pushing his chair back, Cas stood, biting back a smile as he inclined his head. “If you’ll excuse
me, then.”

“This needs a playlist,” Charlie announced once he’d rounded the corner out of sight. “Someone should make one.”

“Are you volunteering?” Sam challenged.

She slapped the table, eyes lighting up. “Speaking of challenges, who wins this week?”

He scoffed. “I haven’t even read the entries, and also, everyone still has until Friday if they still want to play.” Hazel eyes slid to the mirror. “With the added bonus of potentially getting used in real life.”

His face split into a grin as everyone shoved their chairs back and made a mad scramble from the room.

Self-satisfied, Sam laced his fingers behind his head. “Meeting adjourned.”
“What do we do?” Cas worried, staring at the doors of the truck stop, both anxious for and dreading Dean’s reemergence.

In the passenger seat, Sam rolled his eyes and flipped the page on the grimoire they’d acquisitioned. There were various other occult books and objects in the trunk they would study and catalog back at the bunker.

“Dean is furious,” Castiel re-iterated when he got no reaction.

Licking his finger to turn the page, Sam dismissed it. “Dean, like you, is being dramatic. It was a milk run, Cas. Where there were witches, now there are none.” Pausing, he pushed out his lips and shrugged. “With a minor hitch.”

“Your brother was transformed into a female version of himself.”

“Which is already taken care of. He’ll be back to normal in a few hours, no harm, no foul-- save for Rowena, who might still be laughing.” He twisted, one arm over the kept leather seat. “The only real damage is to Dean’s pride, Cas. Insecure from a lifetime of people using his looks as a weapon to belittle him by, and probably Dad’s voice among the rest. I know not to say anything; he’s projecting so hard anything would only make it worse.”

“There has to be some way to… I don’t understand why this is so upsetting, but surely we can help.”

“Misogyny, Cas, ingrained into society. That’s why it’s upsetting for him.” He turned back to the book. “And if you want to help it’s up to you. I am not stepping on that landmine.”

Cas’ attention snapped to the door as a figure pushed it open and stepped out, their head bent in distraction with their phone.

Long strands of hair were shoved behind his ear, newly purchased sweatpants too long and hockey shirt uncharacteristic. He looked small and lost, shoulders hunched as he scowled and jabbed away on his phone. Cas didn’t know if he was texting Charlie they were headed home or Garth to air his grievances his intel that landed them the case and Dean’s predicament.

He didn’t understand what Dean found distressing or Rowena found funny about the situation. Angels changed vessels with some frequency throughout their lives; it didn't change who they were. He was still Dean, still beautiful, with freckles that drew attention to the green of his eyes. He was still reckless and angry and lethal in a hunt as he always was, even when his boots were suddenly too big and his belt failed to secure his pants.

When the witch had flipped the table and Cas caught Dean after the subsequent
explosion, Dean had reacted to his hair falling in waves around his shoulders and Cas suddenly being the taller of the two. Castiel’s concern had been deep cuts and blossoming bruises. What did his appearance matter? Cas would know him in any form, in any life, and his feelings and respect for him would never waver.

Shoving his phone into his sweat’s pocket, Dean’s glare snapped to where the Impala was parked and met Cas’ eyes. Castiel didn’t flinch under the angry gaze, only waited patiently, noting the way Dean broke first, dropping his eyes as scarlet spread up his neck and to his face.

The door creaked when it opened, Dean slamming it harder than necessary when he slid in and cranked the ignition. “Sammy, remind me to oil the hinges later.”

“Sure.”

The rumble of the engine as they sat idle in the parking lot didn’t mask the steady spike of tension mounting in the vehicle as Dean sat clenching and unclenching his fingers on the steering wheel.

Sam flicked a surreptitious glance at Cas, then to his brother. “...is there something we forgot to follow up on?”

The muscles of Dean’s jaw flexed as he ground his teeth, lips peeling back on a snarl. “No.”

Dean yanked the car into gear, nearly gunning it as he backed up and shifted to drive spitting gravel. His knuckles stood out as they sped out onto the highway.

Sam’s eyes found Cas’ in the rear view when the palpable tension doesn’t dissipate. He quirked a pointed brow, then returned his attention to the grimoire having washed his hands of the situation, intent on ignoring them both.

Cas’ expression was scathing before it fell. He was not equipped for this. He lacked context and understanding, and the self-loathing and shame radiating from the front seat made him angry, made him sad. Made him want to step into the past and put a whole new definition of fear into John Winchester.

“Dean.” The hunter flinched, muscles stiff as he braced himself. Platitudes and reassurances would only scrape deeper into the wound. Taking earlier advice, Cas changed tactics. “I’d like to ask a favor of you. Both of you. For when we get home.”

His shoulders fell, muscles going lax as he flicked him a glance. “Yeah, sure, Cas. What is it?”

Folding his hands together, Cas dropped his focus to his lap. “It’s, well, a thought I had from before- when I was human- that at the time, there was no opportunity, and even with my grace back, it wouldn’t be the same, but…” he rubbed the back of his neck, realizing the sincerity to his words as they spilled out of his mouth, “I thought it would be nice, is all. I wanted to try it...”

Sam turned, looking genuinely interested, and despite the grace trying to keep his emotions in check, Cas felt himself blush to have both Winchester's attention regarding something so trivial and selfish.

“What is it?”

He swallowed, regretting opening his mouth. It was a vain request. Childish. “There’s the open field by the bunker, and so far from the city lights, the stars would be... amazing. I thought- it might be fun if-if we were to go out there together. I could- there was food I wanted to try before. I thought- it’s not the same, I still won’t experience it from a human standpoint, but it’s...it’s close
enough.” He shrugged. “I just thought it might be fun to do together.”

With a soft swear, Dean released an unguarded laugh of surprise. “Geez, Cas. Yeah, man, of course. Just come out and ask. You want hangout time, not one of our kidneys. It’ll be great, won’t it, Sam?”

Cas’ head jerk up, brows raised. “Really?” When they nodded, he felt his face break into a grin. “Good. I’ll go get the food.”

Dean ducked at the sound of angel transport so close to his ear. “Whoa- Cas! We’re still over an hour away!”

Giving him a playful shove, Sam grinned, wide and toothy. “Let him be. He’s excited.”

Dean snorted and the corner of his mouth curled into a suppressed smile. “We gotta learn to be better friends. It’s so easy to make him happy.”

When Cas appeared in the bunker carrying food in both hands, Dean was kicked back with his ankles crossed on the table in the library reading.

He didn’t comment on Dean having returned to his normal appearance and bit back the urge to ask how he was feeling after two magical transformations in the same day. If he knew Dean, this was one of those things they would never talk about, going so far as to pretend it hadn’t happened.

Snapping his book closed, Dean’s face lit with interest as his boots landed on the floor and he bounded forward.

“Food! ‘Bout time!”

“It was very hard to decide now that I had occasion. And I wanted to make sure you would enjoy it,” he said as Dean clapped him on the back and steered him around and up the stairs.

“Cas, buddy, it was your idea. It’s your night. Get what you want.”

“It’s not… it’s not my night. I just thought it would be nice since we never…” he trailed off with a frown and Dean raised his brows, one arching higher than the other. He licked his lips and tried again. “Well, we never get to… We hunt. We research. We save the world. We rush back and forth from one crisis to the next, but you and I… we rarely have time to just be friends.”

The light in Dean’s green eyes dimmed, a tight smile pulling at his mouth. Hand on the door, he gave Cas’ shoulder a squeeze. “Well then, we need to fix that.”

He pulled the door open and led Cas outside.

Castiel did a double-take, eyes widening as he broke away from the hunter to stare.

Poles had been erected in the empty field, strings of tiny white lights stretched back and forth between them. Various paper lanterns were hung, offering their warm glow to the evening. In the center, Charlie had taken Sam by the hands and was trying to coax something like rhythm from him as they danced and spun to music. His movements were jerky and awkward; laughing as he shook his head and tried to pull away.
Cas turned, forehead wrinkled. “What is this?”

Taking the drink carrier from him, Dean draped an arm across his shoulders. “Family time. The lights were Charlie’s idea. She and Sam got carried away.” His grin made his eyes crinkle at the corners. “Hey, guys! Guess who showed up with dinner?”

“Cas!”

“About time!”

Taking in the blanket and lights from up close, Cas shook his head in disbelief. “I wasn’t expecting all this.”

Sam waved him off. “I found a portable telescope and brought it out for us, too. You were right. We’ll be able to see everything out here.” Bending back to look at the vast sky, he admitted, “I’m not sure how we never noticed before.”

“Stargaze later, Spaceman,” Dean groused. He was already sitting on the outstretched blankets. “I’m hungry now. Charlie! What are we listening to?”

“You shush, Dean Winchester. You love this and you know it. Embrace your fun side.”

“What’s on the menu, Cas?” Sam asked, folding his long legs and pulling the bag toward him as they settled on the quilts and blankets. “Good news, Dean. Burgers- huge burgers- and curly fries.”

“Man after my own heart! Gimme one.” As Sam handed them out, Dean unwrapped the silver paper and he groaned appreciatively. “Oh, dude. Bacon.”

Charlie giggled around her own mouthful as Dean bit into his food and commenced to make all manner of over-exaggerated sounds of approval and enjoyment.

“Dean. Please,” Sam begged, shooting him a put-upon look. “I don’t ever want to hear those sounds from you in my entire life. I’ve suffered enough.”

Dean nudged him with his boot and smiled in apology. “We should do this more! Cas is right, dude. We run around like chickens with our heads cut off saving the world, but I am getting old and due for a vacation!”

“Technically, I’m older than you at this point,” Sam said, cheek bulging around his food as he stretched for the container of curly fries.

“I was still born first.”

“I’m still older.”

“Doesn’t make you the boss.”

“Probably should.”

“No, you are the king of Bad Life Decisions.”

“Says Mr. I Sold My Soul To Save My Brother.”

“Says Brat Child Still Breathing To Complain About It. You are welcome, by the way.”

“Mr. I Stabbed The First Angel I Met.”
“Total misunderstanding and you know it, Mr. I Knowingly Dated A Demon.”

“Cas is practically guilty of that himself,” Sam argued. "And Meg was Dark Side first!"

“Speaking of dark sides!” Charlie exclaimed, face lighting up as she leaned forward. “Cas, did you know I went to Oz and got split in two? Not magic box split in two. But like, Jedi Charlie versus Sith Charlie! It was… not as awesome as you would think, oh but hey! She ended a war and saved a lot of lives! Plus!” She straightened, preening. “I had a dragon. I named it Buttons. There are totally statues of me and Dorothy all over Oz for stopping the War.”

Dean choked. “Statues? Plural?” he squawked, then tossed a napkin at his brother. “DUDE! How many times have we saved the world and there are no statues of us?” He gave Cas’ shoulder a shove. “Tell the angels to see to that, would you?”

Cas choked, nearly spitting his drink. “I do not think that would go over well.” He waved a hand. “Besides, I’ve been emphatically informed I am disowned. That conversation would really not go well.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “About time they got the message you’re a member of this family. Now you can stop running off to help the ingrates.” He watched Charlie wrap up the remains of her burger and push to her feet. “You cannot be done eating already.”

“Not all of us can eat our weight in cholesterol, Dean.” She held out a hand. “Cas, put down your molecules and come dance with me.”

“Oh I wish I’d brought my phone for this,” insisted Sam, smiling at the uncertain way Castiel wrapped and set aside his barely touched food to stand.

“Charlie, I don’t- I’ve never-”

Her head fell back with an exasperated sigh. “Stop worrying and just do like the man’s singing, Cas: shut up and dance with me.”

Panic coloring his face, Cas shot a desperate look at Dean as Charlie pulled him with her. Both Winchesters threw up their hands in surrender.

He scowled. “Traitors.”

Dean winked, teeth flashing on a grin. Dropping his gaze, Cas bit back a smile, feeling a small thrill down to his core. He didn’t even mind when Charlie stepped, slow at first to instruct him in the dance, then faster, grinning and encouraging him through it until they were stepping and spinning with ease.

They grinned, steps lithe as the music pouring through the speakers. He shook his head.

“I could never have imagined this as my life,” he confessed. “I never knew what it was like before.”

“To be silly?”

“To be happy.”

She grinned broader, spinning him, then tilting her head to peer at Sam watching them. “C’mon, Sammy. You, too. Get up. Dance party time. Up, Dean.”
Dusting off his jeans as he unfolded and stood, Sam winced. “I dunno, Charlie. Pretty sure you spinning me again is a bad idea.”

She and Cas turned and changed positions; she craned her neck to look at him. “I’m not gonna spin you. I’ve got a partner. Dance with Dean.”

Dean barked a laugh, standing when his brother began shoving his shoulder with the sole of his boot. “That’s an even worse idea.”

“It’ll be fun!”

“It’ll end in us stepping all over each other and someone getting elbowed in the face,” Sam warned, arms folded and smirking.

She rolled her eyes again. “Fine. Don’t dance with Dean.” She spun Cas out and stepped up to the younger Winchester. “Dance with me, and Cas can dance with Dean.”

Panic and wide-eyed fear crossed Castiel’s face again, heart hammering against his ribs as he twisted. Despite their height differences, there Charlie and Sam were going through the dance: as awkward and ungainly as before and laughing as they struggled.

He turned at the sound of Dean sighing. The hunter scratched the back of his head and offered a sheepish grin. Even in the soft glow of the lights, his embarrassment was clear as he held out both hands.

“I don’t know how she talks us into this stuff.”

Tongue darting out across his bottom lip, Cas swallowed and carefully placed his hands in Dean’s. “It’s not the worst that could happen.”

Dean gave a laugh as they began to step with the music. “No, not the worst.”

Giving his hands a faint squeeze, Cas moved to catch his eye. “I think we could both learn to have more fun,” he said, letting Dean spin him.

Dean laughed again, movements ungraceful as Cas spun him and they changed positions. “Yeah, we probably could,” he admitted, voice warm and pitched low.

This was it, Cas thought. If he were to ever have a Heaven, this would be his happiest memory preserved with perfect clarity. Just the four of them, under the stars and lights, dancing like they didn’t have a care in the world. No stress, no worry. Just four people in a family they’d made for themselves, being happy and free.

And Dean. There. Surrendering to the fun despite himself.

Pride and affection roared in his chest, and for a moment he could almost imagine the hunter was his. That he might actually stand a chance at having this. That Dean might actually…

He shook his head. “You know, I think I could die happy right now,” he confessed, eyes alight with joy.

“Yeah?” Dean questioned.

“Yeah.”

When they came together to change positions, Dean admitted, “I think I could, too.”
Later, seated on the blanket, Cas stared at the stars and idly stroked Charlie’s hair where she’d fallen asleep with her head on his thigh. Dean sat beside him, braced on his arms and head tilted to peer at the overwhelming beauty above them. Sam was a few yards away, glancing back and forth with a flashlight from a book to the telescope, before jotting down notes of whatever planets, galaxies, and other magical sights were beyond the sky.

Sliding his gaze to peer at the man beside him, Cas confessed, “I’m glad I have you.” Dean looked at him. Even in the dark, the way his brows lifted and his mouth opened were obvious. He smiled, resisting the urge to cover Dean’s hand with his own. “I’m glad we’re friends. That you’ve been willing to teach an angel how to be human.”

Dean looked away, then up at the sky. Cas followed his lead and looked at the constellations he once flew freely through.

“I’m glad I have you, too.” When Cas said nothing, Dean leaned and knocked their shoulders together, but kept his head tilted back. “Our family wouldn’t be complete without you, Cas. I wouldn’t be.” Cas’ gaze lingered on the exposed line of his throat, before drifting to his mouth as he spoke. “And you were right: we don’t spend enough time just being friends. I’m glad we did this. Hunt aside… this has been perfect.”

The two of them shared a smile before settling back and watching the stars drift overhead.

Chapter End Notes

If I had any artistic ability, I would totally draw the scene with them dancing under the stars and then of them look at the stars. I loved that part. I hope you did, too!
If Charlie sighed happily one more time, Sam thought she’d dissolve into a puddle of glittering pink ooze on the floor.

“You would think it was you making progress in a relationship,” he told her with a glance over the laptop.

Without budging from her position half-draped on the table with her head on her arms, she shared a look with Jo through the mirror.

“I’m living vicariously.”

The blonde rolled her eyes, still grinning cheekily with her chin in her palm.

“It certainly sounds romantic.” She angled her head. “How did you keep from reacting while they talked and thought you were asleep?”

“Techniques I learned in Oz for enduring torture.” She sliced a hand through the air. “They had no idea I was screaming inside.”

“You are a true warrior.”

“I know.”

“Where are they now?”

“Dean’s on a supply run. Since Lebanon is in the middle of nowhere and has such a small population, we stand out like sore thumbs if we drop into town for groceries or something, so we drew straws to see who had to make the long drive.”

Jo wrinkled her nose and raised a brow. “It can’t be that small.”

“Population is just over two hundred people.”

“Thousand?”

“No. Two hundred. Two hundred and six, last I checked.” Jo’s mouth fell open. Charlie nodded. “Thus with road trips for groceries. Dean drew the short straw. Meanwhile, Sam’s doing research for a case we’re not even working, which, thank you for that. We deserve a break. Cas is… I dunno. Said he was going for a walk.” She waved airily. “I think for him that means hopping to different sites and locations across the globe rather than one foot in front of the other like a normal person.”

They both settled down with their chins propped on their arms facing each other. “Is that normal
for him? I know plenty about him, but he and I don't really talk. I did meet him briefly, before
dying. He drank my mom under the table. I was very impressed.”

“Mm, nothing’s ‘normal’ for Cas. I think he’s constantly in a state of trying to figure out who he is
and how he fits into the world. I mean, hell, it’s always changing.”

“The world or him?”

“Both.”

“So he went on a continent-hopping walk?”

“He found out that humans make scrapbooks, and that both Sam and Dean have memory boxes
where they collect things that mean something. I think he’s trying lots of hobbies. Trying to find
one for himself and taking time to appreciate Earth in the downtime between battles.” She made a
face, nose and lips scrunching. “I think he’s fumbling for a coping mechanism after being
possessed by Lucifer,” her gaze fell when Sam flinched in her peripheral, “plus dealing with the
final fallout with his siblings and basically everything that came before, stuff we don't even know
about, I'm sure. Cas keeps... a lot to himself. Dean’s making effort to be more emotionally
available, prompting him to talk and stuff. Generally, he does it when it’s just them. Cas tends to
close up when me or Sam enter the room.”

“Cas made a good point the other day,” Sam said. Charlie straightened up to look at him. “Dean
came and found me before bed and brought it to my attention, and well, he’s got more than a small
point.”

“What was it?”

“We’re always busy with crises, but never make a point to spend time together and just be friends.
All their moments of friendship always happen during the current crisis, and I don’t think it was
until Cas said it that Dean realized. He and I know how to be brothers, we know how to be hunters,
we know how to be brothers while being hunters- we don’t know how to be friends, certainly not
good friends.” He dropped his gaze, frowning. “I think Dean’s feeling pretty guilty about it,
actually. Like, he’s failed Cas in some way. He was brooding all morning.”

Jo pulled a face, lips curling into a sneer. “Melodramatic men. How do you not know how to be
friends? Everyone knows how to be a friend.”

Flattening his lips in a line, Sam gave a single shake of his head. “Dean and I didn’t. Growing up,
he and I only had each other for company. It’s how I ended up meeting Sully. Dad constantly had
us in and out of new schools, sometimes only for a few weeks. Other times we just studied in the
motel room. We weren’t allowed to be friends with people from school. Weren’t allowed to spend
time with people outside of school. Dad wanted us as forgettable as possible, like ghosts. I was a
pretty awkward college freshman, but I’d at least made more effort to try and make friends growing
up- mostly due to Sully. Dean has great people skills- but only uses them to use or manipulate
people, never to make actual connection. I don’t ever- in my entire life- remember Dean having
a single friend he talked about.”

“That’s… really depressing.”

“I know,” agreed Charlie. “Here I thought I was a lonely kid.” She faltered, head canted. “Well,
wait. Why didn’t Dean have a Sully?”

Sam shook his head. “I’m not sure. I thought about asking, but I’m afraid of the answer, really.”
“Now who was Sully?” questioned Jo, frowning.

“Sam’s imaginary friend.”

“So why are we discussing them like a real person?”

“Because Sully IS real. Imaginary friends are real,” Charlie said a broad grin stretching across her features. “They’re called Zanna, and they are basically guides and companions for lonely kids, sticking around until the child doesn’t need them anymore. Then they go find another lonely child.”

“But… Dean didn’t have one? I thought every kid had an imaginary friend at some point. I had one.”

A smile pulled at the corners of Sam’s mouth as he perked up. “What was it?”

Jo flushed and glanced away. “I’m definitely not telling.”

“We had to solve the murder of a Zanna that was half-man, half-unicorn,” Sam stated flatly. “Also, another that was a mermaid. Spill. What was it?”

Face a deep red, Jo sunk deeper into her chair, arms folded and glaring pointedly off to the side. “She was a fairy princess named Buttercup,” she mumbled.

Sam snorted a laugh, before slapping a hand over his mouth to stifle the sound. She straightened, glaring despite him being out of view, and Charlie quickly grabbed the mirror so she could level it at Sam.

“She kept me company and distracted when my dad was off on hunts, so lay off, Samuel Winchester.”

He cringed. “Dude, that’s my grandfather, please don’t. And yeah, no offense meant. It’s just… funny thinking of hunters as kids with imaginary friends.”

Setting the mirror back on the stand, Charlie positioned it so all three of them were part of the conversation.

“You should still ask Sully. I’m actually really curious now. It’s unusual that Dean didn’t have an imaginary friend.”

“Charlie, it’s not like I have him on speed dial. He contacted us when the Zanna were getting murdered.”

“How’d you get him to show up when you were a kid?”

He shrugged, corners of his mouth wilting in a quick frown. “He usually just showed up or would appear when I called out.”

“So call out,” they said in unison.

Spots of pink spread high on his cheeks. “I am not.”

“Come on, Sam! Worst he can do is not answer, and it’s not like we don’t know Zanna are real now.”

“I have spent too much of my life talking to empty air, Charlie-”
“Except you aren’t suffering a psychotic break! Zanna ARE real, and, hey, it would also let you know whether or not he would show up in the future if you ever need his help, say if you’re working a case involving a child! I bet having Zanna allies with traumatized kids would be really helpful!” she added, voice sing-song.

He scowled and they grinned brightly. Heaving a sigh, he sucked in a sharp breath through his nose, holding it for a minute.

Then, “Hey, Sully? You there?”

Almost immediately, he startled violently, biting off a curse as his fists came up and he glared over his shoulder. “Geez! Don’t do that!” he hissed, glaring at empty air as he put a hand to his chest.

Charlie blinked, glancing back and forth. “I don’t see anything, Sam.”

“Yeah, no, sorry. Sully, these are my friends Charlie and Jo. Charlie, Jo? Sully,” he said, motioning between them and a spot to his right. “Wanna make with the visible here?”

She watched as his eyes followed something that seemed to move toward her before he smirked and laughed.

“No, it’s a portal, of sorts, not a tablet. It was a gift from angels and reapers and lets us keep in touch with dead friends.” A pause and then a nod. “Yes. Jo is dead,” he affirmed before panic overtook his expression and he pushed to his feet, hand outstretched. “No, no, no. Sully, don’t--” he glanced at the mirror, then hissed, “You can’t tell her her kid is dead, Sully!”

“I still can’t see him, Sam,” Charlie interjected, waving airily. “You’re having a one-sided conversation here.”

“She’s gonna want to know, Sam,” a voice stated as yellow and stripes filled Charlie’s vision, earning loud swearing from Jo and making Charlie squawk and throw herself backward on instinct.

Both she and the chair hit the ground with a crash, head slamming hard against the polished wood floor.

“Owie…” she groaned. She winced and reached back to touch gingerly at her throbbing head.

“Charlie!”

“Oh gosh me! Are you okay?”

The voice made her blink her eyes open, seeing Sam and another man hovering over her with worried expressions. She blinked again, taking in the bright yellow shirt and rainbow suspenders.

“Jo,” she called from her spot on the floor, “you see him, too, right?”

“In living color.” Her voice had the tone of someone who saw, but couldn’t believe.

Nodding, Charlie thrust a hand into the air. “Good. Help me up then.”

Sully and Sam both helped her back up and into her chair, a grin stretching across the Zanna’s features as he reached out to push the tip of her nose like a button.

“Sorry about that!” he said, relief immediate as he poked her and made her eyes nearly cross. “I’m not used to just making myself visible to adults. Sometimes I forget about proximity. You’re right as rain now!” He offered her his hand with a jovial grin. “Hi, I’m Sully!”
“...Charlie Bradbury,” she murmured, clasping his hand.

He canted his head a moment, then snapped and pointed at her, making her eyes cross as he almost poked her nose again. “Celeste! Middleton! You’re Michelle’s friend!”

“Wait, how can you know that?”

“I’m management now!” he exclaimed, hands coming to rest on his hips with pride. “Comes with the job! Gotta keep up with all our kids, you know? Just because they get older doesn’t mean they won’t ever need us again. Our kids are always our kids, even if they’re adults.” His cheerful expression slipped off and he leaned so he could peer at Jo more clearly. “‘Buttercup will want to know. You’re still so young! What happened?’

Brows knitting, Jo threw a helpless look at Sam, then back to Sully. “I, um…” she licked her lips, “I grew up a hunter, like my dad. Mom and I died together, back during the Apocalypse.” Another flick of her eyes. “Death by Hellhound. Oh please don’t cry!” she exclaimed, shooting forward, hand pressed against the barrier of the portal as Sully reeled back to cover his face with his hands. “I’m fine. Really! Sam, do something!”

Drawing in a shuddering breath, Sully moved and began pacing, fanning at his face and shaking his head.

“Oh, Buttercup is gonna be so upset. She was so excited when you got into college! And your mom, too?”

“Take a breath, Sully,” Sam soothed. “Jo’s right there, see? Talking to us. She’s got a ton of friends in Heaven and on Earth. We hang out all the time. We have a weekly writing competition she’s constantly winning.”

“Yeah!” Charlie enthused. “Think of her as less dead and more... long distance!”

“Exactly!” Jo agreed, nodding vigorously. “I just... moved. Far, far away.”

Drawing in a shuddering breath, the Zanna nodded before forcing a strained cheerful expression and clapping his hands together. “So what do I owe to the pleasure of this call, Sam? How can I help? I still owe you a favor, you know.”

“You don’t owe me, Sully. I owed you.”

“We did want to ask you about something, though,” said Charlie. “About Dean as a child.”

“Oh. B-but I was just Sam’s friend. Not Dean’s.”

Sam lowered himself back into his seat. “I know. But- um. We were discussing Dean and mine’s childhood, and how due to growing up on the road and with our dad, we didn’t really ever have friends.”

Sully nodded, face earnest. “We went on quite the road trips, didn’t we, Sam?”

He huffed. “Yeah. I guess we did. But, uh, Dean and I have a friend now, an angel named Castiel, and Dean’s kinda been forced into the harsh realization that he never learned how to have or be a friend. And as we got to talking, you, of course, came up. You were my friend and then pushed me to make friends even if we were only in town a short while-”

“What Sam’s trying to ask is: why didn’t Dean have an imaginary friend?”
“Right.”

Sully blinked a moment. “Oh. Well, uh…” He scratched his chin, nodding and gaze unfocused. “Yeah, by all accounts, he desperately would have needed to have a friend assigned from a very young age. Hmm.” His eyes regained focus, sweeping over the different faces. “I can pull his file if you’d like, but I can’t tell you anything. We have a confidentiality policy, you know. Things stay strictly between us and the child- unless their life or well-being is in danger.”

Sam shrugged awkwardly. “Okay. I mean, he’s an adult now, so—”

“Secrets are always secrets, Sam.”

A moment passed, Sam dropping his gaze to the floor with a nod of understanding. Children often had the most horrible secrets.

“But I will look into his case file!” he quickly reassured, wiggling a jig of sorts. “See what I see. I’m curious about it now myself.”

“Thanks, Sully. I appreciate it.”

“Why the sudden wonder?”

Sam glanced over at Charlie and Jo, holding a breath then blowing it out. “Well, Dean wanting to be a friend, but suddenly realized he never really learned how. It’s… kinda upset him.”

Sully waved. “Oh, fiddle! Being a friend is easy! And look,” he gestured to Charlie and Jo, “he’s got friends!”

Jo held up a hand. “Hunter. Now dead.”


“We’re all brushing up on our friendship skills outside of the job, I guess.”

A sharp nod. “I’ll see what I can do! Bye, Sam!”

When he’d gone, Sam turned back to the other two, finding Jo with her brows drawn together and frowning.

“So that’s your imaginary friend. …Not sure whether or not I want to tell my mom they exist.”

Scowling, Cas raked the match head down the side of the box and dropped it into the bowl as it flared to life. He glared as the package of chocolates in the magic circle vanished in a puff of smoke.

“Return to Sender, asshat.”

With a snort, he cut a hand through the air, making the circle and sigils vanish from the dresser's surface. He dumped the remains of the herbs and ashes into the wastebasket and tried to ignore the amusement Crowley would probably get from having the chocolates all but thrown right back at him.
It took all of Cas’ self-restraint to not show up in person to shove them down his throat. He took pleasure in the idea of Crowley eating chocolates, only to find they were filled with holy water rather than a liqueur. He’d have to figure out a way to send him some, possibly with some sort of card offering condolences and a photograph or postcard from he and Dean doing something fun.

Would Dean like Paris? They could get the chocolates from there and Cas could put the extra special blessing on them himself.

A grin stretched across his features, mood lifting drastically as he opened the door to his room. He grabbed the small vase of flowers sitting on the dresser as well and headed out into the hallway.

He liked the idea very much.

When he came to the War Room, he faltered, looking toward the hall leading to the kitchen where he’d been planning to take the flowers. There was a loud peal of laughter from the library and he turned, following the sound. Charlie was doubled over the table, head on her arms and shoulders shaking. Sam had thrown himself backward, hand covering his face as he cackled.

“But it gets better!” someone declared. It sounded like Kevin.

Curiosity drew Castiel further into the room, gingerly setting the mason jar in the center of the table as he moved.

“So then,” Kevin’s words broke off as he tried to stifle a laugh, mouth wobbling with the struggle, “then, I mean, obviously they have to sell it right? Dean is a professional.”

“Obviously,” laughed Jo, covering her face with her hands.

“Absolutely! So it is a full overblown fake relationship, right? For the case! Dean’s all ‘Imma hold Cas’ hand- for the case! Yeah, I just called him ‘baby’ - for the case! Hey, why don’t we just get married-”

“For the case!” the others all crowded.

Kevin threw his hands up in a field goal sign, grinning wide as everyone laughed and wiped tears.

“You’ve started already?” Castiel asked, taking the seat next to Sam.

The hunter clapped him on the shoulder in greeting. “We didn’t know you were back.”

“Where did you get the flowers, Cas?” Charlie inclined her head toward the other table. “They’re pretty.”

“I picked them. I thought they might be a nice addition to the kitchen, but we spend more time in here.” The lavender flowers made him smile. “When I asked an old woman about the best way to keep them, she was kind enough to put them in the jar and wrap it with the twine.”

“What made you get flowers?” Sam wondered.

“I very much like flowers,” Cas told him, frowning that he was having to explain, then remembered they would have no way of knowing. “When I was in Heaven, my favorite thing to do outside of a mission was to spend time in one specific Heaven because it was a garden on a perfect sunny day. It would be fair to say I love flowers. I find them soothing and pretty to look at. They’re very… happy. And peaceful.”
“Charlie?”

“Adding it to the list!”

“What did I miss?”

Sam waved toward their friends. “We just started. Kevin was telling us about his case fic where you and Dean have to pretend to be a couple for reasons.”

Pamela snorted a laugh. “It’s hilarious.”

“Who’s next?” Sam asked while Cas leaned over to Charlie.

“Is Dean out?”

She looked down at her tablet. “Yep. Went out to a bar. We’re safe.”

“How much time do we have?”

She waved and didn’t meet his eye. “Plenty, I’m sure. The drive, for one. Though I told him to call for a ride or sleep in the car if he decides to get too trashed.”

“What does Dean think we’re are doing while he’s out since we don't go with him?” he questioned, blue eyes sliding to Sam deep in concentration reading.

“Research, translating ancient texts, you know, boring stuff.”

His eyes shifted back to her face. “Sooo... Dean has gone out looking for fun.” She looked up, brows raised in question as though she hadn’t heard him. She even blinked rapidly to increase the effect. Cold horror sunk into his gut as pieces clicked into place. “…You believe Dean is out seeking a sexual conquest.”

Her face crumpled and she slouched into her chair, trying to hide behind her bent knees and tablet. “Don’t be upset.”

He shrugged, schooling his features. “Upset? Why would I be upset?” Everyone was silent, watching him with varying expressions of anger or pity. “I have no reason to be upset.”

“That’s bullshit, Cas, and you know it,” Sam snapped. “I’m not the one in love with him and I’m pissed off!”

Casting his gaze off to the side, Cas admitted softly, “He’s not mine to be jealous over, Sam. I have no claim to him. He has every right to do as he pleases with whom he pleases.” He gave a weak shrug. “There’s no reason for me to be upset about it.”

“Cas, honey,” Ellen said, “you have every reason to be upset- and that’s okay. You love him; that’s enough reason.”

Pamela nodded, pointing to her. “She’s right. The heart is involved. His actions affect you. He’s unintentionally hurting you because he’s got his head so far up his own-”

“What Pamela is trying to say,” Sarah cut in, hand covering the psychic’s mouth, “is that Dean's falling on old habits rather than going with the scarier option of following his heart.” She smiled sadly. “It’s okay to be hurt by it.”

Swallowing, he forced a tight smile. “Well, I’m not.” The expression sat wrong on his face. “So
where were we?”

Glances passed around the table, silent questions and conversations being held.

Several of them stop-started sentences then, voices overlapping, Pamela yawned and stretched in exaggeration, Kevin gave a feeble excuse and pushed back his chair, Jo and her mother began babbling and pointing to the other about some ‘thing’ they really needed to see to, and in moments the table was clear of occupants, none of them meeting Cas’ eyes as they hastened from the room.

Castiel picked idly at his cuticles in his lap and tried desperately to tamp down on the part of him that wanted to follow their example. He wanted to run, wanted the clenching in his chest, the tightness in his throat, the sick twist in his stomach- he wanted all of it to stop. Wanted to walk- run- from the room, the building, hell, the planet, and felt inexplicably trapped and claustrophobic that he couldn’t.

Even if he could, he had no other place to go where he would be welcome.

In the heavy silence that settled, no one spoke.

He nearly flinched when Charlie placed her hand over his, fingers curling as she stood to her feet. He shifted his face into a mask of unaffected curiosity, brows raised in question. She smiled, giving his hand a shake.

“Let’s go curl up in the rec room and watch something where no one falls in love, yeah?”

He felt his expression fracture into a million pieces, eyes stinging as it fell away and he had to swallow down the lump in his throat.

Managing a jerky nod, he stood and let her lead him from the room, sparing only a glance over his shoulder to see Sam with his elbows on the table and forehead resting in his hands.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning. All events mentioned/talked about happened in the past, and while not explicitly canon, these are all things heavily implied, whether in the books, show, or even interviews with actors, writers, etc. TW for references to past abuse and prostitution.

“I’m not sure we got everything we need or if this is total overkill for spur of the moment inspiration,” Sam admitted, hefting the bags hanging from his arms onto the map table. "We didn't think this out. What do you think?"

Charlie carefully laid the larger yard tools down on the table's surface. “I honestly don’t know either, Sam. We acted impulsively. Last time I planted a garden, I was playing Sims. I know things like fertilizer and mulch are important, but I don’t know if they’re a necessity. We should find a library. Check out some books. Or buy some used ones. Is Cas even gonna want this? We didn’t ask. We got over-excited wanting to help him find a hobby and make him feel better.”

“I figure there’s no reason he wouldn’t want one. He said he likes flowers and gardens. Plus, I was reading up on recovery from past traumas and PTSD, and aside from counseling, studies found having methodical hobbies like gardening very theraput-”

Gunshots rang out from deep within the bunker, making both of them jerk around, taking off at a dash.

“Dean!”

They plowed straight into Sully who appeared between them and the doorway, hands raised.

“Whoa, whoa, guys! False alarm! Totally my fault!”

Sam’s eyes darted past him, heart still racing and hand on his gun. “Sully?”

“Yeah, sorry. The wards on this place can throw off my teleporting ability and I ended up in the wrong room. Scared your brother half to death, I bet. No harm done, but I’m very much learning Winchesters and surprises don’t mix well.”

Letting out a long breath, Sam put his gun away. “They really don’t mix well, Sully. Especially not if Dean’s still hung-over.”

The Zanna grinned. “Noted!”
In the garage, Dean kept his gun leveled on the man sitting cross-legged on the hood of the
Continental. Despite the weapon, or the bullets that had just whizzed past his ear, he continued to watch Dean tranquilly, hands raised to show he was unarmed.

“I’m not here to hurt you, Dean,” he said.

“You wanna explain how you got in here? Before my roommates show up to help fill you full of bullets?”

“They aren’t coming.”

“They would have heard the shots. They’re coming. You’ve got three seconds-”

“Sully is making sure they don’t investigate,” he interrupted, “because there’s no threat to you or them in the bunker.” Brows knitting, Dean flexed his fingers on the gun, chancing on a glance toward the doorway. The man nodded toward the weapon pointed at him. “Will you please put that away so we can talk? It would be a shame for you to damage one of the cars.”

“You’re worried about the cars rather than yourself?”

“Well, you put so much work into taking care of them, and the gun’s no threat to me.” He smiled, soft and sad. Everything about him was like he could melt into the background with no notice.

“I’m Max. We’ve met before- sort of.”

Narrowing his eyes, Dean lowered the gun and rolled his shoulder. “You said Sully is here with you? You’re a Zanna?” He nodded. Dean flicked the safety on and tucked the gun away.

“Something killing off more of your people? Wait. You said we’ve met before? I only just learned about Zanna.”

“You were younger,” Max explained, still sitting comfortably on the car, hands in his lap. “I looked younger, as well. It’s no surprise you don’t remember.”

Something niggled and scratched at the back of Dean’s mind, trying to pin him to some time and place. That sadness permeating the air around him was familiar, the way it settled like a shawl on narrow shoulders. It was as if he had seen all the bad the world had to offer, and it left him tired and worn down, fading at the edges.

Dean retreated. “You. You were at the hospital after Mom--” He choked, remembering the shy black boy awkwardly trying to talk to him, legs swinging in the waiting room chair. He’d been wearing a similarly ill-fitting striped shirt, dirt smudged on his nose. “Then at the motel. You kept trying to get my attention, waving and shit.”

Max gave a slow incline of his head. “A Zanna can’t befriend someone who won’t even acknowledge or talk to them. Friendship is a two-way street.”

Snorting, Dean snatched up the rag he’d been using to clean grease off his fingers, vigorously scrubbing. “I needed my mom and life back, not some imaginary friend.”

“Those things were never coming back, Dean.”

“Still didn’t need a damn imaginary friend.”

“Clearly, only adults think we’re imaginary,” Max argued, eyes downcast, then flicking up to meet Dean’s. “And you became mute after your mother’s death. Are you still going to try and tell me you couldn’t have used a friend?”
“Look, what do you want? Get it out so you can leave.”

“It seems you could use a friend.”

“I am not a kid.” He tossed the rag aside. “You can’t just show up and try to, I don’t know, fix some grand flaw in me from childhood trauma. You don’t even freaking know me!”

“Just because you wouldn’t speak to me, doesn’t mean I didn’t keep an eye on you and do what I could to help. Doesn’t mean I didn’t want to help more than I was able. You were still my kid, Dean, even if I wasn’t your friend.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I know you better than you know yourself, and I certainly know you better than Sam.”

Dean snorted and busied himself with tools he’d laid on the red work table. Silence settled between them, heavy and awkward, as Dean tried to ignore the Zanna with impossibly blue eyes. He still wore the gray and black striped shirt, its edges worn and frayed, and his thumbs sticking through slits. His jeans and sneakers were cheap and ratty, well past the point of needing a newer pair.

Now that he thought about it, he remembered him. The familiar stranger he saw from time-to-time, always trying to make quiet conversation in that soft tone like Dean was a cornered animal, the way it had always hit too hard and made Dean angry on reflex. The way he’d always ignored him and walked away.

“Look, you don’t know me,” Dean finally snapped, unable to take the quiet anymore. “I never talked to you, you and I were never friends, and you certainly don’t know me better than Sam.” He waved an arm vaguely over Max’s appearance. “And what are you supposed to be, anyway? Kids fall for this?”

“Not every child needs a mermaid princess or someone to play games with, Dean. Sometimes what they need is someone that can keep a secret about the bad things that happen. Sometimes a kid just needs someone or someone who loves them when they hate themselves for things that happened.”

“What- are you freaking serious? Geez. Look, I had to go over this with Sam, no one ever bad touched me as a child or what the fuck ever, so how about-”

“I know.” Dean threw out his hands. “But your bruises weren’t always from hunts, and Sam still doesn’t know that. And the only time Sam ever got hit was an accident. You later told John if he ever hit Sam again, he’d wake up with his own gun in his mouth.”

“Damn straight I did.”

“When it was you, though… you always felt you deserved any of the punishment you got.”

“He was trying to make me a better hunter. And I wasn’t nearly what I needed to be.”

“Which is why he never did it when Sam was around?” he challenged, brow raised. "It's why you hid the bruises?"

Dean rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t an abused kid. Dad was just strict. He was from the military. It was life or death out there and he knew it. He just expected more from me as the oldest and I had to look after Sam. He took care of us.”

Max lowered his gaze for a long moment. “And as you got older?”
“What about it?”

Their eyes met. “You didn’t end up in a boy’s home because you’d gambled away the money for food, Dean. You wouldn’t risk Sam like that. Yourself, sure, but not Sam.”

Tearing his focus away, Dean returned to the tools, picking something at random to polish. “So Dad didn’t leave enough money for groceries. So what? Lifting them was easy once I got better at it.”

“What about when John didn’t leave enough money for an extra week, two weeks in the motel? Or the motel plus groceries? Or didn’t leave any money because he was mad at you? Again.” The tool fell from Dean’s numb fingers as all the blood drained from his face. Max flicked his gaze up long enough to meet his eye, then dropped it. “That was a little more expensive.”

Dean wasn’t sure when he moved, or if he made the conscious decision, but he suddenly had the front of Max’s shirt curled in his fists and the Zanna pinned to the hood of the Continental.

“How the hell do you know about that?”

“I’m the secret-keeper, Dean,” he said. “It’s what I do.”

“You can’t tell Sam.”

“I won’t.”

He pressed into him harder, mind registering that the high-keening sound of desperation was coming from him. “You can’t. Please. Not Sam. Not anyone.”

Thin fingers curled, soft and careful, around Dean’s trembling fists. “Dean. I won’t.”

Breath coming in sharp gasps, Dean shoved himself away, lifting a shaking hand to wipe over his mouth while Max calmly sat up. He felt cornered, exposed, ashamed and dirty. All he wanted to do was take off at a run and hide behind mortar walls and heavy locked doors until the world forgot, until he could pretend he forgot, pretend it hadn't happened.

“What do you want from me? Why are you here?”

He shrugged. “I’m still just trying to be your friend, Dean.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“And I’m not imaginary, so maybe the rules you think apply actually don’t.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

With a sigh, Max pushed himself off the car, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Your family is growing, Dean. You’ve got all these great friends who love you so much. You’ve got people you love very much. Thing is, you don’t trust yourself when it comes to being happy because you’ve been through the mill more than any one person should.” He shrugged. “It might be easier to be a friend if you have a friend who already knows your secrets.”

Dean swallowed. “You don’t count. You’re a damn Zanna. You don’t see the monster because you just see some broken kid you’re still trying to fix.” He gestured vaguely, voice cracking, “You can’t fix me. Can’t undo- the things I did or the things I went through.”

“You can’t fix something that’s not broken, Dean.” Max hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “Let’s
go get coffee or breakfast, then we can talk more.”

“I-I don’t even know how I’d explain that to Sam. If I just up and take off, he’s gonna think I’m
day drinking at best and have some new dark vice at worst.”

“Or you could introduce the friend you’re going hang out with rather than keeping it from them.”
He shrugged. “Friends hang out just to hang out or talk or get breakfast.”

Dean scowled at him. “Yeah, because suddenly having an imaginary friend isn’t gonna raise any
questions.”

“Not imaginary, one. Two, no one said you had to offer more information than required. They
won’t know I’m Zanna unless you tell them, and Sully certainly won’t say anything, because that’s
the rules. If Sam and the others find out I am Zanna, it will because you volunteer the information-
and only you.”

“Yeah, but shouldn’t he know?”

“My species is no more his business than my sexuality, Dean. If it doesn’t involve him, it’s not his
concern,” he said, watching him all tranquil and relaxed like problems and worry were things that
happened to other people. He smiled. “Let’s go talk to Sam and then get breakfast.”

Drawing in a breath, Dean let it out slowly and nodded. “Okay. Let’s go meet Sam.”

In the War Room, Sam grinned as Charlie enthusiastically listened to Cas recount his morning
“walk”, legs swinging where she sat on the table. She gasped in delight when he retrieved an item
from his pocket and handed it to her.

“A woman had a small shop filled with items both creative and magical,” Cas explained. “And I
remembered our conversation the other day about you liked to collect figures cut from interesting
stone. It’s just green glass, but-”

“I love it!” she exclaimed, hopping off the table to wrap him in a hug. She turned to Sam, hand
outstretched. “Look! It’s a rabbit!”

He took the bobble. “It’s great, Charlie.”

Cas met Sam’s eye with a guilty expression. “I didn’t bring anything back for you, Sam, though I
did look.”

Rolling his eyes, Sam waved him off. “You don’t have to bring us back souvenirs, Cas. I mean, if
you want to, that’s fine, but my feelings aren’t hurt if you don’t. I’m just glad you had a nice...
time…”

His words trailed off and expression fell slack as Dean came into the War Room from the garage,
eyes only briefly meeting his before falling and then glancing back over his shoulder to the man a
step behind him. Sam felt the blood drain from his face at the sight of them, at Dean’s obvious
discomfort and guilty expression.

Oh, this was bad.
“Hey,” Dean greeted.

“Hi,” Charlie returned, posture ramrod straight.

Sam stayed silent, muscles in his jaw flexing as cold horror morphed into something red and boiling. His nostrils flared as he shifted and glared.

Dean flinched, then coughed and jerked a thumb at his silent companion. “Uh, guys, this is my friend Max. We were just gonna go get breakfast or something.” He wouldn’t look at them, and Max offered a small wave in greeting. “So, we’ll be back later, I guess.”

Beside him, Cas regarded the stranger with a curious cant of his head, eyes trailing over his worn appearance before shifting to Dean.

“I brought you something,” he said, expression neutral before warming marginally as he stepped closer, hand already reaching into his pocket and drawing out a strand of beads.

Wary, Dean frowned, gaze darting around counting the exits. “What is it?”

Holding the long, thin band of brown and copper beads between elegant fingers, Cas explained, “It’s a bracelet charmed with a protection spell.”

“Cas,” Charlie reprimanded, her gaze flicking to the man behind Dean when he looked at her in question.

Dean waved. “No, it’s fine. Max knows all about hunting and the supernatural. It’s fine,” he repeated, holding out his hand for the gift as color turned his ears and cheeks pink. “Thanks, buddy.”

Rather than handing it over, Cas wrapped the bracelet around his wrist several times before slipping the medallion through the loop on the end. “I know the charms on your other protectives wore off some time ago. I would feel better about you being out there knowing you have even the smallest bit of extra help,” he admitted softly, fingers lingering where he held Dean’s wrist.

Sam looked at Max, who watched them curiously, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

Cas and Dean continued to stand there, eyes locked as one of their silent and profound moments happened regardless of those around them.

Max touched Dean's elbow. “You ready to go?”

Dean jerked, snatching his hand from Castiel’s. “Yes! I mean, yeah. That’s- we’re just- we’re gonna-”

Sam shoved forward to grab him by the elbow and drag him along. “Can I speak to you in the kitchen real quick, Dean.”

“But-”

“Now.”

Sam refused to let go even as Dean tried to jerk his arm free, fingers digging in so he thought he might leave bruises. He nearly shoved Dean down the stairs into the kitchen before snarling, “You brought him home with you?! Are you out of your damn mind?!”

“Sam-”
“I get your insensitivity level is through the fucking roof, Dean, but to bring him home? Here? And now you’re going to breakfast?! Way to fucking flaunt your hook-ups in our faces. I cannot believe you brought him here, Dean!”

Panic, raw and unmasked morphed his brother’s face. “Whoa- what? No! Sam, no! Max isn’t—” he cast a nervous glance at the door, then back, lowering his voice to hiss, “I did not hook-up with Max, are you out of your mind?” He recoiled away in horror, wiping a hand over his face, before holding it palm out at Sam as if to ward off his advance. “Max is a friend. Sort of. It’s complicated.”

Licking his teeth, Sam folded his arms and scowled. “Yeah, I bet.”

“Look, Max and I, we’ve sort of known each other since I was a kid. Or well, we kept bumping into each other through the years. We ran into each other again. Now we’re going to get breakfast and talk.” Something seemed to register because Dean’s face took on a look of horror and confusion. “Wait. Your problem with this is that you thought I brought a hook-up to the bunker?”

“Yes!”

“You thought I slept with some random guy and brought him here?”

“You made a show of going out to ‘catch some tail’ and we shouldn't wait up, then this morning you're with a guy you’re going to breakfast with!”

“He’s a guy!”

“You brought him home!”

“Hunter or no, I wouldn’t bring some random hook-up to the only safe place on earth we have! He showed up this morning!”

“Um, guys?” They turned to see Charlie and Max standing in the doorway. She had her lips pressed into a line and nose scrunched. “You’re sort of shouting.”

Max held up a hand. “And though I’d be flattered, Dean, I’m sort of in a committed relationship with my work. It’s very serious. We would never work out.”

Scowling, Dean jabbed a finger at him. “Do you want me to go back to refusing to speak to you because I can and will.” Huffing a laugh, the other man raised his hands and Dean shoved past Sam toward the door. “Let’s go before this morning gets any more awkward.”

Spinning on his heel, Max slipped his hands into his pockets. “You gotta admit it’s funny.”

“It’s horrifying,” he threw over his shoulder. “Us.” A full-bodied shudder ran through him, making Sam frown as he peered after them. “To the bunker!”

Max gave a hapless shrug. “I mean, my timing was pretty bad. Imagine if you hadn’t introduced me. He’d think we were having some torrid affair.”

“Stop. Talking.”

The sound of Max’s soft laugh the last thing they heard as the door shut behind them, leaving Sam, Cas, and Charlie alone in the quiet.

“What the hell just happened?” asked Sam.
“I have no idea,” said Charlie. “So. Moving right along: Cas. We have a surprise for you.” When Sam opened his mouth, she held up a finger to silence him and continued speaking. “You like flowers so much, and we got to thinking about it, so what would you say to a flower garden over the bunker?”

Blinking rapidly, Cas looked back and forth between them as though waiting for the end of an unfinished story. “...you’re serious.”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Sam and I are going to help you if you’d like. And I already asked a favor of an earth fairy who made the soil ready for planting.” She gestured to the bags of seed, bulbs, and fertilizer. “And we’ve got all kinds of rocks and stones as well so you can put pathways or sections!”

Lips spreading, Castiel gave them a gummy smile. “I think that’s a wonderful idea. Can we do it now?”

Smirking, Sam pointed to his dress pants. “Not dressed like that you can’t. C’mon. I’ll dig out some clothes of Dean’s for you to get dirty. He won’t mind.”

Charlie danced in a circle then dashed off to the library. “I’ll get the mirror.”

“Why?”

“So they don’t feel left out! And Ash probably knows some bizarre alchemic fertilizer that’s better than store-bought. We’ll have roses the size of cabbages!”

Wiping a hand over his forehead, Sam came and plopped down in the grass at the edge of the garden next to Charlie, gratefully accepting the bottle of water she offered. She had dirt on her nose and tangles in her hair, looking endearing and sweet as she grinned.

A glance back revealed a barefoot Cas in a pair of Dean’s worn jeans and a simple black shirt, carefully arranging flagstone around the perimeter of what would be his garden. Her smile turned soft.

“He’s humming.”

Sam looked, ears straining to hear the soft sound. “You think he’s okay? After last night and then this morning, and well, everything else? I don’t know how to help, really.”

She glanced at the empty portal and toyed with her water bottle, picking at the label. “I don’t know about everything else. I can only hope and make myself available. As far as the other, I think he thought Dean slept with someone last night, but still brought him back a bracelet to protect him on hunts. I think he thought he was giving it to him right in front of the person Dean chose to spend the night with but did it anyway. I think it had to hurt more than words can describe- but I don’t think Dean slept with Max. He might have slept with somebody last night, but it wasn't Max. And I don’t think Cas believes it either, though he surely did at first, same as us.”

“Well, then, why haven’t I heard about him, if they’ve known each other for so long?” Sam
She met his eye and looked away. “Sam, no offense, really, but... there’s a lot about Dean you
don’t know. You prove that all the time. And Dean rarely just offers information. I mean, you
heard them. Whatever they are, it isn’t sexual.” She bit her bottom lip between her teeth. “And,
well, speaking as someone who’s had to come out before, even in a supporting environment, that’s
not how it’s done. Especially not someone with decades of repressed sexuality and internalized
homophobia. It was scary for me; I can’t imagine what it must be like for Dean to try and come to
terms with the fact that—despite himself—he’s in love with not only someone male-shaped but an
angel.” She met his eye. “This from a guy who was a torturer in Hell and literally got turned into a
demon. On top of John’s oh-so-supportive upbringing.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “He wasn’t that bad.”

“Again with how much you don’t know. And repress. Even not knowing, use common sense here,
Sam. Imagine: your dad. Who threw you out because you wanted to go to college, who left Dean in
jail and let him be sent to a boys’ home for stealing bread and peanut butter to keep you fed…
imagine his reaction if he thought one or both of you had maybe liked boys.” He winced and she
went back to peeling her label. “And that’s just two examples.”

They looked up at the sound of movement, watching as Cas lowered himself to sit cross-legged in
the grass beside them, his hair a mess and knees filthy. He was grinning. Sam grinned back and
handed him a water.

“You’re gonna need a water irrigation system,” a voice offered. They looked over to see Ash
pulling his white-board into view. “If you have fairy friends wanting to help prep the soil, why
don’t we go all out? I mean, rather than planting a small flower plot, really plant a garden.” He
cast them a glance over the frayed material of his ripped shirt. “You’re competing with Heaven,
dude. Put those angelic a-holes to shame.”

He began sketching rapidly. “The MOL own all that land, so you have every right to plant on it
without raising suspicion, and besides, no one lives in Kansas anyway, so who cares? The layout of
the bunker, right? Map out, like, uh... half the library into sections. Make that your flower garden,
yeah? Then, section off this area over here, see? And you plant an orchard. A tangerine tree.
Maybe a mulberry. An apple tree or two. Peach. Lemon. And, I dunno, what’s another fruit you
can put in pie? Limes! Limes over here on this corner.” He turned back, motioning to all the circles
and x’s. “You with me? Okay, between the flower garden and the orchard, you plant a few rows of
corn. Some tomato plants. Cucumbers, though not a lot unless you plan to pickle them and/or sell
them, like a single cucumber plant. We’ll talk about the herb garden later, but that can be done in
the kitchen.” He spun, planting his hands on the table. “How much PVC pipe can you get?”

Raising a brow, Sam turned to Cas, who had a wide-eyed almost starry expression on his face. He
nudged him, face split wide with a grin. “What do you say, Cas? Want your own Garden of Eden?”

He gave a broad smile. “Yes.”

Max (Michael Ealy):
“To the bunker!” Dean exclaimed. Max sipped his tea. “The. Bunker. I mean, does he really think I’m… that I would just- that’s our home! And literally the only safe place on earth we have! I’m not just going to lead someone right to its front door, much less let them in! Sure, you know, if we lived in a normal house I might- keyword: might- bring someone home, but maybe not even then out of consideration to my having roommates! I mean, there are three other people I live with to consider.”

Twisting his lips, Max set down his drink and seemed to contemplate it a moment. “I think you’re missing something more crucial about the conversation, Dean.”

He let his gaze trail after a father walking hand-in-hand down the sidewalk with a little girl, her pigtails and dress swishing as she hummed and skipped along.

“Where he would get that idea from? Bringing people home to the motel is different, and I always warned him ahead of time or something. We had a system.”

“No.” Max watched him until Dean held out his hands demandingly and he smiled. “He thought you brought home a guy… and didn’t care it was a guy.”

A flush crept up Dean’s neck to his face and he jerked his gaze away to glare at a potted honeysuckle plant on the sidewalk of the cafe.

“Because that makes sense. Like I would ever-”

“You could, though,” Max interrupted. Dean looked at him. “You could be with someone, anyone you wanted, and regardless of who or what they are, your brother wouldn’t care.”

He rolled his eyes. “The guy who dated a demon harpy doesn’t really have room to judge.”

“There is no judgment, Dean. And not because of Sam’s choices. There’s just not any. Sam was upset you would… how did he word it? ‘Flaunt your hook-ups in their faces’ on top of bringing them home with you.”

“Okay…?”

“It just seemed he might have been concerned your hook-up being shoved in their faces was hurtful in some way. Why, do you think?”

"I'm still trying to figure out why he thought I'd bring them home!"

Leveling a flat look at him, Max arched a brow. “You are being willfully ignorant, Dean. I’m the person sitting at the table you can be completely honest with, so maybe cut the bullshit? I mean, just as a time-saver?” When Dean glared, he waved it away. “Okay, fine. Why did you go out to the bar last night when everyone else stayed home?”
With a snort of disgust, Dean waved at the air as if dispelling a bad smell. “God, I don’t even know what’s going on with them lately. I think they’re bored and want to go on a hunt, because they’re constantly researching, right? Except they never have any cases, they pass them on to other people. I asked if they wanted to go out and shoot some pool or something- I think it was last Friday? Friday before? they were all like ‘I think we’re just gonna stay in and watch a movie or read a book’. Like, every Friday night. What the hell even?”

Picking up his tea, Max asked, “And did you do what you were planning? Get some?”

That earned him a dark scowl. “Thought you were keeping an eye on me.”

“Just because I know something doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear about it. Did you?”

“Didn’t pan out,” he admitted, shrugging and looking off past Max’s shoulder. “Really wasn’t feeling it when the opportunity presented itself.”

“Mm. What led to the itch?” When Dean frowned, he elaborated, “You’ve been going out regularly without them.”

"I dunno. Restless energy from this weird sabbatical we're on. Anxious or something. I thought the outlet might help, but..." He waved, the movement sharp as he gave a rough snort and glared off to the side. "Wasn't feeling it, like I said."

"Why announce it?"

"I don't know. I was irritated and poking the bear. It's what I do."

"Why don't you announce it when you go to karaoke?"

"Is this therapy hour?"

"This is a conversation. That thing where people converse back and forth on a particular topic."

"Can we change the topic?"

"Why? It’s the subject of the morning. You were ready to vent and talk about it a minute ago."

Dean gave him a look that said Max was particularly dense regarding the obvious. “Men don’t sing.”

“Men throughout history would fight you for such a lie, including Elvis and Frank Sinatra.”

“They’re different.”

“How?"

“That was a different time.”

“What was different?”

“It was okay back then.”

“It isn’t now?”

“No, dude.”
“Why?”

“Do you always ask this many questions?”

Max shrugged, expression innocent. “I’m trying to understand. I’m many things, but not exactly psychic.”

“Because people will think you’re a fucking queer, dude,” he snapped. Max’s eyebrows shot up and Dean winced, holding up a hand. “Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Yes, you did,” Max confirmed. Dean dropped his gaze. Drumming his fingers against his cup, Max studied him. “It’s just funny, because… that sounded a lot like John just now.” Dean’s throat bobbed. “That is to say, Charlie’s gay. Cas is indifferent to sexual orientation and technically has no gender, what with them being a human construct to begin with. You’ve worked with gay hunters. You’ve helped gay families. It didn’t bother you when you thought Aaron was hitting on you, save you were embarrassed because he caught you off guard. You don’t seem to have a problem with any of them or their sexualities, but seem to think it would reflect negatively if associated with you.”

He leaned forward to prop his chin in his palm, clicking his tongue. “And I mean… what would be so bad? Surely there are worse things you could be, like cruel, petty, and spiteful. Further still, I think it’s worse to be a murderer or rapist. Humans are strange. Forcing their values on other people, and anyone outside of that way of thinking…” He sat back, gesturing between them. “I mean, fifty years ago, I couldn’t be sitting here with you having coffee. One, they probably wouldn’t serve me, much less let me sit on the patio. If they served me, there would be a door around back I’d have to use. Two, sitting here, not only would it not be allowed, if I did it I would offend people. I’d probably run the risk of getting lynched or dragged afterward. You’d probably only get your ass kicked. Repeated offenses might get you killed.” He shrugged. “There are worse things than being ‘a queer’.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” Dean insisted, brows raised and expression open sincerity.

Max shook his head. “I’m not offended, Dean. I’m just offering perspective. So you like to sing. Then, sing. Hell, if you like ballet, do ballet. They are athletes who could probably crush a man’s skull with their thighs or kick your balls up into your teeth. Dancers should be feared.” He shrugged. “Life’s short: you’re born, you live, you die. Story over. Shouldn’t you be more concerned you have the approval and good opinion of the guy in the mirror, rather than complete strangers?” He waved a hand. “I mean, you’re stuck answering to that guy for life.”

Clapping and rubbing his hands together, Sam cast his gaze to the different people sitting around the table.

“Okay! Picking up where we left off. Ash: stranded at a bus stop in the rain. Kevin, you had the fake dating story.”

“I am totally gonna win this week.”

“Pamela, why are you lying on the table?” Sam finally asked. He’d tried to ignore it when he’d sat down. She continued to lay on her stomach, ankles crossed in the air. The look of cunning triumph on her face was more than a little terrifying if he were completely honest.
She slid several printed pages toward the mirror. “I have this week’s winner right here,” she purred.

“You wrote one that qualifies this week?”

She rolled over, stretching her arms out overhead. “Oh, I didn’t write it.” She grinned at him upside-down. “Ellen did.”

The matriarch shot forward in her seat, reaching for the mirror in a panic. “That’s mine? Sam, give it back!”

“What? Why? You finally wrote one.”

“It’s a thing of beauty,” Pamela insisted.

“Sam.”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” he assured her. “It’s fun.”

She shot him a warning look. “It’s not me I’m concerned for. That fic does not qualify.”

Charlie leaned in to peer at it curiously, while Sam continued frowning. “You printed it this time. It’s fine.”

“She broke Rule #1, Sam,” Sarah clarified. “In graphic detail.”

Charlie snatched the fic away with an eager squeal of delight. He stared in horror.

“Y-you wrote about… you wrote them,” he shot a glare at Cas on his left, his head tilted regarding the screen, “cover your ears.”

“Wha-?”

“Cover them.”

Looking baffled, Castiel hesitantly brought his hands up to cup over his ears, before pressing firmly when Sam glared.

He turned back, hissing, “You wrote them having sex?!”

She threw up her hands. “I was angry! Dean was being a jackass! Angry sex was in demand! They wouldn’t have it so I wrote it as some bizarre form of catharsis!”

He threw himself backward, hands covering his eyes in horror. “Ohmigawd, Ellen! That’s like finding out my mom wrote porn about me! Why would you do this?”

“Pamela gave it to you!” she yelled back, jabbing her finger at the grinning psychic. “I tried to get it back!”

“This is hot,” commented Charlie, nodding in approval. “They should totally have angry sex. Followed by make-up sex. Then Dean makes waffles and awkward confessions.”

An inhuman sound leaked from Sam’s throat like helium from a balloon as Ellen waved flippantly.

“Omelets at IHOP. There’s hand-holding across the table. It’s very schmoopy.”

“Well, after the wall-slamming sex marathon—”
“Anybody else?” Sam demanded, gesturing to Cas it was safe to uncover his ears. Pamela grinned and stretched on the table as everyone looked anywhere but at Sam. “Anyone?” A cough. Jo blushed and picked at her chapped lips. He settled back. “Are you all getting tired of this? We don’t-”

“Oh it’s not that,” Pamela cooed.

“Please, get off the table like a dragon on your hoard. It’s a little creepy,” he told her scowling. “What is it then?”

“They’re all disqualified.”

Horror anew morphed Sam’s face into a contorted caricature. “Everyone wrote them having sex?”

Blushing, fidgety silence was the only response. He turned. “Charlie?”

She played with her hair and wouldn’t meet his eye. “I mean, it’s more a fade-to-black, but Cas was upset and Dean wanted to comfort him and prove his love. Things happened.”

“Oh my God. Jo?”

“Well, it wasn’t wall-slamming like Mom’s, but-”

“Andy?”

“Not even gonna lie to you, dude: filthy, orgasm-denial, punishment porn. I had Dean whining and begging before Cas would give him release.”

“It must be my birthday,” purred Pamela, looking like she might come herself.

Sam shuddered, voice coming out a warbling squeak, “Sarah? Surely you- please Sarah.”

When Pamela held out her hand, looking triumphant and smug, Sarah handed over a roll of papers and refused to look at Sam, her entire face tomato red.

“Cas wanted answers. Anger led to feelings being revealed and passion! I’m sorry!”

Whimpering, Sam buried his face in his hands. “I’m gonna cry myself to sleep tonight, I just know it.”

Jo rolled her eyes, arms folded. “The sex isn’t about sex, Sam. It’s about love and emotional connection, which is what we want for them. To be happy. Don’t debase it.”

He glared at her from between his fingers.

Reaching over, Charlie rubbed his back kindly. “I don’t actually think this will make you feel better, but Crowley’s submission qualifies.”

“A demon, people. A. Demon,” he said, glaring through his fingers. “King of freaking Hell managed to obey Rule #1, but the residents of Heaven did not. Look at your life. Look at your choices.”

“Well,” she corrected, scrolling, “it’s not actually his. Looks like Rowena wrote it. She put a note at the very bottom of the email.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “That’s possibly more horrifying. What is it about? Wait, no, don’t tell me. Okay, tell me. No, don’t. Cas, you decide: yay or nay?”
On his other side, Castiel shrugged. “I’m already plotting revenge against him. He can’t make it worse, but she can be added that list if the need arises.”

“It’s actually cute,” Charlie assured, nodding. “Dean and Sam surprise you with a birthday cake and presents, and when Dean goes to tell you happy eighth birthday, he wishes you a happy eighth anniversary instead, then you and he sit too close on the couch while watching Angels in the Outfield.”

Sam frowned. “That’s… actually impressive. Okay, last call: anyone else?”

“What about you, Sam?” Sarah questioned. “Didn’t you write one this week?”

“It doesn’t qualify,” he answered waving his hand and causing a flurry of sound. “Whoa, whoa! There was no nudity or sex, you freaks.” He pinched his nose, taking measured breaths. “Chuck, send help. Mine doesn’t qualify because only Cas is in it. Dean is only thought about, so they don’t actually make any progress.”

He was relieved to watch the disappointment color Pamela’s features as she slid off the table and into a seat to sulk. Andrew sat forward with his chin in hand.

“What’d you write it for then?”

Sam scratched at his scalp. “I don’t know. The writing thing has become… really fun, actually. Cathartic.” It had also helped him to stop seeing Lucifer when he would look at Castiel and that was an unexpected mercy he was eternally grateful for. “I was mad and went to the workout room while they watched a movie. The whole time I was shadow boxing, I was thinking about Cas using a punching bag and pulling a Captain America: punching it right off the chain and into a wall. I was gleefully thinking about having to explain to Dean that Cas was pissed off at him and thus the large dent in the wall that could have been his face.” He shrugged. “I felt better afterward.”

Looking smug, Andy pointed to him. “So you did write your own masturbatory fanfic.”

“Whoa! No!” exclaimed Ellen, snapping and pointing at the mirror. “Cas! Sam! Cover your ears! Now! There was no masturbating you sick-”

“Maybe not for you,” Pamela muttered, grinning like the Cheshire cat, while Sam clapped his hands over his ears, eyes closed, and tried to imagine he was somewhere far away and safe. Like the Cage. It was less traumatizing.

Jo rapidly flapped her hands. “No, no, I’m with Mom here. It was stress relief, but not that kind of stress relief.” She slapped his arm. “Oh my God, Andrew Gallagher! To Dean and Sam? You sick fu--”

“Sam? No! Cas! Dean and Cas!”

“That’s what I said!”

“You said Dean and Sam!” He gasped loudly, pointing at her. “Have you written Dean and Sam fanfic?”

“What? No! God! No! ‘Sam and Dean’ is just one word anyway-”

“Did you write Wincest?”

“I did not! I just misspoke! You wrote and wanked to porn about our friends, you pervert!”
“You wrote some, too!”

She slammed her palm on the table. “It was wishful thinking for their benefit since they’re stubborn!”

“It’s not that weird.”

Pamela side-eyed him. “It’s weird, Andy. I say that with minimal judgment.”

“You are guilty of the same!”

“I didn’t write it.”

“Okay!” shouted Charlie. They all stopped mid-argument to glare at her. “How about we continue to discuss this topic when it doesn’t threaten to turn Sam’s brain inside out, alright?”

Beside her, both Sam and Cas had their ears covered, but Cas still watched them in a horrified fascination, while Sam’s whole face was screwed up as he silently repeated the Latin exorcism to himself.

She reached out to pet his arm. His eyes snapped open before flicking around the other faces and slowly lowering his hands.

“Sorry, Sam. Cas,” they chorused, looking abashed.

“I really should check into seeing a therapist,” Sam sighed. “Can we please get back on topic?”

“Before we do,” Cas interjected, “can I ask why you would write the subject matter you chose? I’m just… confused. You skipped all of the important parts of courtship and focused on that.”

“Sex is important.”

“It takes up only a fraction of the day, what about all the other hours and days?” At their looks of confusion, he gestured, appearing frustrated with his inability to articulate what he meant. “So many books and movies focus on that aspect of a relationship. I don’t understand. The scary part, for me, is just trying to… find my way to Dean? If that makes sense?” He rubbed the back of his neck with a shake of his head. “I hadn’t even thought about—” Faltering, he pivoted to look at Sam. “It’s early and you haven’t even had breakfast. Would you like some coffee?”

“I think I can handle this part, Cas, but thanks. If I need to, I’ll make a quick escape. Thanks for the out.”

He nodded. “Your stories all focused on consummating the relationship in a physical sense, but what next? And what comes before? It could all go horribly wrong and I could ruin it, as well as my friendship with Dean, which I do not want to happen. It just seems… do people normally work up the courage to confess their feelings to the person they want to spend their life with, then just… take them to bed? Giving yourself to someone physically, that’s easy. Giving them your heart, having them give you theirs, making it work…” He made a gesture of confusion, lost for the words to convey what he meant.

“No! No, no, no!”

“This is not advice, Cas.”

“This was us being angry and venting. It was for our benefit.” Charlie looked at Sam in the middle
of them. “Please hug Cas for me. You’re closer.”

“Why…?”

A flush colored her cheeks, making her clap her hands over them. “I'm just happy! Oh God, it's so romantic. I mean, I know that’s the point of all this, helping the two of you finally get together, but that’s the first time you’ve said out loud you to spend your life with Dean! Oh my god, I think I might die.” She put out a hand. “Cas, I am restraining myself, but know internally I want to throw myself into your lap and hug you. Probably while squeeing painfully loud in your ear.”

He inclined his head. “I respect and appreciate your restraint.”

“It’s a monumental effort.”

“You are an inspiration.”

They fell silent as Sam held up a hand, gaze snapping up just as Dean ambled into the War Room. He came to an unsure stop, frowning as conversation fell silent. He stepped closer, gesturing to the room at large and flicking his gaze around.

“...everything okay in here?”

Sam nodded. “Of course. Where’s Max?”

“Headed home.” He paused and silence hung like a wet blanket in the air while he tried to work out what he’d walked in on. His eyes narrowed. “You sure everything’s okay?”

“Fine.”

“What are you up to? Are we finally holding on intervention regarding your hair?”

“Book club,” Cas offered.

“Book-” He raked a hand over his face, head tilting back to the ceiling. “It’s like living with the Golden Girls, I swear to-“ He straightened, meeting Sam’s eye. “Are we good about the confusion earlier? I did not, have not, and would not ever bring a stranger here and endanger all of you like that, okay?”

“We’re good.”

“I mean, I’ve been tortured for information and never said anything.”

“I know, Dean,” Sam assured him. “I was just caught off guard, I promise. We’re good.”

Green eyes flicked to the other two. “Guys?” They nodded and he returned it. “Okay. Good.” He did a double-take, pointing to Castiel. “Are those my clothes?”

A blush spread high on Cas’ cheeks as he dropped his gaze, smoothing a hand over the soft cotton shirt he wore.

“Ahh, yes. They lent me some of your clothes while we worked on the garden, but then Charlie insisted my normal attire be laundered and they gave me more clothes to wear in the meantime. I hope that’s alright.” Throat bobbing, Dean’s mouth struggled to make words. Cas moved to stand. “I can change back-”

don’t care. It’s fine. I-I’m just gonna-” His words cut off as he backed into the Map Table and a chair, nearly knocking it over and making him grab to catch it. Face beet red, Dean jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “I’m just gonna not book club. Oh, but hey, Cas, afterward, you and me should hang out or something. Okay? Okay.”

He spun on his heel, the bright red of his neck visible over the collar of his shirt as he fled.

They sat in silence until after he’d disappeared down the corridor.

“Advice?” asked Cas.

“Charlie?” questioned Sam.

She flicked through her tablet. “Well, one, keep the clothes, because did you see that reaction? We’re adding clothes shopping to the list. Civilian clothes around the bunker is now a must- if you like wearing them.”

“I do.”

“Give him ten minutes, then follow,” Ellen advised. He looked at her and she winked. “Let him compose himself after that embarrassing display.”

“Why don’t you tell him about the garden?” Charlie suggested. “Mention wanting to read some books on gardening. He might offer to go to the store with you. Or you could ask if he’d want to go with you.”

“Would it be too much to ask if he’d want to go to Paris with me?”

Sam blinked rapidly, brows shooting up. “Well, I mean, that’s a big gesture, Cas. And very… romantic. Maybe wait until he’s held your hand first?”

The angel chuckled. “No. I intend to exact petty revenge on Crowley but assume the only way to do so would be to play to his ego by purchasing true French truffles for this. I don’t think he’d be able to pass up eating them.” Sam frowned, and a smirk curled the corner of Cas’ mouth, eyes glinting. “I am going to bless their centers.”

Choking a laugh, Sam clapped a hand on his shoulder, trying and failing to force his face into something serious. “You are doing God’s work, my friend. Dean would love to go with you, just explain what it’s for before asking ‘will you go to Paris with me’. You have my blessing.”

When he pushed his chair back, Andy’s hand shot out. “Wait, wait! Who won this week?”

Sam glared. "Did you forget how many of you are disqualified?"

"I'm not," reminded Kevin.

Sam looked at Castiel. He pointed to Kevin. “You win for this week, but I would also like to acknowledge Rowena’s efforts, especially compared to her son’s, so if we could also send her a plate?”

Nodding, Ellen pushed back from the table. “Two plates of fried pickles coming right up.”

“And guys,” warned Sam with a glare.

Everyone held up their hands. “We promise to obey Rule #1 next time.”
“Dismissed.” He grinned at Cas and jerked his head toward the hall. “Go get him, tiger.”

A grin spread across Cas’ lips as he headed out of the library. “Oh, I plan to.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“Dude, from this moment on, I am going to be the best friend you ever had- hell, I’m gonna be the best friend ever, period.” Cas chuckled lightly, and Dean raised a brow.
“I’m not joking.”
“I know you aren’t. That’s what makes it… sweet.”

When Cas came into the room with barely more than a knock of warning, Dean nearly came out of his skin, entire body jerking on the bed and making him fumble the stone he’d been admiring.
The angel offered a chagrin smile. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”
Hand pressed to his chest to keep his heart from breaking through, Dean glared. “Hell of a job, Cas.”

Castiel watched as he pushed himself into a sitting position, eyes lighting on the amber stone curled in Dean’s fingers.
“What are you doing?”

Dean carefully placed the Sunset Opal on the nightstand with reverent care before looking at Cas with raised brows. “Hm? Oh. Nothing, man. I was just looking at it. It still blows my mind.” His eyes lingered on Cas’ form, clad in Dean’s own well-worn clothing before he caught himself, jerking his gaze to the hallway with a blush. “You, uh, finish book club?”

“Yes. We actually do it on another night, but it got interrupted, so we were finishing up. And ‘book club’ isn’t accurate, but gives a general idea.” He angled his head, letting his blues eyes travel across Dean’s shoulders, his neck, his face. “...You said you wanted to hang out?”

Coughing, Dean ducked his head on a laugh that that was more breath than sound and made his eyes crinkle at the corners. “Uh, yeah. I feel like we’ve been missing each other a lot recently.”

He nodded, expression earnest. “I have missed you.”

That made Dean’s head jerk up in surprise and he laughed again, rubbing the back of his neck. “That’s not- I mean, thanks, I’ve missed you, too, I guess, but I meant,” he gestured with his hands, making them slide by each other in opposite directions, “we’ve been missing each other.”

“Oh. I see. Yes, we have done that, too.”

“And, I mean, you all seem pretty content to pass on hunts and hand out research rather than taking on cases ourselves, so we’ve got the time.” He dropped his gaze down to his hands, rubbing them in a way that seemed more self-comforting than anxious. “What you said the other night, about how we rarely make time to be friends...” he shrugged, jerky and unnatural, “it bugged me.”

“I did not mean to upset you,” Cas insisted, faltering when Dean shoved to his feet.
“Cas, you said ‘yes’ to Lucifer because you thought you were *expendable* to us- to me!” He poked the center of his chest with his index finger. “That’s on me. That is utterly on me, and I will never stop trying to make that right. I may be a terrible friend, but it is damn well time I learned to be a better one if you *honestly* thought losing you wouldn’t matter to us.”

Sorrow molded Castiel’s features and he dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry, Dean.”

“No, Cas,” Dean argued, stepping forward and reaching up to place his hands on Cas’ biceps, forcing the angel to look at him. “I’m sorry. I am sorry I let you believe for even a moment you didn’t matter. It would devastate Sam, but it would and nearly broke me once. Getting you back, even while you had *no idea* who I was—” his words cut off, jaw working like they were trying to be set free, but were tethered on his tongue. Rather than speaking, Dean closed the space between them, wrapping his arms around Cas’ shoulders and pulling him tight against him. “I’m sorry we haven’t been a better family to you.”

Chin hooked over his shoulder, Cas wrapped his arms around Dean's waist. “Dean, you are a far cry better than the family I was given.”

Dean backed away and Castiel regretted speaking, something unnamable aching for that comforting touch again, like an unfulfilled starvation he didn't know he had.

“Don’t you see, Cas?” He shook his head. “You still said ‘yes’! What does that say? Better than the angels, but you still thought you could just throw yourself away and it wouldn’t matter.” He shook his head, cutting a hand through the air. “Dude, from this moment on I am going to be the best friend you ever had- hell, I’m gonna be the best friend *ever*.” Cas chuckled and Dean raised a brow. “I’m not joking.”

“I know you aren’t. That’s what makes it… sweet.” Despite the stoic expression, Cas still recognized the way his jaw flexed, the blush coloring the tips of his ears. He worried for a moment his word choice might offend the other man and make him back off his resolution. An impish smirk colored Cas' face and he turned his head so as to give Dean a sly look. “In that case: would you be interested in helping me exact revenge on Crowley?”

Dean's posture shifted, straighter and more alert. “You have my attention.”

“It will require traveling to Paris.”

“Wh-”

“I need truffles that will appeal enough to his ego he’ll eat them without hesitation.” His smirk stretched into a close-lipped smile. “I’m going to bless the hell, quite literally, out of their centers and possibly his in the process.”

Dean let out a snort of laughter that became a grin. “Oh God, it’s these moments I am so glad we rubbed off on you. That is brilliant.” He faltered. “Why are you getting revenge on Crowley? What’d he do now?”

Cas rolled his eyes and waved a dismissive hand. “It’s part of our ongoing antagonistic relationship. He has it coming and he’ll know he did.”

Still laughing, Dean pulled out his phone, shaking his head. “I’ve got to call Rowena. She is going to want in on this.”

“You’re sure?”
“Trust me.”

He waited while the phone rang in his ear, before there was a click and a sigh.

“Hello-”

“Don’t say my name,” he interrupted quickly.

Impatient silence followed. “I’m waiting.”

“Are you with Crowley?”

“Aye.”

“Would you like to help us prank Crowley?”

An aborted laugh escaped her, followed by warbling hums as she tried to keep it contained.

“’Scuse me, Fergus, I’ve got to take this call.” He could hear the rustle of fabric and the rapid clicking of her heels as she made a hasty exit. “What did you have in mind, dear?”

Dean grinned at Cas and gave him a thumbs up.

“I expected the box to be bigger,” Dean confessed, eyes on the small packages wrapped in ribbon as the stepped out of the chocolatier. “Especially for how much they cost. Where did you even get the money?”

Cas shrugged. “Previous trips. Money lost or even offered to me for giving assistance in some way or another. Sometimes trading or selling things I find. Mostly money found. People lose a lot.”

He reached out to guide Dean by the elbow around an elderly woman. He was enthralled, trying to take in all the sights of the city at once, head tilted back and whipping back and forth. Even in the waning evening light, avenues lit by street lamps and the warm glow of shop displays, everything caught his attention.

“And you just come here?”

“I travel all over, appreciating everything I can as I never did before.”

Wide green eyes full of wonder settled on his face. “I’m not- I could never, y’know, do that. Me and planes don’t mix, but to be able to just- pop in and out wherever you want? Can you imagine living here?”

Corners of his mouth turning down in a deep frown, Castiel shook his head. “I would not want to live here.”

Dean blinked, head angling. “Why? I thought you would like it. I mean, it’s a lot more crowded than I expected,” he said, moving around a cluster of university students and tourists.

“Prime tourist location,” he murmured, tipping his head back to admire the architecture of the buildings around them. “But this is an old city with old buildings, many of which lack proper insulation, so winter and summer must be equal nightmares, not to mention: it’s very wet here.” His frown deepened. “I do not like wet. I enjoy the sun and outdoors too much.”
“Well, where would you live, then?” Dean pressed. He gestured with his arms to encompass the whole world. “If you could live anywhere.”

Coming to a stop, Cas considered. Dean faltered, pivoting on the sidewalk and waiting. Castiel thought of the scorching heat of the desert, of the wildlife on the savanna, he imagined mountain trails thick with flora and fauna, of snow covered mountain tops. He remembered sitting out under the stars talking in quiet whispers, thought of Charlie teaching him to dance and their frequent impromptu waltzs or silly spinning of each other to whatever music she was playing. He imagined Dean leaning in to offer dry humor and commentary when they had movie nights; Sam with his bright smiles and eager support.

Cas smiled. “With you.”

The dim light of the evening did little to mask the deep blush that encompassed Dean’s face as he ducked his head. Cas spared him further embarrassment by peering down at the chocolates he was carrying.

“I’m glad we also bought some chocolate for ourselves. They will be interesting to try, what with things like flowers, honey, and chocolate combined. I hope I can enjoy them.”

Dean grimaced, eyes on the boxes as well. “Is there… any way to turn that off? To taste things like a human would?”

Heaving a sigh, Cas shook his head. “There isn’t. Some things are more enjoyable than others, like burgers. It’s just a matter of tasting it to find out.”

“Dude. That sucks.”

He looked up and their eyes met, Cas smiling and leaning in slightly as if to bestow a secret. “It just means if I ever become human, I’ll get to try everything for the first time. It’ll be an adventure.”

His eyes lit up with an idea and he leaned back, grinning. “Did I tell you about the garden? Come. We must find a bookstore,” he insisted, moving to grab Dean’s hand to pull him along, before a stab of fear had him grab him by the wrist instead, hoping he hadn’t noticed Cas’ indecision.

“Whoa, Cas, easy. Maybe we should find a bookstore, y’know, stateside since not all of us are fluent in French.”

“You are,” Cas said, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk to let his mind flick through the thousands of options.

“One more item on the list of things Sam doesn’t know,” muttered Dean under his breath.

Cas weighed and compared different stores. Somewhere cozy and quaint? What about coffee? Some places had cafes; they could sit and drink and read. Then again, Dean typically didn’t drink coffee this time of day, and no matter their location, Dean’s internal clock would dictate the time. He was right though, a store that sold books in English would be best.

In a blink, the evening light was replaced by that of mid-afternoon, Dean winced and shielded his eyes before taking in their change of surroundings and peering up at the large sign. “Half Price Books, huh?”

Releasing his wrist and regretting his cowardice, Castiel willed their purchases back home before pointing to the diner next door as he followed Dean. “I thought perhaps once we finished here, we might could get a late lunch.”
Opening the door to head inside, Dean grinned over his shoulder. “We should definitely do this more often.”

“I believe that would be considered dating,” Cas pointed out coolly, stepping inside and letting his gaze wander over the walls.

A snort of laughter from Dean before he clapped him on the shoulder and pointed to a sign. “C’mon. They’re over there, Romeo.”

“I refuse to let us be Romeo and Juliet,” Cas said with a scowl. “Impulsiveness and continued miscommunication are stupid plot devices.”

”Dude, I am so glad we’re friends.”

Letting his eyes roam over the colorful array of gardening books, Cas pursed his lips. “And now I’ve been ‘friendzoned’. After I bought you Parisian chocolate.” He tsked lightly, making Dean snort another laugh and roll his eyes.

“Gardening books, Cas. Focus.”

He pointed to the one in the center of the display. “I guess that one?”

Dean tried not to smile and failed, offering a headshake. “That’s not how it works. See, we’ve got to pick several that look like they might be what we’re looking for, like, uh…” he pointed to one on the top shelf, “vegetable gardening, or rose gardens, or even- what the--?” He scoffed loudly, snatching a book about rock gardens and shoving onto a different shelf. “That’s landscaping. A horrible idea, by the way.”

“Why?”

Dean gave him a flat look. “A single tree surrounded by sand and rocks? It’s a called a desert, Cas, not a garden. Instead of a bonsai tree, it’s a cactus and a barren wasteland.” He grabbed a few books with flowers and plants on the front of the covers. “Here. By the way, why are we doing this? You mentioned a garden this morning, but I was, uh, kinda distracted and missed what you were saying.”

He grabbed a few more guides for himself then sank to sit on the floor. When Cas remained where he stood, Dean looked up, reaching over to pat the thin carpet beside him.

“Sit down. We have to flip through the books until we figure out which ones might be most helpful and which ones are just coffee table books.”

Obeying, Castiel turned and lowered himself to the ground, folding his legs as Dean had done, and sitting close enough their knees were pressed together, making electricity hum through him at the close contact.

Dean watched his eyelashes flutter, the way he licked his pink lips and cast an uncertain glance at him.

“Like this?”

Sitting beside him, dressed in frayed jeans and a soft shirt, looking more human than Dean had ever seen him, it gave the moment a surreal quality, like it were a dream. A dream where Dean could have things like a Castiel who would choose to stay by his side, not because he had no place else, but in order to be with Dean. It was such a nice and impossible image. Something from
another life he missed out on.

“Yeah,” he said lowly, then cleared his throat and tried for something casual despite the quiet intimacy of the secluded alcove. “So. A garden?”

“It was Sam and Charlie’s idea after they discovered my love of flowers. I believe they think it will be… therapeutic, in the aftermath of all that has happened recently, and with my trying different hobbies.” A soft smile warmed his features in fond affection. “It is a thoughtful gesture. I think it’s why they are so insistent on passing on hunts.” He looked up, their eyes locking. Dean held his breath as blue eyes bore into him. “We aren’t done healing.”

Max’s face flickered in Dean’s mind.

‘You’re bruises weren't always from hunts.’

‘You didn’t end up in a boy’s home because you’d gambled away the money for food, Dean.’

‘That sounded a lot like John just now.’

Scowling, Dean dropped his gaze to the book in his lap, blindly opening it as he clenched his teeth on a surge of… something. Anger, maybe, but more complicated. The sense of having been wronged. An impotent desire to lash out with his fist.

“I’m not sure we can heal from all the crap that’s been done to us,” he admitted gruffly.

As much as Dean might not want to admit it, John had failed him. He’d turned Dean into a hunter, yes, but he'd done more harm than good when it came to being Dean’s father.

That was the foundation for the mountain of things that had damaged Dean inside and out over the decades. It had changed his entire outlook. What other kid gave up on life, on hopes and dreams, on a future for themselves at sixteen? Accepted they were just one more tool in their father’s arsenal to be used until destroyed? Just accepted they existed to be broken?

Castiel leaned in, bumping him with his shoulder and Dean looked up, yanked back into the present. There was a secret smile playing at the corners of Cas’ mouth, his voice soft and slightly pleased when he spoke.

“We’re planting more than just flowers.” One of Dean's brows lifted. "We're planting apple trees.” He bumped him again, the smile becoming more pronounced. “And limes and lemons. Peach, mulberry, strawberry, rhubarb. Basically every kind of plant that could be made into a pie.”

Dean smiled, warmth seeping in from where their bodies touched, pushing back against the jagged darkness.

“Our very own orchard? Are you trying to woo me, Cas?”

The angel gave a sharp nod of his head. “Yes, absolutely. That is what I am doing.” He regarded him very seriously. “Is it working? Are you wooed?”

Dean laughed, shaking his head. “No, not quite,” he chuckled, amused by the unexpected display of humor.

Cas snapped his fingers with a chagrin expression. “Maybe after lunch. Will you be wooed by lunch?”
He laughed again. “You’ve been hanging out with us too much. Here I thought angels didn’t have a sense of humor.”

Cas shrugged, returning his attention back to the book in his lap. “Angels, sure. I’m not exactly one of them. Too human, I’m told.”

Dean winced. “Sorry.” Maybe Sam was right and he did need sensitivity training. “You’re- I didn’t mean… You’re just Cas. We all think Cas is pretty awesome.”

He looked at him, smirking, and the playful look in his eyes made Dean want to grin. “Well, since we’re being honest and all... I mean, this is a well-guarded secret I’ve kept- you’ll have to take it to the grave, but uh…” he knocked their shoulders together once more, smiling so that his nose wrinkled a little, “I’m pretty fond of you all, as well.”

Dean pressed back against him, smiling and feeling a pleasant buzz all over like taking a nap in the warmth of the sun. He wanted to wrap himself in the feeling and keep it forever.

“Are you sure it’s fair to let the faeries do the majority of this part of the work?” Sam questioned, brows drawn together in concentration as he carefully gathered more of Charlie’s hair into his fingers to work into the braid. He was getting better at it. It would be easier if she hadn't cut it so short. “I mean, it seems like we’re taking advantage of them—”

“Sam, we cannot take advantage of a people that called us rank-amateurs and kicked us out of our own garden so they can make sure we don’t flood it trying to do the water system ourselves.” Her fingers continued to fly over the keys of her laptop, a movie playing in the background neither of them was really watching. “I mean, we went out and bought all the stuff, the fairies just got the ground ready. We have to do the actual planting, growing, watering, weeding, harvesting, etc. Apparently, too many newbies have made enough amateur mistakes the faeries are happy enough to assist in the first steps, y’know, since we’re rank-amateurs and all- ow!”

“Sorry! Tangle.”

“I’m looking up stuff on beekeeping to see if we can’t put in a beehive of some kind. Cas likes bees and honey, and honey can be used in all kinds of recipes, so Dean would probably get a kick out of that. Plus, pollination. This is gonna be good for all of us. Therapeutic.”

“Why bees, though? What does that have to do with gardening or therapy?”

“Samuel Winchester. I am formally apologizing for how the American education system has failed you, okay? I am sorry.”

Frowning, he tried to lean around to peer at her face while not messing up his progress on her hair. “Apology accepted?”

“Without bees, humanity dies, Sam. We starve and we die.”

“What?”

“Bees are what pollinate the plants to make them bear fruit and all that. I mean, farmers are having to pick up the slack since bees are now a freaking endangered species, but it’s very much not the same. Bees are much better at it. And they’re in danger of dying off. On top of deforestation
already being a huge issue.”

He arched a brow. “So we’re trading in our guns and rock salt for garden hoes and mesh netting in order to save the world?” She laughed and he instinctively tightened his grip on her hair. “Don’t move! I’ll mess up and have to start over!”

“There’s hardly that much to mess up, Sam.”

“Your hair is too short and these braids are too intricate. I have big hands and fingers. It’s like trying to play Operation.” She let out a buzzer sound and he scowled, giving her hair a little tug. “Did you forget I have my hands in your hair? Yanking is a distinct possibility.”

“Ah, truce, truce, I apologize!”

He hummed and went back to weaving tiny braids so as to join them together in the back. “You’re hair is too short for this.”

“No, it isn’t. Just tie them off at my crown, Sam.”

He gave the short strands a dubious look. “Next time, we should invite Claire over for this. She likes braids. And she has tiny fingers,” he advised, tying off the end of another braid.

She twisted to roll her eyes at him. “If the Vikings could do intricate braids, Sam, so can you. We should invite Claire over, though. I would love to meet her. She’s basically Cas’ adopted daughter.”

“Uh, I don’t think so…?”

She patted his knee. “Sam, honey, I’ve read the books. I’ve seen inside all your brains. A dark and uncomfortable place, to be sure. As for Cas, he doesn’t know what he’s feeling is called since he has no context, but it’s totally parental.”

“The books don’t go that far.”

“Yes. Yes, they do. I told you about this. Chuck’s publisher shut down, he then started emailing them to Becky, who became his editor and they released them as self-pub. Then another publishing company picked them up, so now all the books are in hard copy. They’re currently working on getting audiobook versions. I got in touch with her for a case asking if he had any notes involving spells or sigils since the books often have doodles. We email back and forth now.”

He considered that a moment, starting on the next braid. “Does Becky know she dated God?”

“Yes, she does. She’s known for a while. And since Chuck published under the name Carver Edlund, there’s fourth wall breaking, sure, but no self-insert as far as fans can see, since Biblically, there have always been prophets to record, well, all the Biblical stuff. You two were drowning in the Biblical hoo-ha. When he showed up at her apartment and explained everything, Becky beamed him upside the face with a frying pan like she was up to bat for the world series.”

He snorted an ugly laugh. “She did not.”

“She did. And kept swinging. ‘That was for breaking up with me with no explanation or reason!’ Wham! ‘That was for mocking me in your books!’ Wham!” She placed a hand to her heart. “I mean, I gotta tell you, Sam. I was really proud of her.”

“She became his editor anyway?”
“Well, she’s not quite as bad as you think she is. Chuck’s God. He has influence over things, can make things happen, so some things like, say, Bugs or aspects of Becky’s personality being OTT? Totally Chuck’s fault. He wrote it, therefore it happened.”

“How?”

“He stupidly thought fans would find it funny. She was meant as comedic relief in your otherwise very dark and serious lives.”

“I married her. Under a spell’s influence.”

She hummed and clicked her tongue. “Yeah. She hit him with a waffle-iron for that one.”

“Do you think all of this will work?” he asked, guiding her hand to the newly finished braids to inspect. “I mean, passing on hunts, the garden, the bees, our suggestions to Castiel?”

“I think it will. Mostly you three, let’s be honest. I’m the most stable one here and I literally have a dark side.”

He flicked the edge of her ear, making her laugh.

“If you keep coming up with anymore ideas to expand the garden, we’re gonna end up with a farm.”

“Perfect cover for the bunker, Sammy. Just one more farm in the middle of Kansas.” She waved airily. “No one will suspect we’ve got a Batcave below ground!”

“I’m a lawyer, Charlie. I do law.”

“You are a hunter who was a pre-law student, Sam. Unless you’re planning to go back?”

He scratched at the back of his head. “I don’t know, actually.”

“Might as well start thinking about it. You’ve got the time.”

“I know.” He sighed. “I just… haven’t really wanted anything for so long.” He started braiding her hair again. “And, I mean, I’m kind of happy here, getting to relax and breathe for a minute. Is that wrong?”

“Of course not,” she enthused, patting blindly for his leg. “And hey, if you’re interested in new career options, you could always run away and become a clown.”

Scowling, Sam gave her hair a good, solid yank.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which Max and Dean have painful conversations over morning coffee.

Something strange happened in the bunker at certain times of the day, whether in the dead of night or the pre-dawn hours, before the first pot of coffee had been started. Like a deserted rest stop off the highway at midnight or a library after closing, it became a surreal and alien location, where time, space, and physics no longer applied.

Opening the front door to morning sunlight and chill was enough to break the spell, but the scowl marring Dean’s features should have made the sun second-guess itself.

“Now I know you aren’t human,” he growled, stepping aside to let Max in, “I mean, are you normally just up with the sun all smiles and good-nature? Why am I surrounded by such weirdos?”

Ambling down the stairwell, Max shrugged, “If everyone around you is weird, ever think it’s actually you that’s the odd duck?”

Dean shook his head and groaned. “You wake me up at some unholy hour and didn’t even bring coffee as a peace offering?”

Spinning in a circle, Max flashed him a smile that showed his teeth. “But coffee at home and hearth is the best way to start the day.”

“You are entirely too nice and laidback,” Dean complained, rubbing his temples as he sidestepped the Zanna and headed toward the kitchen. “It’s too early. Why are you using the door?”

Dean didn’t bother with the hallway lights, just let memory lead him through the dark corridor toward the kitchen where coffee and sanity waited like old friends.

“You want me to risk startling one of your trigger-happy roommates?” challenged Max. “Or worse: an angel? Bullets don’t bother me, in the long-term picture, I mean. Still hurt. But an angel sword can kill just about anything, including me.”

They rounded the corner to see light pouring out of the kitchen, the scent of freshly brewed coffee making Dean sigh in delight.

“At least Sam is good for something.”

Behind him, Max gave a soft snort of a laugh, amusement evident in his voice. “Surely he’s good for more than coffee.”

“I’m not sure what. Dishes, maybe, because he can’t cook anything aside from chili, and even that is only eaten under dire and desperate circumstances,” he said, pulling up short when they stepped into the kitchen to find Castiel pouring coffee. “Apparently, Sam’s not even good for coffee. Morning, Cas.”

If the angel was surprised or taken aback to see Max right on Dean’s heels, he didn’t show it other
than a slow blink, eyes over Dean’s shoulder, before his gaze refocused and he offered the cup he held.

“Good morning, Dean. I didn’t realize you were up already.”

Grateful, Dean took the steaming mug, sipping it carefully so as to not scald his tongue while he took a seat at the table. “Apparently, it was meant to be.” Rubbing a hand over his face, he watched Max slide into the seat opposite him, noting Cas didn’t offer him a cup of coffee as he had Dean. “Didn’t you want a cup? Help yourself, man.”

Having poured his own, Castiel slid down the counter and out of the way, but made no move to assist, looking awkward and pointedly disinterested as he added heavy cream and sugar to his coffee.

“Now that I think about it,” Dean continued, “I’m not sure what Sam does other than fuss over my eating habits. I mean, he’s great for research, but we’re on some weird sabbatical or something lately. He helps with cleaning, I guess. He can dust the top shelves and all.”

Max chortled, turning to lean back against the counter as he stirred his coffee. “Wow, Dean. He must be so flattered to hear you sing his praises the way you do.”

An expression flickered across Castiel’s face as Dean laughed into his coffee, throwing a good-natured wink that coaxed another chuckle and amused head shake from Max.

“I probably should have shown up with coffee or breakfast or something if I was gonna wake you up this morning,” he admitted, setting aside the stirring spoon to take a seat across from the hunter. “It’s only polite.”

Dean waved him off. “No, it’s fine. Once I was able to peel myself away from the human octopus without waking her, I was pretty much good and awake.”

Max gave him a disapproving look. “You brought home a lady friend?”

Dean thunked his coffee to the table, sloshing the hot liquid over. “Dude, you better be joking, because I am not having this conversation again.”

A grin split the Zanna's features. “You’re the one who brought it up, Dean, just saying.”

Cas groaned, pouring out the remainder of his coffee in disgust. “And now I’m nauseous. Please stop talking.” He shook his head, jaw flexing as he threw Max a bitchface that could have rivaled some of Sam’s best. “Better yet, I’ll show myself out,” he said, shoulders set in an angry line as he stormed from the room. Dean jerked, deep frown marring his features as he blinked and watched him stalk out.

Max also watched him go, brows raised when he turned back to regard Dean. “Gee, I wonder what that was about?”

“Charlie.”

“Ugh,” Max groaned, dropping his face into his hands, “I can’t even tell if you’re being willfully ignorant or just dense this time, Dean.”

“Lay off.” He rolled his eyes and kicked him under the table. Max stayed in the same position for a moment before raking his hands down his face until they came together in front of him, his head falling back as if praying to higher powers for help. Dean kicked him again, grinning. “You are a
When Max looked at him, the earlier humor had left, replaced with the tired sadness from when they’d first met. It reminded Dean how old he must be, much older than he looked, certainly older than Dean.

“Why was Charlie in your room?” he questioned.

Dean’s expression fell, gaze dropping to his now empty coffee, remembering the timid knock and the tearful calling of his name as bare feet shuffled on the concrete floor.

At first, he’d still been mostly asleep, the familiarity of the scene transporting him to another time and place. He remembered being dropped off at Bobby’s, of Sam, small and tearful, coming to Dean in the middle of the night asking if he could sleep there instead.

Dean hadn’t known how to explain to Bobby that Sam had never slept in a room on his own, that they’d always shared the second bed in the motel room. With Dad on a high-risk hunt and Dean sleeping so far away, Sam had been scared and alone and had begun to cry.

“She was scared,” he told him. “She had a bad dream- a really bad one- and didn’t want to be alone.” He pushed away from the table, moving to pour a fresh cup of coffee as a distraction. “Now that she has us, she doesn’t have to be alone when she doesn’t want to be.”

Something soft curled the corner of Max’s mouth that Dean couldn’t name. Too complicated and subtle- and too well masked by a Zanna who saw too much.

“It’s good she has you.”

“Charlie’s the little sister I never got,” he admitted. “I love that kid. I mean, nothing against Sam, but I always wanted a little sister, too, you know? And then I got one.” Staring at his drink in contemplation, he admitted, “Sometimes, I wonder if, y’know, Mom had survived if she wouldn’t have given birth to Charlie instead. She wanted a daughter. I remember her talking about how once Sam was a few months older, she and Dad were gonna try for a girl. She had her heart set.” He laughed and shrugged. “I mean, we’re all just souls predestined to walk the earth anyway. Bodies are just vessels we’re born into, so it makes me wonder if fate didn’t correct itself by leading us to each other.”

“What about relationships with non-souls?” A frown turned down Dean’s mouth, his brows coming together. Max sipped at his coffee. “Well, I mean, what about you and Benny becoming friends? Was that Fate?”

Dean straightened, glaring. “Benny had a soul.”

“He was a vampire.”

“Who chose to keep humanity safe from himself and died to save someone who didn’t even like him. Benny HAD a soul.”

“Okay, well, what about Cas? Angels have Grace, not souls. Do you think the same rules apply? Does Fate govern angels?”

“I hope so,” Dean said, the words jumping from his lips before he thought about it. A shadow of an amused smirk curled the corner of Max’s mouth and Dean spluttered, “I-I mean… Uh…”

“Take your time, Dean,” Max insisted, tone gentle and assuring. “I’ve got all day. Find your
Blushing, Dean curled his fingers around his coffee, pulling it closer and focusing instead on the warmth seeping into his palms. “I just, I mean… life has taken everything from me. Everyone. My mom, then my dad. Ellen, Jo, Ash, Bobby, Benny, hell, even my reaper is gone. My reaper. Tessa’s held my soul and carried it back and forth from one plane to the other more times than I probably even know about. I felt… I lost a friend when she died.” He tried to think back over his and Cas’ years of friendship and the various things they’d faced individually and together, the forces always whirling around both of them. “Cas is… We’re…”

Frustrated, he cast a glance at Max, who continued to watch him with curious patience. Drawing in a deep breath, Dean licked his bottom lip and tried again, releasing his cup to fiddle with the string of tiny beads looping around his wrist. “We’re an unlikely pair. We shouldn’t work, shouldn’t be friends, but we do, and we have almost from the moment we met. It was like- like I got slapped on the back by someone saying ‘Pay attention, Winchester. This is important’ even though I didn’t know why or how. We shouldn’t work. But we do, and Cas ended up, I don’t know, melding to—” he fumbled again, using his fist to tap against his chest twice, “and something always seems to be trying to separate us, whether it's monsters or good intentions. I mean, Cas has died. Several times. When Cas walked into that lake… it broke me. I couldn’t- I mean, we’ve lost people, but that time… losing him… that was it for me. That was it.”

Silence and pain weighed heavy on Dean’s shoulders, suddenly back at the water’s edge and dragging Castiel’s coat out, feeling bereft and robbed and so very wronged. Losing Cas had haunted him in ways he couldn’t articulate, wasn’t able to translate into words. He’d lost part of himself and was left with a raw wound that wouldn’t stop bleeding, a pain that wasn’t dulled with time or alcohol or distraction, an agony he didn’t know how to bear. Worse was that it was a cycle of mourning Cas, worrying about Sam because of Cas’ actions, which then brought on the anger because of what he’d done, before the cycle started over and he missed Castiel with everything he had, wanting him back regardless.

He startled when the tips of Max’s fingers touched his hand, jerking him back to the present and soft eyes that understood everything Dean didn’t say.

“But Cas came back.”

“Yeah,” agreed Dean, voice scraped raw. He wiped a hand over his mouth, nodding. “Yeah, he did. Stupid sonuvabitch can’t catch a break, I guess. Still right by my side like he hasn’t figured out I’m the cause of his suffering. He died again after that, you know. After the lake.”

“Did he?”

Dean wasn’t sure if Max didn’t know or if he was just letting Dean talk, but he appreciated it. Appreciated that he was willing to listen as though the story was new. It hurt, like ripping a band-aid off but exposing the wound to fresh air brought relief.

“We were there to save him, actually. I kicked in the damn door trying to get to him, only to watch as she shoved his own sword through his heart.” He bit his lips, letting his gaze slide away, unfocused. “That… if losing him at the lake broke me, this shattered me. I felt it. I was… I mean, if I hadn’t remembered Sam was in the room, I’d have fallen apart right then and there.”

“You couldn’t have grieved in front of Sam?”

Green eyes snapped up, Max blinking in surprise at the sudden sharpness of Dean’s expression. “No.” He dropped his gaze to his coffee again. “And it wouldn’t have been grief. That’s too simple
an idea. The memory’s kind of blurry, actually. I don’t fully remember after she--" He swallowed and said nothing.

"What happened?"

"I killed her. That's less a memory and more like a photograph in my head. I don’t remember doing it, but know I did, like I can see myself doing it.” He waved dismissively, frustrated he couldn’t express himself properly. “I remember the rage. I remember telling myself I couldn’t break down in front of Sam, remember trying to stuff everything down, the part of me that wanted to cry, that wanted to carry Cas’ body home and bury him in a proper funeral. I remember wanting Sam to leave, hating him for being there."

"And after that?"

"Gadreel-- another angel I got us stupidly tangled up with-- brought Cas back. I think I was numb and in shock. Part of my brain reminding me of the lies to keep, the other torn with all the reactions I felt, not sure which to feel most. Wanted to scream at him for doing that to me. Wanted to… I don’t know.”

“You do.” Dean waved him off, and Max angled his head, trying to meet his eye. “Keeping it to yourself all this time has done what good, exactly? I mean, if you can’t be honest with yourself or me--”

“I wanted to kiss him,” Dean blurted, looking the Zanna in the eye and tilting his chin defiantly. “And to yell at him, then break down sobbing he’d put me through that for even a second to begin with.”

“What haven’t you told him this?”

“Because then I turned around and told him to leave.” Choking on his words, Dean wiped at his eyes and looked away. “Gadreel had a knife to my brother’s throat and if I could just buy enough time, they could both be safe and I could bring Cas home.”

When Dean refused to look at him, staring at some spot on the wall and trying to blink back the moisture in his eyes, Max nudged his foot under the table.

“He’s here now.”

A bitter laugh escaped Dean and he rapped his knuckles against the table, voice acidic, “Yeah. Yeah, he is. After becoming Lucifer’s vessel because he thought he was expendable to us. To me.” He pushed away his coffee, desperately wanting something much stronger instead. “But he keeps being given back to me, and if it’s not Fate, I don’t want to think about why, because it means there may come a day when I lose him forever, and I can’t- not even the thought of it- I can’t.”

“Ever think it may be something besides Fate?”

Dean looked at him and frowned. “I mean, Cas is obstinate enough, I wouldn’t put it past sheer force of will, but…”

Huffing a laugh, Max shook his head. “No, Dean. You’ve met God. And here you have an angel who has been destroyed down to his atoms over and over yet keeps coming back to life and finding his way back to you. Did you at no time during any of this think maybe He had a hand to play in it? When angels die… they just die. Except for Castiel.”

Dean stared at him, eyes wide and mouth working silently before Max faltered, cocking his head
like a dog that heard a noise. Smirking, he lifted his coffee.

“Incoming.”

“Dean,” Sam called out, “Charlie and Cas just up and left.” Dean schooled his features and turned, watching as Sam stalled and halted in the doorway, his confused expression giving way to annoyance, a glare settling onto his features. “What is he doing here?”

Jaw clenched, Dean pursed his lips. “Wow, Sam. Way to be rude.”

Clicking his teeth, Max pushed to his feet. “Well, I guess that’s my cue.”

Dean twisted, expression beseeching and apologetic. “No, Max. You don’t have to go.” He glared back at his brother. “Sam, what the hell is your problem?”

Setting his empty mug in the sink, Max shook his head. “No, I don’t want to monopolize your whole morning. I just came by for coffee and a chat.” He smiled, inclining his head as their eyes met and locked. “I’m glad we got to talk, Dean. Thank you.” Hooking his thumb toward the doorway, he stepped back. “I can show myself out. Bye, Sam.”

The younger Winchester said nothing but continued to glare after him, chastised, but too stubborn to backtrack.

Dean whirled on him. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Lifting his chin, Sam crossed his arms. “I don’t like him. I don’t like that he’s suddenly here all the time, okay? We don’t even know him.”

“He’s been here twice and he’s my friend. End of discussion.”

“Then why have I never met him until this week? Why have I never heard of him, and yet suddenly I keep finding him in our home first thing in the morning?”

Dean shoved to his feet. “There are BOOKS worth of things you don’t know about me, Sam. Just because you are confronted with one aspect you don’t like doesn’t mean you get a damn say!” he snapped.

“Then why don’t you tell me?”

“You don’t get to demand information from me, Sam. I mean, shit! I do not owe you anything, and if I don’t tell you, it’s both my right and for a damn good reason, so stop being jealous and pissed off I didn’t get your approval on something, especially considering you couldn’t even talk yet when I met Max,” he growled, shoving past his brother and storming from the kitchen.

Not hesitating, Sam charged after him. “Then why keep him a secret?” he demanded. “If there’s nothing to hide, why not tell me?”

Dean whirled. “How many people have we met through the years you didn’t realize I knew until you met them, huh, Sam? How many people have you had in your life I don’t know about? How many people has Charlie? Has Cas?” He jabbed a finger in his brother’s chest. “Max is an awesome friend, like I don’t deserve him he’s that damn good- that damn good to me, and all he asks in return is a cup of coffee and to talk, which he can’t seem to do because my family makes it very clear he’s not welcome. And what you fail to grasp, Sam? You aren’t pushing him away; you’re pushing me away with only yourself to blame.”
He turned, stalking off and leaving Sam standing stock still in the hall, pale.

“Dean!”

“Get bent, Sam.”

Without a backward glance, Dean stormed down the corridor and out of sight. Dropping his gaze, Sam shoved his hands into his pockets and turned to go in the other direction, shoulders hunched.

Alone, Dean swung by the library to grab the portal, tucking it under his arm before heading back up the stairs and out the door. Wordlessly, he climbed the hill toward the brick building over the bunker, stepping carefully through dead grass and tall weeds, climbing up the rusted stairs of the fire escape of the abandoned building until he was alone on the roof with no one to follow after him. It was the only place he’d found so far where no one found him when he wanted to be alone.

Settling against the roof access, Dean propped the portal on his knees, peering into the Roadhouse Heaven.

“Hello?”

“Hello?” answered a voice, footsteps echoing on hardwood until Jo came into view, a grin stretching across her face. “Dean!”

“Hey, kid.” He glanced over her shoulder and back. “Is Ellen there?”

The screen wobbled, the room rocking wildly as Jo lifted the portal off its stand and headed off with it.

“Yeah. She’s in her reading nook, hold on.” He waited while she made her way up a set of stairs that creaked and groaned with the comfort of an old home until she came to stand in front of a closed white door. “Mom? Dean wants to talk to you.”

“Bring him here, sweetheart.” Dean got glimpses of an airy room with white walls and soft floral wallpaper before he was greeted with the sight of Ellen leaning back against pillows in a bay window. “How are you, boy? I feel like we never hear from you.” Her smile faltered as the door shut, presumably Jo leaving. “Dean, what’s wrong? What happened? Did you and Cas get into a fight?”

Scrubbing at his face, he shook his head. “Me and Sam, actually. I mean, Cas is mad at me, too, but Sam’s the one I fought with. And I-” Sucking in a breath, he tried to collect his thoughts into something that made sense. “Max is pushing for me to be more honest, and frankly, he’s got a point about it at times, and I didn’t know- I didn’t know who else to blow up to.”

She shifted, pushing herself to sit up straighter, brows drawn together. “Of course, Dean. What happened?”

“What do you know about Max?”

“Um, well, frankly, Sam and them thought you brought him home from the bar the other night, but you told them he was just a friend. Then they thought he might be some sort of monster who mind-whammied you, or is manipulating you like Ruby did him, to put all of you in a vulnerable position. Sam talked about wanting to put him through tests. Charlie was pretty firmly against it, but admitted she was also a little worried.”

Drawing in another breath to steady himself, Dean shut his eyes. “Ellen, if I tell you something, do
you promise not to tell anyone? Not even Sam?"

“So long as the secret won’t get you hurt, yes, I promise.”

He opened his eyes and met her own. “Max is my Zanna.”
“He’s your- oh,” Ellen replied, brows raised to her hairline and mouth perfectly round. Dean held his breath, heart slamming against his ribs as Ellen put pieces into place and drew an inevitable conclusion. “That’s why you won’t talk to Sam about him.”

A flare of anger welled up and Dean glared. “Sam doesn’t have the right to demand I tell him things that are my personal business, and that is exactly what he is doing.”

“He’s just worried,” she said, tone warm and reassuring, only adding fuel to the fire already burning inside him.
“He’s overstepping,” he snarled. “Telling him Max is my friend isn’t enough. My judgment regarding my friends isn’t good enough for him- and this isn’t the first time he’s done this. I have to get Sam’s stamp of approval. If I tell him Max is Zanna, he’ll want to know why he’s never heard of him before, how long have I known him, why didn’t I mention him when I met Sully, what kind of Zanna is he- he won’t stop asking questions like he has a right to the answers. Demanding something from someone who doesn’t want to give it…” he struggled for a moment, several words springing to mind that he couldn’t quite reconcile with the situation. “‘Rape’ is the first word that springs to mind, honestly. ‘Abuse’. I get to make the decisions about my life, and nobody, not Sam, my dad, not anybody is going to dictate to me anymore who I am allowed to be.”

Her head bobbed on a vigorous nod. “Dean, Dean, I get it. I get it, and you are right, okay? You’re right, and I’m glad you came to me to vent this. I know that couldn’t have been easy,” she soothed, one hand reaching forward then withdrawing, unable to offer a comforting touch.

“And Sam just does this!” he raged, the screen tilting as he gestured wildly. “He did the same thing with Benny- who later died for someone who didn’t even like him! Let me- ME - kill him to save Sam- the same person who pushed me to choose between having a friend or having a brother!” The image of a girl who looked far more like her mother than she did him had his throat seize, repressed rage and betrayal and loss flaring hot. He swallowed, voice shaking with barely tamped fury. "Sam, who dated Ruby and snuck around behind my back and lied and became a demon blood junkie! I had reasons to not trust Ruby. Sam doesn't have reasons. He never has reasons. He just makes decisions with standards he doesn't hold himself to.”

Pursing her lips, Ellen angled her head, her expression thoughtful and gaze distant. “What do you and Max do together that might cause him concern? Does he hunt with you without Sam?”

“We have coffee and talk. Which we can’t do in the bunker without Sam- and apparently Cas- being offended by his very presence. And Max- proof how good he is- just leaves so as to not cause further problems.”

“And you’ve explained Max is just an old friend?”

“Repeatedly.”

He watched her nod, ruminating on that a moment with her gaze focused out the window to a scenery he couldn’t see. The shadows of tree leaves played across her face as a breeze blew through them. He wondered what he was hoping to accomplish in telling her all this. Sam’s reaction, his anger, his demands, it had been like a fire lit under Dean’s skin until he was threatening to boil over, a trigger button he didn’t know he had. The only safe option seemed to be to boil over somewhere far from his brother’s vicinity, but to what end?

Ellen tapped the pad of her finger to her lips. “You told me about Sam. What about Cas? How is he reacting to Max?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, scratching at the nape of his neck. “He is a lot more subtle than Sam, so maybe I’m misreading it. He… he’s not curious about Max. Cas is always curious. It’s like he’s trying to ignore him altogether. Despite how awkward he is, Cas takes well to people, and they to him. He and Max would get along well, they can do that whole comfortable silence thing for hours. They call me out when I’m wrong. They’re kind even when blunt. I mean, does Cas think I’m replacing one friend with another? Is that what he’s worried about?” He rubbed his face, agitated and annoyed. “I mean, part of me wants to apologize he’s upset, but I didn't do anything wrong! You would think he would be happy I have another friend.”

“Not if he’s already insecure about what he means to people,” she countered softly.
Dean dropped his gaze, feeling his stomach twist. “But I’ve told him. I apologized for not being a better friend. I’m only just learning how to do this.”

“It’s going to take a lot of effort and patience, Dean. You are both, well, very broken—no offense. Not to mention all the stuff between you from in that past you probably haven’t dealt with. You’ve heard the saying ‘actions speak louder than words’. Why not try that? Take him into consideration. Start doing things for him, unbidden, just for the sake of doing things for him. Things that you think he might like or a story of something that happened. Ask to spend time with him: walks, movies, supply runs, anything. Invest in him.” Her eyes played over his features, a smile that was sadder than anything colored the lines of her face. “He has no foundation to stand on, Dean, so when the slightest thing happens, it threatens to break him. You are going to have to build his foundation and walls and roof until he gets secure enough he’s building them, too. Because then...then he’ll have faith they’ll hold him when the storm hits. He’ll trust them; he’ll trust you.”

Slouching back with a sigh, Dean let his head fall forward, wondering how on earth he was supposed to be the best friend Cas ever had when he was already failing.

“You didn’t have to come,” Cas insisted, holding the door as all three women filed into the store.

“Yes, she did,” said Charlie, her gaze roaming over the walls and racks of clothing. “Right, Claire?”

Hands stuffed into her hoodie, Claire scanned the store in vague disinterest. “I mean, you poofed yourself to the house before breakfast. Kinda screams ‘important’. And if you’re trying to snaz up your wardrobe, you’re gonna need the help of someone with style.”

“I have style,” Charlie said, affronted.

She flicked her blonde curls over her shoulder. “Geek couture doesn’t count.”

Jody pulled a leather jacket off an end display. “And hunting is a lesson in plaid.” She folded it over her arm. “Cas, if you want to dress to impress, do you have a style preference?” He shook his head. “That’s what I thought. Girls, spread out. Time to My Fair Lady.”

Coat hangers clicked steadily as Jody cataloged shirts by the window display and Charlie and Claire grabbed small shopping carts.

Cas slid in behind Charlie. “When I asked if you would want to get out of the bunker, this isn’t what I had in mind,” he hissed as she rifled through denim jeans.

“What did I tell you when you woke me up?”

“‘You drive, I’ll get dressed in the car.’”

Her lip pursed in a pout and she twirled a finger. “After that. I told you we were gonna woo the ever-living pants off of Dean.” She turned a critical eye. “And I get that Max rubs you wrong, but I don’t think he and Dean are a thing, so you need to stop stressing about it. Consider focusing your form of distraction.”

His stomach twisted, instinct bearing him to retreat. “I’m not comfortable with this,” he said. They all looked him. He held Claire’s gaze across the rack. “Involving all of you was not my intent, and
I feel I’m disrespecting you and your father’s memory like this. I look like your father, even if this form, this body, was never his. Claire, I would understand if you were not okay with my feelings for Dean. Your feelings matter to me; I feel like this is... callous.”

She blinked slow, lowering her eyes and thick lashes to the shirts beneath her fingertips.

“I’m not gonna say it’s not weird, helping you with your love life,” she admitted into the strained silence. Her eyes flicked up and then fell again. “Don’t get me wrong, it's weird. But only because you ended up ‘family’ in my head same as Jody and Dean, not because I look at you and see him.” She locked her gaze with his. “I look at you and I see you. You look like my dad, but… but like a twin would. You sound different, you move different, you hold yourself differently than he ever did. I don’t look at you and miss him anymore. I just see Cas. That awkward doof always trying to look out for me.”

Body sagging, he smiled, soft and affected. “Claire, I…”

She held up a hand and offered a green shirt to Charlie. “Save it. We are not having a chick-flick moment. There will be no hugging. There will be an epic make-over Dean’s never gonna be ready for, but there will be no hugging.” Her brow swept up in a challenge. “Capisce?”

“Yes, Claire,” he said, smiling wider. “I capisce.”

The fitting rooms were three stalls with green curtains and a sitting area with mirrors. Castiel helplessly eyed the clothes they had picked out, then the stalls.

Rolling her eyes, Claire quickly snatched together items and shoved them at him. “We’ll teach you to mix and match later. Start with the college professor first. Safe, tame, non-intimidating, classic.” He held stiff and Claire shook the clothes at him. “You were worried about upsetting me by looking like my dad; time for clothes of your own, then.” When he still didn’t move, she pushed them into his arms. “Go.”

While he slipped behind a curtain, the girls settled into the plush chairs and discussed where to go next and what they would do for lunch until the continued silence from the dressing stall had them watching it expectantly.

“Cas?” Jody called. “Everything okay in there?”

He drew aside the curtain wearing dark jeans and a dress shirt under a wool sweater. They straightened with interest.

“Well?” Claire prompted. “You’ve got to show it off, Cas. Do you like it?”

The lines of his face were tight with trepidation, body stiff as he turned in a circle. “It’s an attractive look by current fashion. What do you think?”

“He’s wearing the clothes, but not the look,” Claire muttered, snapping a picture on her phone to post to Twitter. “Let’s poll the audience.”

Jody studied him, lips poking out. "Cas... what's eating at you? What's wrong?"

He swallowed and wasn't able to look at them. "I just... I feel like I'm being too forward. That it'll
be obvious, make Dean uncomfortable, and push him away instead. I’d rather us never be together than to lose him as a friend."

"Cas, they're just clothes." She brushed her hand aside. "Forget Dean for a minute. He’s now irrelevant to the conversation. Do you like wearing clothes? The way it feels, the way it looks?" He gave a slow nod. "Then you are getting clothes. Not for Dean, but for you. Do you like it?"

He fumbled for a moment, looking at his reflection and then down, stumped for a response.

“It's okay if you don't like it, Cas. Or if you don't know. If you’re neutral, but it’s comfortable, I say go with it,” Charlie insisted. “It looks great on you, but your attitude is wrong.” When his frown deepened, she popped to her feet and posed. “Have some snaz, you know? Some confidence. Wear it like you know it makes you look good. Loosen up. Show it off.”

“I’m not certain I understand, but I am sure it sounds ridiculous. No.”

Pushing to her feet, and quickly joined by the other girl, Jody placed a hand on Cas’ shoulder and pushed him to the chairs they’d just vacated.

“She has a point, Castiel. Hell, humans use body language to express something they may not be feeling at the moment, like confidence, in order to give themselves that.”

“I don’t understand.”

Claire rolled her eyes and turned to the red-head beside her. “Charlie?” She turned, and the younger girl inclined her head. “Confidence. Chin up, shoulders back, think ‘murder’, and walk.”

Cas watched as she did so, but then pointed to the red-head, frowning at Claire. “But... you often look ready to kill a room full of people.”

“And because of it, no one questions why someone my age is clearly somewhere they probably shouldn’t be, like a crime scene. Based on my body language, they second-guess their assessment of the situation, because of how certain I appear of my belonging there. Dean is far less likely to flirt with you if you carry yourself with all the finesse of a tree.”

“Why a tree?”

“You can’t flirt with a tree, Cas,” she said, stepping into a stall like the other women. “It's not approachable and doesn’t want you to flirt with it- or hold its hand and go on dates.” They drew their curtains shut for a moment, causing Cas to look helplessly at the saleswoman trying to hide her smile. Yanking the curtains aside, the women all struck a different provocative pose. “You have to be confident, Cas.”

He turned sharply to the employee. “I don’t know these women, please call security.”
There was a knock at Dean’s door he ignored in case it was Sam. He set the laptop on the bed before reaching down to unlace his boots.

The door opened carefully, and he looked up to see Charlie glancing around. The tension in his shoulders eased at not yet having to have another run-in with his brother.

“Hey, kid.” He set his boots by the foot of the bed out of the way. “Where’d you get off to this morning?”

She stepped into his room and shut the door behind her. “Thanks again for letting me come sleep with you- and for not giving me a hard time about it.” He waved her off and she slid her hands into her pockets. “I took Cas shopping for clothes since he didn’t want to impose and keep borrowing yours.”

“Well, I mean, he could have. I wouldn’t have really minded.”

Her lips pulled into a smile that didn’t reach her eyes as she shook her head. “No amount of telling him that would make him believe it. It offers him a sense of security that if he ever became human again, he has decent clothing now.”

Dean did a double-take. “Is he worrying about that?”

She shrugged. “I would. You gotta admit his life hasn’t been very stable since you met him. My life has been stable for a while, but I’m always ready to pack a bag and run if I need. It’s a way of survival that stays in your head. What are you doing?”

He followed her gaze to the laptop. “Avoiding Sam, all honesty.” He gave a forced grin. “Thought I’d watch some anime.”

“Oh?”
“Yeah.”

“Well, you want some company? We could use a good anime night. What were you planning to watch?” He stiffened and her expression fell, thumb hooking over her shoulder. “Or, you know, not, if you would prefer. Were you planning on watching porn?”

He flinched, recoiling. “God, why does everyone keep assuming porn is the only thing my hobbies entail? To hear Sam tell it, just because I enjoy porn, that is all I watch, read, or think about, like I am too damn stupid to even consider having other interests!”

“Whoa,” she exclaimed, hands raised. He was breathing heavily through flared nostrils, fists clenching and unclenching. “You and Sam must have had one hell of a fight today. Look, I only asked about the porn because of the way you hesitated when I asked if I could watch it with you- like you didn’t want company. And even if you were watching porn, I wouldn’t have cared!”

He squared his jaw, pointing at her. “Well, I’m not watching porn. I just- you surprised me. No one’s ever asked if they could watch with me. Sam always just makes some snide or mocking comment and walks off, regardless of what I’m watching.”

Nodding, she stepped into his personal space and wrapped him into a hug without asking. “Yeah, you definitely need some downtime. I’m sorry you had a bad day.” Staying within the circle of his arms, she leaned back to grin up at him. “Oh, but Cas got a bunch of new clothes I’m excited and he’s confused about. Maybe he can show them to you later- though, warning, he’s really self-conscious about it, so tread lightly.”

“Why?” He quirked a brow at her. “You didn’t get him anything weird, did you?”

“What? No,” she said, pulling back and slapping his arm with a scowl. “It’s just… new and different. He’s trying something new and different, trying to express himself, and in doing so now feels really vulnerable and exposed. He even traded his Continental for a truck- and older model F-150. He’s basically an alien trying to pass himself off as human, and clumsily discovering himself along the way. Handle gently.” She moved away, hands going to her hips. “So: anime? What did you want to watch?”

He frowned, gaze drifting to the closed laptop as though he’d completely forgotten about it. “Oh, right. Yeah.” He waved a hand through the air. “I was thinking something just… violent, like Black Lagoon. Lots and lots of guns and seedy crime.” He shrugged. “But, I mean, if you want to watch, we can watch something else need be.”

“Cas, too.” His mouth clicked shut, brows furrowing. She wanted to point out he tilted his head in confusion about as often as Cas did. “New clothes. Feeling vulnerable. I figure a normal night chilling might help his nerves.”

“Okay, well, he’s definitely not gonna want to watch Black Lagoon. FMA is too messed up at times to start him off on. We could watch a classic anime, like Escaflowne. Or a Ghibli movie? Porco Rosso?”

She nodded, turning and pulling open the door. “Escaflowne. I’ll make popcorn and meet you in the Rec Room. You go invite Cas.” She looked back over her shoulder. “Be genuine when you see his clothes. He knows when you’re lying.”

He followed her out into the hall and to the room next door, leaning with his forearm against the frame when he knocked. “Hey, Cas! Charlie and I were gonna hang and watch TV, you wanna?” The door swung inward, his words and thought process immediately coming to a screeching halt.
“Whoa,” he managed, eyes taking in the jeans, dress shirt, and sweater. “You look…” He eyes traveled back up and finally met Cas’, hunter training pointing out the stiff, cagey way Cas was holding himself, braced for a hit and ready to bolt at any moment. Dean smiled, lowering his voice. “You look great, Cas. Really.”

The angel’s tense form relaxed marginally and he offered a shy smile. “Thank you, Dean.” He dropped his gaze and fidgeted, a hint of pink coloring his cheeks. “I feel more than a little ridiculous, actually. Like, I’m making a spectacle of myself.”

Dean rapidly shook his head. “No, dude, no. You do not- you look-” When his words failed, he gestured up and down Cas’ form as if to articulate what he meant, only earning a confused squint and head tilt. He drew in a breath. “You look great, really. Like the kind of man you want to bring home and introduce to your parents.”

Brows furrowed, Cas bit his bottom lip and flicked a worried glance at Dean. “Would you want to introduce me to your parents?”

A flush spread hot and fast across Dean’s whole face and he spluttered, then caught himself as Cas dropped his gaze, realizing he’d misunderstood the meaning and said something wrong. Reaching out, Dean clapped a hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze to make Castiel look at him again.

“Yeah, Cas. I’d love to introduce you to my parents- I’d do it in a heartbeat. Mom especially would love you.” He moved in, sliding his arm around his neck and letting it drape over his shoulder. “Now let’s go eat junk food and watch some anime, what do you say?”

They grinned at each other. “Of course, Dean.”
Chapter 10

Looking disapproving, Max clicked his tongue and eyed the coffee shop corner they’d sequestered themselves in. “Not gonna lie to you, Dean. I kind of feel like your dirty little secret right now.”

The elder Winchester rolled his eyes, exasperation and stress making him impatient. “That is because right now you are.” He raked a hand over his face and Max sat a little straighter, face a mix of protectiveness and concern.


Dean couldn’t have had this conversation just anywhere, more so because it felt like they'd yet to have a conversation they got to finish. They always ended up too personal, too real and sharp and kind, and cut too short. Max’s words were soft, but they always left Dean feeling like a wound freshly tended, with the ache to remind you it had yet to heal. He’d asked him out for coffee, which was becoming habitual at this point, and Max had whisked them off to one in the center of some downtown.

The November air was too cold for them to sit out on the patio, so they’d sequestered themselves to a corner of the coffee shop with a Chinese checkers game on the table and paper lantern orbs and leftover Halloween decorations strung from the ceiling. It was warm and inviting, heavy with the scents of coffee and the sounds of people chattering and playing games on the worn red couches or at different multicolored tables of rainbow, pinks, blues, and purples, or black, white, gray, and more. It struck him as eccentric and inviting. The cozy atmosphere made him feel safe enough to be honest as they settled in with their coffee.

“I told Ellen about you,” Dean admitted, making Max frown, confused.

“But, that’s a good thing, Dean. It shows trust.”

“Only because Sam is being utterly demanding and controlling about you and I had to have someone in my corner about it. I didn’t know who else to turn to.” He plucked at a napkin, face in a harsh scowl as he systematically tore it into tiny pieces. “Doesn’t like us being friends, doesn’t want you in the bunker, wants to know all about you and how we’re friends and why, rather than just accept us being friends.”

Settling back, Max nodded. “I can see why that would upset you. Especially after Benny. He probably sees it from a place of concern, when in fact it’s, frankly, controlling and abusive.”

Dean looked up with a start. “Sam’s not abusive.” Granted, he’d said something similar to Ellen, but that had been when he’d been angry, and he hadn’t known of a better way to articulate what he felt. The Zanna looked dubious, lifting a brow in challenge and making Dean defensive. “He’s not.”

Max leaned forward again, forearms resting on the table. “A girl has a boyfriend who dictates to her who she is allowed to see, be friends with, who she can have in her life, where she can go and with whom… That’s abuse, Dean. It’s no less abuse because it’s your brother. It’s still unhealthy.”

Dean rolled his eyes and returned to plucking at his napkin. “He’s just being protective.”

“You spent your life making excuses for your dad, are you really going to sit there and make them for your brother- to me?” Dean flinched, but kept his gaze down and said nothing. Max settled back, long fingers curling around the ceramic mug of coffee. “What did you do? With Sam, I
“I called him out on his shit,” he admitted, stomach twisting sourly as he remembered all but yelling at his brother and storming off. They hadn’t spoken since, actively avoiding each other over the past several days- and maintaining a tense silence when they couldn’t. “Then I went to vent to Ellen before I could blow up and make it worse.”

“That’s good, Dean. Really.”

“Yeah, except now Sam and I aren’t speaking to each other. It’s dumb we’re even arguing about this!”

Max nodded, thumb tapping against the ceramic mug. “That can be hard. You aren’t required to apologize, though, Dean.” He gave him a flat look and Max shook his head once. “You aren’t. You may have blown up at Sam, but he was in the wrong and your anger was justified. You wouldn’t berate the girl for standing up for herself, would you? Why are you doing it to yourself?”

Unperturbed by Dean’s scowl, Max waved and changed the topic like it was as easy as flipping a switch. “So, how’s Cas?”

Dean groaned and covered his face, splitting the fingers covering his eyes so as to look at him. “Ugh, is it okay if I’m a thirteen-year-old girl for a minute?”

“Why is a thirteen-year-old girl inherently an insult?” At Dean’s flat look, Max let it go and gestured for him to continue.

“Okay, so Charlie and the girls took Cas shopping and bought him clothes.” He splayed his hands on the table, glancing once over his shoulder, before looking Max dead in the eye. “It’s cruelty.

The Zanna’s entire face morphed into a cringe. “It’s that bad?”

“Cruelty to me, Max, to me!” A spluttered laugh escaped him as Dean continued, stress and misery and longing coloring his face and every word. “God, he just… walks around. And he looks really good. I was not prepared to be blind-sided by-by- he’s an angel! I’m going to be sent back to hell for this and I know it. It’s horrible. Worse than admitting I’m attracted to another guy, on no, he’s an angel, and Charlie bought him cologne and I swear to God I just want to push him against a wall or something.” He glared. “My life was normal once, dammit!”

“Your life was never normal.”

Dean buried his face in his hands with a groan. “They’re gonna put me in the deepest, darkest pit of Hell for this.”

Still chuckling, Max reached across the table to tug Dean’s hands away, his grin affectionate and amused. “It’s not a sin to love another person, Dean. You forget cupids pair together same-sex soulmates.”

Dean jerked his hand away and began picking at his napkin with more vicious intent than before. “He’s an angel,” he reminded him petulantly, then threw his hands up in exasperation. “And why am I thinking about this? This is your fault! God, everything is all weird now. What with me and Cas hanging out and me trying not to think about our previous conversations, and the weird tension that’s always between us, and now how he looks and even freaking smells amazing, what the hell, man? He and Charlie keep randomly dancing or twirling each other and waltzing-- she knows how to waltz and taught him-- and generally just being adorable? God, I love my family, but they are killing me. And he’s just so… How am I supposed to be normal around him? I don’t know how to
keep ignoring and shoving this down when you went and kicked the hornet's nest and keep asking me about it and telling me it’s okay and he's just constantly being him!"

“Stop trying to repress it, Dean!” Max said, voice soft but as insistent as the grin stretching across his features. “Chase after the things that make you happy! Fight for them!”

Pulling back, Dean shook his head, looking at the man across the table. “He doesn’t make me happy. He… God, he stresses me out. He makes me worried and anxious and singularly focused yet distracted at the same time. It’s miserable.”

“Might be different if you asked him out for coffee and tried to hold his hand,” he said, leaning back in his seat with fingers laced behind his head. "Maybe ask him for a dance yourself."

With a look like an impatient teacher, Dean began counting off on his fingers. “We met when he pulled my soul from hell- where I was torturing souls. I’ve turned into a demon a second time since then.” He cast a harsh glance around and lowered his voice to a hiss, “I use to turn tricks to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table.” He added a fourth finger and continued at a normal tone. “I kicked him out when he was human and vulnerable and being hunted by all of Heaven. I-”

Max held up a hand. “I get your point, Dean. I do,” he interrupted, “but don’t you think if Hell, demons, and making Cas leave were enough to be an issue between you… Cas might have left of his own free will? Rather than settling in further at what he seems to consider his home as well? What with the garden, the clothes, the staying?” Dean opened his mouth and Max held up a hand, cutting him off. “I mean, if we look at this from a logical perspective, Castiel being an angel with free will, teleportation powers, a vehicle, and other friends… an angel who could leave at any time he wished and go anywhere he wanted… Logically, he’s where he wants to be and with whom, therefore, we can surmise nothing in your past or your past together is enough to make him want to be anywhere other than exactly where he is-” his gaze flicked over Dean’s shoulder, before he leaned back in his seat and dropped his gaze to his drink, “-which includes walking through the door right now, so heads up,” he added hurriedly.

Dean jerked like he’d been shot, head whipping around before panic set in on his features and he ducked down to hiss, “What is he doing here?”

Lips pursed and brows raised, Max awkwardly jerked a shoulder up, fingers drumming against his mug. “I may or may not have invited him when you went to the bathroom.”

“You what?” he hissed, voice nearing a frantic pitch.

Behind them, Castiel was scanning the patrons, eyes narrowed in a squint. While Dean was perfectly happy to duck down and hide in the hopes they wouldn't be seen, Max lifted a hand to gain his attention.

“Best way to normalize our being friends- also, brace yourself, he’s wearing a leather jacket with aviators on his head,” he said, voice low and barely moving his lips, before shifting his expression into something warm, smile stretching as Castiel approached their table. “Good morning, Castiel. Glad you could make it. Did you want to order a coffee?”

Warily, Castiel eyed him, offering only the barest nod of greeting before flicking his gaze in question to Dean, whose refusal to look at him or even breathe only heightened the angel’s confusion and discomfort. He gingerly touched the hunter’s shoulder in concern.

“Dean? Are you alright?”
The heel of Dean’s boot connected swiftly with Max’s shin as the hunter pushed himself to a sitting position, face a mask of cheerful surprise while the Zanna groaned and curled in on himself.

“Oh hey, Cas! Good to see you!” Despite the manic grin, a pained whimper escaped him as he was forced to breathe and beheld the other man backlit in the warm glow of paper lanterns and strings of lights. Charlie must have styled his hair. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear they were conspiring to murder him. “Yo-you look… nice! Really, very… nice! I just, uh, I--” Max kicked him gently. “Coffee! You probably want coffee. You should- I should- uh, here,” he said, reaching back for his wallet, “why don’t you take my card and--”

“Or,” interjected Max, making both their heads turn in his direction, “you could go get in line with him while I wait here,” he offered, shrugging and leaning back against the cushions behind him. “You said you thought you wanted something else, didn’t you? Then we can play another game when you get back.” Long fingers gesticulated to the Chinese checker's board on the multicolored table.

Muscle under his eye twitching, Dean’s face flickered cold fury before flashing a smile that made him look years younger. “I am going to murder you in your sleep.”

“Eventually you’d miss me and regret that decision.”

Castiel glanced warily between them. “Is something wrong? Should I not have come?”

Dean rolled his head around to look at him, offering the same shit-eating grin he used when bravado was the only weapon he had left in a dire situation. “Nah, Cas. You’re always welcome. Unfortunately, I’m an emotionally compromised teenage girl and it’s Max’s fault.” He glared at him.

Giving him an exasperated look, Max threw up a hand. “C’mon, man. They already hate the ground I walk on, don’t make it worse when I haven’t actually done anything.”

“How did you get here?” Castiel interrupted, fingertips pressing against the table top. Dean looked at him in confusion, noting for the first time, the stiff posture and narrowed gaze demanding answers. “Dean, you are nearly a thousand miles away from home, a fourteen-hour car drive.” Blazing eyes snapped to Max as he winced at the oversight. “How did you get here?”

“Yeah, that was my bad,” Max admitted with a guilty glance up at the angel fairly crackling with the desire to start smiting, only slightly abated as Dean shoved to his feet and wedged himself between them.

“No, no, it was mine, Cas. It was mine.” He held up placating hands of surrender under the full force of Castiel’s ire. “Max can teleport,” he blurted out. “I figured you knew, since popping in and out of the bunker for coffee isn’t exactly easy when we live in the middle of- and well, you and Sam have only been openly hostile--”

“Off point,” murmured Max, the toe of his shoe nudging the back of Dean’s calf.

“Right, sorry. So: Max can teleport.” He glanced once over his shoulder to frown at the Zanna. “Aside from putting up with me, possibly some minor mind-reading, which he denies, that’s his only real power I know of.” Tongue darting out over his lips as Cas squinted suspiciously over his shoulder, Dean hedged, “A-and I know you got the text from me, but, um, it was actually Max’s idea to invite you.”

Blue eyes snapped back to his face, widening in surprise, before the angel dropped his gaze and
retreated. “Oh. So I should leave.” His head bobbed. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry I misunderstood the joke.”

Dean reached out, grabbing him by the wrist and not allowing him to draw away despite his refusal to meet Dean’s eye. “No, Cas. You’re still- you are welcome to have coffee with us. I just didn’t think you would if you knew Max would be here, and well, Max thought pretty much the same, which was why he sent the text from my phone.” Drawing in a breath, Cas lifted his head to meet Dean’s eye, the din of the coffee shop lost to his ears. His grip slid from Cas’ wrist to his hand, stroking his thumb over the angel’s knuckles. “Let me buy you a coffee. If you want to leave, you can, but I would like you to stay,” he told him, voice all warm earnestness and sincerity, like a secret whispered between them.

Worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, Cas shook his head, an internal struggle evident in his eyes. “You're not playing fair.”

Dean frowned. “Since when is the truth not fair?”

Casting a sidelong glance at Max, Cas offered, “Quite often,” and pulled away, fingers slipping from Dean’s.

Brows furrowed, Dean gave Max a look of desperate pleading as Cas drifted to the line of customers. He received an encouraging nod. Swallowing thickly, he tried to quell the anxiety and uncertainty wringing his nerves like a rag.

Drawing in a breath, he made himself look at the angel busy squinting at the chalkboard menu; allowing his eyes to travel over him from the aviators to the biker jacket and soft grey v-neck shirt, down to the dark jeans and boots, then back up again.

He gave Max a pained smile, barely more than the lifting of one side of his mouth. “He does look good, doesn’t he?”

Smiling, he jerked his chin toward the line and winked. “Go buy him a coffee, Dean.”
“Where’s Cas?” Jo questioned, glancing up from where she was finishing her handwritten entry for the week. She was still in her pajamas and a plaid house robe with teddy bears on it, hair falling out of the ponytail she’d obviously slept in.

Sam shrugged, eyes scanning over the file Rowena had sent them for the week. “Said he got a weird text from Dean and was gonna go check on him.”

“Where’s Dean then?” She chewed on the end of her pen. “Seriously, what happened to our regularly scheduled programming? We use to do this the same day, same time every week. Now it’s chaos, and we never know when to expect a sudden call-to.”

He rolled his eyes and set the tablet aside. “Dean’s being completely unpredictable right now, it makes it hard to hold official meetings. I figure everyone turns them in when they can, and we try to have a quick announcement of the winner slash discuss useable scenarios.”

“Doing the reading and stuff together is the fun part.” Her expression wilted to a frown as she looked at her work in distaste, then tossed it over her shoulder in a flutter of loose paper. “This just feels like homework.”
He arched a brow at her. “Jo, you don’t have to take part in the game-”

“That’s just it, Sam,” she snapped. “It doesn’t feel like a game lately. It’s not fun. Like right now! Why are you angry? What happened?” He opened his mouth and she held up a hand. “No, you know what? I don’t want to know because I know y’all, so I know the biggest part of the problem is Winchester pig-headedness and I am not getting in the middle of that. I’m not.” She slid off the bar stool, adjusting her house robe. “Whatever’s going on with you and Dean- you need to fix it. Stat. Then we can get back to the writing competition.”

She walked off just as Ellen stepped into the edge of the frame, coffee mug in hand as she watched her daughter leave. Her gaze slid to Sam, one fine brow raised. He shifted uncomfortably. The door to the Roadhouse slammed and she sighed, coming to lean on the bar and pass the coffee through the mirror. Sam gingerly accepted, wrapping his large hands around it to let the heat seep into his fingers.

“She’s right you know,” she told him, and he looked up to find her giving him a pointed look. “You’ve been mad at Dean ever since that night he said he was going off to get laid, then madder still when he became friends with Max. Dean hasn’t done anything wrong, Sam, but you keep trying to punish him anyway.”

“That’s because-”

She held up a hand and he shut his mouth, biting down on the tip of his tongue to keep the words in. “Because we’re all solidly in the Dean/Cas corner trying to get them together, but they aren’t together. They aren’t together and Dean has every right to go out there and spend his time with whoever he wants- and it isn’t cheating.”

He dropped his gaze to scowl at his coffee, hackles rising. “It feels like he’s cheating.”

“He isn’t, though, and I need you to get that through your head. And Dean wouldn’t cheat on Cas. And even if for some reason Dean and Max were together, Dean has that right.”

“He could be another Ruby, how are we to know?” he snapped, glaring. “We don’t even know him.”

Her brow arched higher. “You don’t need to, it’s not your relationship.” She settled into her daughter’s vacated seat and folded her hands together, seeming to search for words for a moment. “Sam… I think you’ve lost perspective on this. Even if Dean and Max were together- which I don’t believe they are- Dean has every right to be with whoever he wants because he and Cas are not and never were together. And with your talk of wanting to secretly run tests on Max? Do you not realize how out of line you are? How obsessive and controlling that sounds?”

“Yeah, but-”

“No ‘buts’, Sam. There will never be a good enough reason to betray your brother’s trust like that. Dean has always shown excellent judge of character when it comes to people. Not to dredge up the past, but I feel you need the reminder: you are the one who snuck around with a demon and became a blood junkie, while Dean was the atheist who befriended and supported an angel, teaching him how to choose to do the right thing rather than what he was ordered.

‘People love Dean so much it’s allowed them to overcome possession, or, like Benny and most the people here, they are willing to die to help him- and you.’ Silence settled over them and Sam kept his gaze lowered, letting his hair obscure his features as his face and ears burned hot. ‘I love you boys, but sometimes you get so focused you miss the obvious. You owe Dean an apology, Sam,
and probably Max. *Fix things* with your brother, then, if story night gets back on track, or y'all decide to make it something else, let us know.” She smiled when he chanced a glance at her. "Chin up, kid. Now, where do we stand so far this week with stories?"

Bouncing on the balls of his feet, Dean watched Max round the corner of Common Grounds Coffee and disappear from sight. With a violent shudder, he yanked the zipper of his jacket higher and pivoted to Castiel.

“I was not dressed for this weather.” Despite the bright spots of colors on Cas’ cheeks and nose, he didn’t appear to notice the frigid cold making their breath come out in small clouds, gaze flicking over Dean in curious observation. Shoving his hands into his pockets, Dean jerked his head. “C’mon. Let’s go someplace with heating or something.”

“Do not wish to go home?”

“Mmm. Not yet. I wanna talk to you first.”

Cas frowned. “Then do you want to go back inside?”

Dean laughed in a single huff, grinning. “No, Cas. We just came out of there. It would look weird and draw attention.” He looked around. “Is there a bookstore or somewhere we could go? A library?” He laughed again, winking. “A different coffee shop?”

Nodding, Castiel reached out, faltering when Dean leaned away from his touch.

“If it’s close enough, we can just walk. And do up your coat. It looks weird for you to have it open with as cold as it is.”

Nodding, Castiel inclined his head down the street while reaching into an inner coat pocket and retrieving a cream-colored scarf. He offered it to Dean. “Here. This is Charlie’s, but I don’t think she’ll notice I borrowed it for the moment. There’s a bakery down the street.”

The hunter’s face lit up as he accepted the scarf, quickly folding the soft fabric around his neck with another shiver. “Dude, that sounds awesome.” He leaned closer as Cas reached once more into his coat and held out a pair of leather gloves. “Do you have TARDIS pockets or what?”

Frowning, Cas tilted his head. “They’re bigger on the inside, as the saying goes,” Dean explained, pulling the gloves on.

Ducking his chin into the collar of his coat, Castiel smiled as they made their way down the sidewalk. “No. It’s less conspicuous to feign pulling them from my pockets than to retrieve them from open air. The gloves are Sam’s.”

Dean slid him a sidelong glance, brow arched. “Alright, but if he throws a fit, this was your doing.”

Castiel rolled his eyes. “I hardly think he’d rather his brother fall ill than to lend him his gloves.”

“He’d probably use it as another reason to stand over Dean preaching about being irresponsible and not using his head or bothering to think. For all of Dean’s efforts, he hadn’t meant to raise the kid
to be so arrogant about the very education and easy life Dean had sacrificed in order to ensure.

“Look, um, that’s part of why I wanted to talk to you,” he began, tongue running across his bottom lip. He rubbed anxiously at his fingers with his thumb in his pockets, gaze focused as he tried to find words amid the panic building in his chest.

Beside him, Castiel kept his chin lifted, blue eyes straight ahead. Dean knew he was bracing himself for whatever was about to come and he hated it, hated that he was part of the reason Cas only ever expected the worst.

“I’m glad you accepted the invitation to come out, and I’m glad you stayed and hung out with us.” He cast furtive glances at him, his lack of reaction and stoic response made Dean growl in frustration and whirl to stand in front of him. “I can’t have this conversation while walking and you looking like I’m handing you a death sentence.” He grabbed his shoulders and gave him a little shake. “I need you to hear me right now. Cas, you are my best friend, alright? I would die for you in a heartbeat. I’d go back to Hell for you. There is nothing on this Earth I would not do or give for your sake, okay?”

He held his hands up in a helpless gesture. “And I am not good at being a friend. I don’t know how. I’m learning, and when I have a friend who I think a lot of, all I want to do is share them with the other people I care about as well, so they can be friends, too. A-and, you know, it just makes it better when my friends are friends with each other, and you don’t have to like Max, you don’t, but I would like it if you and Sam would at least, for me… just give him a chance.” His shoulders sagged, green eyes studying the angel’s face. “I don’t want you worried I’m replacing you with him because I’m not. And if you asked me to choose?” He swallowed, a bitter laugh escaping him as he let his gaze dart away. “God, as much as that would hurt—” he met Cas’ eye again, and it ached to breathe, “I’d choose you, Cas. In a heartbeat. But, please don’t ask me to, and don’t think anyone could ever replace you.”

He watched patches of color spread on Cas' cheeks as he turned his face away, blinking back moisture brimming on his lashes. Dean wanted to reach out, wanted to curl his fingers in the lapels of Cas coat and draw him in. He wanted to fix the fractured pieces and go back in time to kick his own ass for not having seen what he was allowing to happen between them.

How was he supposed to do this? He wanted to say more, to talk until the words ran out on his tongue, but they couldn’t make it past the lump in his throat.

Biting his bottom lip, Castiel nodded, one hand reaching out to curl around Dean’s. He gave it a squeeze, unable to meet his eye, but tried to force a wobbling smile.

Dean squeezed back, reluctant to let go when their fingers fell apart. “So… what do you say we get some pie, hm?”
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Did I tell you I heard back from Rowena?” Cas questioned, tucking the paper bag holding the ice cream under his arm so he could retrieve his phone. “About the prank on Crowley?”

A bark of laughter escaped Dean, grin wide as they paused on their way through the bunker toward the kitchen.

“No. I totally forgot about it, actually.” His eyes shone with mischievous glee. “Did it work?”

A curl of impishness tugged at the corner of Castiel’s mouth as he flipped through the pictures on his phone then held it for the hunter to see. Dean leaned forward, a wild grin splitting his features before throwing his head back on a guffaw. On the screen, the King of Hell was red-faced and bent double over the side of his throne, vomiting black-red smoke as he flickered and flashed. The top of Rowena’s face was visible from where she’d taken the selfie, eyes crinkling at the corners with laughter.

“Damn, that looks painful. Did you go overboard?” he asked as they turned a corner.

Cas hummed and tucked the phone away, readjusting his grip on the bag he carried. “No. Rowena made a video. Once most of the vomiting and seizures passed, he admitted that he probably had it coming.” He bumped his shoulder against Dean’s and slid him a sidelong look. “I think he was actually a little proud.”

Warmth and contented joy practically seeping from his pores, Dean held up the pie sampler they’d gotten at the bakery. “Then we definitely earned this. Warm pie and vanilla ice cream to reward your devious revenge. Even with angelic taste buds, it’s gonna blow your mind, Cas.” He knocked their shoulders together. “I’ll let you drive the Impala if I’m wrong.”

Castiel’s brows shot up. “You are confident.”

“Aside from you and Sam, this is my favorite thing on the planet. And the Impala. And Charlie. It’s a complicated Top Five. You three, then the Impala and pie fighting it out to outrank each other. Then comes the nightmares where I’m forced to either save a freshly baked pie or my car- and I gotta tell you Cas, I wake up screaming from the stress of indecision.” He let his eyes play over Castiel’s features as the angel laughed, soft and unabashed. His fingers twitched with the need to reach out, to touch, to hold. When Cas tilted his head in a quizzical expression, soft pleasure loosened his tongue in the way of warm amber liquid, words spilling forth unbidden, “I’m glad you came out with us, Cas. I miss you when you’re not around.”

And honestly, he felt like he should be angry- at Max. All the soft, affectionate warmth he felt practically spilling out of him, or glowing like a neon sign over his head, it wasn’t an issue before. He hadn’t had to worry about getting caught staring- or well, getting caught quite so often, and especially not with what he was certain was a dopey, fond expression. Hell, he was practically wearing his feelings all over his sleeve and Max was totally to blame for that.

Damn him.

Or well, maybe not, seeing as how Castiel was smiling brilliantly at Dean, expression open and trusting and looking at him like he was actually worth something. Hell, maybe like Dean was
It wasn’t fair; not to mention, confusing as hell that Dean could put that look on anyone’s face, much less an angel’s.

What was Dean supposed to do with that? He was the reason Castiel was so utterly broken to begin with. Cas had truly believed he was expendable; just a throwaway soldier in Dean’s ongoing war.

How had Dean gotten so broken he only knew how to be self-sacrificing, but not how to openly love another person? To be a friend? How had all of Heaven and Hell known enough of his feelings to taunt him with them, yet the person they involved remained completely unaware?

He grinned again, a little forced, and reached out to ruffle Castiel’s already wind-tossed hair.

“C’mon, Cas. Gonna change your life.”

“Honestly, Dean, you might want to give me the keys now, just to save time.”

He lifted his brow, corner of his mouth curling into a surprised smirk. “Oh, is that right? Well, I guess I’m just gonna have to prove an angel wrong.” He checked his watch. “And here it’s not even lunchtime yet.”

Their footsteps staggered to a halt as they entered into the kitchen to find Sam sitting on the table, his too-long hair falling into his eyes as he sat looking like some giant, devastated puppy whose heart had been broken. Dean tensed, whole body going on high-alert and stepping forward without conscious thought.

“What happened?” he asked, voice sharp and cutting.

His gaze darted around, trying to see the problem, something he could fight, take a swing at, something he could fix. His eyes came back to Sam watching him through his wayward hair and looking far younger than Dean knew him to be.

“Sammy?”

Hazel eyes shifted awkwardly to Castiel, then down. “Cas, could you maybe… give us a minute?”

Okay, so not life-threatening, then.

Dean let some of the tension bleed from his shoulders, allowing Cas to take the pie box from him—before he crushed it beneath his fingers—setting both it and the ice cream on the stainless steel island centered in the kitchen.

“I think I’ll go see if Charlie would like pie and ice cream,” he offered, blue gaze flicking to meet Dean’s, before stepping past with the barest brush of knuckles to the back of Dean’s hand.

“Did something happen?” Dean asked once they were alone because something must have to put that look on his brother’s face, especially considering the last few days of fumy silence.

Sam rubbed his thumb over his palm, digging it into the faded scar there in a way that had once left Dean on edge and glaring at corners searching for faces he couldn’t see. Now, it was just a gesture of self-comfort, one of Sam’s tells that he was nervous or guilty or about to break some horrendous news to Dean. Possibly all three, but he doubted it.

“So, I, uh… wanted to apologize.” Dean’s brows rose and Sam powered on, finally lifting his head
to give him a beseeching look, and God, it was like looking at his five-year-old brother all over again, begging Dean not to tell their dad he’d done something he thought might get him into trouble. “You were right, and I-I was being a dick, okay? I just- I just wanted so much for things to be okay- for all of us- and then suddenly there was this other person you just seemed to implicitly trust, right as we were trying to separate ourselves and get past all the-” he gestured wildly with his hands, circles in the air to encompass the great cluster that was inevitably their lives, “*everything!* The angels, Cas falling, the Mark, you dying, Amara, then Lucifer, then one of us being willing to die to save the world *one* more time. I just… I wanted us to *stop*. I wanted us *safe* and *normal* and *here*. I wanted you and Cas fixed, and I just-” he lowered his gaze, rubbing his thumb back over his scar, “I was so focused on trying to fix things, and on this unknown person who could potentially ruin *everything*, I couldn’t see how I was causing damage. And I’m sorry.”

Dean folded his arms over his chest, looking stern as he studied his brother in the tense and awkward silence. “We are safe,” he said, for want of anything better, and unable to stay *quite so* angry when Sam was looking utterly miserable. He’d forgive his brother anything, given time. “And we’re here, Sammy. And me and Cas… we’re not broken. We don’t need to be fixed.”

Sam shot him a look from under dark eyelashes, then softened with a sigh. “You kinda are, but you seem to be working on it, at least,” he said, nodding to the pie and ice cream. “I think... how Cas said he missed getting to be friends with you… I think maybe you and I kinda forgot how to just be brothers and friends, too. Maybe we never really learned how.”

Dean’s brows shot almost to his hairline. “We know how to be brothers, Sam.”

Sam lifted his gaze, mouth twisted. “Outside of motels and living in the Impala and working cases?”

He stiffened, clenching his jaw. “We *know* how to be brothers, Sam.”

Flashes of memory flicked through his mind, still shots of a world where they had grown-up in a normal setting and weren’t close because of it. Hell, apparently didn’t even like each other.

Reality was a far cry more terrifying and horrible, but he’d take the way they’d turned out any day.

Sam hunched his shoulders up. “Maybe we could learn to be better at it? It’s why I’ve been fielding all cases to Garth and letting the hunter community know we’re… well, unavailable. For now,“ he amended, quickly, holding up a hand before Dean could protest. “If I’ve learned anything over the past few years, it’s that maybe we should have taken a step back sooner. Let’s just give it a while? Let Cas heal, let Charlie bask in being alive again, you and me not crammed in the Impala more hours out of the day than not. Say what you want Dean, you and I could use some practice at being brothers outside of working a case, and I think this with Max kinda proved it.”

Shifting his weight to his back foot, Dean cocked his head to one side. Sam didn't say it, but Dean could clearly read the ‘I’ve been a shit brother’ guilt look that was written all over his face. Dean kind of wanted to push, wanted to know what caused this complete and unexpected turnabout but didn't know of any way to do that without it leading to a very awkward conversation delving into their feelings and him feeling like he was living in a *Lifetime* movie- which he most certainly was not.

“I’m guessing you had something in mind?”

Sam brightened, straightening and daring a genuinely pleased smile, like Dean had told him they could celebrate Christmas early or something.
Oh God, he hadn’t even thought about Christmas. The sudden reminder of its swift approach made him fidget and shift uncomfortably. Surely they would all vote on having a real Christmas this year, but hell if Dean had a clue what a normal Christmas even looked like. What with a tree and decorations and gifts and some commercial worthy dinner that didn’t come from Denny’s.

Sam was still talking, forcing Dean to set aside his panic for later in the privacy of his own room. He could ask Ellen about that, too, but really, he’d probably look like a complete idiot for not knowing.

You could Google those kinds of things, right?

“—movie of Charlie’s she got and was super excited about,” Sam explained, and he noted the Blu-ray case his brother was nervously passing between his hands and generally fumbling with. “It, apparently, ties into a new videogame there’s been a lot of hype about, but she was going on about the graphics and fight scenes and weapons, then she showed me the trailer, and I was like, ‘okay, Dean would totally like this’ so then I was thinking, y’know, i-if we’re cool, after the pie and ice cream, I dunno, we could swing for pizza and Chinese take-out, and like all of us just have this big movie night and watch it? Maybe a movie marathon or something?”

Eyes narrowed to green slits, Dean raised a brow. “And you’ll stop making demands about me being friends with Max?”

“Yes.”

His brow ticked higher. “And you’ll give him a chance yourself?”

Swallowing, Sam gave a somewhat stilted and forced nod, holding up his hands. “I will give him a change- I am not promising to like him. I don’t know him, or how you’ve supposedly had a friend for years you never felt the need to mention.” He shrugged. “But I don’t want you to feel you need to sneak around to see him. It’s too much like me and Ruby.”

A flare of old bitterness and anger had Dean pointing, a snarl marring his features. “You were sneaking around with Ruby because you knew you were wrong, Sam, and you know it! And for the last time: Max and I are just friends—”

His brother flinched and recoiled, hands up. “Bad example! I just meant… you shouldn’t feel guilty and the need to hide. I shouldn’t make you or your friends feel they have to avoid the rest of us or that they aren’t welcome here when you clearly trust them. I should trust your judgement, and I didn’t. I’m sorry.” He looked at him, expression open and vulnerable and so very much like a kicked-puppy that Dean could feel his resolve crumbling. “Are we good?”

Glaring only a moment longer, Dean pursed his lips and uncrossed his arms, stepping forward to snatch the movie from Sam’s fidgety grasp with one hand and tousling his ridiculous mop of hair with the other.

“Yeah, Sam. We’re good.” He jerked his chin toward the island. “Now, you gonna eat pie with us or do you—”

His words got cut off as he suddenly had an armful of his giant baby brother wrapped around him in a fierce hug like one of them had died and come back- again. He was tall and broad and entirely too huge, yet all Sam, clinging to his big brother the same way he had his whole life, like Dean could fix the whole world, like Sam was still a little kid following his older brother around.

Dean curled his arms around him and hugged back, chin resting on the soft flannel of his shirt, the
scent of his shampoo and cologne and Sam driving the last of the pent up anger from his body.

They separated, clapping each other on the back while nodding and not meeting each other’s eyes in a way that made a laugh bubble from Dean’s throat from joy and relief.

They were okay.

He grinned, bright and fierce, and thought his cheeks should hurt from the force of it. “Now about that pie.” He glanced over his shoulder to see Cas and Charlie failing to subtly check on them from just beyond the door. “You guys ready for a food and movie marathon?”

Charlie stepped forward, shifting into a pose and punching the air. “Eat all the calories!”

His met Cas’ gaze over her head, the angel’s eyes shining with warmth and affection Dean wasn’t sure he was worthy of but was damned determined to earn.

“Of course, Dean.”

Pizza boxes were stacked in a haphazard pile in the center of the coffee table, Chinese take-out cartons scattered across the wooden surface in the artificial glow of the TV screen. Sam had been the first to slink off to bed, sleepy and lethargic after an evening spent sinking deeper into the worn, comfortable furniture of the rec room watching movies.

Dean had followed after when they finished The Hobbit, glancing once at Charlie to check if she was okay, before nodding to himself, contented the film hadn’t made her sad. He’d slapped Cas’ knee and headed off to his own room to crash for the night.

Charlie had only looked questioningly at Castiel before putting in another movie and tucking herself against his side with a blanket, head resting on his shoulder. He turned, resting his chin on her head and bending his arm to rub her hair and scalp with his fingertips.

“Are you avoiding sleeping again?” he asked softly.

Her answer wasn’t immediate and came accompanied by a small shrug. “Maybe a little.”

“Nightmares?” She said nothing as he continued to pet her hair. “What are they about?”

On the television, the main menu came up and she selected ‘play’ from beneath her blanket, not watching the screen her eyes remained fixed to.

“Lots of things. Dying in that bathtub. Blood. Choking. Being scared.” She drew in a shuddering breath and he shifted to rest his cheek on her hair, hand dropping to curl around her shoulders. “I dream about the war in Oz, of Dorothy, and my other self. About Dean being a demon again. About me being one. About all of you dying and I get there too late to help. ...Sitting next to my mom as they take her off the machines.”

Cas stayed quiet, stroking her arm with his thumb. He wasn’t sure how to help. He could make it so she was able to sleep without nightmares, of course, but it wouldn’t fix the cause of them, wouldn’t undo the trauma and pain she’d endured. It would be a Band-Aid on a more serious issue. He couldn’t fix it, couldn’t fix her, and it made his stomach twist at the feeling of uselessness it left him with, made him hug her a little tighter.
“I understand talking to someone could help,” he offered, and really, it was too much that he was reduced to human forms of healing when he was very much still an angel. Why couldn’t he ever help when it mattered? Help in the ways his friends needed it most? He could heal the superficial scars, but not the ones beneath the surface, the wounds that continued to ache and bleed and fester. “If not me, maybe Sam or Dean.”

She shook her head. “They have enough on their plates. They carry enough of their own crap, stuff way worse than mine, you know? They’re fine.”

“They aren’t fine. They repress. They forget what they can, alter their own memories of things, often giving them a skewed view of their own lives. Have you not noticed how their recollection of events from their childhoods either doesn’t match or completely contradicts the Winchester gospels? Or even each other’s version?”

She shrugged. “I mean, I just thought, y’know, he changed things because it was easier or helped tell the story?”

He leaned back to peer down at her. “God took it upon himself to handwrite their story, Charlie. The Winchesters remember things as they need to, but the books tell the true story, leaving out very little.” Shaking his head, he settled back in beside her. “And they’ve coped the best they knew how, Dean with drinking and promiscuity, Sam with trying to fix the world and keeping himself as healthy as possible. As they’ve healed, their lifestyles have improved as well. Dean settled. Sam became less obsessive over trying to keep his body ‘pure’ and ‘healthy’. They still fall back on old habits, resort to old comforts when things go wrong, but it doesn’t make it healthy and doesn’t mean they’ve healed. They desperately could use help with all they’ve been through.”

“Professional help.” She sighed heavily. “Too bad there isn’t a thing for that. I think all hunters could probably use it. Survivors even more so.”

Sucking in his bottom lip, Castiel worried it between his teeth, mind tumbling to find a solution. She had a point, with as many years as hunters had been fighting monsters and saving people, surely there were people in the know for this very situation, people to help survivors if not the hunters themselves. Perhaps there were professionals who’d encountered the supernatural and then offered their services.

“We could ask Jody,” he suggested, speaking before he’d considered. With the words out, he found himself nodding, trains of thought clicking like magnets into place. “She would have connections, both in the police and in the hunter community, and she stays far more connected with others than Sam and Dean do.” He angled his head to find Charlie watching him. “Living with two traumatized teenagers, I would think she must know someone. Have found someone. It can’t hurt to ask.”

She was looking at him funny, lips pressed together and brows furrowed as her eyes played over his face. He held her gaze, canting his head to one side in unspoken question.

“I’m not weaker than Sam or Dean,” she said. “Having trouble sleeping, not wanting to be alone after nightmares. It doesn’t make me weak. And it’s not because I’m a girl.”

He rapidly shook his head. “Ch- no. I wasn’t, I would never say or think that. The way Sam and Dean have learned to cope isn’t healthy. I wasn’t suggesting-” He shifted, taking her hands in his as he faced her. “I cannot fix the wounds you have. I can’t fix them for the Winchesters. I can’t fix them for me. There’s nothing weak about going to someone who can give you the medical treatment you need. If you want to continue coming to me or Dean at night when you don’t want to sleep or you wake up scared, our doors are always open, but comfort and reassures pale in comparison to actual medical aide.”
She eyed him a moment longer, before settling back, her head pillowed in the plush cushion of the couch.

“If there is someone… you could talk to them, too, you know.”

He dropped his gaze. “It’s… it’s not quite the same for me, Charlie. I’m an angel. There are…” he waved his hand in front of his own face, “filters. Dampeners. They tamp down on things that I never learned the name of while I was human. I rarely sleep or have nightmares. Things are easier-and harder. I don’t feel emotions like I did when I was human.” He shrugged. “And I think what we’re doing is helping. The writing competition. Learning to be friends with Dean outside of missions and saving the world. You and Sam. The walks. The garden.”

“Talking to someone could still help. You’ve been through a lot, Cas, and no one can really understand, not fully, but you might be surprised how much they can. Rejection. Loneliness. Love. Heartbreak. Abusive family. Feeling lost?” He met her gaze and she quirked the side of her mouth into something akin to sympathy and commiseration. “Those are very human things to experience.” He stared at his lap, squeezing the tips of his fingers in his other hand. She shifted her leg to nudge him with her knee and make him look at her. “Tell you what: if Jody has someone who can talk to people who’ve seen the things we’ve seen… I’ll go if you’ll go. Deal?” she asked, holding up a fist.

He stared at it a long moment, gut twisting with sudden anxiety of doing what she was suggesting, realizing how much like a Winchester he’d become. He didn’t want to talk about his own wounds, his hurts and heartbreak, the chasm of loneliness that had all but consumed him, the overwhelming sense of loss and failure like a gulf swallowing him whole.

With his grace, he could shove it down easier, tuck it away, pretend. That was the way angels were built. Emotions got in the way, compromised the mission, made you question orders and risk insubordination.

If he were to become human again… he couldn’t imagine the devastation suddenly being without those dampeners would cause him. If his brethren thought he was dying before, surely his heart and soul would cry out so loud all of Heaven would know their brother’s suffering. It would be crippling; and he knew he wouldn’t be able to survive it. He was barely maintaining now, keeping his head above water in vain pretense, but if he were suddenly mortal once again…

No amount of Dean’s warm smiles and timid touches of reassurance could magically fix the plethora of damage done to Castiel.

Swallowing, Castiel lifted his fist, bumping his knuckles to hers. “Deal.”

Mirror set up on its stand, Sam set up the laptop showing Jody, Alex, and Claire at their dining room table, pens and notepads in front of each of them as all those gathered settled into their chairs. Beside him, Cas and Charlie were in their usual positions.

Sam clapped and rubbed his hands together, grinning. “Okay, after a few bumpy weeks of things being off schedule: Dean is back at the karaoke bar for the evening and thinking we have no idea.”

Jody snatched up her pen. “Claire, we are buying a karaoke machine for Christmas.”

“Why are you telling me?”
The sheriff met her eye across the table, brow arching. “Because if anybody can goad Dean into publically doing something he’d normally be embarrassed by, it’s you. I’ve never seen two people who like to compete with each other like you do.”

Rolling her eyes on a snort, Claire jotted down a note on her pad and said nothing.

“So are we back on a somewhat regular schedule again?” Jo questioned, chin in hand as she lifted her brows expectantly.

Sam gave a sharp nod of his head. “Yes. Dean and I are on better terms now once I realized I was the problem more than Max was and apologized. I think he and Max are out together, actually.”

“And you’re sure they aren’t together and karaoke’s a lie?” asked Pamela. He glanced at her and she continued, “Instead, they're hunkered down in some cheap motel, screwing each other’s brains out in secret--” he gave a full body flinch, throwing up his hands as though it would stop the graphic image from searing itself into his mind, “because he’s worried about the reaction to reveal badass, hyper masculine, ladies’ man Dean Winchester also likes guys? Y’know, afraid it will make people think less of him or treat him how they would normally treat a woman: with condescension and like he’s somehow less capable just for being who and what he is?”

Mouth open to argue, Sam slowly shut it and shook his head. “No, I don’t think Dean and Max are together. Dean’s been pretty emphatic about that in a way that’s sincere rather than trying to hide something.” Guiltily, he dropped his gaze. “I’m actually not sure about the other. He probably is. Afraid of that, I mean. It’s an assumption he’s taken issue with his whole life, and I never really paid attention to the snide comments about him being ‘pretty’-or how often they were made- never really thought anything about the people who thought we were together rather than brothers. It always upset Dean, though. I never cared enough to really question why, brushed it off as him being… Dean, I guess.” He shook his head and met the gazes of the people gathered together. “I don’t know how to fix that.”

Charlie shook her head and raised a hand. “As the only gay and out person at this table- Cas aside, because: angel- there is no fixing that in someone else.” He turned his head sharply, browsing knitting together. “You can’t fix Dean’s insecurities. Can’t fix the way the world is going to look at him, can’t stop the scorn on people’s faces if they see him holding hands with Castiel on a date. You can’t shield Dean from the things people are going to say, looks they’re going to give, the looks on kids’ faces he’s going to get, both the curious and repulsed.” She shrugged a little helplessly. “You can support Dean. You can stop using gendered insults. The rest is something Dean is gonna have to work through on his own, any internalized homophobia he has, John’s ghost, all of it. There’s a lot of shame and self-hatred that comes with being viewed as an abomination, as broken and lesser, worse still, when directed at you for loving someone and daring to be happy with them.” She tapped a lacquered nail against her tablet. “What we can do is support him in whatever and just treat him like Dean- plus help him and his true love finally work through their combined issues in order to find their way to each other.”

On his other side, Castiel frowned, lips pursed as he angled his head. “I feel I should be insulted by that.”

She gestured to the portal. “Cas, it’s taking a Think Tank to get you two together. I’d say you need an outright miracle, but Sam seems to think those also imply dub-con same as a potion would.” She raised her hands. “The facts are what they are.”

Sarah slapped her hand on the table, drawing all eyes to where she was nestled between Pamela and Kevin. “Speaking of Think Tanks! You are celebrating Christmas, right? Because the scenarios waiting to happen around the holiday season are asking to be written.” She waved a small stack of
papers in her hand. “Heck, I’ve already begun writing stories for them. Mistletoe, gift exchanges, gift shopping.”

“-eggnog and drunk kisses,” Andy interjected, and she shoved a hand at him, emphasizing the point.

“I mean, Sam, we are coming up on prime, golden opportunities here. We need to plan for them. You have to celebrate Christmas.”

“Shouldn’t we… focus on getting through Thanksgiving first?” he asked, pointing to his laptop and glancing around in question. “I mean, not that we’ve celebrated that either, but--”

Jody nodded and began scribbling away on her notepad again. “Duly noted. We’ll bring Donna and some casseroles if you guys will worry about the turkey, stuffing, and vegetables.”

Grinning, Charlie began rapidly flicking through her tablet, before pulling up a screen and shoving it under Sam’s nose so he went cross-eyed trying to see it. “That ties in with Rowena’s idea, see? She’s got Dean and Cas baking apple pie. Baking leads to flirting with ingredients and staring at each other from far too close, which then leads to tentative first kisses that taste like cinnamon and apples.” She squeed, pulling back the device and rapidly typing away. “I’m so adding pie making to the list of things they need to do together.”

“What have you got, Sarah?” asked Ellen, gesturing to the papers the younger woman held.


Across the table, Andy waved his as Ellen drew the stories across the wood surface. “I actually wrote a Thanksgiving-themed one where Cas and Dean basically eat themselves into a turkey coma and watch a movie before falling asleep on the couch.”

Jo gleefully snatched it from his fingers, eyes darting over the front page as she slid hers over to Kevin. “Mine is a fun Every Man For Himself snowball fight that leads to all of you catching colds and wandering through the bunker wrapped in quilts being all sniffly.”

Castiel shook his head. “Jo, I can’t catch a cold. And Andrew, you forget my aversion to most food as an angel.”

Jo waved. "Then they could all catch colds and be stuffy and miserable while you laugh and bring them soup, Cas."

“And you liked pie,” Charlie reminded him, glancing only briefly as she reached for the stories being passed through the portal.

He winced and slid his gaze away in a guilty assertion. “Only the apple and peach.” She gasped, thin fingers covering her lips, and he gave her a guilty pleading look. “I didn’t have the heart to tell him.”

“Dude, he bet his car.”

Jo looked up sharply. “Wait, hold up now, Dean Winchester did what?”

“Only that he would let me drive it once,” Castiel corrected. “Pie is his favorite thing. I didn’t have
the heart to tell him I didn’t like it with the same fervor he did.”

Brows raised, Pamela let out a low whistle. “Cas, honey, you may not have noticed? But making a bet that would let you drive his car? That was Grade-A flirting Dean Winchester style.” Mouth twisted, she gestured randomly. “Is there no way to turn off the Grace-to-mouth filter, because that is hella inconvenient. What if it messes with the experience of kissing him?”

“I-I don’t think it would—”

“You don’t like pie, Cas,” Kevin stated with an expression as flat as his tone. “Or PB&J or Chinese food or pizza for crying out loud.” His features twisted. “The filter’s causing us problems, man, no two ways about it. You’re experiencing things with Dean, but you aren’t really getting to experience them, especially not the food-related ones. You got Parisian chocolates and didn’t even like them!”

Sarah gasped liked he’d said something audacious and bawdy, making Castiel drop his gaze. “I know.” He gave a small shake of his head. “The only way to remove it… would be to remove my own Grace and become mortal.”

Shifting in discomfort, Sam cough lightly into his fist, hazel eyes meeting Castiel’s in puzzlement. “But, I mean… weren’t you planning on doing that anyway?” He glanced at the others for help before continuing awkwardly, “I mean, after all this… you said you wanted—”

“I do,” Cas interrupted, then flushed and clarified, “want to be with Dean, that is. I hadn’t thought as far as whether I would do that as a man or an angel if this works. If it doesn’t…”

“Grace dampeners for emotion,” Charlie surmised.

Feeling exposed, Cas kept his head bowed and shrugged. “And even still… as an angel: I’m useful. I can move around the globe quickly, come if you need me, heal any—”

“Cas, we’re not worried about that,” Sam interjected. “We don’t care about you trying to be useful, we just want you here. Everyone at this table is human and not a single one of them, regardless of supernatural experience or powers, is or was useless.”

“I worry about that, though,” he admitted, lifting his gaze to meet Sam’s eye. “I worry about that as much as I worry about the guilt it would put on Dean were I to give up my Grace in order to be with him. I may not regret it, but Dean would think I ought to, that he’d cut off my wings himself. That he’d condemned me.” He dropped his gaze. “I use my Grace as a crutch now, Sam, so I’ve tried not to think about the risks of cutting it out or letting it remain.”

Silence, heavy and uncomfortable pressed down on them until Ellen clapped her hands together, drawing a few eyes to where she sat. “Well, it’s not like you have to decide right now.” His shoulders sagged with relief and he offered her a small smile she returned with a nod, before continuing, pushing her own story forward. “What we do need to worry about is scenarios this week, and teaching you Winchesters how to have a proper Thanksgiving.” She pointed to Sam. “You’re gonna need to make cornbread stuffing with options for cranberry sauce or gravy.”

Nodding rapidly, Sam diligently jotted down the note, thankful for the easy topic shift.

Kevin scowled and pointed at him. “Season your turkey. Don’t just stick it naked in the oven like every White People stereotype the internet’s ever laughed about.” He passed off his story to Sarah,
and added, “There are rubs you can do or flavor injectors. *Cake* it on. Rubbing it and frying it is my favorite, but if you don’t have a fryer, you might can buy a fried turkey.”

“Russian tea,” Sarah added. “Which isn’t actually Russian and is really very Southern, but it’s a really *great* instant cider.”

“Green bean casserole.” Pamela waved, dismissive. “Everything comes in a can, toss it in some cookware, stir, cover it in the crispy onions, then bake it long enough to heat it up. *Bam.* You’re done.”

Sam nodded, scribbling furiously as they spoke and offered suggestions, the sense like this was somehow crucially important looming over him.

This *was* important. This was what families did. Normal, happy, healthy families, so it was something they needed to learn to do. He’d meant what he’d said to Dean. For all that they had been through with each other over the years, there was a lot they still needed to learn, utmost was how to be a somewhat normal family, despite all the adopted members. He and Dean needed to learn to be friends and brothers just like Cas and Dean were learning, outside of the hunting and do-or-die. When there weren’t cases or miles of highways stretched out before them beneath the Impala’s tires.

Seemed like that might take a group effort as well.

Gnawing on the end of his pen, he looked up. “Okay. What else?”

Chapter End Notes

The movie the initially watch is call *Kingsglaive*. I don’t know how it is for non-Final Fantasy fans, but my husband and I were practically screaming and fangirling at each other through most of it.
When Dean stepped out into the fall air that bit at his cheeks and the tips of his ears, the sun was just coming up over the horizon.

This was a terrible idea.

Mornings were a terrible idea.

Getting up with the sun was an even worse idea.

If Dean didn’t love Sam so much, he certainly wouldn’t be out here to go on a run at such an unholy hour.

Heaving a sigh and pivoting, Dean faltered at the figure standing near the garden and moved to join him, hiking up the short, but steep incline to the top of the hill and studying Castiel as the angel stared blankly at the freshly tended earth, face marred by a frown and unfocused gaze.

“Cas?” Dean called cautiously, moving into his line of sight while maintaining a safe distance.

The other man blinked, head straightening and eyes swiveling to find Dean before they skittered away. It was sort of gratifying in a vain, selfish way to see the way Castiel’s entire demeanor softened at his presence, the tension leaking out of him as his guard immediately lowered.

“Dean. Good morning.”

“No. All the things that could be planted in the fall have. Now we must wait for spring to plant the rest. Plus, there’s a rapid decline in temperature this month as winter draws near.” The forlorn look crept back over his features as he slipped in hands into the pockets of his denim jacket. Dean noticed it was the sturdy, warm kind with a wool lining and collar. Though angels didn’t get cold or sick, it was comforting to see on him. “I laid down mulch, but... there’s nothing else to do.”

Dean glanced around. “Then what are you doing out here?”

He watched the various shifts to Cas’ expression, little micro things that made Dean’s mouth melt into a frown when Castiel’s face became a mask of neutrality.
He looked directly at Dean for the first time. “Charlie and I… have plans. We were going to go get coffee and breakfast first. I came out here to… think, I guess.”

“About?”

Tearing his eyes away, Cas lifted a hand to gesture toward his temple. “There’s a lot of stuff in there.”

Stomach twisting, Dean shoved his hands into his pockets and dropped his gaze down to his sneakers. “Yeah, I get that.”

“What are you doing out here?”

“Hm? Oh.” He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “Sam wants to work on being brothers outside of hunting, doing more stuff together, so he asked me to start running and working out with him.” He sucked on his teeth with a wince. “If he’s really serious about this, I’m gonna need ear covers or something. I don’t see how he plans to run once it really gets cold.” With a frown, he nudged Cas’ elbow. “Whatever happened to the two of you working out together?”

Cas shook his head. “It doesn’t… it’s just repetitive motion, for me. It doesn’t have the same effect or benefits. The yoga and meditation are nice. They let me think- or not think. But running- maybe if I were human.” He turned to Dean. “But I’m glad he convinced you to join him. Sam enjoys the exercise a great deal, and he’s been wanting a running partner. I felt guilty I couldn’t.”

Something hung in the air between them, something sad and vast and heavy, draped around Castiel like the empty fields stretching around them. Dean let his eyes play over the contours of Castiel’s face as the angel turned away and wondered how he could feel leagues away while right by Dean’s side, as if some ocean had sprung up between them he could never cross.

“Hey,” he said softly, and he had to stop himself from reaching out, from plucking at his sleeve and moving into Castiel’s personal space like it was made just for him. Blue eyes slid back to him, a brow quirking in question. Dean licked his bottom lip. “You sure you’re okay?” he questioned, then glanced over his shoulder as the door to the bunker opened and closed.

Sam stepped into view below them, clad in sweatpants and a high-collar pullover, his hair pulled back in a ponytail. Meeting his eye, Dean held up a finger before returning his attention to Cas, studying him.

“I’m fine.”

Accepting that with a nod, Dean hesitated, stomach turning. He stepped out on a limb and offered, “I know I’ve never said this, and well, certainly never led by example here, but it’s okay if you’re not, y’know.” Castiel’s brows knit together, blue eyes sharpening with focus as they settled on Dean again, making him drop his gaze. “I-I mean. It’s okay if you’re not… okay.”

And, wow. Yeah. That came out very smooth and eloquent. A+ job, Winchester. Didn’t fumble that ball.

His flush of embarrassment was obvious, he knew. It took every ounce of willpower he had not to squirm under the angel’s gaze, and really, couldn’t Cas give him an easy out? React in some way rather than just… scrutinizing him like he was?

When Cas finally did speak, there wasn’t an ounce of amusement or laughter in his voice like Dean thought there might be. It dropped to that soft, insistent tone Castiel used when he meant something and wanted Dean to know it.
“...Thank you.” Dean bobbed his head, words run out, but feet planted where they were, unwilling to leave. Blue eyes slid past him to Sam. “You probably shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

“You’ll be home later, though? After your thing with Charlie?”

“That remains to be seen. Who knows what the day holds.”

Dean nodded, backing away and hooking his thumb over his shoulder. “Okay. I’ll just… yeah.”

Cas offered him the briefest nod before Dean turned and made his way back down the incline to where Sam was stretching his ungainly limbs.

“Everything okay?” he questioned with a pointed glance to where Cas had returned to being still as stone with a remote expression.

Worrying his lip between his teeth, Dean peered at his brother. “You ever get the feeling you accidentally found yourself in something big? Like something really important? Then, like whatever it was… you dropped it?”

Sam jerked his chin and they began walking, Dean falling into step beside him. “Did something happen?”

“Just Cas being unfathomable,” Dean dismissed with a wave. “Sometimes I still get caught off guard how in over my head I am when it comes to relating, or even understanding him, I guess. I remember he’s this vast, cosmic thing, y’know? Alive since before the world began, and here I am, the human trying to be friends with a monsoon. Facing down a hurricane and feeling woefully inadequate for whatever the hell I’m supposed to do.”

Brows furrowed, Sam said, “Keep trying? I don’t know. I think that’s the best we can do sometimes.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “He’ll come around.” Squeezing, he let his hand fall away and grinned. “Now. You ready to do this?”

“Already regretting it like so many of my bad life choices. Try to keep up, Sammy,” he stated, picking up his pace to a slow jog.

“How would we get it back to the bunker, though?” questioned Charlie at Dean’s side.

Standing in mirroring posture with their arms folded and feet shoulder width apart, they contemplated the treadmill on display as people milled around them in the Sam’s Club warehouse.

He jerked his chin. “With Cas having traded in his Continental for a truck, we could load them up in that.”

“Them?” she squawked, head turning sharply. “We’re getting more than one?”

“Well, yeah. Sam’s pretty set on this whole working out routine, and well- winter’s coming, as the saying goes.” He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “All the equipment in the bunker is from the fifties and hasn’t been maintained. While the weights are fine, the other equipment is due for replacement. Sam was talking about lining one of the walls with mirrors like a real gym. I’ve seen you poking at the archaic treadmills we have--”
“Death traps of undue suffering.”

“This will let you work out in the warmth of the bunker rather than the soon to be tundra of Kansas winters.” He side-eyed her. “Unless you and Cas joined a gym during those outings you’ve started taking?”

She pivoted, clasping her hands behind her back. “No gyms!”

“Started a band?”

“I play the drums. Cas plays the harp.”

“Crime ring?”

She arched a brow. “You’re in the same boat of illegal activities, buster. We should start a mob. I’ll be the boss.”

He continued to frown, eyes playing over her too bright smile and innocent blinking eyes. “You’re okay, though, right? Nothing seriously wrong? You’d tell me if something was wrong, wouldn’t you? With either you or Cas?”

She nodded. “I would. We’re okay.”

Licking his bottom lip, Dean glanced around before regarding her again. “But something is wrong,” he insisted, “and I can tell. Cas is going on long walks or just staring off. You retreat to the rec room or hole up in your room, and Charlie, you don’t have to tell me what it is or where you go; I’m not trying to make you, but you both seem…” words failed him and he growled in frustration, wanting so hard to articulate what had been eating at him for weeks, “like ghosts. And I don’t know how to fix it, and--”

She touched his arm, the corner of her mouth lifting in a crooked smile. “You could try giving us a hug?” she offered. “Or let us know you’re there? Even without saying anything, maybe? Just be a hand to hold?” She shook her head. “Not every problem can be fixed with bullets or a solid right-hook.”

He studied her features, her eyes, the furrow of her brow, before turning his head away and snorting in disgust. “My life would be easier if they could.”

Her elbow, sharp and pointy, jabbed at his ribs. “Emotional vulnerability and availability won’t kill you, Dean,” she huffed, but there was a smile in her voice, making him pull her into a one-armed hug, dropping a kiss to the top of her head, before releasing her just as quick. God, he loved that kid.

He cleared his throat and regarded the treadmill. “Should we get three? I mean, your exercise regime since Oz has been a little lax-”

She punched his arm. “Jerk!”

“Brat.”

“Children, don’t make me separate you,” a voice cut in.

Sam was leaning with his forearms resting on the handle of the shopping cart, smirking. Castiel stood beside him, head tilted quizzically.
Charlie and Dean pointed at the other. “It wasn’t me!”

Sam dropped his head with a sigh, looking for all the world like an exasperated mother praying for divine intervention. Dean eyed the bulk stock items in the cart, ranging from salt to toilet paper.

He pointed to a couple of black bottles with blue lids. “What is that?”

Sam looked down. “It’s for laundry.”

“Then, what is that?” he challenged, nodding to the industrial-sized container of laundry powder.

“That gets them clean, Dean. This makes them smell nice.”

Dean pulled a face, affronted. “Who cares so long as they’re clean?”

“We do,” they said in unison.

His brows rose, gaze sliding over the three of them, before waving them off with exasperation. “Fine. Spend extra money on frivolous,” he gestured to the bottles, “whatever that is.”

“Dean thinks we should get two of these treadmills,” Charlie cut in, making the hunters regard the machines with curious pique.

"Three," he corrected.

“We could come back with Cas’ truck one day and start turning the weight room into a proper gym. I think they sell punching bags, too, if we’re ever planning to replace the thing that looks like a corpse hanging from the ceiling.”

“It used to be a punching bag,” Sam conceded with a frown of distaste. “That room is a graveyard of outdated equipment.”

“I’m pretty sure the room is haunted,” said Charlie with a shudder. “So very creepy.”

Dean waved. “No. No, we are not discussing anything ghost-related. It’s almost Thanksgiving. We are supposed to focus on food. Were you able to find everything?” His eyes flicked over large cans and containers. “Where’s the turkey?”

Sam smirked at him. “We are leaving the honor of deciding this year’s turkey to you.”

Face splitting in a grin, Dean’s eyes lit up. “Then let’s go!” He rubbed his hands together gleefully. “I’m gonna get the biggest turkey they have!”

His grin was a little forced and too bright, met with a small knowing nod from Sam, while Charlie’s enthusiasm was halfhearted at best. Castiel’s gaze had already drifted off to the side, distant. Where did his thoughts keep going? How was Dean ever expected to follow?

His eyes dropped to the soft bundle Castiel held lightly to his chest. Dean wasn’t surprised. Ever since the girls had taken Cas shopping, the angel had taken to clothing. He liked to try different styles and fabrics, seemed to gravitate toward soft sweaters and sturdy jackets. Dean had stood out of sight by the door to Cas’ room while he and Charlie argued about his outfit for the day and the shirt she’d picked out.

It had been a vintage shirt the color of forest ferns and evergreens, well-worn like a favorite memory, and Castiel had disliked it as soon as he’d put it on.
“It’s too thin, Charlie. No, give me a different one. I feel exposed.”

“Cas, no, it’s fine. You can’t see through it. It looks good on you.”

“No, it’s...” A pause. “Like my back is exposed. Vulnerable.”

Dean’s face had crumpled into a confused frown because Cas was an angel. The clothes didn’t protect him. Hitting the guy had been like punching a wall and had broken more than a few bones in Dean’s hand. That had been with Castiel trying to lessen the damage by turning his head with the punch rather than remain immovable. Castiel was a rock. Hell, a mountain.

“Yes,” Charlie agreed, voice soft and quiet like she understood. Dean didn’t see how. “Try on this instead then.”

Dean had paid more attention since then to the clothes he tended to wear. Hell, if it could erase the dark shadows and the faraway look in his eyes, Dean would buy him every sweater he could lay his hands on, bury him in a mountain of soft fabrics.

“What’s got there, Cas?”

A slow blink as blue eyes drifted back to him as if having forgotten they were even there. He looked down at the grey heather clothing he held, and Dean wondered if Cas was asking himself the same question.

He held out a hand. “Here, lemme see.”

When the angel offered out the garment, their hands brushed, the pads of Dean’s fingers skimming across his knuckles and the backs of his fingers. Dean kept his gaze focused on the item like it were something of real import. To Cas, maybe it was. His fingers sunk easily into the bundle, making him whistle as he held it up by the shoulders to examine.

“That... is just damn cozy,” he said, and he could feel without looking the pointed look Sam was giving him that he’d said the wrong thing. The sweater was nice, with a loose high collar, and Dean got why Cas liked it. He carefully folded it and handed it back with a smile. “Makes me want cocoa by a fire or something. Thing looks comfortable as hell; perfect for the upcoming weather.”

A smile, or something almost like one, tugged at the corners of Cas’ mouth. “I thought so.”

Dean’s mind scrambled and he looked to Sam for help, but either his brother had gotten distracted by an endcap display or he was trying to offer them some privacy for their very stilted and awkward exchange. Charlie had already wandered away and was idling through a cookbook.

Clapping his hands together, Dean said, “So! Who’s ready to pick out a turkey?”

Of all the rooms in the bunker, were Cas forced to choose, he’d have to say the rec room was probably his favorite. He had a great deal of affection for Dean’s room, if only because it was Dean’s, and everything in it was a reminder of the hunter, making it both warm and comforting. As if the very essence of the hunter’s presence had seeped into its walls.

Castiel had a designated room of his own, of course, but given he didn’t require sleep, it acted more of a reminder of all the various ways he was the odd fixture in their lives, the one who didn’t
quite fit in. There was very little of him to the room -save for the closet- making it almost indistinguishable from the many unoccupied rooms lining either side of the corridor. It was spartan and cold.

The rec room, though, he liked. It was an open space any of them could be found lounging in at any given time, or quite often, together. There was something welcoming about it, be it the worn red couch and matching arm chair, or the collection of movies and books forgotten and scattered on the coffee table rather than returned to their proper shelf on the wall. Maybe it was just the memories fluttering like ghosts on the peripheral of his vision.

It, perhaps more than any other room in the whole bunker, felt like home, as though he were welcomed there. Fit. Not that there was anywhere else to belong to. It was nice to tell himself there was a least one place, however small and insignificant.

Sitting in the center of the couch with one leg folded in front of him and his other knee drawn up so he could rest his chin on it, Castiel frowned at the dark thought.

He did not like going to their therapy sessions. They made him morose. Made him think about, talk about, things he purposely avoided his every other waking hour- which took some determination for an insomnolent being.

Dr. Grey was right to ask the things she did, though. Made Castiel realize how many answers he didn’t have. Just how many subjects he avoided confronting. What did it mean to belong? To be part of a family? To want, to feel, to love?

Even as he’d risen through the ranks of Heaven, been looked to, admired, entrusted… it had never been the same as ‘belonging’, no more than a hammer belonged with the other tools in a bag. A hammer was easily replaced with no feeling or sentiment involved. One tool to replace the one lost or broken like the changing of a light bulb.

That wasn’t belonging. When something belonged, its absence was recognized and presence missed. People sought to find the thing in order to return it to its proper place.

Belonging went beyond use- which led to questions about purpose. Castiel had no idea what his purpose was. His purpose as a soldier, as Heaven’s soldier, was over. And as long as Dean and the others wanted to remain out of active-duty, Castiel would as well. Their fight was his fight.

It wasn’t the same as having a purpose, though, and that’s what nagged him. Which led to the question of what things Castiel wanted, for himself, now or in the future.

He’d bit his tongue to hold back his answers, if only because they were such selfish, vain, petty things he more often than not thought he should be ashamed of. They wouldn’t have helped or mattered and didn’t offer any clear direction to the storm of fog and fury twisting inside him. He told her easy answers, the obvious ones, only to have her pose new questions he didn’t have answers for.

To be free of Heaven. Do you still long for the acceptance of Heaven, though? Of the family you were born into?

To be of use to the family he’d found. And if there’s no need for the skills and abilities you deem useful?

Control of his life, his body, his own autonomy. To do what?

It was an endless circle. She would ask questions, he’d have no answer. Another question, another
answer he didn’t have.

Sometimes she asked easier things, ask him to tell her stories, about the creation of mankind, about the fall of Alexandria and the subsequent effect it had on the progression of humanity. She would ask about his different siblings, about Balthazar and Anna and Gabriel and Hannah. Sometimes, she asked for stories about Sam and Dean, about fighting the armies of Hell for nearly a decade to get to the Righteous Man, to clutch Dean’s soul in his arms, shouting a victory cry all of Heaven heard, only to not be known by him on that fateful day in the barn.

Words poured easily from his tongue, then, and he knew what she was doing, learning not only his history but about him - though he didn’t see what there was to learn. Telling his history was still easier. Recalling facts and events, and viewing them through the lens of gained experience.

Who he was then was almost alien to him now.

Yet, somehow, distinct comparison offered no clarification to who he was or what he wanted now cleaved from Heaven’s machinations.

“Mind if I sit?” a voice asked, making Castiel startle and jerk. Dean stood dressed in sweatpants and long sleeves looking abashed. “Never wise to sneak up on an angel. Sorry.”

When Dean’s gaze flicked to the spot on the couch beside him, Castiel shook himself, gesturing. “Please.” Dean was jostling a small tablet against his thigh, a fidgeting, nervous tick he recognized as discomfort.

Before Cas could offer to leave, let Dean have the space to himself, the hunter sat, a few inches between their bodies and a palpable tension in the air he knew he was somehow at fault for.

Dean offered no clues, flicking through screens looking for something to read. Castiel recognized the Kindle as Charlie’s and idly wondered why they had never sought to digitize the books and records of the bunker, not only preserve them but also for the ease of access.

Attempting to disregard the obvious tension, Cas turned to rest his chin on his knee again, arms wrapping a little tighter around his bent leg as he gazed unseeing at the TV mounted on the wall.

His body had almost relaxed in the charged silence before Dean cleared his throat and Cas turned to peer at him, eager, yet not, to cut to the chase.

There were high spots of pink on Dean’s cheeks as he spoke. “So, um, this is me trying really hard to a better friend and not having a clue what the hell I’m doing, but, uh…” He inhaled a sharp breath through his nose and blew it out as if he were steeling himself for the conversation. “I get you’re going through some stuff. I can see it. And, y’know, Winchester Rules and Regulations as far as dealing with any of it- or, hell, all of it- ain’t exactly one I’d recommend- though it’s the only one I knew growing up. I get Dad hurt us a lot as kids. Did a lot more harm than good, if I’m being honest. I’m learning, though. Or, trying.”

His rambling fell silent a moment, head bobbing in agreement- or recognition of achievement. Castiel waited for him to continue, eyes falling to Dean’s mouth as his tongue slipped out to run across his bottom lip.

“Charlie’s a cuddler,” Dean offered suddenly. “She’s a hugger. She actively seeks out physical comfort and reassurances and gives them just as freely. Crawls into my bed like a scared five-year-old after a nightmare as if we’re not grown ass adults who’ve fought on the frontlines. Reminded me I can’t fix everything with a fist or a bullet, that it isn’t always what the problem needs.”
words stumbled off, blush having spread to the tip of his ears, entire body coiled tight in
determination not to fidget.

Cas’ brows drew together. Was Dean asking for comfort? Castiel honestly wasn't sure he knew any
more about giving it than Dean did.

“What are you trying to say, Dean?”

For the first time, he looked at him, twisting his body to look Cas directly in the eye. “I’m
saying… I’m saying sometimes people need a hand to hold o-or the reminder they aren’t alone,
even if it just means company through the silence and long hours.” Surprise made his eyes widen,
brows lifting even as Dean’s embarrassed flush deepened and he continued to plow ahead, jerking a
shoulder awkwardly. “I could be that hand to hold, i-is all. I may not can relate or understand, or
y’know, maybe I can. And I just…” His gaze cut away and then back in frustration. “Just because
you’re one-of-a-kind doesn’t mean you’re alone. I’m always going to be right here.”

Cas could only stare- marveling over the wonder that was this creature Fate had seen fit to
intertwine him with- Dean struggling with his own heartfelt earnestness. It was endearing to bear
witness to; warming and making something unclench and uncoil inside knowing Dean meant it.
Unyielding affection blossomed in his chest, and Castiel was grateful he was entirely too old and
too other to worry about the ever-fluctuating manners and etiquette of humans.

Reaching out, he lightly clasped Dean’s chin, leaning forward to press a soft, barely-there kiss to
hunter’s cheek, just a brushing of lips to skin. “Thank you, Dean.”

The hunter was blinking rapidly at him as he withdrew, face a shade of red to rival the furniture
they were sitting on as his throat bobbed on a hard swallow. Offering a soft smile, Castiel returned
to his original sitting position, chin propped on his knee, face relaxed this time.

Green eyes unsure where to settle, Dean nodded to himself, before shifting back onto the cushions,
they’re positions closer to each other as he returned to the borrowed device.

From his position, Castiel let his eyes droop closed, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, at
the warm, grounding presence Dean’s body offered where it now pressed against his own, creating
star-points of cosmic energy that buzzed beneath his skin.

‘Just because it's a bad day, doesn't mean it's a bad life' Dr. Grey's voice reminded him.

His smiled crooked up higher on one side. That may be true.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone was curious, Dr. Grey is a nod to Rachel Grey-Summers from X-Men,
daughter of Jean Grey aka Phoenix, a powerful mutant Empath with telepathy and
telekinetic powers. Kind making her a great candidate to counsel the patients no one
else can. Since she's a multi-verse traveler, I thought, why not?
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

In which, Dean uses his mom voice, and showers and conversations get interrupted.

“Dean, there is no way you are doing that right, look-”

“Sam, I know how to brine a damn turkey-”

“If you would just-”

“I do not need your help here, Sam!”

“Yeah, but Dean-”

Dean shot his brother a scathing glare from his position kneeling to lower the twenty-five-pound turkey into the ice chest filled with marinade.

“Samuel Michael Winchester, if you do not get out of my kitchen, so help me God, I am going to roast you in an oven.”

That, at least, finally got through, the muscle under Dean’s eye twitching as he watched Sam stiffen and then promptly hurry through the door and down the corridor toward the library in a manner that could only be described as a ‘scurry’.

Hands dripping as he stood, Dean moved over to the sink with a growl of frustration. Donna stood leaning with her hip against the counter and arms folded, ignoring the flour all over her hands and apron as she smirked in amusement.

He scowled. “What?”

“Nothin’. Just a killer Mom-voice you got goin’, y’know?” she said, corner of her mouth clearly twitching with the desire to become a full-blown grin.

Rolling his eyes, he used his elbow to turn on the tap to wash his hands. “It’s not a- I mean, yeah, I guess it kinda is because I started using it when we were younger and Sam wouldn’t mind, it’s what Mom did with me, but it’s not a Mom-mom voice.”

She slid against the edge of the counter until she was by his side, knocking her shoulder into his. “For what it’s worth? He grew up great. You make a good mom.”

A flush of sudden heat swole and pricked at the skin on Dean’s face, rushing to even his ears. He ducked his head, dragging his gaze to soapy hands.

“Shut up.” He nudged her back, trying to put a growl to his voice as he said, “And you promised me pie.”

Giggling, Donna did a little wiggle dance as she moved back over to the stainless steel island to continue her work. At the sink, Dean bit his bottom lip and allowed himself a smile.
Down the corridor and past the War Room, Sam’s footsteps faltered as he reached the library and the group gathered around one end of the table. Alex was actually on said table, her expensive camera focused on what they were all hunched over.

Claire blew out an exasperated sigh, reaching past Castiel beside her. “No, Cas. They don’t fit like that. You have to Tetris this.”

Creeping closer, Sam stretched and craned to see past them to the collective project: an array of stones in hues of purple and red, with various hands arranging and shifting them on the pages of an open book. There were fresh wildflowers and plants set off to the side as though for later use.

Charlie shook her head. “Claire, you can’t- that’s too symmetrical.”

“Yeah,” Jody agreed, reaching forward to pluck up several of the stones and shift them to a different position, “it can’t be so uniform. Give it some character and flow.”

“I think all of you are making this needlessly complicated,” Cas growled, face a dark scowl when Sam shifted to get a better look at their colorful handiwork.

“What is all this?” He recoiled slightly at the soft shutter click as Alex took a photo. “What are you guys doing?”

“Cas went for a walk,” Charlie chirped, head popping up with a fierce grin.

“Ah.” Strange how an answer that didn’t actually make much sense was still an answer that made sense. Hazel eyes flicked back down to their group project. “How’s it going?”

Claire swiftly popped the back of Castiel’s hand as he reached to rearrange stones, only to have Jody swat her hand in turn and fix the stones back as they had been.

Charlie pulled a face. “Well, we were planning to do this quickly, so as to not get caught. That’s not working out so well.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Dean still busy in the kitchen?”

“I think so? He just put the turkey in the ice chest to finish de-thawing and brining?” He thought, but wasn’t sure, that was the right terminology. “I’m not actually sure. He said he knows what he’s doing. I think he and Donna are baking now. She was making pie dough before.”

Her eyes narrowed, brows furrowing. “Do they need help? Why aren’t you helping?”

He held up his hands, brows raised. “Dude, he pulled full name authority on me and ordered me out of not the kitchen, but his kitchen. I wasn’t sticking around.”

“He’s probably nervous,” Jody said, straightening to regard their work. “Being your first Thanksgiving and all. Plus, I think Dean’s probably a bit of a control freak when it comes to things like the kitchen or his car. I can understand being territorial of sacred spaces. Alex?”

“Looks good. Now put the plants and flowers around it. Sort of frame it.”

“What are we doing here?” a voice asked close to his ear.

Sam spun, hand curling around the knife holstered under the back of his shirt, only having time to take in amused blue-grey eyes and a smirk, before Charlie all but jumped on the intruder, arms and
legs wrapping fully around them.

“DOROTHY!”

Jody had her gun out, steady in her hands, though she lowered it from pointing directly at them, finger hovering over the trigger. “Sam?”

Hand falling away from his knife, he held it out, wondering how worried he ought to be how quickly all of them—save for the ecstatic Charlie—pulled out weapons Sam hadn’t even been aware they had. Granted, they had guns and knives stashed under tables and in false books all over the bunker, but these were *their* weapons.

Good job on living the normal life, Sam. Bang up job.

“Easy, she’s a friend.” He looked at her, mouth working in soundless disbelief, even as he watched her and Charlie embrace again, the redhead’s feet firmly planted on the floor. “How did you—when did—what?”

Resting an elbow on Charlie’s shoulder and a fist on her hip, Dorothy winked and grinned. “I’d think a Man of Letters would be more articulate, Sam. Tsk tsk.”

A flush spread hot and fierce up his neck and to his cheeks and ears in the face of her cheerful grin—and the eyes that were looking to him for an explanation.

“U-um, guys, this is, well, Dorothy. Baum.” He swallowed thickly. “The one who defeated the Wicked Witch of the West.”

All heads snapped simultaneously in her direction, making Dorothy hold up a hand preemptively.

“Before you can ask: much of what you know is more than likely inaccurate, and I was told emphatically by both Sam and Charlie to *stop ruining their childhoods.*” Her eyes flicked back to him, and she held out her hands in question, grinning bright and fierce. “Speaking of, I drop in from another dimension and don’t even get a proper ‘hello’, Sam? This how you treat a friend?”

Huffing a laugh, he met her halfway and swept her into a hug, resting his chin on the top of her head for a moment. He bit his bottom lip as a voice behind them whispered, “I don’t know who I’m more jealous of right now,” before he let go and put space between them.

“So, uh, welcome home? What brings you back? Are you staying a while?” he asked, eyes falling to her satchel and the carpet bag waiting on the steps.

“More importantly,” Charlie cut in, and taking her by the hand to lead her away, “how’s my dragon? How’s the Rebellion aftermath? Democracy working out? Were they still asking you to be queen? Do you want to spend the night in my room? You’re gonna spend the night in my room. Oh! And you can stay for Thanksgiving! There's a room across the hall from mine!”

Dorothy threw an exaggerated panicked look over her shoulder, before wrinkling her nose on a grin as she was half-dragged from the room, her bag swinging from Charlie’s freehand—hilt of a sword protruding from one end. A fond smile crossed his lips as he watched them disappear.

“I’m here, queer, and too young for beer,” came a sigh, making him pivoted sharply, looking first to Claire, who was smirking up at Alex still on the table. She sighed forlornly, before bringing her camera back up to her eye. “Alright, let’s get this finished before we get caught. The plants are too symmetrical and uniform.”
Sam’s gaze dropped back to the group project. “Caught? Is this a gift for Dean?”

“No, it’s for Cas, because his room is, like, empty,” Claire said, “but you wanna try explaining all this to Dean if he walks in? Good luck with that.”

“Any reason you went on a gemstone scavenger hunt, Cas?”

The angel shrugged, head canted to the side as he regarded their work, making minute adjustments as he considered. It was a look Sam remembered Jess getting on her face when she would be working on a painting, the gaze that shifted between distant and critical as her eyes saw what was and what needed to be.

“I just… started thinking about gems. Of the wonderful color and variety to be found. I found a few, not sure what I would do with them, but remembering Charlie’s words about liking their solid presence, or having them carved into different shapes.” He shrugged. “I sought more. I’ve no use for them, but still wanted to... keep them in a way. Memorialize them.” He looked at him. “Humans do that. Photography to memorialize things, sights.” He said it like a question, as though he wasn’t sure he’d remembered a fact right.

Sam nodded and Cas straightened, a hint of a smile curling his lips.

Jody met Sam’s eye over Claire’s head, brow arched as she twisted her wrist to encompass all the stones. “This right here? Probably worth a small fortune.”

“Are they worth more cut or uncut?” Alex asked, climbing down.

“I can find out,” Claire offered.

Alex leaned into Castiel their heads tilted together as they scrolled through her photos. “What size were you thinking? 11x14? 16x20? 20x24?”

His gaze flitted instinctively to the space by his side that Charlie had come to occupy, then helplessly to the corridor where she’d disappeared. Seeing his loss and confusion, Jody slid in, pointing to the photo.

“16x20 is a good size,” she assured, holding up her fingers to demonstrate the approximate dimensions, then gestured using the flat of her palms. “Then you can frame and hang two smaller pictures here and here, see? Or like this. Make an arrangement of pictures that flow together. Black frames with a white mat are always nice.” Leaning back against the table with her thumbs hooked into the pockets of her jeans, she shrugged. “We could hang it above your chest of drawers.”

"I've still got my first camera you can have," Alex offered. "Take it with you on your walks, so you can keep what you see."

Sam hung back, gaze flicking back and forth with the exchange and wondering what it was about the scenario he was missing, the sense that there was something unspoken because it had already been said or was understood to everyone but Sam. He felt like that too often, like he’d failed to bridge some emotional gap.

Despite how hard he tried, it was something he failed at quite often, way before he’d lost his soul, and even after he’d gotten it back. He could laugh, joke, talk… but when it came to the important things, the times when people were hurting… it was like trying to speak a foreign language he didn’t have practice with. He was awkward, resorting to hand gestures and facial expressions to try and get across his meaning. Worse, platitudes.
He could sympathize, but he was also self-aware enough to realize he lacked the empathy to really help him connect like he wanted. There was a void of white nothingness that filtered emotion into data to be absorbed and processed, and it was that above all else that made Sam feel the most broken.

Wasn’t empathy a basic human reaction? To really understand and feel the pain of another person rather than to just wish they weren’t going through it?

If he hadn’t been one of Azazel’s Special Children, if it hadn’t been the demon blood in his system from infancy, would he still have that crucial element of his humanity, or was that something Sam simply lacked and was left to overcompensate for? Or was it something that he’d been robbed of with each new trial and trauma?

“And what do we do with these?” Cas questioned. Sam followed his gesture to the stones laid out across an open book.

Jody shrugged. “Sell them if you don’t want to keep them.”

“Charlie and I can find buyers,” stated Claire.

Jody twisted, taking in the whole of the room with an assessing eye. “I mean, if you guys were interested, you could turn around and invest that money in this place.”

Sam straightened, frowning. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Huh? Oh, no, nothing’s wrong, I just meant… well, there must be a lot of empty corridors and rooms, Sam. This place was meant to be a base with lots of people living here, right?” Sliding her hands into her back pockets, she shrugged a little helplessly. “I’m just saying there’s a lot of potential here, is all. And the money you could get from Cas finding these stones… well, it could be put to some really good use.”

Sitting cross-legged on the table, with Claire bent over her shoulder and hair falling in a cascade, Alex paused in going through her photos, her brows drawing together as she studied Castiel’s expression.

“What’s wrong, Cas? Did you still not like it?”

He shook his head, hands clasped together as he rubbed his thumb into the palm of his other hand. “No, it’s fine, I still just feel…” he frowned, “I hate having to translate into ‘human’ and then to ‘English’. I don’t know the word. Restless? Anxious? Discomfited?” He drew in a deep breath and then let it out, hands dropping to his sides in defeat. “I thought my walk might help me feel less ‘out of sorts’, like… like I fit in my skin. It didn’t,” he admitted with a shrug of defeat.

"It’s called ‘depression’, Cas,” Claire stated and Jody shot her a dangerous look as Alex elbowed her sharply. "I-I mean--"

Smiling, Jody placed a hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t you go take a shower?”

“Heck. I just don’t need showers.”

“Angels also don’t need a wardrobe of clothes,” she argued, “but you can’t say they aren’t nice to have. Go on. It may make you feel better. You can use my shampoo, conditioner, and stuff, it’s the green bottles and bar soap in the middle shower stall.” She patted him on the back. “Hot shower-or a bath, change into comfy pajamas, then curl up and read or watch a movie or something. You’ll feel better. Right, girls?”
They both nodded emphatically, before heading from the room to pick up their paused game of Mario Kart in the rec room, which they’d spent the better part of a couple of hours competing in when Charlie had introduced them to it.

Cas inclined his head. “That does sound like it could be nice. I think I’ll try it. Thank you.”

Watching him leave, Sam slid into a chair, leaning back to angle his head up a Jody. “What exactly are you thinking regarding the bunker?”

She considered him for a long moment, before sliding into the seat on the opposite side of the table. “You ever thought about turning this place into a school?” His brows shot up. “An academy for the next generation of hunters?”
Though he’d already washed his hands twice and brushed off most of the flour, Dean still smelled like cinnamon and sugar— which wasn’t a bad thing— but there was flour on his clothes despite the apron, and in his hair— a punishment for sassing Donna.

He threw up a wave to Sam and Jody as he passed through the War Room and into the corridor leading to the bedrooms and offices, mentally going through a list of all the things that still had to be done for the next day, and what had already been prepped and crossed off. He tallied it off as he gathered new clothes from his room: turkey was in the icebox and marinating, the pies were all prepped, Donna was making the cookies, they had all the ingredients for the green bean casserole, the red potatoes were already cleaned and just needed to be chopped, seasoned, and roasted.

He flicked a gaze to the doorknob to the bathroom as he approached it, noting the lack of ‘Girls Only’ sign they’d implemented for these visits, before turning the knob with vague distraction. What else? He needed to check his list. Jody was making stuffing in the morning. Didn’t they have another vegetable? Jody had been insistent on the need for a color balance and a vegetable for every starch or carb. They had green, red... did they need an orange? How did you cook carrots? No, wait, those were a starch--

It was the sound of water that caught his attention, body going rigid in the center of the large room. The bunker was meant to house who even knew how many people, so the bathrooms were designed more like locker rooms at the gym, with multiple cinderblock stalls for showers, a line of sinks against one wall, and toilet stalls tucked into an opposite alcove. There was even a large claw-footed bathtub tucked into a recess by the showers.

There was steam curling out of the middle shower stall past the simple white curtain.

“...Hello?” Shit, did the girls forget to put up the sign?

Dean wasn’t waiting to find out, already turned with his hand on the doorknob when a voice answered.

“Hello, Dean.”

He twisted sharply, sheer bafflement and confusion twisting his expression, mouth agape. “Cas?! ”

“...Yes?”

“Wha-why-wha-” His gaze darted around frantically. Yes, he had, in fact, walked into the bathroom. And yet, there was still steam and the sound water coming from one of the stalls that were apparently the direct result of one particular Angel of the Lord. Why didn’t they have an ‘Angels Only’ sign?! Was this a thing? Dean should have been warned if this was a thing. “You’re in the shower,” he stated, though, to be honest, it did come out like a baffled accusation.

God, the guy was gonna give Dean a heart attack. It was some kind of sacrilege he was sure. There was lore across the globe about what happened to people who stumbled across supernatural creatures—especially celestial beings—while bathing, on top of which: Angel. Bathing.

Cas. Bathing.

Heart hammering out of his chest was one thing, but Dean was pretty sure his brain just short-fused.

“Am I not allowed?” And Dean knew without seeing Cas’ head was tilted with his confusion. Oh
God, how did he not just know the stuff he should know?

Swallowing, Dean shook his head, clutching his bundle of clothes tightly in one arm. “What? No! You are totally- you can- absolutely, I was just-” he floundered helplessly, one hand blindly searching for the doorknob as the water cut off, and his voice took on an even more panicked pitch, “...you don’t. Usually. I didn’t mean to interrupt. We’ll get you a sign. I’m just gonna go. Enjoy your shower.”

He spun back toward the door, face on fire, and pulse pounding a steady, screaming get out get out get out get out get out get out get out.

“Dean, stop.”

A whimper escaped him, eyes clamping shut as his muscles locked up in obedience to the obvious order. Curtain rings scrapped against PVC as the cloth curtain was drawn to the side, and soft, wet foot falls stepped across the tiled floor to where Dean stood nearly quaking with the desperate need to escape from the ever compressing space of the room around them.

There was contemplative silence from the space behind him, like a trail of fingers over Dean’s form that had a cold sweat breaking out across his skin.

“Why won’t you turn around?”

He tried not to flinch but was pretty sure he failed epically, balling the hand near his chest into a fist. “Cas, buddy, there aren’t enough words in the English language to explain why I really can’t do that.”

An exasperated sigh, then, “Dean Henry Winchester. Turn. Around.”

“Oh God, you are killing me, dude,” he hissed, head angling back and gaze drifting to the top of the wall and even the ceiling above and beyond the angel as he pivoted to face him, but refused to look. “Really, Cas, I didn’t mean to interrupt-”

“Why won’t you look at me?”

Dean blinked at the ceiling. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

“Cas. You are an angel. Currently in state of undress. While having been bathing. Somewhere, an entire generation just got cursed and I am genuinely shocked I haven’t been struck dead, not even taking into account the normal non-smiting, yet equally deadly amount of mortifyingly awkward this puts me in, so I would really, really like to-”

“Dean. Look at me.”

“Oh, that’s a negative, Ghost Rider.”

Fingers latched around his jaw in a bruising grip, yanking his chin down so that he was staring into glaring blue eyes. Dean could smell mint and rosemary drifting from his skin, and God, thinking about the angel’s skin was a bad, bad, bad train of thought.

“I really need you to take me off this pedestal you have me on.” When Dean’s gaze tried to drift safely past him, the fingers tightened. “Look. At. Me.”
Forcing himself to obey, Dean held up a hand in surrender and causing Cas to release him. Dean's entire face burned hot as he looked directly at the man glaring at him, whose hair was wet and tousled, water droplets gently skimming from his hairline, down his neck, and following the lines of his shoulders and chest. Dean kept his eyes firmly above Cas' bare shoulders.

Folding his arms, Cas' brow lifted finely. “And yet, you won’t.”

“I am looking at you.”

“You are afraid to look at me, and if you had your way not only would you still be facing the door, you’d have already left the room, and potentially the bunker.” Dean snorted, trying to convey with only his face that yeah, that was the obvious course of action any sane person would take. Because, God, naked angel. This naked angel. Why couldn’t the ground just be kind and swallow him whole? “Dean,” Cas began again, voice softer and more serious, expression shifting to something sad that had Dean’s panic drop a few notches and his alertness spike in concern. “I am begging you to take me off this pedestal.”

“Cas…”

“Why?”

Tongue darting out across his lip, Dean grappled for some explanation that would make sense, to put into words what was an unspoken understanding.

“You’re an angel, Cas,” he emphasized, letting his gaze drift to a spot on the wall just above Castiel’s shoulder.

“And I am one of countless you have met. You slept with Anna. You, more than anyone, know we aren’t some intangible holy thing.”

Green eyes snapped back to his. “You are.” He swallowed and tried to refrain from pressing back into the door to put space between them. “And Anna... that was different. She was an angel in a former life but was a human who then became an angel. You... you're the only angel I have ever met that was worth being called an angel, who is what an angel should be.”

How did he voice his desperate need to preserve and protect? That seeing him in such a human, such a vulnerable state terrified him. Reminded him of what Cas still had to lose. Cas who was good down to the core, whereas Dean was only ichor and filth miles beneath him. Just being friends was a waiting game for the next time Dean would disappoint or fail him and it was Cas who suffered for it.

Hurt filled blue eyes before they dropped away, Dean’s gaze accidentally following it and catching a glimpse of abs and a white towel before jerking up again. “I am…” He paused, and Dean’s heart wrenched, instinct pushing him to close the gap, fix whatever it was to put a wounded look on the other man’s face. How did he keep screwing this up? “I’m not some far off and distant thing, Dean.” There was desperation in his eyes. “I’m a different species, yes, but I am right here and you keep pushing me away. How can I make you stop seeing Castiel and just see Cas instead?”

Heart thudding, Dean opened his mouth only for the words to die in his throat. Cas stared at him expectantly until he was forced to admit a weak, “I don’t know if I can.”

Something in Cas deflated further, light in his eyes dimming as his gaze fell with finality. Worse, was the part of Dean’s brain that had seen the look too many times in other people, and even in the face in the mirror, that part saying ‘That’s what the death of hope looks like’.
Hope in what, though? It couldn’t be the death of hope; it didn’t make sense in this context. And surely Cas didn’t take it as an insult that Dean thought highly of him and wanted to protect him, did he? But somewhere, some word he’d misspoke, something he’d done wrong, and he’d done exactly what he couldn't seem to avoid: hurt those he cared about.

“Cas, look--”

A hand flew up, cutting him off as Castiel turned away. “Nevermind, Dean. Go. I’m sorry I make you uncomfortable.”

Dean opened his mouth wanting to correct him, to clarify, to say that it wasn’t Cas that made him uncomfortable-- except for how it very much was. It was Cas, very human looking and very naked, reminding Dean of all Cas had lost and had to lose and deserved so much better. Not to mention, Cas very human and very naked and Dean with a very not-angelic brain. He didn’t know how to admit, much less convey, that just thinking about Cas like that- even looking at him- felt like he’d violated him in some way. A splash of that black ichor on the pristine white of a being that was born of light. Even though he was a warrior, a soldier, there was something inherent to Castiel Dean wanted to protect.

How did he say that? How did he put it in a way that would make sense? Yes, Cas was on a pedestal. He deserved to be there. He was safe there.

So he said nothing and slipped out into the hall to go to one of the other bathrooms instead.

Dressed in a grey heather sweater and soft sweatpants, Cas only barely knocked on Charlie’s door before letting himself in.

“We have a problem,” he announced.

She and the other woman, Dorothy, were both sitting on the bed, with Charlie sitting cross-legged, while Dorothy had on leg folded under her and the other draping over the side of the bed, and both of them looking up sharply at his entrance, conversation cut off.

He didn’t bother with polite manners, outright ignoring the taken aback expression on the brunette’s face.

“We have encountered an astronomical problem I don’t think any of us could have foreseen.”

Pursing her lips, Charlie motioned to him while looking to her companion. “Dorothy, I don’t think I properly introduced you. This is Castiel.”

She dipped her chin. “Pleasure.”

“He’s an angel,” she added, voice bright and chipper.

Dorothy did a double-take and Charlie grinned maniacally. Cas could do no more than scowl and brush off the reaction, socked feet sinking into her white shag rug as he came to stand over the redhead.

“Charlie.”
She tilted her head back, blinking in surprise. “Dude. Why the 911?” Her green eyes narrowed. “Is this about taste buds and tomorrow’s pies, because I can help cover for you—”

“Dean came in the bathroom while I was in the shower,” he interrupted, making her eyebrows shoot up.

Dorothy frowned in confusion. “Unless the bunker has changed, I should think your modesty intact.”

Charlie patted her knee. “Yeah, kinda not the direction we’re wanting to go with them.” She looked back up at him, brow creased. “And why were you in the shower? I think Pamela wins some pickles for this.”

“Except for how Dean didn’t want to face me or even look at me and tried to leave as soon as he realized I was the one in the shower.”

“Oh. Maybe he was just embarrassed at ‘oh hey hot and naked’ and was totally thrown off guard?”

At his demeanor, her expression fell. “You don’t think so?”

“He was practically shouting his panic and shame and self-loathing, as well as some absurd reverence and the need to protect me from him.”

She scowled. “You aren’t supposed to mind read, Cas. House rules. It’s rude.”

He glowered right back at her. “When he is projecting it so loudly I can’t help it. Angels tend to hear the sound of a soul screaming, whether we want to or not.” He lowered himself to sit in front of her, opposite of Dorothy. “He has me on a pedestal. I’m...I believe you would say ‘off limits’. Untouchable, not only in a physical sense but in regards to how he sees the distance between us,” he said, trying to use his hands held at different heights to portray what he meant. “Any feelings or attraction he has for me… that’s a line he won’t cross.”

“Oh wow. Yeah, that’s a problem.” Eye darting back and forth, she held up a hand. “Now, don’t panic. Just- lemme think. We can figure this out, Cas.”

“Charlie, if he’s ignored and suppressed and shoved aside this for the past how many years do you really think—”

“This is the exact opposite of ‘don’t panic’, Cas.”

“He couldn’t even look at me, and then practically fled—”

She snatched a handful of the front of his sweater, bringing them almost nose-to-nose as she snarled, “This means too much to all of us to let one stubborn ass Winchester ruin his own happy ending, so when I say ‘don’t panic’, I mean Don’t. Panic.” And that right there was the Charlie who’d turned the tides of war. A dark determined fire lit her eyes as she slowly released him and held up a finger. “We just need to think and re-assess. Minor setback, Cas, that’s all.”

Several long moments passed as she chewed her lip and jiggled her foot in nervous rhythm while they watched and waited. Scratching at her scalp, she threw up a hand. “I’m drawing a blank aside from keep on keeping on and eventually wear him down. We can have an emergency meeting,” she offered. “See if someone has a more immediate solution? He can’t hold out forever now that you’re purposefully trying to win his heart, Cas. It’s just not possible, but it is something we need to take into consideration so as to not cause problems between you like you were saying about Dean blaming himself if you gave up your Grace.”
“If I may?” asked Dorothy, lifting a brow in question. Cas inclined his head, which she returned. “This may seem overly simplistic, but if the problem is that Dean regards you as being untouchable… why not make yourself touchable? Begin to cross the distance alone, and see if that won’t encourage him to meet you halfway. That it's okay.”

“Dorothy, you're a genius,” said Charlie, hand snaking out to grip her wrist, bright eyes swiveling to Castiel’s face. "Make yourself touchable, Cas. Think about it: how often do the two of you ever really touch each other? Normalize it as much as you can. Pats, pokes, taps, shoves, hugs: all of it. All the time. Touch him to get his attention, lean into him to tell him something, any and every excuse you can think of to invade his personal space? Do it. That’s something we should have been working on with him anyway, I don’t know why I never thought of it. Dean was never given physical affection as a kid but made sure Sam always had it, which is part of why he’s so codependent with Sam, as Sam is the only one who ever gave Dean love in return until well into adulthood. Dean’s probably touch-starved and never even realized it. We're all gonna tactile the hell out of him.”

She jumped up, got tangled over her own feet with only Cas’ steady grip on her forearm keeping her upright.

“I have to go tell Sam,” she exclaimed, throwing open the door and darting out into the corridor.

In her wake, the angel and the hero sat in awkward silence for a moment before regarding each other.

“I’ve never met an angel.”

“And I’ve never met the hero of Oz.”

She offered out her hand. “Dorothy Baum.”

Taking it in his, he shook it, smiling. “Castiel.”

Running through the corridors and rooms, Charlie came to a skidding stop in front of the library, arms outstretched and face lit with excitement, making Jody and Sam shoot wary looks at each other.

Okay, so Dean being touch-starved his whole life? We all need to work on. Cause right now, he’s got Cas on a pedestal where he can only worship him from afar, and walking in on Cas in the shower just brought the problem to light. I’m calling this ‘Operation: Handsy’. Also, probably should have mentioned this earlier, but in all the excitement kind of forgot that I may or may not have sent Crowley and Rowena a sortof fruit basket for Thanksgiving and signed the card from all of us, so there’s that, too.” She shoved her hair out of her face. “Or does ‘Operation: Hands-on’ sound better? You pick. I can’t decide.”

Sam spluttered. “Wait. What?”

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: Depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts.

“I thought you said most of them wanted to watch the movie,” Dean said, tossing the kernel of popcorn in an arch and grinning as Sam easily caught it in his mouth.

Slouching further into his red armchair, a bowl of popcorn resting on his stomach, Sam held up and then tossed a kernel back. Dean’s teeth clacked together as he stretched to catch it. “They said so. The girls, anyway.” He paused to catch the popcorn Dean tossed at him from the couch. “Well, Jody and her crew, since it’s not all the girls- who are growing in number. We’re under siege, did you notice?”

More popcorn fell easily into Dean’s open mouth, and he chewed on it with a grin, tossing another in return. “Are you complaining? Who could have ever imagined us ending up in such a big family? Two kids from Kansas growing up in the back of a car and in cheap motels?” He caught another piece.

“Well, Dorothy and Charlie are still catching up- I think Dorothy is planning to stick around for a minute, and not just to see Charlie.”

“Oh?” asked Dean, mouth wide open.

Sam threw a handful of popcorn, chuckling as it caught his brother in the face. “Uh, yeah. War’s over and the rest is just kind of politics? And lots of people trying to make Dorothy some sort of queen or figurehead. She said she signed up to be temporary leader only.”

Smirking, Dean tossed one of the throw pillows at him in retaliation, which Sam swatted from the air, making it bounce and land near Dean’s outstretched feet while he picked up and ate the scattering of food on the red cushions.

“Yeah, I can’t really imagine a scenario where a General wants to be queen and it ends in a happy ending. Dorothy likes being where the need is. Probably wanted to let things die down there without her, and just took herself out of the equation so they can get it all sorted.”

Head rolling to the side, Sam pursed his lips. “Fair point. I wouldn’t want to win a war only to have the people try to make me their ruler.”

He nearly overturned his own bowl as a handful of popcorn hit him in the face accompanied by Dean’s bark of laughter.

“This from the guy who wanted to be one of the Four Kings and Queens of Narnia? Sam, you would have totally taken the job.” He shrugged in the face of his brother’s scowl. “Hey, better you than me. I’d either be the most irresponsible king ever or, like, turn into some dark tyrant or something. I’d totally ruin it.”

Snorting, Sam plucked a piece of popcorn out of his hair. “Like we’d let you.”
“Be king?”

“Be a bad king,” he clarified, tossing the kernel for Dean to catch. “You’d have me, Cas, and Charlie as advisors and lieutenants or whatever. You’d be on the throne, but we’d be right by your side as a team, like always.” He tossed another. “Actually, with Cas being an angel and therefore technically agendered, we actually could be the Four Kings and Queens, you know.”

A bright grin split Dean’s face as he pushed himself up onto his elbow. “Dude. If we ever find out Narnia is an actual place? We are going there.”

Grinning cheekily, Sam threw popcorn at him. “Now who’s the nerd?”

He tilted his head. “I wonder if Dorothy would know.” Brows furrowed, he looked across at Sam. “What if Narnia is on a different continent? Like, rather than another dimension, it’s part of the multiverse where on the Earth next to ours, instead of our countries, you have, like, Oz and Narnia and Hogwarts.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “First of all, Hogwarts couldn’t exist in the same world as Oz and Narnia, since the real world is still a thing in Harry Potter. Two… you make an excellent point we need to ask Dorothy about. I mean, in the books it’s framed like Oz is an island country surrounded by the Impassable Desert and The Great Sandy Waste, and countries or continents exist beyond them, but none of the Ozians can traverse that far. The land of Narnia is just part of a continent, one entire Eastern side meeting with the ocean, so theoretically, yeah, Narnia could totally exist within the same world. Not to mention other realms of magic, I mean, Middle Earth has water all on the Western side, so it, Oz, and Narnia could, technically, be on the same continent.” He sat up straighter, leaning forward with excited pleading. “Dude, dude, dude, please tell me we can actually investigate and research this, because if this does exist? Supernatural world be damned, we are getting lessons in medieval weapons and going on an adventure, a pilgrimage, something.”

Dean sat up, their hands slapping loudly in a high-five. “Oh hell yes. There are actually other hunters. They can have it. Peace out, losers, we’re going questing.”

“Hunters go on quests?” Jody asked, stepping into the room clad in pajamas, and plopping down on the couch beside Dean when he shifted. She grabbed some popcorn from his bowl. “Got an early start, huh?”

Dean shrugged. “In our defense, we have been waiting for, like, thirty minutes.”

Sam nodded.

Jody plucked a piece of popcorn from his hair. “And keeping yourselves entertained, I see.”

“I mean, we could have been playing with sharp objects,” Dean said, “but we’re not. Considering how many we have, I think that’s a good thing.”

“My brother is wise,” agreed Sam, nodding sagely.

“I need that stitched on a pillow or something. Jody, you’re my witness. Sam admits I’m wise.” He grinned, waggling his brows at his brother. “Dean the Wise King.”

Sam threw more popcorn on a bark of laughter. “Dean the Nerd.”

“Hey now!” protested Jody, jerking back as she was assaulted by edible projectiles.

A bedraggled sigh came from the doorway as Claire, followed by Alex, shuffled into the room.
dressed in patterned pajamas. “I leave you alone for five minutes.”

“It’s been like ten years, Claire. I took out stock options while waiting,” Dean threw back. “We gonna watch a movie or not? Where’s Cas?”

“Taking some downtime,” Jody said, “wanted to stay in his room.”

Dean faltered, gaze dropping as his throat bobbed. Their earlier encountered flitted through his head in way too living color, and his stomach twisted at the memory. He could still feel the fingers gripping his jaw as angry blue eyes glared at him. He remembered the hurt and disappointment before he’d ordered Dean away- let Dean escape.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, think he’s having a bit of a bad day.” She nudged him with her knee, eyes searching his face with concern. “You okay?”

Ears burning, he kept his gaze lowered. “Yeah, I just… I think I may have accidentally offended Cas earlier, is all. And I don’t know how to apologize without making it worse.”

Sitting in the other armchair requisitioned from the library, Alex arched a brow. “What d’ya do?”

Dean opened his mouth, then let out a huff of air. “I don’t know, actually.” Jody glanced at Sam, whose mouth twisted, his brows furrowing. Sitting back, Dean tried, “I mean, maybe it was some sort of… cultural faux pas? Like… I guess neither of us was understanding the other? Or what I meant well-intentioned really upset him instead, and I-” He scratched at his scalp. “I don’t know. Now I wonder if he didn’t pass on the movie because he’s avoiding me.”

“One,” Claire said, rising fluidly from putting in the movie and moving over to sit on Jody’s other side, “Cas is taking advice Jody gave him earlier, so even if you’re part of why he’s not here, you aren’t the entire reason.” She twisted, pilfering from the bowl Sam held. “Two, you could try hugging him.”

“Wha-?”

“Hug him. Like you mean it and just say you’re sorry.” She raised an imperious brow. “The two of you had a fight, right? Fix it.”

“Well, not a ‘fight’, exactly, it was…”

“You had a something. Something went wrong, now Cas is further upset. Hug him and apologize. Even if you’re not sure where you messed up, you’re acknowledging that you did and that it’s important to you to fix it.” At his dubious expression, she shrugged, catching a popcorn kernel in her mouth. “Or go for a more formal apology and explain yourself. I’m sure it’ll go much better the second time, given you aren’t sure how you screwed yourself the first.”

“Claire!” Jody chastised, swatting at the girl’s leg.

Shrugging, she tapped her nose and pointed at Dean. “He knows I’m right.” She popped back a palmful of popcorn and held the remote out toward the TV, stretching her legs out over Jody’s lap. “Now hush. This is gonna change your lives, Winchesters.”

“Isn’t this a rom-com?” questioned Sam.

“Dude! We’re watching a chick flick?”
“Gonna. Change. Your. Lives,” Claire repeated, kicking Dean’s thigh on each word with the heel of her foot.

He threw up his hands. “Okay, okay, alright, geez!” Biting back a snort of laughter, Alex tried to sink deeper into her chair and hide a smile. Looking accosted and indignant, Dean demanded, “What’s it even called?”

“Penelope,” she answered sweetly.

The alarm wouldn’t stop blaring even after Dean knocked it from the nightstand, making him groan into his pillow. Grudgingly, he crawled from the sanctity of memory foam and blankets to shut off the demonic device.

His internal clock had begun to relax over the past months, and after adjusting to an almost regular eight hours of sleep? Now he understood televised depictions of a normal person’s morning. And it sucked. Maybe he was just getting older. That sucked, too.

Waking up at 5 AM was a punishment in and of itself. He’d have to shoot a text to Crowley with an idea for a new level of Hell: like Sam’s Trickster Tuesday’s, but an alarm that always went off at 5 AM. Probably blasting Asia. Or ‘It’s a Small World After All’. Then as soon as you made it through your bland morning routine to your bland morning at work... you woke up again and had to start all over.

“Up-an’-at-’em, Winchester.” He scrubbed at his face and pushed himself up from the bed. “Thanksgiving ain’t gonna cook itself.”

He was at least more cognizant after using the bathroom and brushing his teeth, but Chuck Almighty, coffee was gonna be a thing needed through an I.V. drip if he didn’t get it soon. His sleepy shuffle and yawn shifted to a grateful sigh of relief when he saw the light pouring out of the kitchen and into the corridor.

“Jody, please tell me you made-” his words cut off as he rounded the corner to see Cas sitting at the table, shoulders hunched and fingers curled around a steaming mug. “Oh. Uh. Hey,” he managed, coming down the steps, eyes taking in the angel’s pallid and gaunt expression, the dark shadows under closed eyes. He took an aborted step toward coffee in an effort to look casual, then a more hesitant step toward the angel as cheerless, dead blue eyes opened and met his. “Cas?”

Before he could ask what had happened, who’d died, Cas pushed himself from the table- Dean noting the soft sweat pants and shirt- to cross the space, crashing into Dean like a wave on the shore, arms wrapping around him.

“Cas?” he worried, hands frozen mid-air and heart kicking into a higher gear as he cataloged and discarded dozens of scenarios.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Jody stagger to a halt in the doorway with a worried look. Dean gave a minute shake of his head, attention immediately redirected by the soft plea of “Just hug me,” murmured by his ear.

The sheriff melted into the shadows as he complied, arms wrapping around the angel.

“Did something happen?” His voice was hoarse, addled by sleep and confusion, but soft, like a
secret he didn’t want the other residents to hear. Fingers curling into the worn cotton, he shifted, settling further into the hug and allowing Cas to lean into him as much as he wanted. He wasn’t sure if Cas even knew this went well beyond a hug, the two of them simply holding each other in the kitchen while the rest of the house slept on. He rubbed his chin against Cas’ shoulder. “Did you have a nightmare?”

The arms wrapped around him tightened only marginally, and Dean had the impression that were it even remotely possible, Castiel would burrow even closer, possibly inside him, for Dean to literally hide him from the world. Instead, Cas turned his head, face buried in the junction of Dean’s shoulder and neck, breath ghosting out across exposed skin.

Dean had seen Castiel face off against demons, angels, and the devil himself without batting an eye. He’d faced down Alastair and been ready to define a new meaning of pain and suffering to the demon. He’d led not only garrisons, but a civil war, and had been an urban legend idolized as a hero by much of the Host.

But he’d never seemed as human as he did right then. Dean wanted to be his hideaway. Instead, he was left with his hands all but tied as his best friend struggled in a war Dean couldn’t even see.

He rubbed his thumb between Cas’ shoulder blades, trying not to panic, to just let whatever this was happen.

But Cas didn’t offer an explanation, just held onto Dean in silence, hands trembling where they gripped his shirt.

The world hadn’t ended, so clearly Chuck and Amara were fine, Dean reasoned. Any other cosmic event would trigger the alarms in the Bunker. Had an angel died? Had lots of angels died?

Was it PTSD? There was so much time to incorporate, infinite things to have survived and be traumatized by. The Fall. Hell. The Civil War. Purgatory. Angels falling. Dying. God, so many times he’d died, which one would it be? The lake? April?

Oh God, was Cas’ grace fading? Was that what he was suffering through, but not telling them?

He swallowed, remembering Claire’s advice. It was as good a time as any, and he owed Cas a serious apology. He called Cas family, but then… He’d probably made him feel isolated, maybe even rejected. He’d been cast out for being too different from the angels, and there was Dean telling him he wasn’t one of them, either. That he was something other. He really hadn’t meant it that way.

Words and feelings were really damn hard.

“I’m sorry,” he attempted, eyes closed, “about yesterday.”

“...It’s fine, Dean.”

“It isn’t, Cas, and I am sorry.” He licked his bottom lip. How did he fix this? He was beyond the point of being undeserving of this, and yet there they were, and even still Dean felt desperately far away, with no idea how to close the space. “You’re my best friend,” he said, hoping that conveyed… everything.

Castiel meant the world to him. Dean would do anything for him, whether it was fighting a war and reduce their enemies to ash or to just stand in the kitchen holding Cas together when the angel no longer could. He loved Cas- he was a crucial part of the family the Winchesters had found themselves a part of. There wasn’t anything Dean wouldn’t do for him or to fix what was broken
between them.

But words were *Sam’s* strong point.

Dean found himself bereft, words tangled together and trapped in a knot threatening to choke him. Worse still, as much as he cared about Castiel, he wasn’t sure he could truly understand him. And what did he do with all the feelings he held for the preternatural force that was Castiel? When you fell for the sublime, what then? When something magnificent and sacred was warm and soft and breaking… what did you do?

“Nights can last forever when you’re immortal,” Cas whispered.

Dean rubbed his chin against his shoulder, trying so hard to resist the urge to press his mouth to the angel’s temple, to his brow, his cheek. Actions Dean was good with. He could protect, fight, shield, and even offer comfort without having to say a word. Movement, muscle memory, physical behavior; that was all so much easier.

“Yes,” he said at last.

“We weren’t even meant to *feel or think* for ourselves. I didn’t know I could feel this,” Castiel’s voice cracked on the words, “like I can’t breathe and drowning and-and-” he tightened his grip, all but clinging to Dean, “it was supposed to get *easier*, not harder, like I’m coming apart, hating I’m still alive to keep *suffering* this when I don’t know how--”

“Oh God, Cas--”

“Angels weren’t meant for this.”

He felt the first drop fall and land on his skin, and it had him swallowing and blinking up at the ceiling, desperate to know what to do. How did you comfort someone with memory older than the earth he walked on? Dean had a human life worth of memories, and being broken was something he’d accepted early on. Giving up was something he’d done as a *teen*, accepted his fate as another tool in his father’s arsenal. He’d had years to move past that, to step out from his father’s shadow, but Dean had still resigned himself to die with a gun in his hand, working hard to never hope for a life more than that, because hope was powerful and fragile.

And Fate was cruel.

But Cas… Cas who had never known any different than to be a tool to command, who had never been programmed to be any different, for him to slowly become more and more human, with all the heartbreak, trauma, and regret he’d already suffered… Dean couldn’t fix that.

He pressed his lips into Cas’ hair. “I’m here, Cas. I’m here,” he said, holding on as the angel quaked in silence like Dean were the only thing keeping him from falling apart. His palm rubbed back and forth over the material pulled taut over shaking shoulders, remembering doing the same for Charlie when she’d crawled into his bed in the middle of the night. “I’m here.”

They stayed like that until the worst of it passed, until Castiel pulled out of the embrace with his face turned away. Dean let his hand trail down Cas’ arm as they separated, but stopped when he reached Castiel’s, fingers hooking between his and keeping him from withdrawing entirely. He even dared to reel him back in an inch or two when the angel refused to look at him, shame
“Come to me next time,” Dean said. Blue eyes flicked in his direction before sliding away. “Or Charlie. Or Sam. Or Jody. Or Claire. Cas… you spent thousands of years connected to and surrounded by the Hosts of Heaven but utterly cut off. Now, you’re surrounded by family, but haven’t been taught about the battles we’ll not only fight with you but for you. That isn’t your fault. It’s ours. We learn early to seek comfort from other people- hell, there are studies on how damaging it is to us when we don’t have that.” He shrugged, dropping his gaze. “Look how much it messed me up.”

His head snapped in Dean’s direction in a hot glare, lashes still damp and too blue eyes rimmed in red. “I am not a child, Dean.”

He stared back without flinching. “Pain doesn’t have an age limit, Cas. Charlie has a bad night? She comes and crawls in my bed. Do you know how many times I’ve rubbed Sam’s back until he fell asleep and he clung to me like when he was ten? Or the times I stayed up with Bobby so he wouldn’t sit alone with the memories of his wife?” His fingers tightened around Castiel’s, voice dropping, “How many times have you sat at my bedside and taken the nightmares away?” Blue eyes skittered from Dean’s. “Family means never being alone. I meant what I said the other night, Cas. You don’t have to shoulder… whatever it is you’re going through on your own.”

Dean looked around, gesturing with his free hand to the room and then accusingly at the table. “I don’t want to come in to find you sitting alone when you feel like you’re losing this battle. Not when you have us. Even if there were thousands of miles between us- I’m on the other end of the phone.” Reaching out, he cupped the side of the angel’s face- feeling for just a moment the granite resistance that belied the truth of what he was, before he was soft and malleable, letting Dean turn his head toward him so they were looking eye-to-eye. Dean tried to smile. “Why be alone when I’ve got space for two?”

A huff of laughter escaped Cas and he looked away with a wet smile. “You keep that up and I’m really going to embarrass both of us in a minute.”

_But it made you smile_, Dean thought. A poetic truth, for sure, but a truth all the same.

He stepped back, corner of his mouth pulling up into something hopeful as he tugged Castiel with him. “And we’re celebrating our first real Thanksgiving as part of a family together, right? Like, all of us. We kind of made this ourselves. Made it from us.”

Dean tried not to think too closely that they were standing in the kitchen, basically sort of holding hands, and having a _Hallmark_ moment at the dawn of a new day. The universe- or Chuck- had a very warped sense of humor. How was such a fractured human supposed to guide a lost angel?

But maybe that was why. Who better than a person who knew what it meant to be alone in a world full of people who couldn’t see you?

‘You are so damaged.’

‘Takes one to know one.’

He glanced over his shoulder to the last dregs of coffee in the pot, then flashed a grin at Castiel. “So, how about I make a fresh pot of coffee, some of that flavored kind Jody brought with her, then you and I will get started on our first Thanksgiving, yeah? Then, once Jody wakes up, you can bear witness as we get into ingredient chopping contests, because being a hunter comes with honed skills with sharp objects that would probably terrify normal folk- or at least make Sammy wring his
hands.” He winked. “We can teach you to cook, and then later, Donna and the girls can teach you to bake all the best holiday desserts. After that, we groan in the blissful misery of the overfed and watch Die Hard like God intended.”

They both turned as Jody shuffled around the corner mid-yawn, patting Cas absently on the shoulder in greeting as she bypassed them for the coffeepot.

Faltering, she held up the empty decanter, staring at it with narrowed eyes. ”I'm not hurt, just disappointed.” She sighed in defeated acceptance. “Dean, honey, get me that bag of coffee we brought. And the tin of hazelnut wafers. This morning is gonna need all the help it can get.” She pivoted, smiling at Cas. “Which, by the way, thanks for coming to help us. Ingredients and meal prep take longer than the cookbooks tell you. We need the extra set of hands.” She inclined her head toward the sink, seeming to not notice how Dean still had Castiel’s fingers folded into his, thumb brushing over the angel’s knuckles in reassurance. “I’d tell you to scrub up and grab an apron, but apparently, Winchester men have never thought to own one.” She waved dismissively over her shoulder. ”And the ones Donna brought are still in the wash."

With a final squeeze, Dean let their fingers fall away, his encouraging grin and wink met with a shadow of a smile from Castiel.

“Jody, we had this argument yesterday—”

She tossed a dish towel in his face. “Yeah, yeah, grew up on the road, yadda yadda, no permanent kitchen, something-something—” she offered a dish towel out to Castiel, winking, “aprons are for butchers and 1950’s housewives on sitcoms blah blah. Honestly, Dean, are you sure you didn’t grow up under a rock maybe near a road or something? That sounds more accurate. Cas probably knows about aprons—Dean Winchester, put down the hazelnut wafers or the coffee gets it.”

He licked a stripe up one of the chocolate-filled wafer straws, several more slotted between his fingers like the claws of Wolverine. “You wouldn’t ruin your own coffee like that.”

“Those are meant to be savored.” She swatted at him with the terrycloth towel. “I swear, this is why I have to hide them at home! You and Claire are birds of a feather. No more for you! No coffee, either. Make your own.”

“Oh, now, Jody, c'mon, you wouldn’t be cruel. We’re up at—”

She jabbed a finger in the air. “‘We’ nothing. Cas can have coffee, Winchester. And my overpriced wafers. You suffer alone.”

“I’m putting them back! I’m putting them back!” he insisted, shoving the cookies back into the cylinder.

She squawked in horror. “You licked one!”

“So what? I’m putting them back!”

Raking a hand through her hair, she turned to narrow an eye at Cas. “I’m making him your responsibility. Anything goes wrong, it’s your fault from this moment on,” she insisted, not even looking away as she and Dean traded swats to each other’s arms with the backs of their hands in hilarious child-like aggression that had Castiel chuckling and inclining his head.

“I will do my utmost, but make no promises.”

After a moment's consideration, eyes darting between them, she relented. “Alright, fine. Coffee for
three, but you have to make the next pot. Cas, I’m not sure your experience when it comes to coffee, but I’m about to introduce you to the wonders of French Vanilla.” She rolled her hips to bump his as he stepped up next to her. “Heaven may have invented all things, but humans learned to perfect them.”

Dean threw back his head on a laugh. “Oh, that is toeing the line very close to blasphemy- and to an angel, Jody.” He grabbed the bag of potatoes to be cleaned, peeled, and washed. “And here I thought I was ballsy.”

“Well, when it comes to flipping Heaven the bird,” she gave him a pointed look, “I’m pretty sure adopting one of their own and claiming ‘mine’, is pretty much as high as that bar is gonna go, kiddo. It’s all very Little Mermaid, I’ll be honest. Very Part of Your World.”

The potato Dean held under the water fumbled into the sink basin as he frowned. “Okay, one, there are worse Disney movies to be compared to, I’m sure,” he grabbed the spud, “and B, for Cas- being an angel- all singing parts fall to him.”

She patted his shoulder. “Trust me, Dean, for this analogy, there are no other roles you two would play.” He dropped the brown vegetable yet again, mind revisiting what he could remember of the movie as a hot flush spread across his skin and Castiel eyed them in confusion. She clapped the angel on the back. “While he sets about with that, I’m gonna teach you how to make coffee and then cornbread and dressing. And don’t be surprised if come Christmas you Winchesters end up getting some aprons.”

She shook her head, like this was somehow the most tragic thing she’d ever borne witness to, and seriously, how did Sam even think Dean was the dramatic one of the family when he was pretty sure they were all gonna end up with frilly, monogrammed monstrosities come the next holiday?

Fingers closing around the bottoms of the bottles, Sam pulled the antique milk jars through Heaven’s mirror, frowning at the liquid contents that shimmered in hints of amber and rose.

“What are these, Bobby?”

Their surrogate father was clean shaven and well-dressed, which looked wildly out of place with the Roadhouse as a backdrop.

“Thanksgiving present,” he groused, one brow raised. “I know you boys never really grew up with holidays, but there are a few with some set traditions. Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas. Family and friends tend to potluck or exchange food as part of the celebrations.”

Sam’s eyebrows were nearly to his hairline as he looked from the jars to the other man. “Which includes Heavenly moonshine?”

“Don’t judge what you’ve never had--”

“But have heard rumors of.” He pulled the stopper out to tentatively sniff. “Rufus mentioned you and he use to trade and bribe each other with this. Holy hell, Bobby. It smells like a dessert.”

“It’s meant to. After meal treat, if you will. It’s an evening one that was always nice.” He shrugged. “Made everybody a bottle this year. It’s easier to do in Heaven, since basically any ingredient I could need is always available at the store, or just appears in the cabinet if I don’t
much feel like gettin’ out. I’ve got several fruit and floral moonshine and wine recipes Karen likes, and I make ’em on occasion.” He tipped his head toward the bottle Sam held. “Figured Dean would like the apples in that one.” He glanced over his shoulder. “I should probably get back in there. You boys keep outta trouble.”

“Bobby, wait.” Dropping his gaze, he rubbed his hands together, thumb digging into the scar of his palm. “We heard about Hannah putting you in prison after you helped us that last time- and seriously, if we’d known we’d have done everything to get you out--”

He scoffed. “It wasn’t worth the effort, Sam.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t know, and never realized they would have consequences for, well, the already deceased, and just...” He paused, trying to find a way to put guilt into words. “We’re sorry. Really, we are. We didn’t even know until after the angels gave us this mirror, and by then, you’d already been let out and returned to your Heaven, and--”

“Son, if all this babbling is leading to you saying you think I hold it against y’all for how things turned out,” he said, “lemme cut you off to say I don’t, and you’re a damn idjit for thinking for a moment I would.”

Worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, he flicked a glance up and then back down again. “We never see you,” he admitted softly.

Bobby let out a long sigh, running a hand over his neatly combed- though thin- hair. “I need to get better about that. It’s not at you boys. It ain’t. I just...” He shrugged. “I don’t think about it. Aside from keeping my nose clean now I know Heaven’s got a prison for that, I never did much socializing before, Sam. You boys always came home to visit me, not the other way round, and what with being dead an’ all, not having to work cases...” Again, he shrugged, rubbing the back of his neck. “Just been pretty damn content to stay home with Karen. I read, she tends to flowers, we work out in the vegetable garden, and we spend the evenings sitting out in chairs on the porch. The concept of time is white-washed pretty so you don’t really notice it passing, see? Else residents of Heaven would start to feel like birds trapped in a gilded cage.” Chagrin, he offered an apologetic smile. “Ellen told me I was being a hermit, but I guess I didn’t realize how much. I’ll get better about coming to visit. It ain’t you, son, and I’m sorry I ever made y’all think it was.”

Eyes pricking as a knot in his chest unfurled, Sam bobbed his head, keeping his gaze focused on the imprinted bottles of alcohol. Bobby rapped his knuckles on the wood surface of the bar, making Sam look up to be met with a timid smile.

“You boys have a good Thanksgiving. Hear tell, you’ve got a house full.” He nodded. “Good for you.”

He smiled in return, wishing he could reach out and wrap Bobby in a hug instead. “We definitely do. Happy Thanksgiving, Bobby.”

Clearing his throat, he turned with bottles in hand and stilled at the sight of Dorothy standing hesitantly by the arch, lips rolled between her teeth and one foot hovering mid-step.

“I apologize,” she said as his eyes trailed over in the tie neck blouse matched with dress pants and heels, “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

Hazel eyes traveled back up to her face, the light brushing of make-up and the way her hair was carefully styled and pinned back and off her neck. She watched him expectantly, and he flushed hot, blinking rapidly and trying to tear his gaze away.
“No! Sorry. You, uh, you didn’t interrupt.” He gestured to her. “You look…”

She nodded with a roll of her eyes and a self-deprecating smile as she came into the room. “Horribly out of fashion, I know. Vintage, I believe is the term.” He hadn’t noticed the wine bottle until she set it on the table. “I do own a dress, mind you, for more formal occasions, but I felt petticoats were further still out of season than this.”

He stammered, “No, it wasn’t- I was just gonna-” he gestured, encompassing her head-to-toe, “Great. Y-you look great. Really. Very Vivien Leigh.” He coughed and willed his face to not be nearly as red as it felt. “Uh, what’s with the bottle?”

Head canted, she considered for a moment. “Vivien Leigh’s an actress, yes? Or, I suppose, was. I saw pictures some of the men would hang in their rooms. She’d be quite old by now.”

“She died, actually. Back in 1967; she was fifty-three.”

Dorothy raised a brow, corner of her mouth curling in amusement. “Fan?”

Chuckling an embarrassed laugh, Sam scratched the back of his head, dropping his gaze. “No, actually. I mean, I read about her, an actress with a mental disorder in a time when those things weren’t openly discussed or acknowledged, it was- yeah.” His gaze flicked to the door and then back. “Don’t tell Dean I said this, but even as a kid he really wanted Dad to look at him and see him. One thing we knew our dad cared about was the Impala, so Dean became obsessed with learning not just about cars, but about that car, and then other things from that year, even that decade.” Drawing in a deep breath, he remembered Dean trying so hard to get Dad to notice him, to please him- the look of relief on his face when he asked the right thing and got more than a one-word response. Back then Sam hadn’t known why the exchange made him sad. “He brought up things that happened in ’67, one of which was her death, and he and Dad talked for like twenty minutes about the disease that killed her and how the nation responded. The whole thing was really… yeah. It wasn’t until I was in college and doing a course on psychology that I even really thought about it. That I never had that desperate need for love and validation that he did- and does- because…” he shrugged, "I grew up having Dean.”

“And he saw you.”

He nodded. “Dean saw me.”

She sighed. “Childhood is the true fable in this life.” Forcing her face into a brighter expression, she tapped the bottle of wine. “This appeared on the Map Table a few minutes ago, in answer to your question. The card says it’s from Rowena and Fergus.” She slid it toward the bottles of hooch from Bobby. “Apparently there’s a theme in modern holidays. Friends of yours?”

“King of Hell and his mother, actually, though Rowena must have sent it. He took the name Crowley once he became a demon.” He drew the bottle toward him, trying to read the faded and cracked label of the seemingly well-aged wine. “A gift is… unexpected.”

“So not friends?”

“I’m not sure there’s a word for what we are, and all of us try very hard not to really think about it. We’ve all been enemies, but have also saved the world together, so it’s…” He set the bottle back down. “Charlie sent them a basket for Thanksgiving. I’m surprised they made a return gesture.”

“Or at least his mother did.”

“Or he did and signed the card like that to make us think it was her. He was mostly human once,
and has bouts of sentimentality that I think surprise even him, which he tries to mask as something else.”

He watched as she shifted to sit on the edge of the table, regarding him. “Charlie did mention them, actually, but as Crowley and Rowena. They maintain a semi-regular correspondence through electronic mail, I believe.”

Lips pulled back on a grimace, Sam pivoted and sat beside her. “Yeah, another one of those things I really don’t want to think closely about. I worry about Rowena taking on Charlie as an apprentice witch and what would happen if things ever went Dark Willow with her. It’s the hairstyle, I’m sure, and Dark Charlie was bad enough, but Dark Willow?” A shudder escaped him, and she reached over to pat his knee with a grin.

“I am going to pretend I understood that last part, but I can see why a witch might wish to take her on as a pupil. Charlie is exceedingly bright and sharp-witted.”

“There are good witches in Oz, right? Wait! No!” he exclaimed, off the table and grabbing her hands in an instant. “What lies to the East and West of the Impassable Desert and The Great Sandy Waste?”

She blinked a moment, mouth opening and then closing with a frown. “I, uh…”

“Okay, see, Dean and I were talking earlier about Oz and Narnia and Middle Earth, and the fact that technically- wait.” His eyes flicked rapidly back and forth for a moment as he recalled publishing information and the file regarding Dorothy’s dealings with the Men of Letters. His eyes lit up, hands squeezing hers. “You have never read Tolkien or Lewis!”

“Who?”

“Wizard of Oz was published in 1900. You got trapped in 1935, and The Hobbit didn’t get published until- oh my God,” he turned, pulling her by the hand off the table and toward the bookcases, scouring the shelves, “I cannot believe I get to do this. Charlie is gonna- this is awesome, I’m sorry, you don’t understand. Tolkien and Lewis were after your time. I grew up with Dean reading these to me until I learned to read them for myself.”

“It is a decidedly refreshing change to see this reaction regarding someone’s story but mine,” she sighed dreamily. He grinned. “I assume you were wishing to inquire if these worlds, too, exist?”

She accepted a book as he handed it to her and then dragged her to another section of the library. “I know there are lands beyond the deserts, but given we had wars of our own, I was none too keen to find out, preoccupied as I was. Land travel is possible, though more fraught with danger than most deem worthwhile. I suppose one could fly- cross the Wastes and circle around over the clouds to pass the sandstorms of the Impassable Desert.” She studied his face for a moment, and Sam had a moment to reflect that she really would make a beautiful queen, before she asked, “Would you like me to have the theory investigated? Perhaps the lands you mentioned inquired about?”

He did not whimper. He didn’t.

One of her brows raised at the sound, regardless, corner of her mouth curling in a smirk, before she patted a hand to his chest and turned away. “I’ll go write up a request now, shall I? I’ll be sure to inform you as soon as I know anything, is that alright?” she asked, peering at him over her shoulder.

He tried to retain some appearance of composure by propping his elbow on the bookcase, casual, nonchalant, no internal screaming at all… only to miss, stagger, and straighten to scarecrow
standards as she bit her bottom lip on a suppressed laugh.

“Can we just pretend that never happened?” he asked, clearing his throat and sort of just wanting the ground to swallow him whole.

Her smirk spread into a grin. “What happened? I only remember you lending me books and requesting a favor.” She threw him a wink. “See you at dinner, Sam.” Inclining her head toward the table, she added, “Don’t start without us.”

He waited until she was out of sight before letting his head drop forward with a whine of the miserable and defeated. Because, yes, of course, teenage awkward! Sam was still alive and well when face-to-face with not only a legend, but an icon people built statues and wrote poetry to honor.

Oh, he was never gonna live this down. How did he end up with such a smooth-talking brother, but was unable to make words or, you know, function, like a normal adult human when it came to women?

Cringing at the memory, he trudged from the room, head bent in shame as he headed directly through the halls and into the kitchen, only giving Dean a moment of surprise before he took the bowl Dean was holding and set it aside, before throwing his arms around him in dejection.

“So, apparently, you can want to die of shame and embarrassment,” he said. He felt Dean huff a laugh and relax. “I’d really like to do that now.”

Chuckling, Dean settled a hand on his back, another coming up to pat his head. From the dusting of flour that fluttered down, Sam knew it was intentional. “Let me guess: you talked to Dorothy?”

He could see Donna biting back a grin out of the corner of his eye, and at the table, Alex and Claire both rolled their eyes. No one appreciated his mortification.

“Dorothy freaking Baum, Dean. She led a revolution. She won a war. She saved an entire country! She is so damn cool.” He dropped his head further. “Plus, she is really pretty, and I can’t even make words.”

Dean patted his head again, more flour showering down, and Sam pulled a face before straightening with a glare, met only with Dean’s fierce grin.

“Trust me, Sammy, it’s adorable when you do that crap. Girls like it, don’t ask me why.” He shrugged. “I mean, yeah, she’s probably still laughing, whatever you did, but she probably thought it was…. Uhh, what’s the word?”

“Endearing?” offered Donna.

Dean pointed at her, brows raised. “Endearing.”

“I hate you.”

“Only because you are a teenage girl.”

“Hey,” snapped Claire, twisting. Her fingers were carefully lacing together a decorative lattice. “Do you want any of this pie or not?”

He balked. “Aaaannd teenage girls are the bedrock of society. Good on you, Sam, rising to the occasion.”
“You’re terrible,” Sam sighed, reaching up to ruffle flour from his hair as Dean washed his hands. “By the way, Bobby made us hooch from his Heavenly still, and Rowena and Crowley sent us a bottle of wine.”

“I was abducted and raised by vampires,” Alex cut in, “and even I know this is probably the weirdest family ever.”

Dean’s face scrunched, head canted to one side as he tried to connect the dots, until Sam shrugged and shook his head. “Charlie sent them a fruit basket from all of us. I think this is the return gesture.”

Dean twisted to Jody. “Are there rules on including the King of Hell and his witch mother for holidays?” He looked at Donna. “Do we have to?”

“It’ll be nice!” chirped Donna.

Pursing her lips, Jody rinsed her hands in the sink. “It’s already started. I think you’re kinda stuck with it.” She glanced at him sidelong. “And it’s better than risking offending them.”

Dean spun to point up at Sam. “They’re not invited for dinner.”

“I wasn’t going to.” He cataloged the faces. “Where are Cas and Charlie?”

“Cas is getting a nap,” answered Dean, turning away and busying himself wrapping asparagus in strips of bacon. “Charlie’s gone all Arts and Crafts making a Do Not Disturb sign for his door,” he turned, holding up a finger as he pointedly made eye contact with each person in the room, “but rule of thumb: if his door is shut, leave him alone unless it’s an emergency. Even then, knock.”

Claire frowned, opening her mouth to speak, or probably question what inappropriate moment Dean had walked in on to implement that rule, but was silenced with a glare from Jody. Sam studied the tension in the way he held himself until everyone nodded their assent. He made a mental note to ask him later what put Dean in Protective Mode regarding Castiel, if it was the angel’s continued odd and reserved behavior.

Sam probably needed to address it with Cas himself. Dean was best suited to be there for him, and was probably the one Castiel would choose to go to with whatever he was dealing with, but he wanted him to at least know he was there, as well. Maybe it wasn’t just Dean that could learn to be a better friend.

He could understand what Bobby meant earlier, forgetting the need to make effort and put yourself out there as available to others and taking for granted them coming to you or knowing they could. Friendships, relationships, family… all of it took more time and self-investment than he’d ever considered. People had to work on these things- consistently- to maintain what a mattered.

“By the way,” Dean began with such careful deliberation as to break through Sam’s thoughts and make him look at him, “Max texted me and asked if it would be okay for him to drop by for dessert and coffee,” he said, turning his head to met Sam’s eye, changing the casual statement into a question hinging on Sam.

He’d handled the whole thing badly, he knew. Granted, Max still put him on edge, as well as whatever it was about him that Dean was keeping secret, but for all that they’d seen, there was no reason to distrust his intentions- toward Dean, at least. Their entire relationship seemed to revolve around coffee and conversation, which he would never have thought of regarding his brother, but it was a novel idea as well. Like Dean had settled some, grown into himself or unwound enough to
have casual interactions without any strings attached. It was nice, actually.

“That sounds great,” he said, trying on an awkward smile. “Though you may want to warn him we have a full house.”

Donna snapped her fingers. “Oh! We could play board games after dinner!”

Sam watched as Jody bumped the blond with her hip and jerked her head toward Dean. “Pretty sure we’re more likely to end up passed out watching a movie like Dean suggested.”

“Well, then I’m looking forward to it. Assuming you boys have room for one more guest? I mean, I know I ran a little late for the party, but...”

“The more the merrier,” he nodded at the sheriff. “Jody helpfully pointed out to me how much underutilized space we have here. Pick a room.”

“Meanwhile,” Dean cut in, waving Sam away with a distracted air, “dinner will be ready in...?”

“About an hour and a half,” Judy supplied.

“Well, then I’m looking forward to it. Assuming you boys have room for one more guest? I mean, I know I ran a little late for the party, but...”

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“About an hour and a half.” He rolled his head to give him a disapproving scowl. “So how about you go get a shower and dressed, Sam. You're a mess. I raised you better.”

Sam rolled his eyes, unable to fight a grin playing across his face as he gave his brother an affectionate shove. “Jerk.”

“Brat. Go.”

“Want me to wake Cas on the way?” he asked, hooking a thumb over his shoulder.

Dean and Jody shared a look before his brother shook his head. “Nah. Let him sleep. I’ll check in on him in a bit. You go get pretty for dinner.”

Sam grinned. “And thus begins the first Winchester Thanksgiving.”
Eyelids drooping as the credits rolled, Dean groaned and sank lethargically into the couch. Head on his shoulder, Charlie hummed her agreement. Sam was splayed across his armchair, legs outstretched.

“I didn’t know I could eat that much,” he told the ceiling.

Dean cracked open an eye to glance at him. “You got that tall for a reason, Samsquatch.”

“I am so full,” announced Claire. She sounded quite pleased about that fact.

He looked where her head was in his lap, body twisted so her legs rested on the arm of the couch.

“So we’re doing this again at Christmas, right?”

Donna was curled up asleep in the other armchair. From her position sitting on the floor, back against the couch, Jody nodded and rallied herself to her feet, quilt in hand.

“Christmas is at my house. Hope you like pumpkin pie and wassail.” She dropped the quilt onto Claire and gently woke Donna. “Time to tap out and go to bed.”

A chorus of good-nights followed them from the room, Claire pawing the quilt away from her face, before letting her eyes drift shut again.

Inhaling a sharp breath, Dean tried to become one with the couch, fairly certain he was a formless puddle incapable of movement. “Bed sounds like too much effort.”

A wry grin pulled at the corner of Sam’s mouth, teeth flashing. “Don’t forget that 6 AM wake up call, Dean.”

He groaned and Charlie snickered. “Dude. No. No.” He struggled to lift his head and glare. “I am gonna be too tired and too full to go run in the morning. Waddling will be involved. Cas, what are you doing?”

The angel had drifted in like a silent shade; carefully going unnoticed despite proximity.

Head angled, Castiel pressed down the shutter button with a soft click. “Alex gave me a camera,” he said, voice serene. There was another click as he shifted his view of the room. “For posterity.”

“Cas,” groaned Claire, pulling the quilt to hide her face, “that’s like kicking us when we’re down. You are totally cheating.”
He browsed his photos with blatant disregard. “Consider it the price for gluttony.”

“That’s the Thanksgiving tradition!” she argued, peering out over worn cotton.

Dean and Sam pointed to her.

“She’s got a point. When was the last time any of us got a real family holiday?” Sam asked.

Charlie lifted a hand. “Years.”

“Years,” chorused Claire, hand lifting.

Dean and Sam followed suit with “Years” and “Never” that made Castiel lower the camera, head angled like he was considering. Dean was pleasantly sleepy enough to just watch him as the other man puzzled in the privacy of his own head.

“This is- it’s a family holiday.”

Sam frowned. “Ye-eah.”

A soft, affectionate smile warmed Dean’s features as the pieces clicked together.

“No, this is… it’s my first family holiday.” Blue eyes drifted over their faces, before settling on Dean’s. He had to tamp down the desire to hug him. Just invade his space with an arm wrapped around him and another in his hair. “You’re my first real family.”

Silence fell heavily over them, broken by a whimper, caged and small, from Charlie and followed by Sam wiping a hand over his face.

“Oh God, dude, that’s begging for a group hug.” He shook his head, eyes falling to Dean as if expecting him to act on the casually dropped emotional bombshell. “I can’t. I'm too full.”

“Please, don’t,” said Cas, expression dubious at best, “I understand those are very awkward and generally just... uncomfortable .”

Dean grinned at him, the arm stretched across the back of the couch patting the space beside Charlie’s head. “C’mon, Cas. Have a seat. Let’s take a look at those pictures everyone’s been taking today.”

As he came forward, Charlie shifted, making space for him between her and Dean. Sam rallied himself together, dragging his body up and out of the chair to stand behind the couch, leaning on his arms as Castiel settled and Claire untangled herself from the quilt to twist around so she could see the screen.

“I’ll start at the beginning.”

The girls left the next morning with hugs and goodbyes that simultaneously made Dean’s heart swell with fierce affection and ache with every beat.

It hurt so much to watch people leave. To let them go and trust they’d come back. There was something fearful in watching their vehicles pull away; Claire’s hand trailing out the window.

“The bunker’s gonna be so… quiet now,” Sam said.
Dean glanced at him, the line between his brows and the sad eyes that made him think of a puppy left in the rain. There wasn’t anything to add to that because Sam was right. The bunker was going to feel cavernous, with too much space and silence.

Dean sighed and clapped his brother on the shoulder. “I think I’ll go check on Cas.”

He’d said his goodbyes earlier, not wanting to be there to watch them drive away. Dean could understand that. He’d wanted to do it himself. It made it easier.

Given his breakdown over the holiday, having to say goodbye and live in the space left behind by family… Dean worried.

He trailed past the library, waving Sam off to change for a run. He checked the kitchen, bypassed the garage and the archives, ducked his head into Cas and Charlie’s rooms, then peeked in the Rec Room- waving to Charlie and Dorothy as he did. Finally, he made his way to the Workout Room, half-finished though it was.

They’re removed the defunct equipment and deathtraps, loading them up into Castiel’s truck and taking them to a dump. Sam had taken mirrored closet doors and removed the frames, before cleaning and mounting them on one wall. The hook for the punching bag was empty, as was the space where treadmills would go, but there was a bar weight bench in one corner with a weight tree and dumbbell rack. There was even a yoga ball and a collection of medicine balls in the adjacent corner.

It was incomplete, but it was turning into something resembling a gym, what with the sparring matt they’d laid down and the yoga mat Cas was currently using.

The sight of the angel in the middle of a pose had Dean still. Feet planted, he was bent backward until his hands reached the mat, body in a perfect arch like a backbend kickover he hadn’t completed. His thin cotton pants rode low on exposed hip bones, the grey tank top that had come untucked in the front pooled around his ribcage, the ink of some tattoo just barely peeking out.

Dean’s tongue darted across his lips, mouth and throat suddenly dry. Castiel’s eyes were closed, the frown of his mouth and crease of his brow smoothed into something peaceful and calm. He had a moment to wonder at that, to stare in awe at the easy display of strength that Cas made look graceful, his body one sensuous curve, before Cas shifted, slowly lifting his legs up, holding them at an impossible angle with serene ease.

Oh, that should not be hot.

Coming there was a mistake, Dean’s very presence invasive.

He shifted, stepping back on one foot to creep away, but blue eyes snapped open, turning to look directly at him. Words died on Dean’s tongue as Cas flexed, drew his legs up and over until the pads of his feet rested on the floor, straightening with fluid ease.

Oh boy. That was... yeah.

“Dean.”

Mouth hanging agape, Dean shook himself, stepping back as Castiel turned toward him. “Sorry,” he blurted, “I didn’t mean- I just wanted to check on you. I didn’t mean to interrupt.” He gestured futilely at the mat and then Cas’ comfortable attire and naked feet. There was something obscene about Castiel’s feet being exposed. He realized it was the first time he’d ever seen them. “That was… kind of amazing, actually. I really didn’t mean to interrupt. I’m sorry.”
Blinking, Cas crossed his arms, twisting to frown at the mat, then back at Dean. “This? You aren’t interrupting.” He gestured, fingers elegant in thoughtless motion. “You’re even welcome to watch if you’d like. I don’t mind.”

Heat pricked at Dean’s face and ears in a rush. “No, that’s…” he swallowed, “I know that’s important to you. To think- or not think,” he quoted. “We all need those things.”

“You were checking on me?”

Parroted back, Dean flinched, remembering Sam’s concerned hovering. Even with the best intentions, it felt patronizing and oppressive.

“Not checking. Just… with the girls leaving and the bunker suddenly a lot more empty, on top of, y’know, a bad couple of days,” he shoved his hands into his pockets, dropping his head on a shrug, “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Being honest and open was hard as hell, but it was at least getting easier, less forced- though still embarrassing. He’d made a promise and meant to keep it: he wouldn’t stop trying to be the best friend he could be.

Worse than the embarrassment was constantly battling to squash the inappropriate desire to back Cas against a wall, carding fingers through dark hair and slotting their mouths together. Or for Cas to.

Further was how deceptively possible it seemed, the fantasy so tantalizing in its realism that it left a visceral wound that never healed, constantly aching in sharp reminder of what Dean couldn’t have.

Cas stepped through the doorframe into the hall, a crease between his brows. “I’m sorry I worried you.”

The silence that settled was awkward, Dean unsure how to extricate himself gracefully.

An itch crawled under his skin, an annoying insistence he’d been in one place for too long and needed a hunt yesterday. Something to hit or stab or shoot in the face, but he needed a singular violent focus with mild desperation.

Bobbing his head, Dean turned. “Again, sorry to interrupt. Have fun.”

“Dean,” Cas called. He looked back, brow raised in question. Castiel’s tongue flicked out over his bottom lip, drawing Dean’s eye. “I was planning to ask if you’d like to do something today. To go somewhere.”

‘Like, on a date?’ pressed doggedly against the back of Dean’s teeth. He curled his fingers to dig blunt nails into the palm of his hand. This didn't use to be so much of a problem. Want and hope had never warred so hard against understanding and acceptance. It was like a cruel game, his mind presenting him with a lie, the bait in a trap made of disappointment.

He’d rather they never be anything than for him to try and inevitably fail, losing not only Cas but their friendship in the process. He wouldn't risk that. Couldn't. What they had meant too much already.

“Sure. You have something in mind, or just restless?”

“More restless, I think. I thought perhaps somewhere warmer?” At Dean’s nod, a smile split Cas’ lips. “Great. Is… now too soon? I would only need to change.”
“Now’s fine. I didn’t have plans.”

Head angled, his closed-lipped smile became lopsided in unspoken amusement. “Good. You *may* want to remove your socks and shoes.”

He was gone from sight before Dean could even ask, the sound of displaced air and torn paper filling the corridor. Snorting a small laugh, Dean dug out his phone and shot Sam a text that he and Cas were going for a walk ‘somewhere warmer’, before pocketing it and returning to his room to remove his boots and socks per Cas’ advisement.

Hopefully, it wasn’t a desert. They wouldn’t be in danger, and popping up at an oasis would be hella cool, but there was a distinct difference between ‘warmer’ and the realm of ‘God has abandoned us’ hot.

Castiel never seemed to notice the temperature, insulated as he was by grace, and though Dean felt a modicum of concern, it seemed rude to actually come out and *ask* how Castiel defined *warmer*.

He chuckled and pushed to his feet. As long as it made Cas happy the location didn’t matter.
Castiel couldn’t fight the smirk at Dean’s squawk of surprise as the world shifted and water rushed around their ankles. He’d expected it, but it was still fun to witness the hunter jump as though the ground had betrayed him.

The waves receded, making their feet sink as sand was pulled and shifted. Cas smiled as Dean overcame his shock to stare in awe at their surroundings, turning in a circle to take in the curve of the secluded beach and too blue ocean, the lush greenery and tropical forest a wall behind them.

“Oh wow,” gasped Dean, eyes wide as he took it all in. “You weren’t kidding about somewhere warmer.”

The waves rolled in, over his toes and around his ankles in a wash, small minnows swimming with the tide. Drawing in a deep breath, Cas turned to look over the water, tilting his head back and eyes drifting closed. He savored the warmth of the sun on his skin. Beneath the water’s surface, he could sense countless lifeforms drifting with leisure, could feel the birds and beasts in the forest behind them, various birdsong and animal cry filling the air. He felt the breeze catch under a bird’s wings as it took to the air in flight.

*This* was peaceful.

He wanted to peel off his shirt and lay on a towel in the sand as he knew humans did, to just be still with the warmth pouring down on him with the sounds of the comforting lull of the waves and the birds overhead. He could probably fall asleep like that, wouldn’t that be novel.
Cool drops of water flicked the side of his face, making him blink and turn to see Dean’s easy grin and dripping fingers.

“Don’t space out on me, cowboy.” He flicked more droplets. “I don’t want you to forget I’m here and leave me behind.”

Dean had rolled up the bottoms of his jeans to just below the knee, tan calves and the sharp juts of his ankles, then the delicate skin and bones of perfect feet. His eyes trailed back up, over the freckles of Dean’s cheeks and nose.

“I could never leave you behind,” he said, meaning every word and interpretation. How could Dean not already know this?

Angels had tortured him for it. The demons mocked him because of it. Heaven scorned him. But anything, everything, any agony they could dream, Castiel would happily suffer to stay by Dean’s side.

If he were to be remade a thousand times in a thousand lives, he’d forever hurl himself from the stars to be caught in Dean’s arms.

How could he not know how much Castiel loved him? Could he not see it like a stain of ink under his skin? It thrummed and stretched and swirled, pulsing all around his form and reverberating inside his chest, twisting his stomach in fluttering knots.

“I thought you might appreciate the change of scenery,” he said, gesturing in futile attempt to encompass all the vibrant life around them. “I’ll admit, I’ve never been here before and now regret that very much.”

Dean nodded, studying the sandy white beach. “Just some towels and a cooler? Dude, I might never leave.” Green eyes focused on him, head tilting. “Where are we anyway?”

“St. Thomas.” When there was no reaction, the corner of his mouth curled into a smile. “The Virgin Islands.” Dean whistled low with newfound appreciation. “I’m led to believe such locations are dream vacation spots, and that cruises often come into port here. Rather than adventure, people come for romance and relaxation, which I can easily understand.” He swept his gaze over the water. “It’s beautiful here. Would be beautiful even at night.”

He had a list at home, notated in a journal with dog-eared pages, all the locations and things he’d like to experience as humans did, wishful thinking of what it would be like to take in all they had to offer through human eyes, taking comfort that in another life, another world, he might have such things.

A mountain cabin, drinking coffee on the porch in the early morning hours, or stretched languorously in bed, too content and sleepy to move away from the warm body beside him.

Days spent in the blissful heat of the sun on such a beach as this, and nights spent dining at local restaurants and dancing under strings of festive lights.

Those were his two favorites, entertaining the thought in the back of his mind like a guilty pleasure. What would it be like? To be properly human, with a home and someone to love?

He turned to look at Dean. What would it be like to be loved by him?

He bent, pulling up the wet hem of his pants, willing them dry so that he could roll them as Dean had.
"I wish you’d told me to bring shorts," Dean said, grinning. “Dude, this is… this place is great. God, Sam and I use to talk about going to the beach. Just drive until we reached the nearest coast and take the day off, laying out in the sun or cooling off in the water.” He shrugged, mouth twisted. “Never got to.”

“Why not?” he asked, moving to walk along the shore so the waves and foam still skimmed over his feet. Dean fell into step beside him.

“I mean, at first, there was looking for Dad, then Azazel, then the Apocalypse, Apocalypse Mark II, so on and so on, and somewhere along the way I guess we forgot.” He rubbed his jaw. “Always too busy trying to survive one more day.”

Castiel canted his head, lips pursed. “I wonder what a cruise is like.”

“Your guess is a good as mine. The Titanic ended badly, and The Love Boat looks boring as hell, but from what I’ve seen they're supposed to be fun. Lots of food and drinking; I’m guessing there are things on the boat to do or else everyone would get bored. Laying out by the pool and swimming.”


Dean flashed him a grin, pointing. “Just don’t forget the sunscreen in case you end up napping in the sun. Can angels sunburn?”

Cas dropped his gaze to his hands, turning them over to examine both sides. It was startling to realize he had no idea. Occupying a vessel meant the end of normal human functions and necessities like requiring food and sleep, but exposure to the sun wasn’t harmful unless prolonged, and in all his years on earth, no matter the vessel, Castiel couldn’t think of a single instance where he’d had such an experience. He wondered if he’d have even noticed it as he was before. Probably not, so focused on the mission and obeying his orders to the letter, with his vessel a weapon to be wielded same as his sword.

“I don’t know.” He looked over at Dean. The sun accentuated the lighter shades of his hair. They probably would turn blonder were they to spend the day out on the beach. “We should do that.”

Pink spread across his cheeks beneath his freckles, eyebrows shooting up. “Go on a cruise?”

“No,” Cas shook his head, “though that does sound nice. What you said about spending a day at the beach. We should plan for it. All of us could spend the day doing what we’ve never had the chance to before, bringing towels and food and whatever else we would need.”

Green eyes lit up, Dean’s face split into a grin. “Dude, yes.”

Cas nodded and they continued their walk along the stretch of beach. Occasionally, Dean would dart off, splashing in the waves to get a closer look at something swimming beneath the surface, waving wildly for him. “It’s a sea turtle, Cas! Like, just right there! Sam would flip!” or cackling as he scooped handfuls of water into a spray at Castiel who laughed at his antics.

Dean was naturally attractive, effortlessly beautiful, but especially like this, with him happy and carefree in the sun, water glistening on his skin and eyes impossible shades of green against the too blue water. The Greeks and Romans would have thought him a god. They would have built temples and left offerings in his name. Artists and sculptures of the Renaissance would never have been
able to capture his beauty, though they’d have tried.

Castiel loved every exquisite inch of him. It was possibly blasphemy, but for all of his mistakes, all his missteps, errors, and well-intentioned poor choices, Cas could never regret this. To him, Dean was perfect.

Not perfect as a statue in his image might be: cold, lifeless, without flaw. No, Dean had many a flaw. He was rough and wild and violent and brash. He was a force of nature with a single-minded determination that no one, not even the forces of Heaven or Hell had ever been able to stop. He was brilliant and beautiful, kind in ways that were forever unexpected, given freely and without expectation.

Dean was perfect because there was nothing in him or about him to be improved upon. Castiel would not wish for a single change to be made. Even his Father could not improve on what he was, and that was certainly blasphemy, but he found he didn’t care. Not when Dean was smiling at him like that.

Dr. Grey was right. Castiel was holding back out of fear, refusing to make any decisions for himself, because what if they were the wrong ones?

Then he would make them, and he would have his newfound family by his side when he did. They were the constant in the equation: unshakeable, irremovable. They were and would be for today, tomorrow, and on into the future just as the world spun on its axis without fail. And he had that.

Dean splashed more water at him, half-hearted and with an expression Cas couldn’t interpret, something veiled in his eyes and careful in the way he was smiling.

“So what brings us out here, Cas?”

He frowned, puzzled by the question. “I thought it would be nice. I thought you would like it.”

“No, I do, buddy,” he insisted, hand pressed flat to his chest, “but I’m more concerned with whatever it is you’re running away from.” Castiel stopped walking and Dean did the same, turning to face him. “You go on walks when there’s too much going on in your head. Yoga is for when you need a solution to a problem or to shut your brain up entirely. You may not need sleep, but that doesn’t mean the exhaustion of whatever you’re going through isn’t evident.” Cas lowered his gaze guiltily, unease making him shift. Dean lowered his head, reaching up to scratch the back of his skull. “So, I’m guessing we’re out here because you made a decision, and all this,” he gestured to the beach and the forest they had to themselves, “was suppose to make breaking the news easier.”

Castiel flinched, sliding his gaze off to the side.

It didn’t make sense that this was hard, nor that it felt like a secret to keep hidden, but it was and it did, and no amount of telling himself that was illogical changed the weight of the information twisting in his chest.

But not telling Dean felt the same as telling him a lie, and Cas had sworn to never do that again, no matter the stakes.

And it wasn’t a secret. It was just… private. A profound exposure and vulnerability he desperately wanted to protect like an open wound.

But this was Dean. Dean whom he loved more than Earth itself, more than the sun in the sky or its warmth on his skin. Dean- a visceral, inseparable part of him Castiel would do anything -
sacrifice anything— for.

It wasn’t a weakness. Or a flaw. It didn’t make Castiel broken or reduce his value.

Even if it felt like it did.

Even if admitting to it made it worse, made it real.

Drawing in a breath, he lifted his gaze to Dean’s. The hunter held himself stiff, arms folded over his chest as he waited for the bomb to fall.

“I’m seeing a therapist.” Dean blinked. “Charlie goes with me on my scheduled appointment days and waits for me in the lobby until they’re done.” There was no need to tell him that Charlie saw the same therapist on a different day. That was her secret to tell. “I didn’t have feelings until after I met you, and I didn’t know what to do when they were more than I could bear. There was too much and I was— I wanted—” his voice cracked, remembering the first time he’d wished an end to his existence. So much more had happened since then. He tore his gaze away. “A couple of months ago, Charlie found someone she thought uniquely qualified to help or at least talk to. Having no viable argument, I conceded to go.”

A heavy sigh punched out of Dean’s chest and a hand came up to wipe over his face, entire body sagging.

“God, Cas. I thought you were leaving us.” He placed a hand to his chest as he sucked in a breath and released a full-bodied sigh that made Castiel stare. “Sorry, just— God, I was bracing myself for the worst and—” he gave a rapid shake of his gesturing toward him, “I didn’t mean to interrupt. Go ahead.” His brow furrowed, mouth turned down at the edges as another thought occurred. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Because I can’t bear the thought of you looking at me with anything like disappointment.” He frowned. “Why would I leave?”

“Because of you,” he said and wondered why he had to. His reasoning should be the most obvious thing in the world, but Dean’s wide eyes and rapidly flushing face said otherwise. “Dean… you taught me to think for myself, grounded me through defying everything I’d ever known, stood by my side against my family, and have generally made it clear your home was mine. I’ve been ordered, forced, manipulated, threatened, and tortured into subjugation, but you are the choice I have always made. I always had a choice with you.” He looked away, rubbing idly at his arm. “It’s why I didn’t want you to know.”

“Know what, Cas?” He held his hands out. “You’ve got thousands of years of baggage? So what?”

He turned to look at him, their eyes meeting. “That I know how to be a tool, but not a person.” Dean winced. “I have walked this earth bringing cities and civilizations to their knees. Garrisons of angels put their faith in me, demons of hell cowered in my wake, and gods of past and future whispered my name with reverence and fear. I have laid siege to my enemies and wrought devastation, I’ve annihilated entire species, and would stand alone on the front lines of a new war right now were you to but need or ask me…” He wet his bottom lip, eyes studying the other man’s features. “But I’m only just learning how to want things selfishly. To recognize and name the things I feel. I barely know who I am or what I want. I can’t answer her most basic questions because I never thought about any of it before. I have nightmares and panic attacks a-and anxiety
because my grace no longer processes experiences as input data like an impartial field report.” He swallowed. “I’m a wounded soldier, Dean. One that defected, alien in my own skin… but I know home is here, and everything - all of it- starts, stops, and ends with you.”

Hands tightening around her ankles, Sam scowled upward as much as he dared, trying desperately to maintain his balance and remain immobile- which would be a lot easier with minimal cooperation.

“Charlie, stop moving!”

“You stop moving,” she snapped, and he could feel as she lost her balance again, grabbing the shelf in front of her and glaring down at him. “You are absolutely unreliable scaffolding, do you know that?”

“Me? You won’t stop wiggling!”

One hand braced on the shelf, she gestured to the archives at large. “Do you want the blueprints and schematics or not, Sam? I have to find them in order to retrieve them.”

She reached for a box, yanking it toward her and effectively throwing him off balance so that he swayed, stomach muscles tightening as he tried to be an extension of her. His shoulders hurt where her socked feet were planted, and though shoes would hurt more, he was certain they would have been a better idea, allowing her more balance and greater stability.

They should have rethought this whole thing, but there they were, searching through the long-abandoned archives proper, searching for blueprints to the bunker they called home, with Charlie standing on his shoulders because they didn’t have something as simple as a damn ladder.

“I think this is it,” she announced, paper rustling as Sam willed himself into something sturdy, thinking of oak trees and wide branches. “Or at least a starting point. Sam, how are we going to get it down?”

They should have just waited until they got a ladder. A proper, sturdy ladder with steps made of aluminum so that they could search the archive in a conducive and more dignified manner.

“I didn’t think that far,” he admitted. His impatience was to blame, he knew, like an itch under his skin he had to scratch. He’d wanted to know right then what the designs to the bunker were and why he’d never considered it before. They lived in a labyrinth of hallways and rooms but had never really explored more than the portions they lived in. “Is it safe for you to just drop it?”

She looked down at him, glowering through a halo of red hair. “No, Sam. Seriously. Last time you went digging through boxes, you found the key to another dimension! I am not going to drop it.”

“Well, we’re already here-” He knew that was a ridiculous argument for sure, and God, he was possibly channeling Dean here with his impatience and poorly thought out plan. “The only other option is to go in blind, Charlie, and I’d rather not, given that they kept things like transdimensional keys in boxes and the Wicked Witch of the West was trapped in the bunker.”

“I’m still not dropping it. We can just wait for Dean and Cas to get back.”
“They are probably going to be gone all day.”

“Then we drive into town and buy a ladder, like sensible people.” She scowled at the box, and he bit back the retort that he wanted the blueprints right then. It was cabin fever. He and Dean had never been stationary like this, had never gone so long without a hunt, and force of habit to solve a mystery was clawing at him. She drummed her nails against the aluminum shelving- they had aluminum shelving but a wooden ladder, what the hell?- determined gaze sweeping across the room. “We buy a ladder and then I start digitizing everything in this place. I swear to God, it’s like living in the Stone Age.” Her gaze dropped down to him again, the overhead lights illuminating her hair like a burning sun. “Physical blueprints, Sam.”

“What are you doing?”

Sam craned his head around, then sharply adjusted his grip on Charlie, hands surging upward so his fingers dug into her thighs as she jerked off-balance.

“You are killing me, Charlie,” he hissed. “Please don’t fall. I can’t catch you.”

“You’re the one who didn’t want to wait for a ladder,” she threw back at him, sighing in relief at Dorothy standing in the doorway. “Thank God you’re here. Please help us get these boxes down.”

Stepping beside him, Dorothy raised her hands. “Why aren’t you using a ladder?”

He tried to jerk his head toward the corner where the dry-rotted remains were piled like kindling. “Fifty plus years of neglect destroyed the ladder we had.” She looked at it, then to him. “Practically collapsed when Charlie tested her weight on it.”

Taking the box with care, Dorothy grinned. “Gaining weight, Red?”

“You will shut your mouth right now! I am lithe and slim and delicate!”

It was only Sam’s grip on her leg that kept her from trying to stomp her foot. The knowledge that Charlie, of all people, was going to have bruises in the shape of his fingertips on her thighs was horrifying in ways that had his brain folding in on itself.

“Look, can we not right now?” he asked. “This is precarious enough.”

Chuckling, Dorothy set the box aside and wordlessly accepted the others that Charlie passed down to her before assisting Sam in lowering the redhead safely to the ground.

“Now may I ask what exactly it is the two of you are up to?” She slid her hands into the pockets of her khakis with a smirk. “I mean since I’m helping you with it.”

Her hair was in a braided knot, and he wondered idly what she would look like with it down. He couldn’t picture it. Depending on how long she stayed, Charlie might talk her into a current style of dress, but Sam still couldn’t imagine Dorothy wearing a more modern style.

“Jody got me thinking about how big this place is,” he explained, “and how much of it we aren’t utilizing, because, well, the Men of Letters was an organization. We haven’t even explored all of the bunker; entire hallways have only been glanced down. The gym was a more recent find- only because it was right next to the Rec Room.”

Her brow swept up. “Somewhat negligent of a hunter.”

He shrugged. “The place had been sealed. For decades. With wards and runes against just about
anything and everything.”

“Except a wicked witch,” she countered, head angling to one side with a frown. “You’ve really never explored? Not even the other levels?”

They looked at her sharply. “What other levels?”

Her brows shot up further. “What other- you’re serious?” Running a hand over her hair, she grabbed one of the boxes and turned to leave. “Come on. We’ve got work to do.”

The waves against the shore weren’t the soothing backdrop they’d been earlier, though the water still snaked around his ankles as they walked the shore in pensive silence.

Castiel thought he should be more… something. Upset. Hurt. Angry. He should feel more than the numb detachment that had settled over him. He probably would, had it not been for the way Dean had tried to smile when he’d turned away and suggested they walk some more.

He’d made a misstep, but couldn’t pinpoint where, maybe from the beginning. He should never have told Dean, never brought it up. He was an angel and a warrior, yes, but he wasn’t broken, even if damaged. He didn’t want Dean to see him as broken, as something fragile he would have to treat delicately. It would be insulting.

Cas would probably threaten to throw Dean off of a cliff for that, actually. Or a very tall building, at least. Better, he’d teleport him to Japan or the middle of a pasture in Germany and leave him there. The hunter was ingenuitive, and doubtless had at least two weapons on him at any given moment- three if he were wearing his boots. His safety wouldn’t be a concern, and he would find a phone and way to contact them. Eventually.

He hadn’t decided whether or not he would force Dean to take a plane to get home or go get him, when Dean looked at him- or, glanced at him and then down, frowning at the damp sand as it passed beneath their feet.

“Why’d you wait weeks to tell me?”

“I told you.”

Dean spun, placing a hand in the center of Castiel’s chest. Cas frowned down at it, then back up at Dean who stared back with something akin to incredulity and horror.

“You really thought I’d be disappointed in you?” The arm fell slack by his side. “Cas, you’ve never done anything to disappoint me—”

Cas gave him a flat look. “We both know that isn’t true.”

“Name a time! Name one time I have ever been disappointed by you!”

“One? Which one, Dean?” he demanded. “Should I start alphabetically, categorically, or just by the sheer amount of shock it must have brought you? I’m assuming it became routine after a while, but let’s start at the top with Purgatory and a ring of holy fire, shall we?”

He had the satisfaction of watching Dean recoil, color draining from his face before the satisfaction twisted into something sour and vile that made him want to turn and run, hating himself for the words he couldn't take back.
“I wasn’t…” He swallowed. “I wasn’t disappointed, Cas. ...I was hurt.” Now Cas winced, yanking his gaze away and wishing for all the world he’d never thought to tell Dean. “I was angry… at you, yes, but mostly at myself.” He snapped his focus to Dean, the hunter’s expression remorseful if anything, but that- “You turned to a demon rather than to a friend, so what kind of friend must that have made me? Yeah, you were absolutely to blame for your choices, but I also had a hand in what led you to make them, and the fact remains that rather than ask me for help… you accepted his.”

“No, Dean, it--”

“Then, as if I didn’t learn from that? Take it as a lesson I could learn to be a better person and friend, especially to the angel who threw away everything to do what was right? I told you to leave when I was forced to choose between my family and what was right. Continue the cycle of me being possibly the worst friend right to the part where you thought you mattered so little to me you were willing to say ‘yes’ to Lucifer like it was a reasonable option because I never let you know you mattered.” Green eyes searched his face. “But you were afraid I’d be disappointed in you?”

Castiel wanted to undo the last hour. The last week. The years that had passed since that day in the barn. Go back, do it again knowing what he knew now. He’d do so much differently, avoid the two of them ending up broken and standing on a beach contemplating every misstep that led them there. Visit the Dean of the past under the guise of an unfamiliar face and tell him one day he’d meet an angel who would throw away everything for what was right. They would face demons, monsters, angels, and gods, saving the world one battle at a time, and even as the angel could feel their connection to Heaven fade, could feel feathers fall one-by-one from their wings… He wanted to tell Dean that one day an angel would fall in love with a man, but that the ending had not yet been decided.

He opened his mouth, only to have Dean jab a finger at him, glaring. “Do not apologize to me, Cas.” His teeth clicked shut. Dean swept his hands over his face and behind his head, eyes a dull green staring at Castiel like he wasn’t sure what to do with him. “Cas, I don’t think you get what you mean to me, and honestly, I don’t even know how all to tell you.” His hands fell down to his sides. “I told you before I failed you. Told you how losing you was the breaking point for me. That I plan to spend the rest of my life making up for it, be a better friend, to be… to be what you deserve. I meant it. This is not all on you. I’m as much to blame.”

Machete by her side, Dorothy regarded the iron door. “You really never noticed a giant metal door inside your own home?”

Double-checking his memory of the blueprints, Sam flexed the fingers on his gun, comforted by the extra ammunition in his leg pocket, as well as the knives sheathed to his belt, the Beretta hunting knife at his thigh.

“We never even came down this corridor.”

“Giant. Sealed. Door.” He pinched his nose. “In a bunker meant to survive Armageddon.”

“Could have sealed itself when the angels fell and it set off all the bunker’s alarms,” Charlie offered, leaning on the baseball bat she’d wrapped in barbed wire and kept by her bed. "Or when the witch got free."

Dorothy stared incredulously at both of them. “Did you not ever question why the bunker was empty when you found it? Surely you didn’t think all the Men of Letters were conveniently in one
location on the night Abaddon decided to murder them?” When he opened his mouth, she cut him off, “Further still, you didn’t think to investigate every inch of your home even after discovering the Wicked Witch and myself had been trapped in it for decades?”

“To be fair,” argued Charlie, gesturing wildly with her index finger at the vault-like door, “it’s enchanted to go unnoticed unless you already know it’s there, Kansas. Most of the bunker is.” She rolled her head around to look at her. “Because -oh wait- they had a door that sealed off just the lower levels? Where they kept the labs, containment cells, and forbidden Black Magic reading? The big library? I’m sure it’s just a coincidence the door is sealed and enchanted to be ignored.”

Blue-gray eyes scowled at her, then flicked to Sam. “We should probably wait for Dean and Cas to get back. Eyes in every direction.”

Stepping to the keypad, he let his fingers hover as he checked the numbers he’d scrawled on the inside of his wrist. “Whatever- if anything- is sealed away down there, it’s been down there for decades. All we would find would be skeletal remains,” he assured, punching each number in sequence. "Not to mention the door could have sealed in order to keep something from getting in rather than out. And anything trapped- if anything- would be dead by now."

A beep followed as the light changed from red to green and mechanics within the walls groaned to life.

“Unless it’s a zombie,” countered Dorothy.

Charlie grinned, adding, “Or an army of zombies.”

“Or a ghoul.”

“Or an army of ghouls.”

“Or a wraith.”

“Or a demon.”

“Oh! Or an archdemon.”

“Nice one,” Charlie commended with a snap and point of fingers. “Can’t dragons go into hibernation for decades? What if it’s a dragon?”

Settling back with his gun up and trained on the door, Sam chanced a glare at both of them as a crack of space appeared, increasing as the door slid open with a moan. “Enough! The door’s opening, in case you didn’t notice, and anything or nothing could be on the other side.”

Moving into stance with her bat over her shoulder, Charlie clicked her tongue. “We definitely should have waited for Dean and Cas.”

They ended up stripping down to their boxer briefs for lack of swimsuits to wear, their clothes in neat piles on an outcropping of rocks that had formed a tide pool. Dean had marveled at the starfish and other creatures making it their home before he’d started shedding clothes with abandon, grinning in the face of Castiel’s confusion.

Then they were floating on their backs out in the middle of the impossible blue, and Castiel wondered if alongside his grace he’d also gained a soul in the time he’d been human (he thought
so; Metatron had alluded as much), and if he’d be allowed a heaven of his own in passing (please for the love of everything yes)- if they didn’t strike him down for his trespasses. Honestly, it wouldn’t surprise him. The Host would happily condemn him to Hell, and personally deliver him there for his transgressions both perceived and suggested.

But. But if he were to be allowed a heaven, if he had a soul- and he thought he did, oh he hoped he did- he thought his heaven might be this. Floating on the water in lethargic bliss, content, reliving this memory with a Dean fabrication by his side.

If heavens were recreations of a person’s happiest memories, then his would be made of moments with Dean.

They would need to come back another day, to plan for when it would be hotter and they had the appropriate swimwear, with food and whatever things humans deemed necessary for a day on the beach. He wanted to swim around the coral reefs- given he was an angel, there was no reason he couldn’t swim as deep as he liked, or hold his breath an infinite amount of time. He could bring an underwater camera and take pictures, and then afterward nap on a towel in the sun.

He and Dean could do more of this. Just floating and existing in peaceful serenity.

Water shifted and splashed before fingers brushed his arm. “Hey.” Cas shifted, angling his body to tread water as Dean was doing. His expression was neutral, but his eyes cautious and hopeful. “When’s your next appointment? You go weekly, right?” He nodded, watching Dean shrug. “If you want, I could go with you. L-like to just some of your appointments. I know you said Charlie goes with you, but--”

“That would be nice.” The relief on Dean’s face was gratifying, as was the genuine delight in his eyes. “I am glad you aren’t upset about this. I genuinely worried you would see it… Human society as a whole looks down on counseling, and certainly, you and Sam stick to a rather strict policy of repression, denial, and alcoholism as a way of coping.”

Dean blinked sharply, sputtering out a surprised laugh. “Damn, Cas. Way to rake me across the coals there.”

“I didn’t mean it as such.”

Cas studied the way droplets of water clung delicately to his eyelashes and rolled across his skin, his wet hair dark and ruffled from running his fingers through it.

How had more angels not fallen from grace when humans were such divine art? Their father had crafted them as such, so surely it was expected as inevitable. He had even ordered them to love humanity. There were many types of love, and not just of selfless service.

Heaven had no prison before angels dared to follow their father’s words, even if only to intervene in human lives to grant prayers and miracles that had not be authorized. The punishment for falling in love with a human had always been far more severe and permanent, leaving no need for a prison cell.

His brethren had been all but chomping at the bit to inflict harsh judgment on him time and again, but perhaps he’d lowered himself enough and for so long that seeking him out was somehow far enough beneath them they wouldn’t deign to do so.

If he did have a soul, perhaps it put his actions outside of their jurisdiction.

He brought himself closer, resisting the desire to reach out and brush a hand along Dean’s ribs as
he spoke. “For much of my time here, you have been my guide, and you are set in many of your ways only because it is the way things have always been done. If society looked down on something as simple as the need for support, I knew the hunter world must scorn it. Different has always been found offensive. It clashes with habit and expectations. Humans find it… grating.”

“Cas, I don’t care that you’re in therapy. Good for you for going.” His mouth opened, then shut as he cast his glance away. “We could probably all use it, truth be told.”

“You’re welcome to inquire about sessions with Dr. Grey,” Cas offered and had to bite back a smile at the thought of all of them ending up having family sessions in her office.

It shouldn’t have been funny, but the impossible image struck him with a quiet hilarity, as did the certainty that they would surely benefit from it.

Dean snorted and shook his head. “No, Cas, we’re good. I, uh…” He cleared his throat, eyes dancing away. “Max and I actually end up talking… a lot.” His face was a dark crimson, ears turning pink. “I think it helps.”

Castiel really wanted to kiss him. A pointless, jealous urge. He wanted to wrap his arms around his shoulders with a hand in his hair dragging him closer, smiling into the kiss. He wanted the feel of Dean’s arms around his body, fingers pressed into skin. He wanted to see Dean smile and know it was because of him.

“I’m glad you have him as a friend, Dean.”

Dean’s mouth curled in a fond smile, then faded into something dark and sullen. “Yeah. Really kinda wish I’d been friends with him sooner.” His expression shifted quickly, a mask slipping into place as he pushed a hand forward, splashing Cas’ in the face. “C’mon, dude. We probably better get back before Sam starts to fret because we’ve been gone so long.”

Cas rolled his eyes, pushing his body easily through the water. “I find his concern very unlikely,” he answered. “But know I do plan for us to come back here. Preferably soon.”

He watched Dean grin and splash at him again before the hunter began a lazy breaststroke toward shore.

Castiel had to have a soul. He didn't think it would be possible to love him so much without one.
Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed it! Please remember to be kind and leave a comment on all fanworks you enjoy—length and coherency no object. Smiley faces and keyboard smashing will make someone's day same as a long comment. Comments take a moment, but the effect lasts much longer.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Hiiii!!!!

1) Sorry for the delay, as some of you may know, I ended up having to drop everything and move in with my mom for a month to play caregiver on top of working a full-time job, so that was a lot of fun and meant absolutely no time for decent amounts of sleep, much less fic writing, reading, or anything else. Then I was sick with a fever for about two weeks from the sheer exhaustion of pushing myself when there was nothing left.

2) WARNING: There is graphic depictions of violence atypical of the show in the chapter, as well as implied threat of sexual assault, because monsters are monsterous.

3) At the suggestion of some people, as well as with their help, there will be a slight change as far as updates, a system being put in place where you get things such as BTS writing and excerpts, as well as getting to read chapters 3-days or even a WEEK before it's posted on AO3. You can find more on that here.

4) Also, if you follow me on tumblr, you may remember when I was writing last chapter and all the things felt like one big chapter, but I knew I would need to break it up for sheer volume? Yeah, that was last chapter and this chapter. Which would be a LONG chapter, so be glad I didn't XD

Again, I am extremely sorry for the delay-- real life has been extremely brutal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The change of location from wide open space to the corridors of the bunker made Dean’s ears pop, the phantom memory of waves echoing as the silence engulfed them.

Fingers brushed light and tentative against his forearm, Castiel regarding him with a canted head.

“Thank you,” he said, “for today. I had fun.”

Dean smiled. “It was your idea.”

“I still had fun. And I’m glad you agreed to go.”

His fingers itched to lace through Castiel’s. He had to remind himself that it hadn’t been a date-even if it sort of felt like one. God, he felt like a teen again, all giddy nervous energy, trying to scratch up the nerve to kiss someone for the first time.

It wasn’t a date.

It wasn’t.

His only reference for dating was from movies and tv, and what would a date with Cas even be
like? How would that work, with the two of them living in the same space? Kiss him goodbye, then
go about the rest of the day trying to act like normal? Or did the date sort of just... continue once
they were back in the bunker, maybe to watch a movie or something, right up until one of them
called it a night? Then did he kiss him goodnight? Could he?

Castiel was looking at him expectantly and Dean realized he’d missed something.

“Sorry, do what now?”

“Should we tell Sam and the others where we went or leave it as a surprise for when we go back?”

“A surprise, definitely. I want to see Sam’s face.” Unable to resist, he stepped in closer- too close
were it anyone but Cas- studying his features. “So... uh, y’know, whenever you’d be okay with me
going with you...”

Blue eyes blinked, a blush spreading across Cas cheeks as his eyes dipped and drew back up. “To
the beach?”

Dean laughed, voice warm and hushed, “That, too, but I meant your appointments.”

“Oh.”

“Just let me know, okay?”

“Tomorrow morning?” he asked, a hopeful pitch at the end. “We could get breakfast and then--”

The angel’s gaze dropped again, tongue darting over his bottom lip. When he lifted his head, one
hand reached for Dean’s, just the tips of his fingers snaking through to hook them together. Dean
was certain he moved impossibly closer, well beyond a minor breach of personal space.

Any closer and there better be kissing involved.

“Thank you for going with me,” he murmured into the space between, making Dean’s gaze fall to
the pink mouth forming the words.

If he were to lean in, he didn’t think Cas would stop him. Might even meet him halfway. What
would his lips feel like when pressed to Dean’s?

“Anytime,” he tried, voice hoarse, and he honestly had no idea what they were talking about
anymore, free hand reaching forward.

“And I still say it was an asinine idea,” an exasperated voice insisted, making Dean jerk away,
snatching back his fingers as Sam, Charlie, and Dorothy rounded the corner, weapons in hand and
looking varying levels of annoyed. “It was reckless--” Dorothy chided.

Sam lurched to a stop, eyes widening. “You’re back.” And, oh boy, that was a caught red-handed
guilty face.

Dean’s scowl became a glare as he left Cas’ side to move toward them. Charlie at least had the
sense to try and shield her weapon -a bat wrapped in barbed wire??- behind her back.

“Sam.”

His brother lifted a hand, gun still held in his other. “Before you get mad, it isn’t as bad as it
looks.”
“Really?” he challenged. “Because Dorothy seems to think it was pretty damn reckless even with all of you armed to the teeth. You wanna explain why and what you were up to?”

Charlie leaned to the side to glance around him. “Did we… interrupt something?”

Heat crept up the back of Dean’s neck and to his cheeks, shoulders tensing as both Sam and Dorothy glanced past him, curious. “No. We just got back from a walk. Why are all of you suited for battle? Charlie, is that a bat wrapped in barbed wire?”

Presenting it, she let her eyes settle fondly on the weapon. “This is the best weapon made by man. It has extreme sentimental value… I call her Vera.”

He frowned, gaze flicking between Vera and Charlie. “Do you really or are you just quoting Jayne?”

“Oh no, I do,” she assured, setting the endcap on the ground, with her hands folded over the knob. “But it’s no less true.”

Dorothy nodded, expression one of impressed appreciation. “She took out a lot of winged monkeys with that thing. Sea Devils, too.” She inclined her head toward the weapon with reverence. “Respect Vera.”

Dean held up a hand because really that was a conversation for another day. He pointed to Dorothy. “Aside from Vera, you’re carrying a pistol and a machete. Sam, you’ve got your gun,” he angled his head, “couple of small knives- good for throwing-, and a thigh sheath holding a damn hunting knife.” Cas drifted up beside him, head tipped as he considered their gear. Settling his weight on his back foot and folding his arms, Dean asked, “So you wanna get to the part about what you’ve been up to?”

Charlie was staring down with a steadily increasing head tilt. “Why are you wearing flip-flops?” Everyone dropped their gaze just as she jerked her head up. “And why are your pants like that?”

The heat that had receded now flooded back, because dear God, could she not let it go? He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t change the subject.” His brow swept up. “Still waiting, Sammy.”

“Erhm… it’s complicated, sorta,” Sam tried, hunching in on himself like a scolded child.

Dean pursed his lips. “It’s really not. Cas? What did we do today?”

“Nodding, Dean elaborated, “I got green apple sherbet topped off with kiwi. Which, as it turns out: is damn amazing- if you don’t mind tart. Cas here got chocolate and vanilla topped with honey and cinnamon. See? Easy. You were saying?”

“The bunker’s bigger than you thought,” Dorothy told him, brows arched and expression cool. She looked a step away from shouldering her way in front of both Sam and Charlie as a human shield. Maybe as their guard dog. He met her glare head-on. “A lot bigger. Except most of it was enchanted to dissuade you from noticing or opening locked doors, or apparently even questioning why there were so many bedrooms, yet so few places to sit, say, in the kitchen or the library.”

“Seeing the blueprints was enough to break the enchantment on us,” Charlie added. “So we went exploring.”
Dean wiped his hand over his mouth and jaw. “You found and opened enchanted, locked doors and went exploring?”

The girls gave sharp nods, Dorothy’s brow held high in defiant challenge. Sam’s confirmation was more sheepish, expression crumpled with guilt. Something like a growl emanated from Dean, lips peeling in a snarl and flash of teeth.

Waving flippantly, Dorothy shifted her attention to carefully manicured nails, disinterested in the continued conversation. “Of course, Dean. Charlie and I won wars—Charlie won one by herself, and you two have saved the world numerous times against forces above and below. The three of us were not only ample, it was practically excessive.” Sam turned his head to look at her, hazel eyes widening as she picked lint off her sleeve. “Not that we found anything. Alive, anyway.” She spared him a glance. “It’s been some half a century, at least, surely Corpse Cleanup can wait until tomorrow? We’ll probably need a wheelbarrow.”

Both Dean and Cas snapped their attention to Sam, who held up his hands. “Not people!” he insisted. “The corpses are in the containment cells and lab cages. Experiments and prisoners.”

“That is a horrible way to die,” Cas lamented, then narrowed his eyes, “and cruel if intentional. Why were there no human corpses?”

Biting his bottom lip, Sam shook his head. “That we don’t know.” He looked at Dean. “When you and I first came in the bunker, that was an initial thought: why everything looked as though the Men of Letters just up and left in the middle of whatever they were doing. I assume when Abaddon attacked the other group during initiation, someone hit a panic button that alerted them here.”

“Poughkeepsie?”

Sam shrugged, stuffing a hand into his pocket and still looking like a reprimanded child. “There were meals half-finished. A chess game abandoned. Books, papers, research just left where it was. We cleaned it all up, remember?”

He did. The bunker had gleamed like a promise come to pass, an invitation offered on a platter, but with the fingerprints of ghosts marring the edges. Looking back, it was uncharacteristic how they’d simply moved in and moved on. They’d never looked deeper, and God, that practically screamed all the levels of wrong. There had been runes etched into floors, walls, doors, and archways, many they didn’t know or recognize, and they’d never even thought to question what they meant. Now that he thought about it, he remembered the way his eyes seemed to slide past corridors and doorways they’d never opened, as if they weren’t there or weren’t anything to be concerned with right then, to come back later. Followed by immediately forgetting them.

“The bunker full-on Obi-Wan’ed us!”

Sam nodded. “Exactly. And until acknowledged and questioned, it continued to work, but when Jody pointed out the unused space we already have, and Dorothy asked us about the other levels, plus we actually looked at the blueprints… we never even saw any of it.” He gestured to the angel by Dean’s side. “Even Cas didn’t notice.”

A glance over at Cas was met with a shrug that had Dean nodding, rubbing a hand over his jaw as his mind turned over. While good, of course, it raised all kinds of questions that had his hunter instincts kicking into high alert. There were suddenly unknown factors and elements about the place they called home and laid down their heads at night. They’d been safe to present, but that was before doors were opened and enchantments dispelled.
“Okay.” Green eyes fixed on hazel. “Where are those blueprints? I want to know every nook, cranny, and hallway of this place before we go back in there. The door you went through- did you shut it? Lock it?” Sam nodded. “Good. We need to strategize and then go back in fully prepared this time-” he glared at Dorothy, “not half-cocked with two members of this family and team missing. Sam, how could you-”

Rolling her eyes, Dorothy moved between them. “It was my idea, Dean, and once you’ve led not only armies but also a kingdom, you can question my judgment, but until then,” she turned, throwing a wink and a smile at Sam, “I think we’re done here.”

Muscles in his jaw flexed as Dean clenched his teeth, honestly having no viable retort that wouldn’t make him sound like an overprotective mother with a toddler.

“And the reckless and asinine idea?” he demanded over his shoulder.

She chortled, the delighted sound echoing back to him. “Ask them about the ladder.”

“Cleanup starts tomorrow,” he barked, glare snapping to Sam, “first thing.” Castiel’s elbow subtly bumped with his and Dean stiffened, then waved a dismissive hand. “Or eventually-” he pointed to Sam, “but I’m not telling her that.” He looked at Charlie. “She always like that?”

She blinked wide, innocent eyes. “Refusing to back down when someone’s being overbearing? Yeah. She’s like that.” Her attention flicked between them, and if she hadn’t figured it out, she at least suspected. “You two got plans in the morning?” Her gaze locked with Castiel’s. “Breakfast, maybe?”

Dean felt hot under his skin. Part of him wondered if ‘breakfast’ wasn’t a code word and if they actually ever went to breakfast as well as Cas’ sessions.

“Yes,” Castiel confirmed. “Did you want to still come?”

She conveyed her disinclination with a gesture, and Dean kind of wished she hadn’t. Even if Cas didn’t need her there, Dean thought he might. He was already nervous.

“Nah, me, Sam, and Dorothy can keep looking through the archives for any other blueprints or records regarding what’s down there. First, we’re buying a ladder.”

Cas looked at Sam. “Will you show me the blueprints you found? Also the door in question? I want to see what runes protected it.”

Sam nodded vigorously, tucking his gun away and jerking his head to the corridor they’d come from. “Yeah, sure. I-it’s down this way.”

Dean snagged Cas’ wrist as he moved forward, stopping the angel mid-step to meet the hunter’s worried expression. “Do not go through that door without me.”

A smile pulled at the corners of Cas’ mouth and he inclined his head. “Of course, Dean.”

Their hands fell away- by now, a frequent enough occurrence as to drive Dean quite literally up the wall, and make the itch under his skin an insistent clawing. He watched them round the corner and disappear, anxiety twisting viciously before he pivoted and stalked away, unsurprised when Charlie fell into step beside him. To her credit, she waited until they reached his room before speaking.

“So.” Her attention dropped and bounced back. “Flip-flops, huh?”
He kicked them off and put them in the closet, shooting her a glare. “Vera, huh?”

Shutting the door and propping her weapon in the corner, she moved to sit on his bed. “Oh, my day was very boring, I promise. Yours, on the other hand, I am very curious about.” She placed a finger to her lips, head tilted to the side and face scrunched as though thinking very hard. “A walk in a warmer climate- involving flip-flops I am pretty certain you didn’t own before today- plus, what was it? Ice cream and sherbet? Followed by plans for breakfast in the morning. Meanwhile, we’re here in snow-covered farm country.” A dramatic pause as he took a seat. “Well! Didn’t we have an interesting day.” He rolled his eyes, and she pivoted so she was sitting cross-legged in front of him. “So tell me: did he stall until after the ice cream to tell you- I’m assuming not, given how okay with the information you seem- or did he tell you while the two of you were on a private stroll someplace remote- I’m guessing a beach given the sun you got?”

He reached up to touch his face, then glared at the wide grin it gave her, dropping his hand into his lap.

“You’re making it sound like something it wasn’t,” he told her flatly and was rewarded with wide eyes of innocent confusion. He loved that kid way too much. “I guessed as soon as he asked me to do something with him this morning.” When she raised a skeptical brow, he glared harder. “This has been coming for weeks, I just didn’t know what and I actually thought he was planning to break the news he was leaving- permanently.”

She gasped, face paling. “God, no, Dean- if I’d realized you thought he was even considering that… I’d have told him to tell you sooner. No, Dean, no.”

“I am aware of that now, thankyouverymuch.” He waved away her next comment. “Then, afterward… I dunno, I figured we ought to have one fun thing- I mean, the rest of the day was fun, but overshadowed until the information came out, you know? I wanted to try and fix it, so we went for ice cream, and had to pick up footwear first. No shoes, no service.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Apple sherbet with kiwi, though?”

A guilty grin spread across his face and he slid his gaze away. “Cas couldn’t decide what to get, so I offered to let him try whatever I got. I thought it was gonna be a hilarious disaster. Oh God, you should have seen his face, Charlie. It was priceless.”

“Really?”

“I don’t think he’s ever had anything sour before,” he laughed. “He had no idea what to think or if he even liked it.”

She chuckled. “Little bit too much, huh?”

He couldn’t fight the grin on his face, chest swol with affection. “There are no words for what all his face did.”

“You are so mean!” She slapped his thigh.

He shrugged, unapologetic. “I took pity on him and he tried it again. He liked it that time, once he knew what to expect- still preferring his, though.”

“And did you try his?”

“I know what vanilla and chocolate taste like.”
“Mm-hmmm, topped with almonds and… honey, I think?”

“Cinnamon and honey,” he corrected, “though that does sound good.” She continued to stare, eyes alight with a determined and knowing glint until he caved under the pressure. “And yes, okay?” She burst into triumphant giggles. “When he offered for me to try his, I did, but it’s not what you’re making it sound like!”

She held up her hands, shaking her head. “Dean, I haven’t said anything!” She continued to laugh. “I’m just happy for you two, is all.”

“Mm-hmm.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “Why do I sense you’re up to something?”

She rolled her eyes. “If I were up to something, I’d be trying to get Sam to take Dorothy on some sort of date. Coffee and a bookstore.” She slapped his leg with a sharp sound. “Did I tell you that traitor gave her Tolkien and Lewis before I got to? He can pine for all I care!”

“What are we even talking about anymore?”

She jabbed a finger in his chest. “You and Cas learning to be actual friends. Like normal folk.” The memory of fingers tangling made Dean drop his head, remembering how very close they’d come to… something in that hallway, and God, where had that even been going? What would have happened after? That wasn’t… he wasn’t… Heat seared across his face and to his ears in a swift rush that had Charlie’s brows shooting up, ducking her head to glimpse his features. “Or maybe becoming something else?” He flushed darker and she gasped, fingers coming up to her mouth before she shot forward on her hands. “Oh my God, Dean! Was this a date? Are you dating?”

“No!” he exclaimed, dizzy from how fast all the blood just as quickly drained. She sat back, startled and pouting. He held up a hand, struggling because honestly, he didn’t know either. God, it was all so confusing. How could Cas mess with his head so much? “We… We’re just… I don’t know.” He threw up his hands. “I don’t know.”

“That’s vague and unhelpful.”

He scowled. “So is our every interaction, trust me.” Collecting himself, he tried again, bringing his hands up to emphasize with. “He’s my best friend.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“I would do anything for him.”

“Okay.”

He looked at her helplessly. “That’s all I’m sure of.”

“Whoo boy.” She raked a hand through her hair.

He slumped back against his headboard, head resting on the ledge behind him as he stared at the ceiling. “He’s my first real friend, Charlie. He’s an entirely different species,” he laughed, a sound made of broken glass and sharp edges. “I don’t know how to have a healthy… anything with anyone. You’ve seen me and Sam,” he insisted, lifting his head to look at her.

“I’ve read the books,” she countered.

He shoved a hand at her. “Then you know how co-dependent I am. Sam, at least, doesn’t have it as bad, because- I don’t know- I raised him relatively healthy, but me? I’m a basketcase! I sold my
soul to save my brother! I ripped him from his life at Stanford so I wouldn’t be alone. I could have searched for Dad on my own, but I didn’t want to. I told Cassie about me because I didn’t want to be alone. I tried to play house with Lisa- who had only been a weekend hook-up! I let my brother be tricked into saying ‘yes’ to being possessed by an angel in order to keep him alive, and kicked Cas out of the bunker to save Sam!” She swore in elvish under her breath and he deflated on a sigh. “I don’t know if I’m even being a good friend, or if all of this is transference: Codependency from Sam to Cas, then going one step further into something even more screwed up, with lines blurring and being totally inappropriate because I don’t wanna be alone--”

She held up a finger. “I’m gonna stop you there.” He dropped his gaze to his lap with slumped shoulders. “You have a valid point, Dean, you do. And, normally, that might be a legit concern… But look at your relationships with everyone around you.” He frowned at her. “Look at how much healthier your relationship with Sam has gotten. Look at your relationship with me. With Jody and Claire and Alex and Donna. Look at you and Max.” She searched his face, voice soft as she encouraged, “Now compare them to your relationship with Cas. With your interactions. And maybe- maybe- one of these is not like the others?”

When his gaze fell again, she scooted closer until their knees touched, taking his hands in hers. He stared at them, the muscles of his jaw ticking. “I forget sometimes where you came from. How far you’ve come. I take for granted more than I should other people’s baggage or lack thereof. There’s a difference in co-dependence and wanting to build a life that is shared with someone else, and it comes down to knowing what you want- just because you want it and could have it- and what you need because you never learned to function without it.”

She squeezed his hands and let them drop. “So, maybe we just take today as a win, because it sounds like it was an awesome damn day, and I am super jealous of warmer climates and ice cream. Mine came with bruises and dead bodies.” He chuckled, a wry grin stretching his mouth. She shifted off the bed, patting his knee. “Also, I’m gonna get you some books to read. Boundaries. Co-dependency. Healthy relationships. Might make you feel better when you see for yourself how far you’ve already come. I’ll give you my Kindle to read them on.”

At the door, she grabbed Vera and turned back to him. “I’m just gonna give you my Kindle. Read all the things you want; I can add more on request. Though tread careful: it’s got everything from lore to fanfiction. You can delete what you like,” she said with a wink as she pulled the door open.

Her absence a moment later had him digging out his phone and hitting speed dial. “Garth? …hey! Yeah, great to hear you, too. …No, no, we’re good, honest. Nothing’s wrong. I just, uh…” He walked from the bed to the door and back. “Y-you got any milk run cases nearby I could take?”

The door to the Impala jerked open just as he put the car in reverse, Dean balking as Sam dropped into the seat beside him with a slam of the door.

“-Sam? What?”

Brows raised, Sam asked hopefully, “You found a case nearby?”

“How did you-?” His gaze flicked between his brother and the door into the bunker. “You’re not going!”

He rolled his eyes. “Dean. It’s gotta be a cakewalk if you were sneaking off to go alone.”
“Aren’t you suppose to be busy with blueprints?”

“Dorothy and Cas are going over all the protectives and spells that are worked into the walls, floors, and ceiling throughout.” He held up his gun and patted his still sheathed thigh. “Look, see? I’m already prepared.”

“To wait in the car?” Sam glared. “It’s one vampire, Sammy. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

He shrugged, lips pulling down at the corners. “Okay. I’ll go let Cas know you went out on a hunt. Alone. Without telling anyone.” Hazel eyes slid over to him in a sidelong glance. “I’m sure that’ll go over well.”

Eyes narrowing on a growl, Dean punched the gas, pulling out of the parking space. “You... are evil.”

Sam grinned, eyebrows waggling. “Slytherin. There’s a difference.” He patted the dash with a grin. “Now, c’mon. We can buy a ladder on the way back.”

The only thing Dean had time for was the silent wish that the cracking, splintering sound wasn’t coming from his own body as he was hurled across the barn and crashed through a stable stall. The support beams were neglected and dry rotted, but sturdy enough there was going to be serious bruising and pain later, even his winter coat wasn’t enough to take the brunt of the impact.

Sam got off easier, flying through the air until he toppled and rolled disjointedly into a pile of hay. Body screaming its numerous grievances, Dean pushed to his hands and knees, shaking dizzying vertigo from his head. His belt shifted, rubbing against the raw skin at the small of his back and waist where the metal had raked like claws.

“Sam?” he demanded through grit teeth.

His ungainly brother scrambled toward him, hay clinging to his clothes and stuck in his hair. “I’m here. I’m okay. Dean--”

“I’m fine,” he grit out, pushing up to his feet. “Garth’s intel sources could use some work, though.”

Sam straightened to full height, throat bobbing on a hard swallow as he rolled his shoulder.

A vampire was simple. Depressingly simple. Dean could have done it one-handed while putting gas in the Impala.

This was a nest of vampires.

A nest of vampires that were working with Crossroads demons.

Demons set up the bait and trap, deals got made, the nest got fed, and the contract collected in a neat little loophole skewering souls on the rack like a succession of slamming doors.

He snagged his machete, twirling his wrist as he tried to decide which was worse: that these might be the demons that exulted in inflicting pain for the sheer pleasure; or if they were sniveling pencils pushers where ‘people’ and ‘souls’ were just numbers in a quota.
Had Dean remained in Hell originally, or even remained a demon later, Hell would be his by right. He was the direct successor of Alistair as his apprentice. Cain had passed on his mark and the First Blade to Dean. That was two mantels on his shoulders. He’d thought about that through the years; certain Crowley had, as well.

The only reason Crowley had a throne and a title was that Dean never challenged his authority, never claimed what was his by right. Dean allowed Crowley to be king.

Even Sam, as both one of the children chosen by Azazel and as Lucifer’s vessel, could very well challenge Crowley’s claim to the throne, and between the two of them, Hell certainly belonged to the Winchesters.

Crowley knew that. It would explain why he’d been so quick to ally himself with them throughout the years. Maybe being tentative allies was better than having Winchesters for enemies.

Maybe Crowley knew they could lay siege to Hell and win.

As some half dozen vampires swaggered closer, unaffected by the biting cold or the snow outside. His fingers twitched to curve around the leather bound handle of a bone blade- or even a scalpel. He’d always had *so much fun* with the small blades.

Swallowing, Dean rolled his shoulder. His gaze flicked to the red whorl of smoke that curled and coiled with anxious anticipation through the rafters, meatsuit deposited somewhere for later collection. They didn’t have weapons that would work on a demon freed of human confines. As far as he knew, nothing could hurt them while in smoke form, though they could certainly do some damage his back reminded him.

“Y’all are gonna need some more guys,” he said, cocky grin sliding into place. “Told you you should have stayed home, Sam.”

One of the vampire’s eyes shifted to red as his second set of teeth slid down in violent sequitur, and yeah, great, demon-possessed vampire, because why not?

“It was this or the gym.” His fingers flexed. “This was easier.”

The demon-vampire smirked, lines of his body swaying in a sensual predatory swagger as he came forward. “Always wanted to sink my teeth into a Winchester,” he purred.

Dean frowned, stepping back. “Do you want to *bite* us or *screw* us? I can’t actually tell.”

Sam’s gun arm snapped out, firing off a shot that caught the demon between the eyes, slamming its head back. “Either way: answer’s ‘no’.”

As the demon staggered and regained his footing, Dean shot forward and into a batter’s stance, body twisting with a swing of the machete, “We’re gonna insist,” he growled, honed edge of the blade biting into flesh to tear through muscle, sinew, and bone in a spray of red.

The demon tore from the body in a noxious billow of smoke just as Sam threw two of his knives. They caught vampires in the throat, sending them staggering back, choking and clawing at the weapon as they struggled to draw wet, gasping breaths.

Dean was tackled with the force of a linebacker, caught low and lifted up and over, making Dean slip out of his coat in the process. His back screamed on impact, white sparks flickering at the edge of his vision even as he twisted and rolled away from a pitchfork being brought down at his head.
As the vampire yanked back on the rusted tool, Sam fired a shot right over his brother’s shoulder into the head of another, slamming her head back and giving Dean the half-second he needed to twist and turn his weapon on her. Her head hit the ground just as Dean dove out of the vicinity of the wildly swung pitchfork.

The demon overhead swept down and caught Dean full force mid-dive, throwing him hard across the barn, once more. He twisted and curled best he could so his uninjured side hit the barn doors. Even with the time’s neglect, they held firm under the impact, hinges squealing and wood cracking.

“Dean!”

Curled in on himself and cradling his arm, Dean pushed to his knees, swimming vision trying to focus on Sam, perilously close to being overwhelmed. He swore, struggling to his feet and raising his gun in his left hand. He really ought to have pushed learning to shoot with either hand equally.

“Sammy!”

His brother spun out of the way, but backed himself into a box stall. A vampire eagerly followed with a snarl. Dean fired his shots. His weakness obvious, bullets catching in shoulders and skimming the sides of vampires’ heads, buying precious time, though.

In the stall, Sam grabbed an old shovel, slamming the blade against the side of the vampire’s face, and then down across his back, sending him sprawling. Planting his boot between the vampire’s shoulders, Sam brought the tool up and rammed it back down with all his strength, the cutting edge dull with time and neglect. He did it again. And again. Blood splattered denim and leather as he fought to sever the head from the neck. He managed just as another vampire lunged at him. Instinct had him swinging, clipping the vampire’s face with a wet snap-crack as the jaw was broken and dislocated. He dropped the shovel, grabbed the edge of the stall, and leaped over.

One of the demons tore into the vampire’s willing mouth, jaw hanging wrong and body convulsing with the possession. Red eyes slid open, hand rearranging the broken jaw back into place with a grotesque wet grind. Lips stretching into a grin, the demon threw out a hand, a force like a hurricane hitting Sam and sending him crashing through the air and into Dean. His brother cried out as he landed wrong on the arm he’d already been cradling. Something snapped and cracked as they landed in a tangle of limbs.

Sam scrambled off his older brother’s prone form as he curled in on himself with an agonized whimper. Bile rose in Sam’s throat, stomach turning at the sickening sight of blood and bone punctured the skin of Dean’s right arm.

Placing himself as a shield in front of Dean, Sam yanked out the hunting knife sheathed to his thigh, holding it and his gun at the ready.

Heaving for breath and lips curled in a snarl, Dean raised his gun with his good hand, mostly steady despite the pain. Blood trailed down the side of his face from a cut at his temple, soaking into the collar of his shirts.

They were backed into a literal corner of the barn with three vampires and two demons to contend with. Dean had a broken arm, there was no holy water or salt, the machete was beyond reach—kicked into the destroyed stable stall for good measure.

Garth *really* needed better intel. Their milk run was turning into a battle royale.
“Shoulda stuck with the treadmill, Sammy,” Dean said, voice rough and edged with a tone he knew Sam understood.

It was bad, and Dean would rather face it alone than risk Sam.

Their guns both went off at the same time. Heads jerked back and bodies twisted with the force of impact, yet all Dean could think about with every fired bullet was what would happen? They wouldn’t win, couldn’t win. More bullets fired. What would happen to Sam? Could Dean buy him time to escape? Would they turn Dean or just feed on him until his veins ran dry?

He fired until his gun emptied. What would that do to Cas?

The vampires barely took note of their injuries before predatory grins slid into place once more. The other demon had returned to their pixie-like meatsuit, all small frame and lithe body, perched with glee on the wall of a paddock.

“Hear you’ve been a party dress some two times over,” one of the vampires said to Sam, voice a warm drawl like a summer night. His eyes glinted. “Wonder what that’s gonna taste like.”

“Don’t forget his two-time demon of a brother,” another added, voice amazed and impressed as he wagged a finger at Dean’s crumpled form. “How screwed up do you have to be that that kinda darkness just seems to come natural? I mean: wow!”

The demon on the ledge of the stall swung effortlessly around the support beam in her heeled boots. “What if we kept them as pets?” She hung half over open air, clinging with one hand, and eyes glittering as they locked with Dean’s. “Chain them up. Bleed them slow. Who knows what else? We can keep them locked in separate cells far away. Make them watch as we take turns having fun with the other.” Her tongue came out to run over her lips as her eyes roved over Dean’s body, eyes half-lidded. “Oh, I would like to see you fight. To make you scream.”

“You’ll never get to,” a deep voice growled as lightning and thunder exploded through the barn, doors imploding on the vampires.

Dean tried to turn his head away, lifting an arm to shield his eyes from debris and blinding light. Sam pivoted, attempting to bodily shield his brother from further harm.

Surprise gave way to panic, Dean completely forgetting about his broken arm as he attempted to push himself up and cried out in agony just as wings spread wide across the walls and ceiling. Face ashen, Dean made an aborted attempt to rise, Sam holding him back with an outstretched arm.

Castiel stood just inside the torn open doors of the barn, the howling wind of a sudden storm whipping his hair and the open collar of his white shirt, flurries of snow swirling around him. For a moment, Dean thought he saw something else, like a long dark coat and tall legged boots and waistcoat, something regal and elegant and defiant. Something almost royal. But no. Cas looked different than that morning, denim and boots, Dean catching the glint of a sword in his hand, but just Cas as Dean had always known him.

The angel moved, a blur of celestial wrath, tearing from one place to another to the center of the vampire nest mates, sword shoving through the chest of one, while he lifted another off the ground by the neck. The vampire’s body jerked and spasmed as the demon possessor hastily escaped the violent smiting.

One of the vampires grabbed for Dean’s lost machete, grappling with the angel as Castiel yanked him around and pinned him to a beam. He didn’t flinch at the machete blade pressing into the
delicate skin of his throat, didn’t blink, face hard and eyes cold as his sword slid under the vampire’s ribs and into his heart.

He yanked his weapon out, the body collapsing in rotten hay. Unseeing eyes stared at Dean, mouth open on the last in-draw of breath that would never be.

The petite demon jumped from her perch to stand in the center of the stables, her demon companion swirling around her like a snake. Castiel turned slowly to regard them, one brow arched with insulted superiority.

“Well, well, well…” she purred, “if it isn’t Castiel, the lover of humans. Or, wait. Was it the human’s lover? I do get it mixed up.”

“I’m sure I have many names and titles accompanying my various ranks.” He angled his head, the blue of his eyes flicking over her in critical assessment. “You, however, are either new or utterly underwhelming by Hell’s standards. I’ve no recollection of either of you.”

She flushed, anger darkening her expression. “I’m-

He waved dismissively. “Dead already. Shall we?”

Both demons rushed him at once, pixie-demon throwing Sam’s knives with elegant lethality. Castiel knocked them aside with a sweep of his sword, moving forward so fast Dean lost sight of him. The angel was a blur, the storm outside roaring louder in an echo of his rage. Wind tore at the roof, sending snow trickling through loose shingles and aged wood, more poured in like a blizzard storm through what was once the doors.

Metal clashed as the machete caught with the angel blade, Dean watching in horror the two pressing into each other, her with teeth bared, and Cas’ expression hidden.

Sam tucked his weapons away and scrambled around behind his brother, trying to take his weight and help him to a sitting position that protected his arm. When Dean hissed, Sam snatched his hand away and swore at the blood covering his palm.

“Dammit, Dean.”

Until Sam had drawn his attention to it, the jagged sharp pain of torn flesh and internal damage had been lost to that of his more serious injuries. Sam grabbed for the hem of his shirt and Dean batted him away.

“Forget me,” he snapped, twisting to glare. “Go help Cas!”

Hazel eyes slid to where Cas blocked blow after blow from the demon without seeming to try, much less take notice of the demon whirling around like an angry wraith.

He pulled Dean’s arm over his shoulder, one hand carefully sliding around to his brother’s hip as he fairly much lifted Dean to his feet. “I don’t think he needs the help,” he murmured, a hunter’s caution making him track the fighters’ every movement as he edged closer to the door, half dragging a resistant Dean.

“Sam, we-”

“Your arm is broken, Dean. Weapons gone.” He let go and tore off his jacket and then his outer shirt to use as a tourniquet, glaring at his brother. “We can’t help him, and he doesn’t need our help.”
The desperate longing on Dean’s face as he turned to watch the battle told Sam it didn’t matter, would never matter. Even hurt and unarmed, Dean would rather be in the fight with Cas than to let him go it alone.

“We have to do something, then,” Dean thin with distress, eyes darting back and forth trying to track the blur of parries, feints, and attacks.

Sam ignored him, folding and wrapping the shirt around Dean’s waist. Sweat and blood darkened his gray undershirt, hair falling across his forehead and into his eyes. There was nothing they could do. They’d gone in acting under misinformation that had nearly landed them in something far worse than a quick death.

Further, Castiel was playing with the demons. Blessing Sam’s knives with a touch and throwing them, dealing deep cuts and gashes, but not fatal blows, before summoning the weapons back to him. Grace lit his fingertips as he trailed them through the intangible form swirling around them, sending the demon thrashing in a seizure of pain. The cruel pleasure of his actions chilled Sam.

Dean didn’t realize he was surging forward again until Sam caught him by the shoulder, jarring his arm and ripping another strangled cry from his lips.

Green eyes peered over his shoulder, neck craning. “What about Cas?”

“He’s still got two demons and a nest of vampire corpses to deal with. You need a hospital now.” He maneuvered Dean toward the door, even as Dean craned his neck, struggling. “Hospital, Dean.”

A blizzard raged beyond the doors of the barn, called down by the fury of a wayward angel. Everything inside Dean twisted in sick apprehension as Sam herded him toward the door. Dean dug in his heels, shaking his head. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t. Dean knew it down the marrow of his bones and nothing could make him leave Cas behind.

“Cas!”

Something in that - perhaps the fear and desperation layered with pain- got through. Castiel’s posture changed, head turning to slant a glance over his shoulder. They stood bloody and huddled together, winter’s ire a backdrop behind them.

Dean felt the change like a breeze shifting direction. The snow slacked off as Castiel struck out an arm, fingers curling around the demon’s nonmaterial form, the demonic entity thrashed like a snake as it caught alight where he gripped it, flames spreading, twisting serpentine in a ribbon of blazing fire.

The demon exploded, smoldering embers raining down. Sam jerked at the sight, throwing up an arm on reflex.

Dean watched, wide eyes riveted, as the other demon attempted to smoke out of her vessel and escape. Castiel covered the smoke with his hand, forcing it back down and into the body she was possessing. One hand gripped the back of her neck at her skull, other clamped over her mouth as terrified eyes stared into the angel’s face. He feet kicked uselessly as the straw-covered dirt.

Leaning in, Cas tilted his head, eyes playing over her features, almost in curiosity. Then, his gaze narrowed, nose wrinkling with a snarl.
“Say ‘hello’ to Crowley for me.”

She lit up brighter than any Christmas tree, too bright and blinding, making Cas’ wings stretch wide in the light. And just as suddenly, it seemed to drain, sucked violently into the ground beneath her boots, leaving charred wood and smoldering hay as her body went limp in his arms.

Both Winchesters stared.

Lowering the empty vessel- corpse - to the ground with the others, Castiel turned. Just as much rage lit his eyes as he picked his way through the bodies stalking toward them.

Sam put himself between Dean and the angel, holding out open hands. “L-look, Cas. I-it’s not as bad as it seems, okay? It was--”

“What were you thinking?” Cas yelled. They both recoiled, swallowing back apologizes. He looked back and forth between them, one arm sweeping out toward the devastation he’d wrought. The bodies littering the floor. “Going on a hunt? Not telling anyone? You could have died!”

Dean shook his head. “Cas… it was an accident. We didn’t--”

“It doesn’t matter!” he snapped, glare settling on him. His shoulders heaved, entire form shaking where he stood. There was blood soaking into his white shirt. “It. Doesn’t. Matter. You left- you left- and no one knew, no one would have known, and you could have- would have- died! You were so worried about Sam or me exploring the bunker and then you do this! Do you not understand? You could have- I could have- how could you be so utterly--”

“Cas, I’m sorry,” exclaimed Dean, moving forward, arm cradled to his chest and keeping him from reaching out. Anger and devastation warred on the other man’s face. Dean’s expression crumbled. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. It wasn’t or we wouldn’t have come. Cas, it was supposed to be one vampire. Just one we could take care of for Garth.”

Anger won out, expression turning jagged and sharp. “One misjudged hunt is all it takes, Dean! Just one! And I will not lose you - either of you! Do you understand?”

Standing silent and hunch, Sam shook his head. “Cas… this is what we do.”

Blue eyes snapped to him on a snarl. “Then it needs to be done better. One hunt, one case, one ‘off’ day… and suddenly it’s your last and I will not stand by and let that happen.”

“You didn’t,” Dean insisted, fighting the defensive anger swelling. “You saved our--”

“Sam,” Cas interrupted, holding out his palm and Dean’s keys to the younger Winchester. Dean didn’t even question how he’d gotten them. “Please go get the car.”

Gingerly, Sam plucked the keys from him, stepping back with only momentary hesitation, before he was outside, the storm receding to the steady overcast of recent days. Dean watched his brother pick his way carefully through the snow back to the car at the mouth of the drive.

Castiel had moved, retrieving Dean’s lost coat before stepping close to him, eyes lowered. “You could have died, Dean,” he murmured, hand gently resting on Dean’s broken arm. The flood of warmth and calm were something he would never get used to, his body mending in ways it couldn’t naturally, the way it didn’t hurt when it should have. “I could have lost you. Lost both of you.”

“But we’re okay--”
Blue eyes snapped up to glare, filling Dean’s vision. “Only because you had a moment of true fear: for yourself, for Sam, for me. And had you not?” His fingers curled in the material of Dean’s jacket as he draped it around the hunter’s shoulders, gaze dropping once more. “Dean, I can’t do that. You can’t make me go through that.”

“Cas, it was an accident.”

“It doesn’t matter!” he exclaimed, and the way his voice cracked with the words hurt Dean more than anything else had, his blue eyes pleading when they met Dean’s again. He was shaking. “Do you not understand? What that would do to me to lose you? I--” He faltered, biting back the words and swallowing them down. “The two of you are the only family I have. Losing you would destroy me.”

The rumble of the Impala’s engine coming down the worn trail to the barn distracted Dean, his gaze flicking away and back. Cas wasn’t looking at him anymore, hands falling away. God, was it only that morning when things had been so different? When the space between them had been alight and searing, and when Cas had actually looked happy? It seemed like months ago.

He grabbed Cas’ hand, thumb brushing over his knuckles. “Look at me.” Cas shook his head in refusal, gaze lowered. Dean squeezed his hand. “I’m okay. Sam and I are both okay, and y’know, Sam’s right, Cas. This is what we do, who we are, you know that--”

“It shouldn’t have to be!” Cas insisted, voice a desperate whisper as he met his eye. “You shouldn’t have to keep putting your life on the line. When does it end? When have you suffered enough? Sacrificed enough?” His gaze drifted to Sam in the car, bruises and swelling already coloring his temple and jaw. “Where is the line drawn, Dean? That here is where you get to live for yourselves and know you deserve it? That for all you’ve sacrificed or had stolen, being safe and happy is your reward?” He turned back. “When do we get to just be?”

Dean looked at Sam again. Six months old in a cradle. Twenty-two and in college. Centuries trapped in Hell with archangels.

He turned to Cas, who’d spent millennia a soldier. Who’d seen something more, had seen what was right and had been punished for it since. Who’d bled, died, and fallen more than once.

Then there was him. Lost childhood and innocence first, then sense of self, and ultimately the death of hope that he’d ever be anything more than a tool for his father and a protector to Sam. Dean would never have more than that; had adopted the facade befitting a life lived with no expectations for a happy ending. Reckless, sarcastic, cocky, and charming… masks interchanged to hide the hollow ache, jagged rage, and drowning desperation. Masks worn so much Dean had stopped even knowing who he was if he wasn’t fulfilling the purpose his father had hammered into him. Deaths and decades later, Dean was still fighting with his father’s ghost.

But fighting monsters was what they did.

And if they didn’t… if they didn’t…

What would they do?

Who would they be?

Dean’s eyes stung. “I don’t know, Cas.”

“We deserve more than this,” Cas insisted, tugging his hand from Dean’s to jab at the bodies scattered across the hay-strewn floor. “We deserve better than to end up casualties of one more
hunt we never should have taken.”

He knew he was right, but knowing and accepting that was like standing on a cliff’s edge, the bottom unknown and the winds whipping at his clothes.

He swallowed. “Cas, I don’t know how. I don’t know anything else.”

“Neither do I,” argued Cas, blue eyes just glancing at Sam before playing over Dean’s face. “We could do it together, but we can’t keep doing this.” He looked at the bodies, then down to the blood-soaked shirt tied around Dean. Pulling away, he stalked toward the car. “I won’t.”

Chapter End Notes

Again, so very sorry for the delay in update, but I hope you enjoyed? Please let me know by way of a comment and/or kudos! Or comment if you've already left kudos! Thank you so very much!!
Chapter 17

Hi guys! Per the update schedule, here is chapter seventeen! I didn't get much time in the past week to work on Ch 18, being sick with cold/flu and migraines, but I did get some done, and am diligently continuing. If you would like to know more about the update schedule and early release of chapters, please go here for more information.

NOTE: Brief mention of suicide, so please be warned.

It wasn’t a surprise when Max dropped on the couch next to Dean in the waiting room of the office. Dean had half-expected it, wordlessly accepting the coffee he held out.

Cas hadn’t said anything to them after the barn, just shut himself up in his room with the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign hanging on the doorknob.

Dean couldn’t blame him.

Garth’s people were dealing with the cleanup of the situation, but the reality of what happened—could and would have happened—was oppressive.

The image of himself and Sam set on the pyre played on repeat in his head.

Worse still, he was sure the same thoughts were haunting Cas. That was Dean’s fault. It had been an accident, but the results would have devastated more people than Dean had considered. He’d never thought about the people he would leave behind. Before, it had only been Sam. Now…

Somehow, Dean had found himself part of a family and hadn’t really noticed. Not the full extent of what that meant. Holidays and guest rooms during reprieves were one thing. These were people he was accountable to. He had always discounted his worth as something dismissive, even trivial. He mattered to people now. People other than Sam.

It shouldn’t have been a realization or epiphany, but it was. They mattered to people. He mattered to people.

Dean didn’t know what to do with that.

He could imagine the guilt that would put on Garth, knowing it was his information that was wrong. Charlie losing the people she considered her brothers when she had no other family left. Jody who’d sort of adopted them and the girls, the fondness on her face Dean recognized as that of a mother. What would that do to her? What would it do to Claire? Claire who’d already suffered so much, who had been nothing but sharp edges and misguided anger, only now healing, to soften and open up.

*The two of you are the only family I have, Dean. Losing you would destroy me.*

Dean’s thumb stroked over the textured wall of the coffee. He didn’t have to wonder at Cas’ reaction. He’d told Dean.
His attention drifted to the closed door leading to offices and professionals beyond. Yesterday was probably what was on Cas’ mind most, maybe what he was opening up and discussing when he’d only shut the door on Dean.

Not that Dean blamed him. He got it. They’d scared him. Once the worried yelling was out of his system, he’d shut them out, wanting space and distance and walls.

Drawing in a deep breath and blowing it out through parted lips, Dean felt no steadier, letting his gaze drift as he sat back in the stylish leather couch. The walls were lined with tasteful, but expensive looking high-backed chairs and dark wood side tables. Soft lighting and rich colors didn’t ease the anxiety Dean felt over what was being discussed beyond the door.

“There was an accident yesterday,” he said, dropping his eyes to his coffee and the way his fingers circled around it. The thin strand of beads wrapped around his wrist peeked out from the cuff of his jacket. “A hunt went wrong.”

Max sipped from his cup. “Was anyone hurt?”

The clap of thunder. The torrential blizzard. The sheer wrath Castiel had displayed, followed by relief fueled anger. The way Cas’ face had crumpled, something scared and fragile in his eyes like the last breath he’d take.

“Sam and I nearly died.” A pause. “Or worse. Cas saved us.”

“I see,” Max said, lowering his cup to his lap as Dean had.

Dean looked at him, searching his face. “It was an accident.” The Zanna’s blue eyes showed nothing as he gave a single nod, and Dean turned fully. “Really. It was- it wasn’t anyone’s fault. It wasn’t.”

Max nodded. “I believe you, Dean.”

He wiped a hand over his face, shaking his head. “I mean, that’s the job, man. That is the job. What we do, who we are, risks we accepted a long time ago.”

His hand trembled and he curled his fingers into a fist, pressing it against his thigh.

“Somehow I missed that everything’s different. That we have a lot more to lose. That our loss would be more than passing comment in the community- if noticed at all. It would wound people. It would devastate some.”

Max picked idly at a frayed hole in his jeans, the hem of his sleeve nearly as ragged. He focused on that, on thin fingers and trimmed nails and not the way Cas had looked at him like Dean had threatened his whole world.

“I’ve never mattered like that to people,” he admitted in a harsh whisper, scraped raw and agonized and scared from his throat.

His heart pounded. He felt like crying. It didn’t make sense, but there was an aching loss, a crushing guilt pressing down on him he didn’t know what to do with. His mind was too dizzy to even make sense of it, overwhelmed with questions he’d never had before.

He looked at Max, as if he, with his calm disposition, might somehow hold the answers. “What do I do?”
Blowing out a breath, Max’s lips twisted. “I can’t tell you that, Dean. Seems like something you need to ask yourself.”

“This is the job.”

“I know.”

“It’s what we do.”

“I know.”

Dean swallowed, expression broken. “Then why am I suddenly scared?”

It came out a whisper, small and fragile. A secret admission.

The Zanna shifted, twisting and leaning back so he could regard Dean with tilted expression. When had Dean come to rely on him so much? To trust his wisdom and discretion?

When had Max become a friend? Like, an actual friend.

His thumb tapped against his folded knee. “Maybe what you want has changed, Dean. Maybe that’s why it bothers you so much. Things are different for you now like you said. The scales have shifted. I think that means you’re going to have to reassess what you have to lose and what you’re willing to risk.” He shook his head. “And I can’t answer that for you, and you don’t have to have the answer today.”

Dean opened his mouth to argue, but Max laid a hand on his arm, brows lifted. “Dean. You had a bad scare.” He jerked his head toward the door on the far side of the room. “I’m guessing he did, too, since it sounds pretty similar to the story you told me that morning in the kitchen.” Dean frowned. “About when you went to rescue him but got there just too late? Sounds like it was almost a role-reversal and he nearly got to watch you die.”

Dean forced down stinging bile, stubbornly lifting his coffee and chugging the hot contents. It was sweet and indulgent, something he’d have never ordered, and it burned all the way down.

When it was empty, he lowered it to his lap, guilt flaring like raging fire.

“You don’t have to have answers today,” Max reiterated. “Your world is different than how it used to be. Why not try talking to Sam? Maybe sit down and talk with your family.”

Licking his bottom lip, Dean’s nodded, automatic and jerky. His knee began to bounce, eyes flicked to the clock on the wall and then to his watch, barely restraining his urge to pace the rugs.

“Do you have something to read?” asked Max.

He thought about the Kindle sitting on his desk and cursed his lack of foresight. They hadn’t gone to breakfast. Cas had knocked on the door and asked- with a sort of dead-eyed expression- if Dean 'still wished to accompany him to his appointment'.

Dean had been pacing then, too, scrambling to comply before the invitation was revoked. The nod he’d received was the only warning he got before Cas reached out and Dean found himself in the hallway outside the lobby.

“Not with me,” he said. “I left it on my desk.”

Reaching to his side to retrieve something between his leg and the couch, Max’s arm came back
up, casually offering out the purple case.

Dean took it with numb fingers, brows drawing together. “How…?”

Max reached once more and retrieved a worn paperback, spine creased and corners curled. “Comes with the job description. It’s not a candy buffet, but..” he let the sentence trail off with a shrug.

Dean flipped open the cover, swiping his finger across the screen and then pulling up the main library, scrolling through pages of shelves as silence settled over them and the clock on the wall ticked.

Swallowing, he bumped his shoulder against Max’s, keeping his gaze focused in front of him as the other man turned his head.

“Thanks for being here.”

Max smiled and settled back with his book. “That’s what friends are for.”

When the door to the hallway opened, Dean shoved to his feet, a touch to his hand the wordless signal of Max’s departure before Castiel stepped out and into the room.

Dean staggered a few steps forward and caught himself. What was he supposed to do? What did he say? What could he ask? It’s not like they were at a doctor’s office to receive a diagnosis.

There were lines and dark shadows under Cas’ eyes, the angel’s gaze remote and lost as he just… stood there. Not looking at... anything.

“How’d it go?” he ventured, taking a cautious step.

Cas’ head snapped in his direction, expression morphing like an animal cornered and ready to fight tooth and claw. Dean faltered, brows knitting as he shifted his weight back, trying to give him space without retreating.

Relief washed over Cas’ entire posture then, something flitting over his face Dean couldn’t name. Crossing the space, he crashed into Dean, arms wrapping tight.

Dean hugged him back, face buried in the shoulder material of his grey peacoat.

“I’m sorry, Cas.”

He pulled away, shaking his head. “Let’s just go home, Dean.”

Nodding, Dean followed him out into the hall where Cas took his hand, the two of them stepping from one location to another without breaking stride.

The angel let go. “Thank you again, Dean,” he said, crossing the War Room and into the corridors without a backward glance.

Dean stood staring after him, expression a fractured mix of emotion.

Did he follow? Was there a procedure for this? He’d gone with him, yes, but it hadn’t made it any clearer to Dean how to help Cas. How was he suppose to be there for him when it felt like Cas was
shoving him away?

When someone cleared their throat, he turned to see Sam and Charlie sitting in the library with blueprints and laptops.

“How was breakfast?” Charlie cautiously asked.

She had what looked like account ledgers stacked neatly by her on the table. He idly wondered where they’d found them and why.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he climbed the stairs. “Tense.” He paused, both of them watching him. Sighing, he shrugged off his coat and draped it over a chair. “Actually, I think we need to talk.”

They shared a look and he wondered how much they’d already been talking. Or had no one brought up the elephant crowding the room?

He dropped heavily into a chair, rubbing at the throb in his temple. “Cas has a point.” Sam dropped his gaze and Charlie bit her already raw bottom lip. “Yesterday could have been our funeral. I don’t know why it hadn’t occurred to me until this that…” Protocol. Acceptable losses. Habit. “Things are different,” he finished lamely, unable to find the words for what he meant.

Hell, he wasn’t sure what he was even trying to say.

Sam tapped his index finger against the polished wood surface. “What did Cas say to you?”

“I… I-I don’t know. He said… a lot, actually, and adrenaline and all that, I can’t remember word-for-word, but…. he had a point. It could have been our last hunt-- was almost our last hunt, and y’know, he’s right. Things could be done better. Garth’s info was wrong. Very wrong. But he had every reason to believe it was right, just another milk run.” He looked at the blueprints spread across the table. “And I think Cas may want to step away from hunting.”

“What?”

“I think. I’m not sure. His words could have meant either he wouldn’t tolerate our endangering ourselves like that, I guess? Or that he washing his hands of it all.” He leaned forward on his elbows, hand rubbing over his mouth. “He had another point, as well.” His fingers tapped out an irregular rhythm as he kept his gaze downcast. “At what point is it maybe time for us to step off the field?”

Tense silence.

“You want to retire?” The shock in his voice made Dean flinch. “From hunting?”

“No, that’s not-- I mean…” He threw up his hands. “I don’t know what I mean. Just… maybe we should start looking at it differently… or something. We’ve been doing things the way we’ve always done them, but everything else is different. Something’s gotta give. That’s not gonna work. We almost died, Sam. Or worse, were gonna be playthings locked in cages.” He gestured to their laptops and books. “I mean, it was your idea to go on this sabbatical. Every hunt we’ve found or that’s been offered to us, we’ve passed along to other people. It’s been months. What are we even doing?”

Eyes lowered, Sam rubbed the palm of his hand, digging his thumb into the scar there. “I just thought we deserved a break,” he admitted. “We’d saved the world-- again. Charlie was dead, and then suddenly not. We’d been through so much, it didn’t seem right to just act like our wounds
weren’t still bleeding.” His head jerked up, expression raw. “Cas was possessed by *Lucifer*. You didn’t get time to breathe between Mark of Cain and becoming a demon before suddenly you had Amara obsessed with you and trying to control you. Me? I had to watch both of you go through it knowing there was nothing I could do-- hell, Dean, I went to *my worst nightmare* for help because things were *that* bad. *I saved his life!* Do you know the nightmares that brought back? *All of them!*” He dropped his gaze, rubbing hard into the scar. “We deserved to be *safe*, for once. If just for a little while.”

Charlie’s worried green eyes flicked between them, droplets of blood visible on her gnawed lip.

Dean didn’t know what to say.

Questions loomed, unspoken and too terrifying to give voice to.

**What did he want to do?**

What else *was* there? This was what they did, who they were, had been Dean’s entire life since he was *four-years-old*.

If they weren’t actively hunting…

He shoved the question down, mind reeling viciously away from it. It wasn’t something he could answer. Not today, when his head was still careening from the past thirty-six hours.

Rapping his knuckles, he pointed to the ledgers, grasping the easy subject change like a vise.

“What’s that?”

Sitting ramrod straight, Charlie slid one off the stack, opening the wide yellow pages. “*Archived bookkeeping.* Well, part of it.” He slid it toward him when she offered. “A lil’ while ago, Cas returned from a walk with some gemstones we sold, then I invested the money in a couple of things. It got me thinking about this place though.”

He frowned.

She gestured around them. “Dean. Who’s paying the light bill? The water bill? The *property taxes*?” Fingers gesticulated toward Sam. “Jody and Sam were talking about the history of the MOL and the cloaks and daggers of it all, but the Men In Black had to get funding from somewhere. You don’t get a Batcave for free, *and the lights are still on*. So I went digging.”

His eyes trailed over faded ink in neat, tight script. “What did you find?”

“I don’t know yet.” His mouth pulled down at the corners and she shrugged. “Look, this was just a few days ago. I haven’t had time. These are some of their older books, but not the more recent ones-- and even still, without the paper trail to go with it…” She shook her head, forehead wrinkled. “What was shorthand to them is practically code to me. It would take longer to, well, *translate*. I’m digging for the other pieces.”

Tapping his thumb, he remembered her earlier words, brows drawing together. “Invested? Invested where?”

“Oh, y’know, a set-aside I already had back when I was stealing funds from Roman Enterprises and other one-percenters.” She examined her cuticles. “I might have invested in some property.”

His brow furrowed further. “What property?”
A wicked grin split her features. “A little place known as Chitaqua.”

He wiped a hand over his face on a groan and sunk into his chair.

Sam looked up in surprise at a gentle knock, Dorothy standing in the doorway to his room.

“May I come in?”

He shifted, eyes darting over the haphazard piles of files and records all around the room and spread across his desk and bed.

“Oh, yeah, sure.” Even the chair held books. He scrambled to clear a space on the bed. “Sorry, it’s, uh--”

“Bringing your work home with you, Sam?” she mused, casting her gaze around and taking a seat.

He flushed. “It’s… complicated.”

“I didn’t take you for the obsessive type.”

“I’m not! I just, well… this is our lives. The bunker’s not home. It’s a base.”

The corner of her mouth curled. “Meaning you can’t have a space where you can shut the door and leave it behind? Tsk. That’s not healthy, Sam.”

He huffed, ducking his head. “Yeah, I guess not. I mean, I still come in here and read or watch TV.”

“Yet your work looms around you on every available surface,” she said with a tick of fingers. “It’s a wonder you don’t feel claustrophobic.”

Hazel eyes took in the ever-growing piles of research, both his own and from the archives. Bestiaries he’d read-- and one he’d begun compiling himself. Notebooks of memos and dates and survivors. Weapons on his nightstand and under his pillow.

It made sense in the beginning. The bunker was meant to be a powerhouse of force against the supernatural, an absolute trove of so many things he’d hoped to absorb like a sponge. There was so much knowledge laid dormant and neglected. It had been a race against time, to make up for all the decades they’d sat unused on shelves and in drawers.

He’d excused it, brushing off Dean’s comments about nesting, the way the muscle in his jaw ticked when Sam argued the bunker wasn’t their home.

He’d resisted claiming it. It was where they lived, yes, but its purpose was for hunting. He didn’t want to call it ‘home’. Didn’t want to settle and get comfortable. Attached. Home was… something else. Something safe, mundane, loved.

“I guess…” He drew in a deep breath. “I guess I was always trying to keep a distance there. When we found this place, everything of permanence had been taken from us. We’d lost the closest thing to a home we had. Had spent a year on the run with only what could fit in a bag and-- sometimes literally—could be grabbed on the run.” He met her eyes and shrugged. “I worried about how long we’d have this place; tried to internalize as much of it as I could while waiting for the other shoe to drop.”
She leaned on one hand, head canted. “And how long have you been waiting?”

Flushing, he chuckled and ran his fingers through his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. “Couple of years, actually.”

She laughed, the sound soft and throaty. “Then maybe it’s time you moved in?” Her smile widened, wicked and flirtatious. “Just a suggestion.”

He waggled his head noncommittally, before stating, “I meant to thank you for the other day.” Her brows drew together in question. “With Dean. You took the blame when it was my idea, and you’d actually agreed with him. You were both right. It was reckless, just like Dean and I running off on that hunt. I shouldn’t have put you and Charlie in that position.”

“Sam, we could have said ‘no’,” she countered, touching his knee. “Could have argued with you. We both armed ourselves and were by your side as you opened the door, bad idea or not. We were part of it.”

He lowered his gaze, scratching at the denim on his thigh. Her platitudes didn’t make him feel better. The gnawing inside didn’t ease, twisting savagely into something sour. Anxiety pulled at him, grabbed and plucked and coiled at every inch of him. Perhaps his previous restlessness hadn’t been due strictly to idleness, but his mind already sensing that he was being presented with a choice he didn’t have an answer to.

“Why’d you go back to Oz?” he questioned, mouth twisting as he glanced at her. She straightened. “I mean… when we freed you, so much time had already passed. Oz had continued on without you. You could have walked away. Stayed in this realm. Could have done anything you wanted, really. But you went back. Why?”

Brows raised she drew in and blew out a harsh breath, attention drifting to a point on the wall. She considered his question, mouth twisted. “I guess… I knew I had one more big adventure left in me. One last quest to see through.”

His lashes lowered, focus dropping to his hands as his thumb rubbed into his palm. “But then you left. Came here.”

She chewed on that for a minute, lines of her face relaxed and thoughtful. She really was beautiful. Sam wasn’t even sure she realized it. Both the way she looked and carried herself was like a queen. He could imagine her leading the Ozians. Easily see how they’d come to love her enough to want to make her their queen.

“I think it’s simply a matter of trusting yourself. Following your heart and knowing where you belong.” She slid her gaze to his. “Even if it means stepping back.”

“But you didn’t just step back. You left.”

“That I did,” she agreed. “Because I wasn’t needed in Oz anymore. I’d fulfilled my part in the greater scheme. I came here knowing my sword still had a use, even if not on the front lines of a war.” She shrugged. “I considered teaching, actually.”

He blinked. “Really?”

She gave a gentle slap to his knee with the back of her hand. “‘Not like you’re thinking. A school for hunting. Training other hunters. Soldiers, I guess. I trained troops in Oz, and though it’s a different battle here, it’s still one that needs to be fought. Competent hunters goes a long way in that.” She shrugged, grinning. “Helps in keeping them alive, too.”
He gnawed the inside of his cheek, head canted as he considered that. A school for hunters. More than just what the Men of Letters did, but actual practical knowledge and field training. It was a good idea, actually. Better than the previous system of two separate factions in an uneasy alliance. He could see her doing it, too. She would excel in that sort of role.

He jerked his gaze back to her as she spoke, blue eyes searching his face. “So I guess the question becomes: what do you want, Sam?”

The Do Not Disturb sign was still hanging from the doorknob as Dean swallowed a lump and knocked anyway.

His nerves coiled tight as he waited, skin feeling stretched taunt and too small, ears straining to pick up any little sound. The chill on the bunker crept through his socks as he shifted, rising doubt and panic that he’d made a mistake forcing him a step back, half-way between retreat and staying.

The door opened. Not fully, but enough Cas could lean against the wall and peer out at him. Dean’s heart clenched, and the hands holding the mug of tea itched to reach out, an impotent urge.

Cas was dressed much like Dean was, in sweats and soft cotton, his shirt a size bigger than he needed because he found it more comfortable to be swathed in clothing.

Mouth dry, Dean swallowed with a click. “I brought you tea,” he offered weakly.

He was intruding, he knew, but worry ate at him. He had his own questions to answer, questions he couldn’t even ask yet, and shifting his focus to caring for Castiel seemed easier, somehow. More pressing.

Castiel needed him. It made shoving everything else down a little bit simpler.

Cas looked haggard, features waxen under the ancient lights. His gaze fell away from Dean’s almost immediately, flinching as though the sight of him hurt.

“Thank you,” he said, reaching for the warm drink.

Dean met him halfway, noting the careful way Cas took the mug so their fingers didn’t touch. It stung, possibly more than it should.

Cas still wouldn’t look at him and Dean grasped desperately for something to say, to keep him a few seconds longer.

“Uh, I was- I mean, I know you don’t need to eat, but I was going to make soup? And grilled cheese?” Castiel’s gaze flickered up from beneath thick lashes and back down. “I thought maybe you might like some. It’s snowing again outside.”

Fingers curled around the mug clutched to his chest, Cas offered a brief, tight smile. “I appreciate the offer,” he declined as he drifted back into his room. “Thank you for the tea.”

He shut the door.

Swallowing hard, Dean’s head bobbed in stiff acceptance before turning on his heel, forcing one foot in front of the other.

Pulling out his phone, he shot off a text to Max.
Thx again for this morning. Making soup & grilled cheese if you wanna drop by.

The response came back a moment later.

That’s what friends are for. And thanks, but I already made plans. :( Raincheck?

Dean smiled. Anytime. My kitchen’s open.

He pocketed the device and made his way alone through the bunker.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t, y’know,” Dean pulled a face, gesturing with his free hand as he slid a bowl in front of Dorothy, “intervene?”

“Between Charlie and a puzzle to be solved?” She carefully blew on a spoonful of soup and ate it.
“No. No, no, no. That is not the proper care and feeding of a Charlie.”

He leaned against the counter, dishrag over his shoulder and arms folded. “Well, then what?”

“Aren’t you going to sit?” she asked, gesturing to the seat across the table. He complied, setting a plate stacked with grilled cheese sandwiches between them. She plucked one from the top. “When Charlie has something she needs to puzzle out, best thing to do is keep her properly fed and watered-- and take away the dishes when she’d done with them. Perhaps cover her with a blanket once she’s fallen asleep on top of her work.”

“She’s not that bad,” he defended, faltering when one brow swept up high. “She’s that bad?”

“To anyone who didn’t know her, I’m sure she appears eccentric and quite mad. Hair unkempt, pencils shoved behind her ear and into yesterday’s hairstyle, clothes wrinkled, muttering to herself, and making loud exclamations as she dashes into the room with her latest break in the case?” She dipped the corner of the grilled cheese triangle into the vegetable beef soup. “People thought I had lost my senses for having her as my right-hand.”

“Really?”

“Mm. Though she was quite deft with a longsword, which surprised them all.” A conspiratorial smile crept over her features. “She and I did a lot of secret training at night to teach her the things she didn’t know, and the rest, well, she learned a style all her own while in the field. Necessity is a great teacher.”

He chewed on his sandwich, mind turning over. “That whole feed and water thing,” he began, noting absentely that the blue of her eyes was a dull reflection of Cas’, “does that also apply on days where she just sort of retreats? Locks herself away in her room or is up at odd hours in the Rec Room?”

Her lips twisted. “For the most part. When doors are shut, it’s a little different. Offering is best. If you already have tea or food in hand, she’ll sometimes accept it. If she’s not behind a closed door, I generally just bring the food and leave it for her without asking. Give her a pat, ask if she needs something, remind her I’m there if she needs me.” She shrugged, shifting through vegetables and beef in her soup. “We all have bad days. There’s a lot of trauma and bad dreams inside all of us.”

“And that helps?”
“Love always helps. It will guide you through the darkest of days.”

His gaze fell, thinking of Cas taking him by the hand and then immediately letting go. The way he’d avoiding looking at Dean as he’d fled to the sanctity of his room. How he hadn’t wanted to open the door or even look at him earlier.

He thought of Charlie, dressed in too big clothing and wrapped in quilts, sitting on the couch with unseeing eyes while *Harry Potter* played on the tv screen.

Sam and his scar, the way he would throw himself into some new project or research. Busying himself with more than one person could handle, all the while fighting to keep from rubbing at his palm.

He thought of Max, silent as he’d handed Dean coffee and sat beside him to wait so that Dean wouldn’t have to do it alone.

Swallowing, he grasped for a subject change, fighting the tightness in his chest, the knot lodged in his throat.

“So, uh, where’s Sam?”

She dipped the corner of a sandwich and bit into it. “Working on a project of his own. He’s moving all of those files out of his room and back into the archives proper.”

He snorted. “About time. His room was starting to look like another storage room.”

She shrugged. “I suppose he thought it time, as well.”

Time for what though?

Why did everything feel as though it were teetering on the head of a pin? A house of cards ready to come crashing down around his ears?

His stomach twisted, vicious and uncaring, inside of him, his foot bouncing as he fought to quell the mounting panic.

He shouldn’t have said what he had earlier, hadn’t been thinking. If he ran to Sam now, told him it was a mistake and stupid, to ignore it… everything could go back to normal, right? They were fine and the way they’d always done things was fine. This was their *lives*. And it was a good life what they did. Their actions mattered, even if no one would remember their names. Even if they ended up just being stories told by other hunters around a table and bottles of booze.

Was that so bad? They could keep on doing this. Saving people, hunting things. The family business.

And, sure, one day it would be them on the pyre, but he was okay with that, wasn’t he? Hell, he’d never expected to live past twenty-three. He’d expected to die alone with a gun in his hand, probably on the floor of some dirty basement. After Sam had left and Dad was gone, he’d wondered if he wouldn’t just get sick of it all. Sick of seeing all the bad, all the rot and evil that preyed on the defenseless. Wondered if the utter lack of hope in the world, the constant stalling for time against the inevitable, he’d wondered if he wouldn’t just one day drown himself in a bottle and then put his gun to his head.

But what they did mattered, and doing it together just made them that much more effective, saved that many more lives. *And that mattered*. Who they were and what they did… it had to matter.
Yesterday had been a bad day, an off-day, sure, but they could fix that! This sabbatical could end and they could get back out there. They could hunt and fight and do all the things no one else should have to.

The image of him still hunting, surly and gray, fingers gnarled from so many years clutching a knife, drifted up before his mind’s eye. Miserly and bitter, drowning nightmares and bad memories in a bottle, angry that that was all his life had accumulated to, that the fight kept on until it took him, and it was only out of habit and fear of the unknown that he kept on in a life he held no value for, resented-- no, hated with a venomous rage.

Dean sagged on his elbows, hunching over his bowl, and shuddered at the thought.

But what else was there? He didn’t know anything else!

When he’d lived at Lisa’s it had all been an act. He had been utterly miserable, despite his feelings for her and her son. He’d spent months drowning in grief, had tried to find a way to bring back his brother, and had ultimately conceded to the fact that nothing would ever be the same.

It had been easier to live the lie than to exist on his own. He could shut everything off, put on the mask, follow the steps in the role he’d accepted, make it a habit. It was cruel and selfish, but it was what Sam had asked him to do. Sam, who was still been paying the price for Dean’s ability to live in a safe world. How was Dean going to walk away knowing that, unable to forget it for a single moment? When his nights were nightmares filled with the sounds of Sam’s screams? The sight of him burning on the ceiling like Mom and Jess? How was he suppose to walk away when he kept waking up screaming for his brother?

He hadn’t had a choice then, not really.

Now, there was a choice threatening everything Dean had ever known. They all had choices and the outcome of those decisions terrified him. He had so much to lose.

“Why’d you leave Oz?” he asked, voice a rough whisper.

She blinked at him over the table. “I’m getting asked about that a lot today.” His brow furrowed as she angled her head. “Why do you ask?”

His bowl was empty. His hands empty of something to occupy them. “Just… I never asked. Oz had become your life, though you started out here. You went back to it when you could have gotten out, but eventually, you made the decision to leave.”

“I did,” she agreed, her own bowl pushed aside as she propped her chin in her hand. “I did my part. I think it’s important to know yourself well enough to recognize your purpose in the big picture, to know when you need to be a part of it, and when you can let others step ahead. Oz needed me to fight its wars, to liberate its people. It did not need me to rule, though the people disagreed.”

Shrugging, she rose to her feet, grabbing their bowls to place in the sink. “And I decided to go looking for a place that might need me, unwilling to hang up my sword just yet; to stop training troops. So I came here knowing the hunter’s war could always use another sword arm and the knowledge of experience. For a while, at least.”

“So you couldn’t give it up?”

Dishes clanged against the metal basin, spoons rattling and sliding as she reached for the soap and turned on the hot water.
“Oh no, I plan to give it up,” she corrected. “Just not yet.”

He frowned, regarding her. “What would you do?”

She turned, leaning back against the sink with a grin. “Well, that’s the fun part: I could do anything.” Her grin stretched wider. “Sometimes daring the unknown is the best adventure.”

TBC

Note: I hope you enjoyed!! Thank you so much for your continued support and I would love to hear your reactions to the fic, so please never be shy about commenting, not to me or anyone else. It's proper care and feeding of creators. Your comments are so appreciated. Even if they're short or small. They're treasured.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Note: Mention of gas agents and experimentation by MOL on supernatural prisoners, which may be triggery for some.

“How did we never question what was down here? What kind of spell was that for us not to notice something so big?” Sam asked. His voice carried strangely in the corridor of cells, their walls made of thick glass. “If their operation was this expansive, why weren’t there more Men of Letters?”

Running her hand over the runes etched into the metal frames of each cell, Charlie knocked hard on the glass before moving to examine the next one.

“Because they were a misogynistic group filled with white male privilege?”

He riled at that, defensive. He wanted to say it had been a different time. There’d been long-standing traditions. Duty passed from father to son.

She was right, though. Arrogance and pride had been their greatest flaw and weakness.

Stepping back, Charlie swung Vera with her full weight at a cell wall.

“Charlie--!”

The hard impact jolted through him and thundered off the walls. Charlie hissed, dropping the bat to curl her arms against her chest. “Well, they’re definitely solid.”

He looked between her and the unmarred glass, then down at the barbwire bat. “What was that?”

“Testing a theory,” she said. She shook out her hands and gave the bat a cursory glance. “Seems like their elitism was their downfall. Too busy looking down on ‘the lower classes’, they ended up wasting most of what was at their fingertips.” His gaze followed as she gestured around them. “There’s no way they could have properly utilized this place with so few members. I searched a bunch of the bedrooms yesterday. Most of them were unused. Records show that toward the end, no more than five Men of Letters was stationed here at any given time. Five, Sam. And most of them stuck to the main floor researching and copy-editing transcriptions of old journals and lore.” She looked up at him as they walked. “This place could be so much more.”

Expression pensive, he nodded and said nothing.

They’d found a control room for the power and air to the lower levels of the bunker, letting ventilation circulate for the first time in decades, but the stale air coated his tongue. So far, they’d discovered an antiquated lab, Research and Development department, Magical Research and Development, rooms upon empty rooms, a library triple the size of the one upstairs, as well as a mess hall.

The labs and cell blocks had been the only area with bodies, each well-preserved in the sealed crypt. They’d taken them outside, using rakes and shovels to clear away the snow along the wall of
the abandoned building over the bunker. They had little choice but to bury the bodies in snow until
the harsh winter had passed and the ground was easier to turn for a proper salt and burn before
burying the evidence left behind.

From what he could tell, the second level seemed dedicated to research and study. The lowest level
was a prison. The control room had a kill switch for both the doors and air supply. In the event of
an emergency, that floor could be completely cut off from the rest of the base. Defunct tanks were
attached to the ventilation system containing something in the event of a breakout or emergency.

Tear gas, maybe? A sleep agent? Something worse?

The thought turned his stomach.

His gaze drifted to the labs behind a wall of the same thick glass, shuddering at the thought of
experiments performed in full view of prisoners.

For all their talk of sophistication and elitism, some of their methods were simply sadistic.

He pointed to it. “First thing, that is getting turned into a Medbay.” She hmm’d her agreement.
“How many people do you think could live here at any one time?” he questioned as they returned
to the stairwell.

There were three levels to the bunker. The garage had multiple levels, too, with clipboards listing
available and occupied slips, vehicle owners, and mission location when deployed. It was the first
level, with its labyrinthine hallways, that was dedicated to office space and housing members for
extended periods of time.

Everything their organization could need, and yet so little of it was utilized.

“I didn’t do a full count. Fifty? Maybe more, and for sure more if members bunked together.” They
stepped out onto the main floor. “I don’t know if the bunker was set up to house that many people
long-term, though. It seems like it was intended as a sort of hive, both where pre-initiates were
forced to live and study, as well as a base for active Men of Letters.”

“How far have you gotten with their books?”

She shook her head. “Mm, having found the Bookkeeping office is going a long way in helping
make sense of their accounting. I’ve got some solid breakthroughs, so that’s something. I think the
MOL had accountants and finance firms handling their money-- under various names and fake
corporations-- so it’s a matter of finding out who, hunting them down, and re-establishing contact.
Proving ourselves as having a right to the information is going to be tricky and time-consuming.
Gonna need Ash’s help with that-- once I even get that far.”

Scratching her scalp, Charlie’s mouth twisted. “This is a much bigger project than I expected. I
could maybe get Claire to be my extra hands.” Her arm fell slack to her side, nose wrinkling in a
sneer. “I don’t like someone else’s hands in my cookie jar.”

They stood in the middle of the hallway outside the Bookkeeper’s office. Sam folded his arms.

“As long as it’s not too many hands and they understand it’s your project.” Her expression
softened, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. “Though Claire’s not who I’d have chosen to
help. Why not Alex instead? Seems like she would listen to instructions better.”

She gave him a look like he’d said something both surprising and incredibly rude. He stared at
her until she sighed.
“Sam. Alex was kidnapped and raised by vampires. Usually in abandoned houses or in the houses of their victims.” He frowned. “Alex didn’t even know how to use a computer until Jody took her in. She knew basics, like reading and simple math. She wasn’t expected to need more with how they lived. Her reading skill levels were on par with Elementary school. Alex has a tutor, as well as Claire, Jody, and Donna constantly studying with her to help her get to an age-appropriate education level.” She held up her hands, conceding. “Now, granted, she seems to have a pretty Eidetic memory which is helping her in leaps and bounds to get caught up, but even still. Bookkeeping and accounting? Claire may be more difficult, but she’s good with numbers and has connections that might come in handy.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Heaving a sigh, she hooked her thumb over her shoulder. “So, like, if we’re done checking the floors and you don’t need me, I should probably get back to Paperwork Hell.”

“No, no, go ahead.” He backed away a step, glancing to the side at movement in his peripheral. Dean passed the end of the corridor with a laundry basket, pausing to dip his chin toward it in question, then continuing on his way when they shook their heads. Sam turned back to Charlie. “Go do your thing. I’ve got boxes of my own paperwork to finish dealing with, plus a conference call of sorts.”

She smirked. “The great migration continues, huh?”

“I didn’t realize how much I’d collected.” He scratched the back of his head, hair falling to hide his face. “I kinda forgot my room is as big as it is.”

She heaved a weary sigh, then playfully punched his shoulder. “Your issues are showing, Moose. We should be in therapy. We should all be in therapy.” He blinked, jerking. She waved over her shoulder as she turned away. “But until then: drink water, get sleep, and keep a journal. Good luck with yours. Wish me luck with mine.”

He grinned. “Good luck.”

Shifting the laundry basket to his hip, Dean rapped his knuckles against the closed bedroom door.

When after a moment there was no answer, he glanced down to affirm the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign was still there before knocking again. His excuse to subtly check-in was feeble, but he’d cling to it with everything he had if it meant getting that door open.

The door cracked part of the way, Cas standing there dressed in a Henley and jeans, face an expectant question.

Dean jerked his head toward the basket. “About to put on a load of whites. Got anything you wanna add?” Cas shook his head, the gap in the door already closing. “I could use an extra pair of hands with this if you aren’t busy,” he said quickly. The angel paused. “Towels and sheets for five people are a bit much for one person to do.”

Castiel came more into view-- Dean releasing the breath he’d been holding-- and tilted his head.

“Where are Sam and Charlie?”

“Absolutely drowning in projects they’re working on,” he told him. “Dorothy, too, or I wouldn’t bother you.”
He took an aborted half-step into the hall. “...There’s no reason for you to do it alone.”

A grin split Dean’s face and he fought to wrangle it under control when Cas gave him an odd look. Stepping back, Dean jerked his head in invitation and turned away, ignoring the internal panic that the other man was no longer in his line of sight, and said nothing when the angel followed him with a full basket of laundry.

“You said they were working on projects?” Cas asked.

Setting the basket on the ironing board, Dean opened the dryer, gathered an armload, then another, depositing them on the table centered in the room. Cas wordlessly began folding as Dean transferred the sheets from washer to dryer.

“Yeah. Bunker exploration, Sam having to clear all the files and books from his room, Charlie’s digging through the Letter’s accounting records. When I checked in with them a second ago, they were both surrounded by paperwork. Very focused.” He tossed in dryer sheets and started the machine before starting the load of whites. “Dorothy’s busy with her own paperwork. Apparently leaving Oz doesn’t leave it behind. She has letters to write, treaties to look over-- she packed a bag and left earlier to give someone a piece of her mind in person.”

“Really?”

Dean glanced at him over his shoulder. “Apparently, she doesn’t take well to the idea of an arranged marriage uniting territories in the name of peace.” He tossed in the Downy ball and moved to where Cas’ laundry basket sat, pointing to it. “You mind?” Castiel shook his head. Dean began separating his clothes. “Yeah, I’m in my room, getting ready to do laundry, and I hear her, ‘WHAT?!’ from all the way down the hall. By the time I get there, she’d already thrown on her coat, her sword on the bed, and she was stuffing clothes into a bag, stopping only long enough to snarl, ‘I’ll be back tomorrow.’” His fingers curled in a stained white shirt that drained the energy from his voice. “Remind me to never make her angry…”

The blood had dried dark, making the fabric stiff. He had to take a moment to remind himself it wasn’t Cas’ blood.

God, the rage on Cas’ face when he’d walked into that barn. He had been a storm unleashed. No, not a storm. Storms were impartial, simply were. Castiel had been… he’d been beautiful and terrifying and driven.

Swallowing, he turned and retrieved a basket from under the table before setting them down. Castiel stiffened, long fingers freezing mid-motion. Dean began to hum a quiet melody in the tense silence, plucking hydrogen peroxide and a cotton ball from the basket, before he began working with meticulous care.

Slowly, like a train just starting into motion, Cas began to move, his actions deliberate and precise as he folded. Dean could feel his eyes on him, burning a trail across his skin as they played over features, studying him for a long, agonizing moment before falling away.

Dean continued to hum, trying not to wonder at what expression Cas wore or the thoughts running through his head. He was grateful it wasn’t Cas’ blood he was getting out of the shirt. He wouldn’t have been able to feign calm if it were. He tossed away the bloody cotton ball and grabbing another. There came a point when shirts were beyond salvaging, when the effort to repair them wasn’t worth investing and it was better to just buy a new one.
The obvious metaphor could crash and burn. Every thread, every stitch, every fiber of Cas’ shirt could be drenched in blood and darkness and Dean would still stand there with cotton ball after cotton ball cleaning it no matter how long it took.

When he started the new load, Dean stepped back to the table, grabbing a towel and listing to one side so his shoulder bumped Cas’. Sincerity and simple joy tugged at the corner of Dean’s mouth when Cas looked at him.

“Thanks for helping me with laundry.” He nudged him again. “I’ve missed you while you’ve been closed up in your room.”

The haggardness of the angel’s expression melted into fragile awe, then something else, some complex sequence of emotions as the corners of Cas’ mouth wobbled on a weak smile, throat bobbing.

“I missed you, too.”

Giving a curt nod, Dean set aside his towel and reached for another with a smile. “Good.”

Tapping his pen to the legal pad in rapid staccato, Sam shifted, stomach twisting as he berated himself for his stupid idea.

“Somehow I don’t think this is a fic meet,” Andy hedged, sinking into his seat with the wary expression of the habitually guilty.

Everyone at the Roadhouse wore a mixture of concerned expressions, even Jody on his laptop screen.

“Sam,” began Bobby, “you okay, son?”

He licked his lip, expression twisted. “Yeah, no, I’m fine, I just… I mean, it’s probably a stupid idea or a crazy one, but you know,” he scratched his scalp, over-animated with nervous energy, “I couldn’t get it out of my head, to the point it’s kind of driving me-- yeah. S-so, I thought if maybe I just ran the idea by you, theoretically, it might get it out of my system, because it’s a really big idea-- and it’s just an idea, completely theoretical, but if I did-- if we did…”

“Might help if you started at the beginning and actually told us what it is, Sam,” Ellen spoke up, arms folded.

“…And why aren’t you asking Dean and Cas? Or even Charlie, for that matter?” Jo questioned. Her eyes narrowed, tone dropping, “Sam, did you do something?”

He breathed a small laugh. “No, I didn’t. Charlie’s got her hands full with her own project, and Dean and Cas are busy being domestic.”

Pamela and Sarah shot forward in their seats. “Did we miss something?”

He waved dismissively. “No, I mean, they’re literally being domestic right now. They’re washing and folding laundry together.” They slumped in shared disappointment. He glanced at Jody. “Okay, so, over Thanksgiving Jody commented on the amount of unoccupied space we had in the bunker, going so far as to offer up the idea of maybe, y’know, repurposing it for the hunter community. Make it sort of, well, the equivalent of Bobby’s house, but also act as a place for hunters to crash if they were passing through or needed to lie low.”
“Could also be used as a place to send teens and young adults affected by the supernatural,” Jody added. “They could learn in a proper environment about what happened to them, offering support as well as a sense of closure.”

Sam bobbed his head with her words. “Then there was…” he faltered, swallowed, tried again, “We… Dean and I took a milk run case nearby to help out Garth, and it ended up going pretty south.”

He felt more than saw as Ellen, Bobby, and Jody went ramrod straight.

“How far south?” demanded Bobby.

He hunched, hair falling as he ducked his head. “Uh, nearly getting to say ‘hello’ to you in person?”

“Dammit, boy!”

He held out his hands. “I know! I know! Trust me, I know.” Raking a hand through his hair, Sam cast his gaze off to the side. “Look. We had a bad scare. A really bad scare on top of things here already being…”

He thought of the way Dean’s worried eyes always drifted to Castiel. The way Cas fluctuated between being lost in his own head or prowling the bunker like a caged tiger. Cas hadn’t been able to look at Dean since it happened, had flinched at the sound of his voice. The way Dean found an excuse to walk by the angel’s door a dozen times. Of Charlie’s gaze tracking everyone’s movements and gnawing her lip until it bled.

“Everybody’s been dealing with a lot here. This just... brought everything boiling over.” The anger had subsided, but most all of them sat straight, gazes sharp and all hunting instincts brought to the surface. He ran his tongue over his teeth and shook his head. “It made Jody’s point more pressing-- on top of finding out the bunker is much bigger than we knew, just sealed off by enchantment until now.”

Pamela drummed her lacquered nails against the polished surface of the table. “So what do you need us for?”

Jody nodded encouragement and he took a steadying breath.

“Theoretically, I wanted to know what all it would take to actually get this place up and running at full capacity with a fully-functioning hunter network. Dean and I nearly died two days ago because we went in with bad information. What if that was no longer an issue? What if we could contact any hunter at any time, giving them exactly what they need to know. What if we could send in reinforcements to hunters?” His gaze drifted to each face at the table. “Theoretically, if we were to attempt that: where would we even start and what all would it take?”

Ellen rubbed her temple, a headache already throbbing behind her eye. “Ash? We’re gonna need your whiteboard.”

Towels and sheets folded and put away, Cas made his way through the corridors biting back a smile at the low thrum of pleasure he felt, the small ball of warmth inside that purred like a cat.

He’d been angry and overwhelmed-- still was.
But he had missed Dean. It had been more than time and a door that had separated them. They’d been on opposite sides of distant shores, cold wind whipping at his clothes and biting his skin.

No, not opposite shores. A crossroad where they both had choices.

That scared him.

It wasn’t just Dean’s decision that he was afraid of. How was Cas to make a decision when he didn’t even know his choices or what he wanted?

In the quiet of the laundry room, with Dean’s humming a soft comfort, he’d heard Dr. Grey’s voice in his head.

You don’t have to have an answer today.

And that was true. He had to remind himself of that when the panic set in. His family was there. They were safe. He knew what happened scared them all enough to make them step back and reconsider. That meant something. That was enough for the moment.

The hallways were quiet save for the way his steps echoed and bounced off the tile and concrete walls. If there was one thing Cas were to say he disliked about the bunker it was that it was truly a bunker. There were no windows to let in the morning sun, nor could he curl up with a book and watch a gentle snowfall on a clear night, the moon bright and illuminating the fields of white. He missed windows.

Further, he missed trees. He loved fields, loved Spring when the fields were rows upon rows of lavender and tulips. When Summer and Fall rolled around it was wheat, corn, and sunflowers for miles. He loved the wide open blue of the sky.

But he also missed the lush green of the forests. Missed feeling the soft earth beneath his feet and pathways lined with wild ferns. He enjoyed the way forests had a magic about them, a secret they weren’t ready to tell but you might discover if you went looking. They were quiet in a way that wasn’t quiet at all and settled something inside him. They unknit the tangled knot of thoughts and feelings and made him quiet.

Not to say the bunker was dark or cramped. There was a great deal of room, even with the narrow hallways and so many people for a shared holiday. It never felt cramped.

He loved the bunker because of the people who made it a home. But he missed windows and the feel of open, airy spaces. He missed being aboveground.

Stepping into the War Room, he faltered seeing Sam in front of the portal steadily writing notes as voices on the other side spoke.

“Has the story competition continued or is this holiday advisement?” he asked, climbing the steps.

Sam barely gave him more than a distracted glance, bottom lip between his teeth as his pen scrawled across paper.

“Hm? No. Different Think Tank.” He frowned at his paper, then at the portal. “Ash, this- the coding on this is beyond me.”

“It really isn’t,” Ash argued, hands planted on the table. “But it’s complicated, no other option. And it’s involved. You’re thinking of it as singular, but it’s two separate systems interdependent of each other to create a real-time network. This is what you asked for.”
Cas drifted to his side, head angling to peer at the legal pad filled with Sam’s neat script, several pages already folded back. There were two whiteboards behind Ash covered in complicated and near-illegible scrawl.

“What are you working on?”

“A better system of hunter connectivity and interdependency. Ash, how are we even suppose to get everyone on board with an experimental idea?”

“Just ask,” Ellen answered. She and Bobby were flipping through books and steadily copying down information. “Word of mouth is the best we’ve got at the moment.”

“And phone numbers that may or may not work,” Bobby groused, writing down another one.

“You’d be surprised how far and fast hunter gossip gets,” she continued. “But if you want it to work, you’re gonna have to get everyone on the same page first. Talk to Garth, you said he’s been trying to fill-in since Bobby kicked it. He’s probably already built up the trust you’ll need to get people to begin signing on and then more will follow.”

Sarah tapped her nails. “With as distrusting as hunters are, this is going to take a lot of PR and networking.” She looked at him. “You would need somebody assigned with that as their primary focus: salesmanship and recruiting. But even before they can start, you need to have some hierarchy in this plan. People are going to want to know who they’re dealing with and how.”

Brows raised, Cas regarded Sam. “You’re building an army.”

Sam’s jerked, head snapping around to look at him. “What? No!”

He inclined his head. “Frontline warriors all answering to and receiving missions from a singular source. What would you call it?”

Mouth agape, Sam made a series of aborted vowel sounds before settling for, “Organized.” Cas raised a brow that had Sam scowling and straightening. “The Men of Letters was an organization. They tracked the cases, then fed the information to hunters. The Letters got wiped out and hunters became solitary, which seems to have only worked to our disadvantage. I mean, Garth’s trying, but this might be a better way. Think how many hunters we know but none of them know each other. Think if we could all share resources and work together on cases.” Flush high on his cheeks, Sam turned back to his notepad, feigning returning to work though his pen didn’t move. “It’s not an army.”

With a smile, Cas patted him once on the back and turned away.

“Cas, wait!” He turned, finding Sarah’s gaze. “Have you planned for Christmas yet?”

He looked to Sam for clarification. For all he knew of human history and countless customs it was nearly impossible to keep some many vague ideas and expectations straight. Also, human train of thought was more confusing than not most of the time.

“It’s not December yet,” he tried. “I thought I’d wait closer to the day to get gifts.”

“Yeah, but you’re planning to string the whole bunker with mistletoe, aren’t you?” Andy asked.

Sam pulled a face, sitting back in his chair. “I don’t think any of us have thought about Christmas.” He glanced up. Cas shook his head.
The younger persons at the table shared a look. “Right, but… you at least got a tree, right?”

Sam spread his hands. “Guys, I can remember twice in my life Dean and I have celebrated Christmas-- once as kids and the other because he was dying. It’s not something we do.”

“You don’t have a tree?” squawked Sarah. “I was worried about presents. You haven’t done the tree? It has to be up by December 1st!”

Sam frowned. “What is the big deal?”

“Superstition,” answered Ash.

“It’s bad luck to put up the tree after December starts,” Jo explained. “Or to take it down before January 1st.”

Cas and Sam shared a side glance unmissed by Jody.

“It’s tradition. Happy?” she demanded with an eye roll. “If we’d thought about it, we would have stayed longer to help you set up. I mean, if you don’t know about Thanksgiving, I don’t know why we thought you’d know what to do about Christmas.” She leaned back in her chair to bark orders up the stairs. “Claire! Alex! Pack a bag! We’re going back to the Winchesters!” A muffled voice shouted back words he didn’t catch. With another eye roll, she resettled. “They are suitably dismayed and overly-dramatic. We’ll be there in a few hours.”

“Jody, wait,” Sam said. She raised a brow in question. “What about your job? Aren’t there rules about how much you can be off?”

Fingers gestured flippant dismissal. “Extenuating circumstances and becoming caregiver for two minors. Work understands. I’m blowing through all my vacation for the year, but that’s what it’s there for, right?” She tapped her knuckles, winking. “Jody out.”

“Sarah?” Ellen said. “Why don’t you and Pamela start putting together a list of all the Christmas things you think they’ll need to know while we keep on with this.” She tore the pages she’d been writing on from the legal pad, passing them down the table to be handed to Sam. “That’s all the numbers I have. No telling how much of it is good information anymore seeing as how long we’ve been dead. Best bet is to go ahead and get together with Garth on this. He may have more up-to-date info on these guys.”

Ash slid into her chair as soon as she vacated it and opened his laptop. “Alright, Sam, ready to start building from the ground up? We can start by using hunters you already know would be on board and are active.”

Cas patted Sam on the shoulder. “I think it best I leave you to your work… Director Winchester.” He grinned before stretching his wings and shifting through space.

Castiel resettled on a wooden bridge built over a tumbling and uneven waterfall. His legs dangled over the side, arms folded on the support beam. The dense foliage was lost with the change of season, leaving behind pale bare trees and stark contrast. His breath frosted as he twisted to look up at the top of the waterfall before letting his gaze trace the pattern of water over rock and boulder as it coursed down the mountain.

He’d changed his clothes with a thought, grateful for the weight and warmth his gray coat provided, the way Charlie had taught him to do a scarf and wear a loose beanie so he felt bundled
and secure in the sharp chill of the air. Even his boots and socks were sturdy.

There was something comforting about sturdy clothing. Walking through the bunker wearing Dean’s clothes had given him a delicious thrill. The pure self-indulgence of it was addicting, the sense of possessiveness it gave him, the casual intimacy of the act. Dean’s clothes on his skin. It had only made him crave Dean more, to dream or imagine various scenarios both domestic and carnal to the point he’d admitted to Charlie it was probably for the best he stop.

Now he had a chest of drawers and a small closet full of his own clothing. He liked knowing they were his. In the beginning, choosing to clothe himself in human garbs rather than don the armor of Heaven had given him a sense of defiant pride. Look at him, he imagined his siblings saying, see how far he’s fallen.

But it was not a fall from grace. It was like Cas saving Dean from Perdition. Without even knowing, Dean had stretched his hand into the darkness and raised Castiel from a pit. He’d given Cas choice, individuality, freedom.

He’d come to cherish the ability to try different looks, deciding what styles to express himself with. He liked the sense of belonging it offered, as though this realm had become his home.

The idea of Dean’s gruff rebuttal made him drop his head on a grin, warmed by the knowledge it wasn’t just wishful thinking anymore. Their home was his home. Angels had no concept of that. Didn’t know what it was to miss a place because it brought solace and comfort. They didn’t know what it was like to want to be somewhere because the people were what made it home. Whether it was in a bunker or on the backroads in a sleek black car, ‘home’ and ‘family’ were things Castiel finally had.

His phone gave a low engine rumble and he dug it out, thumbing open the text from Dean.

Dude, where are you?

Amicalola Falls, he sent back.

Am I a koala what?

Snorting a soft laugh, Cas was there and back in the width of a breath, settled into his original position before Dean registered the change. He gestured to the waterfalls in front of them.

“Amicalola Falls.”

The hunter spluttered and spun as if he’d misplaced the bunker. He glared at Cas’ profile.

“Dude. I could have been naked from a shower or something!”

Cas smirked. “And yet still texting me. I’m flattered.” He slid him a look. “I’d have lent you my hat.”

Dean grumbled something suggestive he didn’t quite catch, lowering himself down to sit. At Cas’ deepening smirk, Dean shoved him with a grin. “Dick.”

The warmth and fondness in his voice were unmistakable. Cas smiled and bumped their shoulders together.

Dean motioned at the hibernating forest. “I finally coax you from your room and you go running to the cold?”

“I know an appropriate quote regarding my indifference to the temperature. It’s even musical.”
He felt rather than saw the eye roll before Dean leaned to better peer at his face. “All seriousness, though.”

He slid his gaze to his friend’s. “I was simply thinking. And I missed trees.”

“O-kay. Tree missing aside for now: how is the old noodle? You never said.”

“Are you asking about my sessions with Dr. Grey or my state-of-mind after nearly losing you and Sam?”

Dean stiffened.

“...I meant more in general, but yeah, sure, those. Either. Both. How are you with those? I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to ask or if I was supposed to wait for you to come to me. Are there rules for that? Do you have rules about it?” he asked with wide eyes and worried expression.

He smiled softly and looked away. “I have no rules, Dean. If I wished not to answer, I simply wouldn’t. As to your question: my noodle is complicated. You are alive, and so long as you stay that way... I’m fine.”

“Look, Cas--”

“Dean, I am aware it was an accident, though the potential result is no less horrifying.” The hunter dropped his gaze. “Flogging yourself over the matter won’t undo it.” A twist in the pit of his stomach made him fold his arms over the support beam, resting his chin in one palm. “Besides, I have plenty of other things to think on. I’m not going to obsess over something I can do nothing about-- I’m trying not to, anyway.”

“Other things like what?”

“‘Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,’ I believe is the phrase?” A chuckle escaped him. “I have, after all, declared my independence.”

Dean pushed his lips out. “Nature got any of the answers you’re looking for?”

He shrugged. “I hadn’t had long to think before you texted me, but a few things are taking shape.”

“Feel like sharing with the class?”

“Too soon for that.” He turned. “What is a customary Christmas present to give?”

“What?”

“Sam was talking with Jody and the Roadhouse about Christmas traditions and decorations. Sarah asked about gift-giving. What are the rules?”

Brows arched, Dean blinked his confusion. “Uhhh… I don’t think there are? Rules, I mean. It’s about you and the people you care about.” He shrugged. “I think you’re just supposed to buy people stuff they need or might like.”

Cas scowled at the water trailing beneath their feet. “That is unhelpful. By your definition toilet paper is a suitable gift.”

“Not really--”
He counted off on his fingers. “You need it, and when you don’t have it you’d like to.”

“Then just buy something you think they’d like or you’d like them to have, things you saw that made you think of them.”

He punched out a sigh. “Dean, if that was the criteria for giving people gifts I’d come home with new things every day, especially for you.” He glared. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to not get you something because I think you might like it or could use it? Humans and their ridiculous customs and social norms. If I want to give you gifts or share things with you, why can’t I?”

A lovely pink blush spread and deepened to scarlet on the hunter’s face. Cas really did hate the complicated rules of courtship and humanity, hated the self-loathing and shame instilled in Dean that made it impossible for Castiel to lean in and press their mouths together like he wanted. He hated when the logical straightforward path was the one to be most avoided.

He looked away when Dean said nothing. “And what would Charlie want? How am I to buy for a pop culture savant when I rarely understand her references? And getting Sam a book seems... insulting.”

Schooling his features, though the blush remained, Dean cleared his throat. “Not if you get him fiction.” Cas peered at him. “Kid loves to read, what can I say? I raised him right. With fiction you’d be giving him something fun to do rather than research.” He settled back on his hands, grinning when Castiel twisted to see him. “I’m gonna get him a Barbie.”

“A… Barbie.”

The grin stretched wider. “It’s sort of an in-joke. I’ll buy him a real present, too.”

He hmm’ed and they lapsed into silence. The unspoken question about what they wanted for the holiday hung heavy in the air and pressed hard against the back of Cas’ teeth straining to get free. Dean would probably give a vague answer, if not dismiss the question entirely before asking Cas what he would like for Christmas.

Cas didn’t want for material things or human comforts. He couldn’t say he wanted more of what he already had. He wanted a lifetime as part of this family and spent with Dean, for them to see and experience new things together. He wanted Dean’s smiles and the knowledge he was safe. He wanted Dean to look at him the way he looked at Dean. He wanted to know what it was like to be loved as much as he loved Dean.

The wind sighed through the trees, the rustle and clack of branches drawing his eye. He thought of coming back one day, of hiking the different trails through the mountains as humans did. He would have to add it to his hypothetical list of human experiences he wanted. He thought the purpose of the exercise was to overshadow the pain and loneliness of... before. For weeks the page had remained empty, the very idea of being human again triggering a primal fear and panic that froze him in place.

He turned his head enough to study Dean’s profile.

Much of his headway was just from trying to find his way to Dean. When everything around him was chaos, Dean was as near a constant as Cas had.

The crossroads of decision loomed large in his mind’s eye and he looked away again. He didn’t have answers, but time and effort were allowing them to form. One day he’d have a more concrete path, one he hoped to walk by Dean’s side.
“I’d like to come back out here one day,” he said. Dean tilted his head as he offered his full attention. Cas met his eye. “Or places similar. Hike through the forest when it’s alive and green, or enjoy the warmth of a fire when it snows.”

He imagined being wrapped in a cocoon of blankets, fingers curled around a warm mug as he watched the sun creep over the jagged outline of trees against the horizon. He wanted that. To be safe and warm, secure in some haven and watching the sun rise on a new day knowing he was exactly where he was meant to be.

He imagined having Dean beside him and being exactly where he was wanted.

“I have spent most of my life doing little more than just existing.” He offered a small smile. “Sometimes I wonder what it might be like to live.”

Lips pursed, Dean nodded and tilted his head back with a thoughtful expression. “...Sometimes I wonder what that would be like, too.”
It wasn’t that Dean hadn’t seen strange things, they were the story of his life, but somehow there was always a new weirdness beyond the old he struggled to comprehend.

“This is chaos,” he said, stopping at the stairs to the library.

Alex glared down at him from her ladder. Where were they getting all the garland? “It’s festive.”

He shifted his gaze to Sam half-buried in the branches of a massive fir tree as he and Jody struggled to get it in a stand on the far end of the library. Claire was sitting cross-legged on one of the tables rather than in a chair like a normal person and carefully threading popcorn on a strand. Add in Alex’s enthusiasm with garland and it was like one of those dreams where you walked through the door but found yourself, somehow, in the wrong house.

“Uh huh.” Arms folded, he tilted his head back, looking directly up. “Is that mistletoe?”

Her glare became a defensive snarl daring him to fight her. “It’s. Tradition.”

He remembered it was probably her first Christmas since before her abduction and bit back a retort. A mix of pride, vampire grooming, and being a typical teen made her seem generally underwhelmed, but on occasion, she did give herself away.

“Where did we get live mistletoe?”

“We keep a supply of it,” Sam called. Dean looked over to see him trying to comb his hair back in order, picking tree needles out. “For medicine and spells.” At Dean’s face, he huffed. “Dude. We have a pantry of herbs and sundries.”

“I did not realize Christmas decorating was so heavily... involved.”

Dean looked to see Cas standing beside him with a deep frown. “Right?”

He looked at him. “And this is tradition?”

“Grew up in the back of a car and cheap motels,” he reminded him, one brow lifting. “You are asking the wrong person.”

Still wrestling with the garland, Alex pointed out, “You’re both standing under the mistletoe.”

Cas looked up and then to Dean, expression open as though waiting for clarification. Unfortunately, Dean’s blood was battling to rush to his face as well as drain from it at the same time, leaving him with a feeling of vertigo, the noise of the room lost to the rushing in his ears.

The angel swiveled his attention to Alex. “Is that a jinx of some kind?”

She blinked at him. “Are you new to Earth?”

“Oh course not,” he answered, tone bland. “But do you know how many millennia humans have been hanging things on or above doorways? Generally to ward off some evil or other, as well as based on religion or holiday. How familiar are you with the customs of Japan? Not very? I am not even from this planet.”

A flush had spread across her fair skin, brows drawn up to her hairline. Grimacing, Dean ducked
his head to rub his brow, feeling bad she had to be the one his mounting annoyance got directed at.

“Kissing,” he offered.

Cas turned his annoyed glare on Dean. “What?”

Hating himself already, Dean lifted his gaze to meet his eye. “The tradition is about kissing,” he clarified.

Rather than seeming to feel the embarrassment Dean was suffering, Cas narrowed his eyes, watching him like he thought Dean was trying to pull a joke on him. “Sam, is that right?”

A snort of laughter from the far end of the room. “Yeah, Cas.”

The angel’s whole face twisted in perplexion, looking to Sam, Alex, and then back to Dean. “So anytime people pass through a doorway decorated with a poisonous plant … tradition has them kiss?”

That pulled a laugh out of Dean and he scratched the back of his head, face still hot. “We never said it made sense, just that it was tradition.”

“So you gotta kiss,” Claire stated matter-of-factly, sounding irritated the explanation was taking so long.

“Wha-? No! No, that is not what we’re saying,” Dean spluttered. “It’s a couples thing-”

“No, it isn’t.”

He glared at her. “-and being that all of us are family or children, there’s not really a point to our having it--”

“We brought the lights!” Charlie declared, sliding into the War Room holding up bags, then deflating as her eyes took in Alex’s work, whining, “You started without us?”

Dorothy urged her forward, arms laden down with her own bags. “We also brought decorations. Hop to, Red, there’s plenty left to be done.”

“Yeah, but they started without us.”

“We can still join in, and I thought you were busy today.”

“Do you know the last time either of us had a real Christmas?”

“I really don’t, and you’re delaying our participation further.”

Dean stepped out of their way, both women pausing their bickering long enough to greet Cas with a peck on the cheek as they passed.

Charlie squawked in surprise. “Popcorn garland? I’m missing out on popcorn garland?”

“You’re welcome to grab a needle and thread,” Claire stated, one hand gesturing to the pots and bowls full of awaiting popcorn.

“Where are the cranberries?” questioned Dorothy. “I remember that much.”

Dean started in surprise when lips brushed his cheek, pivoting to find Cas’ blue eyes blinking
curiously at him from too close. All heat rushed to Dean’s face.

The angel looked around the room. “This tradition makes no sense.”

Charlie looked over with a handful of popcorn to her mouth. “Ritz rout wove.”

“What?”

She grimaced, forcing down a too large mouthful. “It’s about love. A tradition based on getting to see relatives and friends again for the holiday-- which generally involves travel-- and an open showing of affection for one another.”

“Oh.” He turned back to Dean, considering this-- and Dean. “Then it’s a nice tradition.”

Dean’s heart was going to bruise from how hard it slammed against his sternum. The others were occupied with their tasks but he still felt in the spotlight on center stage, having forgotten his lines while his partner just delivered theirs on cue. A lifetime worth of panic passed through him in a moment.

Shame flitted through Cas eyes before he dropped his gaze, expression slamming shut harder than a storm door before Dean managed to school his features.

His brain sputtered and jerked to life, prompting him into motion as he remembered well enough to never let that look cross the angel’s face no matter what.

Hand shaking, Dean tilted Cas’ chin up as he leaned in, angling his head to brush his mouth across skin and stubble. Cas drew in a quiet gasp, eyelashes fluttering. Withdrawing, Dean swallowed, watching pink lips part, then meeting blue eyes accentuated by the bright spots of color on his cheeks.

“It is a nice tradition,” Dean assured him, voice a rough whisper.

His knuckle still touched under Cas’ chin, the two of them standing too close. Cas’ hand curled in his sleeve, gaze falling to Dean’s mouth.

“I--” he tried, tongue darting out across those exquisite lips.

“Dean, are you gonna help decorate?”

They jerked apart, staring at each other with wide eyes.

“What?” Dean asked. He didn’t even know who’d spoken; turned to find Sam helping Charlie straighten out lights.

“Are you going to help us decorate?” Sam asked again, casting a brief glance as they unwound and untangled.

Dean retreated. “No.”

His hands still shook. Cas drifted into the library without a glance and Dean’s eyes trailed after him, wanting to go to him, wanting… something.

Jody looked affronted. “Why not?”

“What?” he asked, trying to remember why other people were even there right then.
“Why aren’t you helping to decorate?” Dorothy repeated.

That made his stomach drop and sour. He shook his head, recoiling from the idea.

“Last time I experienced a real ‘family’ Christmas Sam wasn’t even born yet.” He held up a finger, lips pursed. “Too many bad Christmases between then and now. This is--” His eyes darted to the tree, the lights, Claire’s tree garland, and Alex decorating the archway. He felt nauseous. It was too much. Overwhelming like being thrown in the deep end barely able to swim. “No.” His fingers curled around the edge of the map table as he backed into it.

Throat bobbing, Sam dropped his gaze. Claire scrunched her face like he’d said something stupid she couldn’t make sense of, opening her mouth before Dorothy cleared her throat, her expression making Claire bend over her task with agitated movements and quiet grumbling.

“Understandable,” Jody agreed. Dean sagged with relief and sent all the silent gratitude he could as he met her eye. “You’re welcome to change your mind whenever, or help out with something else.”

“You need help in the kitchen, I’m your man.”

“Gonna hold you to that, Winchester.”

He gave a manic nod before his gaze met Castiel’s. A new surge of heat rushed his face and he pivoted, heart stuttering as he remembered the feel of his lips on Cas’ skin.

Stirring the corner of his grilled cheese in the bowl of Poor Man's Soup, Sam glanced at Jody as she handed a bowl to Claire.

“You know, you didn’t have to come all the way back,” he offered. She glanced at him. “I’m sure Dorothy could have told us the ins-and-outs of Christmas-- and didn’t you say we were celebrating at your house?”

Dorothy nudged his foot with hers, grinning from across the table. “You forget I spent most of my life in a different realm fighting wars. Oz doesn’t have Christmas.”

The mischief in her eyes had him grinning back at her, pushing against her foot with a swell of affection.

“You still have to acknowledge and celebrate the season,” Jody told him taking a seat at the table while Claire hopped up on the center island next to Alex. She watched Cas inspect the large stockpot on the stove. “Are you sure you don’t want some, Cas?”

He offered a chagrined smile. “Molecules,” he reminded her, expression longing as he considered the soup.

Dorothy met Sam’s gaze across the table, silent conversation with facial expressions passing between them, her pressing and he reluctant, before he focused on his bowl to end the debate, biting the inside of his cheek.

“You know,” Dorothy began, flashing Sam a wink when he glared and kicked her under the table. She kicked him back. “If you ever decide on becoming human, Cas, I’ll have to make you an Ozian specialty as a Welcome to Humanity present.” He looked at her and her words took on a warm, coaxing tone. “I know a mean Munchkin stew fit only for royalty...”
His mouth pulled up at the corner. “That does sound enticing.”

“Where is Cas?” called Charlie’s voice from somewhere down the corridor, impatient tone getting closer. “Where is everybody? I need Cas.” Her head popped around the corner and Sam blinked. Her hair was straightened and curled under. Her heels clicked as she came into view running a hand over her fitted suit and blouse. “There you are. I need your help. I have a meeting at a finance firm and need you to be my busy and distracted boss while I play assistant.” Her gaze flicked over his jeans and sweater. “You need to change first.”

“Wait, Charlie, what’s going on?”

Green eyes flicked to him and she gave a dismissive wave. “Got a lead on a finance firm that handled some of the Letters investments and bank accounts. Was going to go by myself, then realized that would never work if they thought they were dealing with a woman. In order to take me seriously,” she gestured to the angel, “they’re going to need to think they are dealing with him: someone too busy and important to even pay attention during the meeting, letting his assistant handle everything instead. Cas?” He nodded, and she urged him forward impatiently. “Then come on. You need to change and I’ll do your hair.”

When they disappeared down the hall, Sam called out, “Let us know how it goes!” He turned indignantly to Jody. “Why am I just now hearing about this? You’d think she’d have told us.”

“She probably didn’t want to say anything until she actually had results.” She shrugged. “She’s just following a lead on a, what? Fifty-year-old cold case? Finance firm is probably gonna stonewall her for trying to get into funds that have been inactive for decades.”

“They’ll try,” Claire stated. “She’s got the paperwork to prove her legitimacy. Both original and forged.” She shrugged, sliding off the island. “They are not going to be prepared to do anything but give her exactly what she wants.”

“You knew about it?” Sam asked.

“Who do you think helped her with forged papers?” Her dishes clanged in the sink. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have five miles of popcorn to string together. Alex?”

The other girl heaved a sigh and pushed off her perch, boots landing with a muted slap. “Ugh, fine. Give me a needle and thread.”

“Or you could not, and I’ll just do it on my own for twenty years and three generations, that’s fine.”

“I said I’d help.”

“Well, it’s not like you’ve got more mistletoe to hang.”

“Second thought, I’ll get my camera and take pics of you working.”

“Just tell me when to pose.”

"Ugh. I take it back."

Their voices faded down the hall.

Jody indicated the hallway with her spoon. “Amazing how different they are at home versus on a hunt.” Her mouth twisted. “They definitely act like siblings.” She regarded Sam. “If this idea of
yours works out, I’d like to see about sending them here on a sort of internship. I’d rest easier about them going on hunts without me.”

Dorothy made a cooing sound. They looked at her. “Looks like I’ve already got troops to train.”

His brows raised to his hairline. “You’re going to stay?” he asked, hearing the blatant hope in his voice. “I thought you were going search for one last adventure.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Sam. It found me.” She winked and he grinned. “I think you are going to need help with this grand undertaking, and I am so looking forward to sticking around.”

The wind whipped at them as soon as they stepped out onto the busy afternoon sidewalk. Cas reached out to grab Charlie by the elbow, steadying her as people swerved around them.

“I think that went well,” she said, adjusting the collar of her coat to protect her neck and stuffing her hands into her pockets. “Don’t you think that went well?”

“If I understood anything about human finance and investment, I’m sure the legal jargon and numbers would have been very encouraging.”

She hooked her arm through his, grinning as she led him into the flow of bodies. “Point. Well, what now? I think I am done with numbers and paperwork for the day. Do you want to go shopping? I’m sure there are all kinds of things to find in the city.”

He considered the skyscrapers and crowded sidewalk. The grey sky overhead threatened a drop in the temperature, maybe even snow.

“I think I’d like to visit Dr. Grey.” She looked up at him, eyes wide and blinking. “I assume she knew before I did and is expecting me.”

“You’ve got thinky-thoughts?”

He inclined his head with a shadow of a smile. “As you say.”

Despite being underground, the change from day-to-night was evident in the way overhead lights were turned off, letting the soft glow of Tiffany lamps set a hushed atmosphere. It was in the evening that the sheer size of the bunker always hit Dean. It always seemed quieter, making the vastness loom larger.

Sam and the girls were all in the rec room playing a video game. Dean walked past empty bedrooms, boots sounding on the floor and echoing in the still corridor. There was an itch under his skin, a restless and unsettled crawling that had him rubbing at his forearm as he stepped into the War Room, gaze flicking around, only belatedly realizing he was actively searching for Cas after Charlie returned alone.

The lit tree in the library made him double-take, thoughts skidding to an abrupt halt. It was beautiful; tiny white strands the only source of light, drawing a soft ‘wow’ from his lips as he moved toward it.

He’d avoided the library since that morning, bypassing it without a glance at lunch and retreating back to his room with his meal rather than stay and risk the playful banter of Christmas
cheer that seemed to have taken over.

He climbed the steps and stopped as calm washed over him. Maybe that was why people enjoyed them so much. There was something peaceful and serene in the solitary tree wrapped in lights and delicate strands of garland. He’d had that dream before, or the idea of the dream, of a home and family and the safety that allowed for such frivolous things like Christmas. It had always been so far removed from his reality it may as well have only existed in Hallmark movies.

In the quiet, the sight was almost a holy revelation.

“Is everyone in bed?” He turned, seeing Castiel walking toward him unbuttoning his peacoat and then loosening his scarf so that it hung from his shoulders. “I didn’t think it was that late.”

“You’re safe,” he blurted, more relieved that he’d expected.

Cas paused, brows pinched. “I’m sorry you thought I might not be.”

Dean shoved his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “You were gone so long I thought you might have taken a cab back or something.”

“After the meeting, I asked Charlie if we could stop by Dr. Grey’s office for an impromptu appointment, and then I wandered a bit on my own.” He tilted his head. “...I didn’t get a message from you. The phone must have messed up with the sudden change in location as well as the snow.”

Shaking his head, Dean stepped closer, dropping his gaze. “I didn’t send one, I just…”

“Worried.”

The word hung in the air between them and Dean shuffled on his feet, wishing he could bite back the words.

He swallowed. “Well, I’m glad you didn’t have to get a cab home. G’night, Cas,” he said, clapping him on the shoulder as he hurried past.

“Dean.” He faltered, turning his head. Mouth open, Cas hesitated, then drew a breath. “What would you like for Christmas?”

Blinking, Dean turned with a frown, before looking around him and holding out his hands. “Cas…I’ve got more than I ever let myself hope for.” His arms lowered, voice a whisper. “I’m too afraid to ask for more.” In the silence, Cas lowered his gaze, nodding. Dean took another step back. “Good night, Cas. ...I’m glad you’re home.”

It was still strange seeing all the Christmas decorations. Charlie bought a small tree and multicolored lights to add a splash of Christmas cheer to the rec room. There was a tense stand-off happening between them regarding the use of loose tinsel.

She yanked back the box before his fingertips snagged it. “I don’t think coffee and board games is a fair trade.” Her eyes narrowed. “Not for the shiny.”

He scowled, open hand insistent. “Coffee and board games and I’ll invite Max.”

Her lips pushed out, corners still trying to pull up in a predatory smile. “So. Much. Shiny,” she
said, sprinkling a few loose strands over the artificial tree’s branch and letting silver pieces slip to the floor.

“And I will let you help me pick out Cas a Christmas present!”

She surged forward, slapping the box against his chest. “Got yourself a deal, Winchester!” He clutched at it as she skipped out of the room. “Let’s do this again sometime!”

He glared over his shoulder. “You’re a Winchester yourself, you know!”

“Happy Christmas to me!”

Gathering up the fallen strands of messy abomination, Dean shoved them to the bottom of the trash and faltered. What was the likelihood of Charlie only buying one box?

He stormed after her down the hall. “Charlie!”

A side door opened and a disheveled Claire stepped out wrapped in a quilt. “Stars and stripes, Dean, it’s not even 9 AM.” She pushed up onto her toes and clumsily kissed his cheek. “Good morning and tell me there’s breakfast.”

He looked up and scowled at the green plant affixed with red ribbon to the light fixture.

“Did Alex hang mistletoe everywhere?”

“Your hallways lack color. It’s depressing; this is festive. Why am I explaining before coffee?” she groaned stepping into the War Room as Dorothy came from the other direction.

“Well then, you’re just in time,” she offered brightly. Dean eyed the tray she carried. “We’re having breakfast in the library. Coffee’s on the table,” she threw them a wink, “with a second pot brewing.”

Dean climbed the steps and rolled his eyes. “Where did we get stockings? Why do we have stockings —” Alex twisted on her perch on the ladder, “—because it’s festive, right? Where did you get more garland? Charlie, put down the tinsel or our deal is off!”

Dorothy smiled, setting down the tray and returning the way she’d come, kissing Dean on the cheek. “Morning.”

“Morning,” he answered, not breaking his glare from the indignant red-head.

“Wha-? No! That wasn’t part of the deal!”

“I’m renegotiating!”

“You don’t even know how many boxes of tinsel I have!”

“For all the tinsel!”

Groaning, Claire abandoned her seat and quilt. “Too much yelling.” She paused by Dean, bowing her head. He distractedly kissed her hair before she shuffled on.

“Charlie.”

She folded her arms, smirking. “Oh, buddy, you can’t afford for me to give up all my boxes of shiny fun.” Alex made a sound like she agreed. Charlie’s grin grew. “By all means, please try.”
“I’ll let Alex hang more garland and lights.”

The younger girl snorted, climbing off of her ladder. “Like you could stop me.” She kissed him on her way past.

He shot her a glare of payback and tried again, more frantic as he saw Charlie reposition the ladder by the tree and begin climbing. “I’ll go to Moondor!” She gave him a look that said to stop wasting her time. “I—I’ll let you drag me around whatever convention you go to next!”

“Now that’s a sight,” Jody commented, pecking his cheek as she passed with a platter of bacon and sausage.

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. “Keep talking…”

“In costume.”

She rolled her eyes and climbed higher. “You’d love every minute, Dean. I thought you were here to negotiate.”

Jody cast her a look. “Don’t take it off the table, Charlie.”

“Fine.”

“Convention, costume, presents, coffee date. Is that not enough?”

“No, no, see: we already made a deal for the other box of tinsel which you were given. This is a new deal for all the tinsel still in my possession to relinquish if you can afford it.”

“That’s not fair,” he squawked.

Dorothy and Alex came through carrying orange juice and coffee.

“It’s actually quite fair,” Dorothy argued. “C’mon, Red, go easy on him.”

“Stay out of it, Kansas. I’m gonna rob a Winchester blind.” She sprinkled a few silver strands across the top-most branches.

“I’ll let you drive Baby!”

Her face lit. “Keep talking.”

“Twice.”

“Nope, sorry, only counts as one entry,” she sighed, reaching for more tinsel. He took a step forward. “Uh-uh. Stay where you are or I dump the whole box at once.” He froze and her eyes narrowed. “And you’ll never know where I have the other boxes.”

He took a step back, palms open and raised. “What do you want?”

Claire came through carrying plates and silverware. “Are you still arguing?”

“It’s about to be thoroughly entertaining, I’m sure,” Dorothy grinned, sitting down and scooping eggs on her plate. “An unconditional surrender is on the horizon.”

“Did you teach her to be this evil?” he demanded.
“Cunning and wits in a woman does not make her evil, Dean.” She shot him a look. “Didn’t you save the world once or twice? Surely you can save yourself before breakfast.”

“What’s going on?” Dean turned to see Cas walking up with a puzzled expression. Sam was leaning back against the map table with folded arms and a shit-eating grin.

“I’m about to watch my brother get owned, I think.”

“Thanks for the backup, Samantha,” Dean snapped, before turning his attention to where Charlie was carefully pulling tinsel out one strand at a time to hang on the tree. “Charlie, please! It’s gaudy and it’s gonna get everywhere! I just swept! The tree is pretty as is.”

“I hardly got to decorate it,” she sing-songed.

“A bigger room? My room? Spa treatment?”

A hint of a smirk pulled at the corner Cas’ mouth as he stepped up and kissed Dean’s cheek. “It might be best to just surrender,” he advised.

Dean glared. “You're supposed to be on my side!”

The angel winked. “Always,” he assured, before walking into the library and not helping at all.

A flush of pink rose to Dean’s cheeks, deepening when he noticed all the faces looking deeply amused. He glared hard at her.


“Depends on what you’re willing to give me.”

His head dropped back. “Anything, Charlie. For the love of everything I hold dear, anything.”

“And that, ladies and gentlemen,” Sam crowed, slapping him on the back as he passed, “is a one-hit knockout. House Cup to Slytherin.”

Mouth twisting, Dean blinked at Charlie and waited. Her expression softened, turned thoughtful as a smile tugged at her mouth unevenly.

“Pictures.”

He frowned. “What?”

“Pictures,” she repeated. “Of us. Of all of us. Now and going forward. We’re here. We exist. I want pictures, not just memories, and I want to hang them on the walls and in the hallways.” Worry twisting his stomach, Dean’s frown deepened and he took a step toward her when something in her face became shuttered off and sad. “I almost lost you and Sam, and the only picture I have of us is from the day before it happened. I want pictures.”

Dean stood breathless for a moment, then wiped a hand over his face, nodding and lowering his eyes.

“Geez, Charlie,” he beckoned her with one hand. “Yes. Deal. Now get off the ladder so I can hug you.”

He reached her just as she got down and slotted herself against his chest, arms wrapped around his waist. Dean pressed his mouth to the top of her head, clutching her.
“All you had to do was ask, Charlie.”

“You would have scoffed.”

“Brat.”

“Jerk.” A pause. “And I still get to drive Baby.”

Before he got the chance to do something ridiculous and sentimental, like telling her he loved her or how glad he was world-saving brought them together, he released her, pushing her forehead with the pad of his index finger. “Once.”

She smiled, knowing what he meant.

Sleep refused to come. Dean laid in bed staring up at a ceiling he couldn’t see as restlessness marched lines underneath his skin. Tossing aside his blankets, he rose, the floor biting cold through his socks, but flannel bottoms and long sleeves enough to ward off the chill.

The hall was quiet. The lack of noise and light had been the most disconcerting thing about moving into the bunker. He’d jerk awake on full alert not because of a noise, but because of the lack of it. No neon sign or yellow street lamp glow through the curtain in a cheap motel. No hum of the A/C or the rumble of traffic on the highway. No Sam snoring and talking quietly in his sleep in the other bed. Just… quiet.

He’d spent so much of his life with the same familiar background noises their absence had been deafening. Quiet was comforting once he’d gotten used to it meaning safety rather than danger. It meant everyone else was tucked in their beds asleep as he padded down the hall to the War Room and Library beyond.

He walked easily in the dim light, past the rows of bookshelves to where the main power switch for the tree was. The sudden brightness nearly blinded him at first, turning his head as he tried to blink spots from his vision and moved back to lean against the wall under the archway entrance taking the scene in.

It was something straight from a Hallmark card. But it was real. It was real and he was here with a family of his own and they were having a real Christmas.

The surrealness had worn off a bit, replaced with the weight of realization pouring through him like ink in water.

He could have this. He did have it. Not only did he have it, he had a choice in the matter.

Sam may have been the one to initially hand off all the months’ previous cases, but Dean had allowed it without fuss, reveling in the well-deserved break and ability to mend and rest. But, it had been more than a temporary recovery. He’d made excuses for the cases they passed off, as though he hadn’t had a choice in the matter, as if they didn’t have any option but to redirect them to other hunters. If he didn’t have a say in it, then he didn’t need to think about it. Didn’t need to think about the fact they weren’t hunting and the world continued on without missing a beat. The weight that had threatened to suffocate him, to bury him in a shallow grave on some back road, it wasn’t shackled around his neck like he’d thought.
He wrapped his arms tighter around himself considering the inviting, uncomplicated cheer offered by the lights of the tree.

“Can you not sleep?”

Dean turned his head, watching Cas cross the War Room in sweats and a shirt to take up position beside him.

“Could ask the same of you,” he pointed out, eyes tracing the rumpled hair and comfortable sleep clothes the angel preferred. Their eyes met when he dragged his gaze back up. “Something on your mind?”

A shadow of a smile pulled at Cas’ lips and he shook his head. “For once, no.” He turned to the tree on the far side of the room. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

He gave a wordless nod and wondered what others saw when they took in the scene. Did they see the novelty of it? Recognize what it represented? What it offered? Why weren’t they prompted from bed with restless introspection in the dead of night?

“Something on your mind?” Cas wondered with a side glance.

“Choice. Free will. Life.”

Cas blinked, regarding him with a frown. “Did you dream about the Apocalypse?”

He snorted a soft laugh, head dropping, then gestured to the tree. “No. I’m just… I’ve been given what I never let myself even hope for.” He folded his arms. “I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

“What you never hoped for?”

“I mean, I’ve pretty much got everything.” He shrugged. “Sam’s safe. You’re safe. We’re all together.” He turned his head to regard him in the soft glow. “You said it at Thanksgiving, but I guess I’m realizing it for me: I have a family again, and I get to have things, frivolous things, like holidays.” His throat bobbed and he looked away. “I never thought I’d have this again. Never thought I’d get to be happy. And safe.”

“Dean…”

Silence, comfortable and light, fell over them, Dean still reveling in the unexpected gift he’d been given as well as what that meant going forward. The hunter community was marching on without them. There was amazing freedom in that. Theoretically, what if they never went back? What if Sam went back to school? Became a lawyer like he’d wanted? What if they kept on like they were, passing out cases and helping on research? What would that mean for Dean if they never went back?

Free will and limitless choice were being laid at his feet… and he didn’t have a clue what to do with it. He’d never had a choice before, not really. Everything until then had all been decided for him. What did he want?

A touch at his elbow made him turn his head, blinking with a start to come nearly nose-to-nose with Castiel as he leaned in to kiss his cheek. Cas flushed, pulling back an inch with embarrassed stammering.

“I-I’m…I only meant to, um…” his gaze flicked to the mistletoe above them, then back to Dean.
Green eyes watched as his tongue darted out across his bottom lip. “I-I only meant to say good-night.”

He considered that for a heartbeat, then crossed the narrow space to capture Cas’ lips with his own, feeling the angel’s small gasp as Dean threw caution to the wind and did what he wanted. What he’d been wanting.

The kiss was soft and chaste, Dean’s hand trembling as he touched Cas’ jaw, cradling it, holding their mouths together but for a moment. A *perfect* moment where everything was right and he didn’t want to leave.

When Dean pulled back, green eyes flicked over his features, gauging his reaction, studying the stunned, blinking eyes and expression.

Wide eyes darted over Dean’s face, falling to his mouth and back up. Fingers curled in the material of Dean’s sleeve. “Dean,” he breathed.

Turning fully Dean reached up to cradle the other side of Cas’ jaw, tips of his fingers sliding into dark hair as he brought their mouths together once more, heat and heartbeats passing between them.

If life was offering him choices, this one, this moment, the one he’d dreamt a thousand times in a thousand ways, the thing he thought he could never, would never have, this was the first choice he wanted to make.

He kissed Cas in a slow, languorous slide of lips. He let the pad of his thumb trace back and forth over the stubble at the bolt of Cas’ jaw. Castiel’s fingers curled into the front of Dean’s shirt as the hunter shifted, pressing the lines of their bodies together in a moment of pure indulgence.

He felt the way the angel’s hands clutched and released his shirt, Castiel all but trembling under his hands. Dean wondered if the angel was holding back as much as he was, resisting the urge to push for more, just savoring the slight scrape of stubble, the lingering scent of Cas’ cologne, memorizing the feel of Castiel’s full mouth as it moved against his. Was he as terrified as Dean was?

In the light of the Christmas tree in the dead of night, it was a moment spun from dreams and unfulfilled wishes. It was perfect and inevitable and impossible, and most importantly, it was Dean’s to have forever.

He broke the kiss, regretfully dragging his mouth from Castiel’s, breathing into the space between them as dazed blue eyes fluttered open, playing over Dean’s face in confusion. His lips and cheeks were tempting shades of matching pink.

Smiling, Dean rubbed his thumb across the spot behind Cas’ ear before stepping back.

“Good night, Cas,” he whispered, before drifting from the steps, leaving Cas silhouetted as Dean ducked his head and retreated to the darkened corridors and his room.
They didn’t talk about it and it didn’t happen again.

Jody and the girls had returned home leaving everyone a little more subdued in their absence, but Charlie and Sam both had projects of their own that kept them busy. Cas was sure Dean still didn’t know what Sam was, hypothetically, working on.

Aside from the quiet, nothing had changed. Cas stood leaning against the counter nursing his tea, eyes studying Dean’s profile and mannerisms as he talked with Sam over a story Jo had told him involving a hunt gone comically wrong.

Dean was exactly the same. He laughed and smiled and joked and frowned just as he always did. He kissed Charlie under the mistletoe and playfully shoved at Sam when they met under it.

With Cas, though...

They didn’t touch. Or kiss. There was no flicker of the memory in Dean’s face when their eyes met, and they somehow never ended up under the mistletoe at the same time.

He’d wondered if it was a dream. He’d had a few good dreams before, though nothing like that. Normally, they were fragmented chaos, bits and pieces of relived history or subconscious guilt taking form. Logically, he knew the reason behind his nightmares, but it didn’t make them any easier to face. Were it not for Dr. Grey’s telepathic and empathic abilities, he doubted their sessions would be nearly as effective as they were.

His anxiety was better. With her help, he’d carefully begun navigating the questions and choices available to him. Having a better grasp of who he was and what he wanted made things easier, more concrete.

He fought the urge to use her as a crutch just as he used his grace, like now, with Dean acting no differently to the point Cas questioned if their kiss happened at all. If he’d dreamt it, what was he suppose to do? If it happened, and he was still certain it had, why hadn’t Dean addressed it?

Cas ached to kiss him again. Wanted to know if that was allowed. Wanted the casual intimacy of being able to take Dean by the hand or for their lips to meet. He wanted to be a ‘them’ so badly that it hurt. His heart ached to share time, space, affection, and a life with him.

He was not so optimistic as to believe the transition to a romantic relationship would be without snags and bumps, that they wouldn’t have to work at it. Awkwardness, from Dean, he had anticipated. Shyness. Uncertainty. Self-doubt. Possibly even self-loathing. Cas had expected for him to refrain from meeting his eyes, perhaps avoid being left alone together until Dean went round-and-round enough times in his own head while Castiel waited with impatient understanding.

What he had not expected or prepared for was to look Dean in the eyes… and see nothing.
The feeling of rejection gutted him. It wasn’t fair. It was cruel, even. Dean wouldn’t have kissed him if he didn’t have some idea the desire was reciprocated; if he hadn’t known Cas cared for him in that way. He’d known and had made the decision to kiss Castiel. Dean had kissed him, and then had turned around and acted as though it never happened, completely shutting Cas down and out.

It hurt. It was unfair.

His stare lasted too long, the weight of a steady gaze garnering Dean’s attention. He broke off mid-sentence, brows furrowing with worry. “You okay?”

Cas straightened. “Fine.” He frowned at his cold tea in distaste and poured the remnants in the sink. “Just lost in thought.”

Dean’s pensive expression remained, green eyes watching him carefully. “You sure?”

Cas nodded, averting his attention. “I’m gonna go find Charlie.”

“Last I saw she was already in the Bookkeeping office working,” Sam said. “You give Charlie a project,” he pulled a face, “man, she is on it.”

Inclining his head, Cas set his cup in the sink and drifted from the kitchen.

He didn’t want to ask about what had happened. Dean had kissed him, and oh help him, what a kiss. But Dean had initiated it, had made that decision, and it was such a far step from where they’d been Cas felt addressing it would also have to be on Dean’s time. But this?

It was all so confusing and frustrating. It was viscerally painful.

All of him wanted all of Dean.

He’d accepted that getting there meant playing the world’s longest waiting game, having to assuage a lifetime of fear and insecurity. He’d been okay with that, understood it.

He was not okay being made feel rejected and used to satisfy curiosity.

Castiel had a dream of snow last night. He’d been standing in a forest in a light snowfall, face upturned as flakes landed delicately on his face and lashes. A hand had taken his, coaxing him to come inside, and he’d known without seeing exactly who it was. His presence, his touch, his warmth familiar. Treasured. Perfect.

Then it had been a scene in a cabin and he was asleep in a large bed and comfortable, burrowed under quilts and a down comforter. In the fuzzy, sedated haze on the surface of sleep, he’d known he was tangled, arms and legs, with another person and it had been everything he ever wanted. He’d been home.

Castiel made his way through the bunker. Time would tell what path Dean would decide on, but Cas had to start making independent decisions for his own needs. That was the difference between independence and co-dependence.

Cas knocked softly against the wood frame of the office door, easing it open. Charlie sat at a desk with multiple laptops and ledgers in front of her, fingers flying away.

“No, I’m not hungry,” she said, preemptive as her gaze darted back and forth double-checking her work. She was still wearing her clothes from the evening before.
“I’m here to interrupt you.” Her fingers stopped, hovering over the keys as she looked at his empty hands and then to his face as his words sunk in. “You’d talked about investments. I wanted to speak with you about them.”

Lips pushing out, she narrowed her gaze to thin slits of calculating green. Sighing, she reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear and dislodged the pen and pencil she’d tucked there and forgotten about. Casting them a glare, she stretched and nodded to where he stood. “Come in and shut the door.”

“I hate you so much,” Jo insisted, sliding into frame at the bar.

Sam straightened with indignation. “What did I do?”

“The writing competition! First about each other, then Dean and Cas, and because there hasn’t been the need to continue it recently, Sarah and Andy started their own original writing!”

“Why does that make you hate me?” She glowered over her coffee and he took in the dark shadows under her eyes, the unwashed hair. “Jo, are you okay?”

“No, I am not! I stayed up all night reading about star-crossed lovers and unresolved sexual tension and neither Sarah or Andy are done with the next chapters of their stories!” He laughed and she slapped a hand down. “It’s not funny! My suffering is great! It was fine when they were writing short story drabbles, but I need to know what happens!” She groaned and slumped forward in a miserable heap. “I got an hour’s sleep. I hate everything.”

“Can you be sleep-deprived when you’re dead?”

“Harsh wording, dude. And, yes, you can.” She pushed herself up, propping her chin in her hand. “Honestly, it’s not all that much different than being alive, except every day is my off day and it never gets old.”

“So Sarah and Andy became novelists? I thought you were the writer.”

“I was only in it for the competition. And, yeah. One writes epic romantic drama, the other: dramatic erotica. Sarah has me so emotional and I hate you for it.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“It’s so great. I’m so miserable.” He grinned. She angled her head trying to see the books and papers around him. “So what are we working on today?”

“Digital library that could be accessed by specific people if hunters were to call needing help with a case.” He gestured with a twirl of his wrist. “Here, obviously, but also Garth and Jody. I don’t want just anyone to be able to get their hands on it since in the wrong hands a lot of this could be dangerous. Even still, the really powerful or dangerous stuff would only be here at Mission Control.”

“With you and Dorothy as the badass power couple leading.” He blinked as she sighed, gaze starry. “I can see the two of you being that couple to kiss on a battlefield while people cheer your victory.”

Searing heat rushed his face in sharp pinpricks. “Jo!”
She jerked back, frowning at him. “What? The two of you are a thing, right?”

“No! Where did you get that idea?”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

Licking her teeth, Jo shoved away from her seat, hands raised. “I can’t. I can’t. Nope. Good luck with that.”

“Jo!”

“Bye, Sam!”

“What was that?” Dean asked, coming around behind him and dragging out a chair.

His blush burned hotter and he kept his gaze down. “I’m not sure.”

“It’s about you and Dorothy, wasn’t it?” His gaze jerked up to find his brother grinning, holding his coffee up in a toast. “Knew it.”

Sam lowered his eyes, forcing his features into something unaffected and neutral. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he stated primly.

The toe of Dean’s boot nudged him under the table, his brother’s expression devoid of playful mirth. “Seriously, Sam. Ask her out to dinner.”

“I--” Words died off in his throat until he settled back, shoulders hunched. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Sam.” He offered his brother a timid glance, feeling small and young and caught in a lecture. “You’re crazy about her. Do something about it.”

He prickled defensively. “I could say the same to you,” he snapped.

Dean’s expression flattened and he gave a slow blink. “What’s that suppose to mean?”

Oh geez. He really didn’t want to fight with Dean. Not about this.

“Nothing. I don’t know. Shut up.”

Tension easing, his brother laughed into his coffee before gesturing to the spread with it. “What’s all this?”

Cold dread poured down Sam’s back, eyes widening. “I, uh…” Dean raised a brow and Sam swallowed, pushing himself back and pivoting to offer his full attention. He felt his brother shift gears to Work Mode. “Okay, so… I had an idea.”

Cas’ shoes echoed on the wood floors of the empty bedroom and off the high ceilings as he finished inspecting the bathroom and spun in a circle to take in the master suite again.

“I like it.”

It was airy and open feeling, with two windows on the far wall, while the adjacent included glass
doors that opened out onto the large deck overlooking the snowy forest around the cabin.

Picking nervously at her lip, face puckered and worried, Charlie’s eyes tracked his every
movement. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Her head bobbed as she shifted her attention to the tablet in her arms. “Okay, well, we can mark
it as a definite ‘maybe’.” He slanted her a look she studiously ignored, fingers scrolling and tapping
away on the screen. “As investment properties go, it’s not a bad one. It’s secluded and certainly has
a lot of space--”

“Charlie.”

“I mean, if it’s not being used as a safehouse, which would be rarely--”

“Charlie.”

“--our property manager can rent it out to people taking mountain getaway vacations!”

“Charlie.”

“A-and it’s actually not all that far from a city for shopping and dining out--”

“Charlie...” he said again, this time softer as her bottom lip started to tremble and she turned
watery eyes on him.

“You’re leaving?” she demanded for the second time, voice high and cracking with the words.

He sighed, heavy and patient, before offering her a gentle smile. “I’m not… leaving, Charlie.”

She wiped at her eyes with the heel of her hand. “You want to move out.” Hurt filled eyes glared
at him. “How is that better?”

He dropped his gaze, taking a moment to choose his wording and not sure how. “...I need to live
for me for once,” he tried, licking his bottom lip. “With Sam wanting to re-establish the Men of
Letters, it’s only a matter of time before he and Dean have the choice to get back into active
hunting, as well.”

“So?”

“If Sam hunts, Dean hunts, and if Dean is out there... I will be out there.” He hesitated,
swallowing and shaking his head. “Charlie, for my own well-being…--I want off the battlefield. I
am tired. A-and I deserve to be allowed this! I deserve to be able to draw a line in the sand!”

“It doesn’t mean you have to leave!”

“Charlie, I can’t be in that atmosphere! I am drowning, do you get that? I am trying so hard to
keep it together, but living there means constantly waiting for the next milk run case they go on
that ends in a funeral and I cannot do that!”

Her bottom lip quivered. “But what about Dean?”

The tension and anger bled out of his form and he sighed, sliding his gaze away. “Dean has to
make his own decisions about what he wants. We all do.” He looked at her. “And it’s not like I’m
leaving Earth, Charlie. It’s no different than Jody and Claire. I can visit. You can visit me. I am on
the other end of the phone to call, text, or even facetime.” He dropped his gaze, hating to admit such weakness. “I plan to let him know, but I’m suffocating and this is the only way I can think of to get air.”

The door to the bunker opened and then slammed shut, making both Dean and Sam look up in surprise as Charlie stormed down the stairs, Cas following her in exasperation.

“Charlie!”

“Don’t talk to me!” she snapped, throwing a vicious glare over her shoulder. “I am still angry at you.”

Dean watched the angel with wide eyes as he came down the stairs rubbing his forehead.

“What was that about?”

Drawing in a breath, Cas let his arm fall slack and shook his head. “Something we’re working out. I had hoped she’d be calmer before we came in which is why I--” Cutting himself off with a wave, his eyes fell on their laptops and paperwork. “What are you two working on?”

“Sam wants to turn this place into S.H.I.E.L.D headquarters,” Dean said, grinning.

His brother huffed with impatience. “Dean, it is all still just an idea I’m trying to get off the ground.” He jabbed an open hand at the books. “I don’t even know if it’ll work. We’re going to have to hire staff!”

“It’ll work, Sam.” He turned back to his laptop. “You just need some extra hands to get it done faster and you never bothered to ask.”

He shot him a sidelong look, managing to appear both offended and guilty like only Sam could. “I thought you’d be mad.”

Dean dropped his gaze, busying his hands as he gave a jerky shrug. “Why would I be mad? Baby brother’s out there stretching his wings.”

Cas’ blue eyes flicked between them, before he nodded, stepping away. “Then I’ll leave you to your work.”

Dean frowned, noting the rigid posture and deep lines under his eyes. “Cas, you okay?”

“Just… a lot on my mind,” he said with scarcely a glance. “I’m gonna try and talk to Charlie.”

Dean watched him leave, letting his eyes linger on the way his dark sweater pulled across his shoulders and accentuated his waist before he dragged his gaze away; refocusing on Sam.

“You really thought I’d be mad?”

He gave an awkward shrug, keeping his head bowed. “I didn’t talk to you about it first. And it kinda affects all of us, I guess.”

“Sam, I only get mad when you know you’re doing something wrong behind my back,” he said with a level stare. “You trying to step out on your own and make something better and new, why would I be mad about that? If anything, I want to help.”
“Really?”

Dean rolled his eyes. “I’m the same brother who helped you with your homework and science fair. You think I wouldn’t help you with a project now that you’re an adult? Pssh. Gimme that beastiary while you work on your algorithm.”

Grinning, Sam handed the thick tome over. “Jerk.”

“Brat.”

He knocked his index knuckle against the varnished wood of the bedroom door.

“Charlie?”

“I’m still mad at you,” her voice announced from the other side.

He lowered his eyes to the floor, heart clenching with the desperate need to undo a wrong. “Are we still friends?”

A soft thump he thought might have been her throwing a pillow at the door.

“Of course, but that doesn’t make me any less hurt!”

He shifted so that he held one arm behind him, the other of the doorknob. “Aren’t you at least going to give me a chance to maybe make you less angry?”

“Groveling, Cas. It’s called groveling.”

“Charlie, may I please come in?” When she didn’t refuse, he opened the door a crack. She sat at the head of her bed, arms and legs folded, face morphed into an angry pout like the most adorable ball of rage. One of her decorative pillows lay on the floor, and he lifted a brow. “If I come in, are you going to throw something at me?”

She turned her face away, chin raised. “Depends on your groveling technique.”

He slipped inside, keeping his back to the door as he shut it behind him. “I hope this is a good place to start,” he told her, pulling his other hand out from behind his back.

The tiny black bundle of fur squirmed impotently in his grasp, back and forepaws paddling at empty air as it mewed its protests.

A sharp gasp escaped her, shooting forward to the end of the bed in instant and leaning forward to near-tipping point as her expression melted into soft lines and fawning.

“Aww, is that a kitten?” She gathered the small creature to her chest with something like a whimper, high and keening in the back of her throat. “Where did you get him? Oh, look at his little blue eyes!”

He gave her a sidelong, corner of his mouth curling impishly. “Does this mean I’m forgiven?”

Her smile wilted, lips pressed into a flat line. Leaning her head forward, she pressed her mouth to the kitten’s fur while keeping her gaze downcast. Cas held himself still, cold creeping over him that she might not be able to forgive him so easily. Not only was he upsetting the balance of their home, but the man she cared for as a brother, whom she’d known far longer and was closer to.
Swallowing, he drew a breath and tried to find the right words to make her understand.

She cut him off with a sigh and gesture of nimble fingers to the available space on the bed. “Have a seat.”

A sigh that had him sagging punched out of him and he moved to perch on the comforter beside her. She’d yet to look at him, still rubbing her chin back and forth over the kitten’s head with a muted gaze.

He twisted, but she looked away from him. “I’m sorry, Charlie, I am.” The kitten began to purr, eyelids drooping as her administrations coaxed it to sleep. He held out open palms. “What would you have me do?”

When she still didn’t say anything, he yielded to her silence and pushed to his feet, nodding. He still had other potential properties to look through, as well as books on finance and investments he needed to learn. In the meantime, he thought, fingers curling around the doorknob, he’d just have to take comfort in knowing she would forgive him in time.

Sam was sitting alone in the library, tapping away at his computer when Cas came back through.

“What’s Dean?”

The younger Winchester blew errant hair out of eyes and jerked his chin toward the other hall. “Coffee, I think.” He glanced at his watch. “Maybe lunch. Probably lunch.” Hazel eyes drifted the way he’d come and back again. “...everything okay?”

“In due course.”

Castiel rounded the corner into the kitchen just as Dean straightened retrieving a stockpot from the fridge, expression lighting up.

“Hey, you’re just in time!” He made a show of the silver cookware before setting it on the stove. “Chili’s always better the next day. Wanna eat with us this time?”

“Thank you, but no,” he said, not breaking stride as he crossed the space, lifting a hand to tap, a little harder than needed, the center of Dean’s forehead.

“Wha-?”

“Charlie has a cat.” He finely arched a brow. “You’re welcome.”

“Wel-?” The deep frown became an affronted scowl. “A cat? Where did she- dude, she can’t have a cat.”

“A kitten more precisely, and yes, she can, because I gave it to her in the hope of making peace. I, in turn, healed you of your feline aversions.” The brow ticked higher. “You. Are. Welcome.”

Mouth opening, Dean reconsidered his words, twisting his lips. “She still can’t have a cat, Cas. Allergies or no.”

He narrowed his eyes and angled his chin. “She can and she does.” He turned on his heel to leave. “And as I assume she’s aware training and care are up to her, I doubt you’ll have to concern yourself with the matter.”
Taking a step after him, Dean reached out a hand, then stopped, yanking it back before touching him. “Look, Cas, I’m sorry the two of you are mad at each other--”

“I am not mad at her,” he corrected, stalling in the doorway beneath the mistletoe, he noted and pivoting around. “She is mad at me, just as I am at myself, and you, and potentially Sam should his name need to be added to that list.”

Eyebrows shooting up, Dean lifted both hands and even put space between them. “That is one hell of a tiff you two got into.” Cas turned and stalked down the hall, missing the feel of his trenchcoat’s flair and snap as he stormed down the corridor. Dean chased after him, stopping so that he now stood under the festive archway. “Cas, wait.” He did, clenching his teeth. When the silence stretched, he shot a pointed look over his shoulder to where Dean lingered. Shifting, the hunter tried again, tongue slipping out over his bottom lip. Castiel’s eyes tracked the movement then returned. “I am sorry the two of you had a fight.”

Cas inclined his head. When Dean didn’t move, he turned to him. “Was there anything else?” he asked, hearing the cool demand in his own tone.

“Just… thanks for the, uh,” he gestured, a single backward roll of his wrist, near his chest.

Cas offered him a slow blink and canted his head. That inward-directed anger gained momentum in a new direction. “Please clarify. I’m unsure if that was meant to encapsulate your head and allergies or what’s above them.” Green eyes jerked up and Cas felt gratifying and petty spite at the way they widened in alarm and Dean flinched.

“Allergies,” Dean said, though the pink spreading up his neck and to his face gave away what his voice did not. “It was nice, uh, of you to do… for her.”

“She is dear to me,” he replied turning away. “There isn’t much I wouldn’t do.”

“Um, Sam?” Dorothy’s voice called from the hall leading to the garage, she was still half-turned the way she’d come before looking at him with puzzlement, thumb gesturing over her shoulder. “Is everything alright?”

Bottom lip clasped between his teeth, Sam considered the invitation on his screen one last time before clicking ‘send’ and blowing out a breath. Given their tumultuous relationship to-date, it was anyone’s guess whether or not Rowena would agree to the meeting.

He pushed back in his seat, turning toward her with brows raised as his brain caught up that he’d been asked a question. “Sorry, what?”

“Is everything all fine and dandy?”

“Yeah. Why?”

She pointed, forehead wrinkled as she looked back and then to him. “Because Dean just left? Uh, something about Charlie and pet supplies?” He rocked back in his seat. “Did she get turned into a chipmunk again?” she questioned, taking Dean’s vacated seat.

“Wha-? Again?” he spluttered, then rubbed his chin. “No. I wasn’t aware there was a first time.”

Grinning, she touched his hand with slim fingertips. “Oh, she was precious. Fit right into the pocket of my jacket.”
Nodding, he looked across the way and back. “You’re certain he left?”

“Yes. I was doing a bit of automobile maintenance.” He considered her, the rolled up sleeves and simple way her hair was tied away from her face, though a few wavy curls fell free. She shrugged, leaning back. “While I hear your brother is quite the greasemonkey, these are more my timepiece. Are you sure nothing’s wrong?”

Mouth twisted, he chewed on that a moment. Cas had come back through looking nearly as angry as Charlie, but in that purely angelic way he had that was a sensuous roll of storm clouds blowing in on a front.

“...pretty sure the fight between Cas and Charlie just became a family drama including Dean.”

All mirth vanished from her eyes, expression darkening so fast her sword hand twitched where it rested. “What fight?”

“One I am certain they’ll work out! ...especially if Dean had to go to a pet store.”

She hummed her agreement, gaze softening before drifting to the books and laptops. There was a smudge of grease on her cheek. “What project has you so busy, Samuel?”

“A, uh…” he blew out his cheeks and tried to find the words to translate what he meant to a time period before cellphones or the internet. “A phone… switchboard?”

She snorted, smirking. “Don’t strain yourself. I pick up far more than you might think. I did live and travel with Charlie.”

“I’m trying to create a network for hunters, so that we know exactly where each of them are using the GPS-- location device-- on their phones, and with the real-time placement across the country, we can then also send people on missions, give them information on local hunts they’re working, or even send in reinforcement and rescues.”

“Sam, that’s a wonderful idea.”

He drummed his fingers on the table, gaze slipping to the portal on its stand. “Yeah. Except a lot of the people I would use for this are already dead, so I’m having to find other people to help me, and that’s difficult because I don’t know them. I’m having to rely on Garth to know and recommend people, and it’s just a weird position to find myself in.”

“Having to place your trust in others when you’re used to having to trust only yourself or your brother I can imagine is a difficult transition, but not a bad one.”

He regarded her, lips pursed. “I was going to ask you to meet Garth, actually. Have him introduce you to different hunters, and see about the two of you coordinating in recruiting people. You have a lot of experience in politics and meeting with foreign dignitaries. You’d be perfect for it if you’re willing.”

“Yes, Sam, of course. I can head out whenever you’d like.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“That’s great. I’ll contact Garth and we can set up a meeting, and the two of you can coordinate from there.”
She patted his hand and stood, stretching so that her back let out a series of faint pops. “Well, I’d best get back to the garage. Even if the vehicles are too dated for the constant use, in good enough shape, they’ll turn quite the profit, I’m sure, and we can invest in their replacements.”

He bit his lip as she turned away, his foot bouncing beneath the table. He twisted. “Would you want to have dinner with me?” She turned, one brow lifting high as she blinked in surprise. Heat flooded his face. “Going to dinner would be… uh, yeah, so I was thinking maybe we could, y’know, cook together and have dinner, i-if you would like?”

A slow grin stretched across her features. “I would like that very much, Sam.”

It wasn’t until the next morning that Charlie was ready to face him. She knocked lightly on his bedroom door, peeking and then easing in before pushing the door to behind her.

Cas sat in the center of his bed, surrounded by books and jotting down notes from a book on finance investments he was reading. His journal lay on the bed beside him sporting multicolored tabs and dog-ear marked pages, cluttered lists in neat script and scrawl, with items marked off and arrows drawing attention or prioritizing. There were more books on his nightstand separated into stacks of Read and To-Read.

He blinked at her as she placed the kitten in her hands on her shoulder.

“I named him ‘Catstiel’.” She gave a sheepish grin when he glared. “You deserve some minor payback. I think I’ll call him Catsy for short.”

Moving aside his work, he scooted back toward the head of the bed, allowing her to take a seat. “Does that mean you’re less angry with me now?”

Catsy carefully navigated his way down her sweater and to the navy blanket on the bed, both of them watching him intently rather than look at each other.

“I wasn’t mad at you-- I mean I was, but I wasn’t. I just… it’s complicated. Old wounds and insecurities about being alone, and there you were leaving, on top of the fact everything feels like it’s changing and I’m going to miss you, and worse still, Dean is going to be devastated to learn you’re leaving, and honestly, I’m just gonna miss you!” She reached out to roll Catstiel over onto his back, using her hand to wrestle with him. “I’d just gotten used to the idea of all of us here together. Being the Avengers of the MOL, you know? Me as Maria Hill, Sam as Nick Fury, Dorothy as Iron Man, with you and Dean as Peggy Carter and Captain America! We were gonna be a team.”

He took her other hand in both of his, running his thumb over her bird-like knuckles. “Charlie, we’re no less a family because I need to remove myself from this atmosphere.”

“I know.”

“I will be here for you. Any of you.”

“I know.” Her green eyes lifted to meet his. “Doesn’t make me any less sad you’re just wanting to go off by yourself. Seems wrong for you to be alone after all of this.”

He pulled his hands away, letting his eyes drift to the lists and notes he’d written. “There’s a difference in being alone without a choice and choosing to be independent. I want... there’s so much I want to do. Things I want to see and experience. I want to sleep in and go on vacations. I
want to take a cruise and go hiking and camping in a national park. I want to learn to cook and to know what Chinese takeout tastes like! I want to live, Charlie.”

Catsy was clumsily attempting to climb a stack of books like a rock climber, fuzzy tail sticking out straight.

“I know, Cas,” she insisted, putting a hand to her chest; the earnestness in her voice making him look at her. “And I’m going to help you. We’ll go look at houses together. I already set up a bank account just for you and made you your own identity and fake documents to get us started.” She winced. “I did clear it with Claire first, but uh, congrats? You are officially Jimmy Novak’s twin brother, her uncle and next of kin. Castiel Clarence Novak.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “Somehow I think Meg would be amused by that.”

She grinned at him. “I thought so, too. So, yeah, you are officially a person! Welcome to humanity. You can own property, get a job, pay taxes,” she plucked at a frayed hole in her jeans, “and even get married.” He opened his mouth, but she cut him off, straightening with an overly bright smile that threatened to crack and break at the edges. “So! Any properties you wanna go look at? We can buy some to use as safe houses and you could go stay there for a week or whatever if you want a change of scenery.”

Reaching over, he grabbed his tablet. “Actually, there are a few I wanted to look at in person before I decided.”

Jerking her head on a nod, Charlie scooped up the kitten and moved toward the door. “I’ll go drop off Catsy in his kennel and then we can go, okay?” Faltering, she turned to look at him, bottom lip caught between her teeth. “...when are you going to tell Dean?”

He dropped his gaze, mouth dry. “Tonight.”

“I still like the first one best,” he said as he and Charlie reappeared in the War Room, her clutching his arm and grinning.

“Can you imagine if you lived in the other one though? I bet you anything that is the house that gets teepeed by kids every year. Very Boo Radley.”

“Hey,” Dean called as he rounded the corner, frowning with his hands held out. “I’ve been looking for you two. Where have you been?”

They met each other’s eye, then turned to him as one. “Looking at investment properties.”

Charlie patted Cas’ arm, waving the tablet in her other hand. “Which I need to get started on. Faster we can get all this going, the more it helps Sam, too.” She waved over her shoulder. “If you need me, I’ll be in my office doing paperwork and moving funds around. Amazing how fast the ball gets rolling when you throw enough money at it. A lesbian profiting from a bunch of sexist white dude’s hoarded funds. I am living.”

Dean’s head slowly swiveled around to face Cas, one brow swept high. “I take it you two made up and had fun?”

“Indeed.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said, shifting and sliding a hand into his pocket. “Look, ah, now that you
and Charlie have worked things out, I figure you and I probably need to talk, and given that Sam asked if all of us could stay away from the kitchen so he and Dorothy can have a date, I figured--"

“Yes. Excellent timing,” Cas said, nodding.

Dean blinked, lips pushing out. “It is?”

“Yes. I wanted to see if you would like to go to the aquarium with me.”

Frowning, he glanced around before pointing to himself and then down. “You mean right now?”

“You’re welcome to change clothes if that’s what you mean.”

“...you wanna go… to the aquarium.”

Cas slid his hands into the pockets of his peacoat and shifted to his back heel. “You say that like a question.”

“No, I just… you were… yesterday--”

“If you are worried if I am still angry, I am, but you’re nonetheless my best friend and I do need to talk to you about something.”

Wariness shifted to something sharper, Dean taking an aborted step forward, eyes flicking over him. “Are you okay?”

Warm affection coaxed a smile from him despite his hurt and Cas nodded. “I’m fine, Dean. Would you like to go or not?”

Hesitantly, Dean nodded, hooking a thumb over his shoulder. “Yeah, sure. Just… let me go change and put on shoes.”

When he eventually came back, Castiel had discarded his coat and stood leaning back against the map table, head canted as he considered the Christmas tree on the far end of the room, replaying that night in his head again, the way Dean had trembled with nerves, the way his mouth, silken soft, had pressed against Castiel’s.

“You ready to go?”

Straightening, Cas nodded, reaching out to take Dean by the elbow as time and distance shifted around them until they were standing in the center of the main lobby for the Atlanta aquarium with only the exit lights and glow of the tanks illuminated.

Dean looked all around them, giving a small shudder. “It’s sort of creepy with no one else here. Like something’s wrong.” He turned to him. “Where is everyone?”

Sliding his hands into his pockets, Cas made his way toward riverbed area, intent to see the otters. “It’s Christmas Eve. They closed early and everyone has gone home.”

“You brought us to the future just so we could go to the aquarium?”

“They are open every day of the year, Dean. It’s just a matter of figuring out when is the best time to visit. This holiday was closest.”

They were quiet for a bit, both considering the creatures on the other side of the glass as they walked through the area. A few of the otters were running around, seeming to play a game of
chasing each other in laps and diving in and out of the water.

“Y’know,” began Dean, “Sam and I went to an aquarium on a field trip once. I was a nervous wreck the whole time.”

They moved to a different display.

“Why was that?”

“It was the first time we’d been on a field trip. I honestly don’t remember much of it other than constantly trying to keep an eye on Sam with the crowds and his excited running around.” He bent to better peer at the creatures beyond the glass. “Before then the most crowded public space I’d ever taken him to was the park. I completely failed the pop quiz we had because I was so busy trying to keep my eyes on my baby brother rather than the exhibits.” They trailed to a different hallway housing arctic climate residents. “I ended up having to write a report to make up the grade. Sam told Dad I must have been too busy flirting to pay attention.” He rolled his eyes. “Shows how much attention he was paying. Typical Sammy.” He jostled Cas with his elbow, using a hand to talk. “It’s never not baffled me: I raised the kid, for the most part, on my own. I know pretty much everything about him. Sam, though?” He snorted. “Did you know he actually thought I’d be mad he’s wanting to restart the Men of Letters and combine it with the hunter community? A resource we desperately could have used our entire lives, but he thought I’d be mad. --Is that a Beluga whale?”

They stood watching the beautiful white creatures glide through the water for several minutes. He’d read somewhere once that Beluga whales were probably the origin of the mermaid myth. Looking at them he could see why. They were amazing to see, but the way they looked almost like the form of a woman was unnerving and surreal. The flat stomach, naval, hips, even what looked like legs and pointy knees jutting out as they swam. He could understand why a half-drowned sailor might see something else.

One of them turned, swimming so Dean could admire the rest of the white creature, mirth tugging the corner of his mouth at how happy they looked, like they were all smiling. A surprised laugh punched out of him when it came right up to the glass, smooshing its face against it, then pulling back, body vertical as one fin waved. He waved back.

Cas turned away, moving to the next display. “Sounds like you still hold a lot of resentment toward him for the way you were forced to grow up.”

“Not toward him,” Dean argued, then conceded, “yeah, okay, toward him, but, y’know: I get it. He was just a kid. He got to be a kid. I didn’t. And I don’t realize how angry some of that stuff made me until something goes and jabs at it, like thinking about that trip however many years ago, which makes me think of all the other times Sam has proved how little he knows me, or when he thinks he gets to make decisions for me, and then it’s like, ‘oh hey, Winchester, you’ve still got some issues with this and they’ve compounded, you’ve just been ignoring them’, and boom, there goes the volcano top.” He shoved his hands into his pockets, and Cas watched his expression darken in the reflection of the glass. “Hindsight, you see where you screwed up, but at the time, what are you suppose to do? I didn’t have anyone to raise me or help me grow up. I’m a grown-ass adult and still mad about it. Talk about damaged.”

They made their way to a small display window, looking at the tiny creatures inside. There was something deeply humbling to be faced with such exquisite marvels, each different from the next, delicate and complex lifeforms.

“Dean, you forget I’ve existed since before the Earth and I see a therapist. You forgive Sam and
condemn yourself in the same breath. You did your best by him but had no one to do their best by you. You were the adult as a child because there was no one else.” Their eyes met in the reflection for half a second before Cas stepped away. “It only makes sense you’re angry.”

Tense, awkward silence fell over them, Cas studiously attempting to feign ignorance as he considered the animals and knew Dean was doing exactly the same. Maybe that was part of their bond: for all their differences, they were much the same, creating a complementary balance with each other.

When they rounded the corner, Dean sucked in a surprised breath, green eyes widening as the otherworldly tunnel came into view, illuminating the large swimming bodies and shimmering schools of fish.

“Oh wow!” he breathed, darting forward, eyes trying to take it all in. A massive whale shark swam overhead. Warmth spread through Castiel as he watched the wonder play over the other man’s features. Dean looked at him, emerald eyes wide. “Can you do this anytime you want?”

“Come to the aquarium? Anyone can, Dean.”

“No, could you view this in real life? Just… appear somewhere in the ocean, or hell, on another planet and just… see all of this?” Castiel shrugged and Dean huffed a laugh of disbelief, spinning in a circle with arms held wide. “What in God’s name are you hangin’ around here for? Looks boring as hell when Sam’s watching it on tv, but damn. This is amazing.”

“Dean, this is only a small percentage of the life on this planet, or even in the oceans.” He gestured around them, biting back a smile and trying to remember he’d been angry at Dean before coming there. “This is nothing compared to what there is to see and experience.”

Even with his upturned profile, the corner of Dean’s mouth pulled up in a smirk, casting him a sidelong glance. “I repeat my question.”

God, he was beautiful, and Cas would never stop marveling at him. Opening his mouth, he stopped and reconsidered, teeth clicking shut before he shrugged and walked past.

“I never had a reason to want to before now,” he answered, then without a glance pointed to a Blacktip shark swimming alongside them. “That’s Betty. She’s asking if we got separated from the rest of our herd.”

“Really glad there is super thick glass between me and Betty,” Dean stage-whispered, leaning into Cas’ space. “Not that you aren’t beautiful,” he called in a louder voice when she turned and swam quickly in the other direction.

“Not even your species and you’re flirting,” Cas said, rolling his eyes.

Dean half-jogged to catch up to him. “More like ensuring my survival for whenever we go back to St. Thomas and the beach.” He pointed. “I am not insulting a lady whose relatives have that many teeth.”

“Mm-hm,” he hummed, then watched in fond exasperation at the child-like awe on Dean’s face as an enormous manta ray swam overhead flocked by a school of silvery fish. The light reflecting off the water played across Dean’s face, making him look ethereal in the shimmering blue light.

“Speaking of beauty,” he sighed and turned away.

Dean grinned at his back and moved to catch up once more. “Can you imagine if they could fly? Or, like, alien species manta rays who swim through star oceans instead? Just swimming through
He slid him another glance as they stepped out of the tunnel. “What you’re describing isn’t all that different from angels, Dean.” He shrugged and conceded, “An overly-simplified version of some angels, at least.”

Something fond and far-off settled on Dean’s features, gaze distant. “I’m trying to picture you flying through space, but all I can see is a school of manta rays, but sort of more... flowy, like a jellyfish and made of the Northern Lights.” They stepped into a large theatre room where an entire wall was glass looking into the massive tank they’d just walked through. Dean’s face went slack, eyes growing wide. “Oh wow,” he breathed, stumbling forward.

Smiling, Cas followed and came to stand beside him, both of them watching the bright blue water teeming with life. Whale sharks and sea turtles. Flashes of bright blues and yellows as schools of fish swam and darted around. Stingrays glided in front of their eyes. Sharks surrounded by cleaner fish. An octopus curled and crawled over coral, tentacles coiling and rolling as it propelled itself forward, skin nearly a perfect match to its environment.

Dean was beautiful as he watched, making Castiel’s stomach twist in a vicious sense of loss and longing. Pain that this was fleeting. Of what he was losing, what he was giving up and choosing to walk away from. What lay ahead of him, the unknown, the uncertainty, the new... was terrifying.

Accepting he would brave it alone only made it worse.

He reached over and took Dean’s hand, fingers curling around his palm as he lowered his gaze, focused on coral and signs of small lifeforms within. Dean blinked, looking down at their joined hands and then to Castiel, confusion puckering his brow, followed by worry as he felt the way Cas’ hand shook with anxiety.

“...Cas?”

He didn’t look at him, couldn’t for what he had to say. Why was it impossible to look at people when you were scared by the words coming out of your mouth?

He swallowed, throat bobbing with the effort. “I’m giving up my grace.” He felt rather than saw Dean go rigid beside him, hand tightening a fraction around Cas’ own. “It’s something I’ve discussed with Dr. Grey and Charlie, and honestly it’s been coming for a while, but I was too scared to do it until now.” The silence that settled over them was weighted, the feel of Dean’s eyes on his profile as he stared and Cas kept his eyes downcast. He tried to take a calming breath, blowing out slow like he’d been taught, but it did little to quell his nerves over the truths he was admitting. “I’m moving out.”

Dean’s fingers opened, hand slipping from Castiel’s as he turned and stumbled away, expression a shocked mix of pain and surprise as though Cas had slapped him.

“What?” The word was strangled and small, fractured, and Cas hated himself for it, hated the betrayal clear in Dean’s expression.

“Charlie is taking care of the legal paperwork and has already created me an identity based around Jimmy and Claire. As soon as the paperwork is finished, it’s just a matter--”

“When?”

He flicked a glance at him, then down, unable to bear him looking so devastated. “I’m not sure. I didn’t want to drag it out and make it harder, so Charlie’s doing everything to expedite the process.
A week, maybe. Two.” He shrugged. “Charlie is confident about the purchase of the house, so she
and I are to spend tomorrow ordering furniture for it.”

Dean placed a hand in the center of his chest, expression open and pleading. “Cas. I—if this is
about me, about the other night, I’m sorry! I am so sorry. Please don’t leave because of that.”

He turned his head, managed to look him in the eye and hold it. “This isn’t about you, Dean. This
is about me. About what I need to do.” He shook his head, watching as ripples of light played over
the hunter’s form. “I told you before: I’m tired of just existing. I want to live.”

Dean’s Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, lips trembling with words and emotions he didn’t
know how to convey. “Don’t leave me,” he pleaded finally, voice as close to a beg as Cas had ever
heard. “Please.”

He turned to him, slowly, offering out his hand, which Dean immediately took in his own. Cas let
his eyes play over the hunter’s face, gaze falling to his mouth and then back up.

“Come with me.”

“Wha-?”

“You have a choice, Dean. This is mine, and you can come with me.” Green eyes fell, and Cas
knew he was thinking about Sam, about a lifetime dedicated to the safekeeping and raising of
another. Though they were adults, Dean had still never known anything else. Didn’t know how to
be anything else. Cas squeezed his hand. “I love you.” Dean’s head jerked up, eyes wide as Cas
stared back calmly. “I don’t want to leave you, but at the same time, I have to do what’s best for
me, and I know I can’t stay anymore. There’s so much I want to do, to see, to discover. You could
come with me and we could do it together. The house is spacious and has several bedrooms. One
could be yours.”

Dean’s gaze fell, eyes flicking back and forth as the words rolled over with indecision in his head.
Castiel stepped in closer to him, dropping his voice to a hushed whisper.

“You don’t have to decide right now.”

Dean looked at him with understanding. “This is why you and Charlie had a fight.”

He lifted one shoulder. “She has her own abandonment issues to contend with, as well as
worrying about others. Specifically, how you might respond to the news.” He shook his head. “But
the choice is yours to make.”

Dean bit his bottom lip between his teeth, brow creased trying to maintain composure. “Please
don’t leave.” Green eyes met his. “I feel like we just got you back.”

He lifted a hand to the side of Dean’s face, reveling the way the other man turned into the touch,
pressing into his palm. “I’m not abandoning you, Dean. You aren’t going to lose me, even if you
stay and I go. We're still family.”

A hot spark of electricity shot through him as Dean captured his hand, turning his head to press a
kiss to Cas’ palm, the inside of his wrist, before peering at him from under dark lashes, the green of
his eyes hidden as they fell to Cas’ mouth.

The hunter leaned forward to close the space between them and Cas leaned back, his mouth just
out of reach and heart hammering in his chest. His eyes played over Dean’s face as he tried to
remember how to breathe. Green eyes looked at him in question, brows furrowing.
Cas swallowed. “Dean, if you kiss me now I won’t let you pretend it didn’t happen tomorrow,” he warned, their lips just brushing as he spoke.

Dean considered that for a moment, eyes playing over the planes and angles of Cas’ face while he held his breath and waited, pulse fluttering rapidly beneath his skin. The fingers circling Cas’ wrist trailed down the length of his arm, dropping to rest on Cas’ hip just as the other came up to card through his dark hair, setting Cas’ skin buzzing from head-to-toe.

“You won’t have to,” he promised, a ghost of breath across Castiel’s lips and shattering the last of his self-restraint.

He grabbed fistfuls of the front of Dean’s shirt, surging forward to press their mouths together, their forms silhouetted in the ethereal glow of an artificial ocean.

Choices still had to be made, but they could wait until tomorrow or even further down the line. For now, he wanted just this and the illusion he would get to keep it.

Chapter End Notes

TBC

Please be kind and don’t forget to comment on fanworks as they are the lifeblood of creators, and fanworks take a very long time to create for your enjoyment.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

So guess who totaled their car over the weekend??? This girl! Guess who found out they didn't have full coverage when they thought they did? This girl! Guess who had a REALLY. BAD. WEEKEND???? THIS GIRL!!!!!!! My stress headache continues.

Sigh. Here's the new chapter. I hope you enjoy it. I had a lot of fun writing it, and I've been planning that end scene for almost a year. I have actually opened up commissions (over on Twitter) and my Paypal (my email in on my profile) in order to help alleviate some of the stress and strain of suddenly being without a car and having to replace it. If you can/want to, you are more than welcome to contact me regarding commission fic prompt or even a podfic (permission from creator must be given prior if you are not the creator, and I would need proof of approval).

“So how’d the date go?” questioned Dean, halfway through pouring himself a cup of coffee when Sam shuffled in.

He was sporting regular bedhead rather than sex-hair, so clearly no one got laid last night. Dean obliged and filled Sam’s mug when his brother held it out.

“Fine,” he answered, the sound automatic, before his expression softened, biting his bottom lip as he moved to pour a ridiculous amount of cream and sugar into his coffee. “Great.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” It was then he turned to sit at the table and faltered, lowering his coffee to shake his head in sleep-addled confusion, but the full spread breakfast including an egg-white spinach and mushroom omelet remained. He turned to level Dean with a flat glare. “What did you do?”

“Nothing!”

“Dean.”

“Nothing,” Dean insisted, then dropped his gaze and conceded, “but I did want to talk to you about something kind of important.”

Rubbing his temple, Sam moved over to the cabinet and pre-emptively tossed back a couple of tablets for a headache he didn’t have yet and sat down, gesturing Dean to the seat across from him.

“Is this going to involve the addition of more animals in way of tribute to Charlie?” he asked, adding fresh fruit and sausage links to his plate.

“...I hope not? I hadn’t considered that. I don’t know.” Dean shook his head. “Look, it’s not even definitive yet, well, part of it isn’t. I just wanted to talk to you.”

His baby brother bit into the corner of a piece of toast and stared unimpressed and unblinking at him. “Mm-hm.”
“Stop getting defensive when I haven’t even told you what it is yet.”

He gestured to the table. “It’s looking pretty bad if you are starting the conversation with a bribe.”

Dropping his gaze, Dean focused his attention on curling his fingers around his steaming mug, thumb stroking the ceramic. “I just… I guess I was trying to think of how to say it and ended up… stress cooking.”

Digging his fork into his omelet, Sam waved his other hand. “Alright, well: out with it.”

“Cas…” He swallowed, grip tightening around his coffee. “Cas is moving out.” He heard a splat and looked up to wide eyes and a gaping mouth, fork poised at Sam’s lips, but the food on the plate. Dean dropped his gaze again. “It’s what he and Charlie had a fight about. He told me last night.”

The fork clattered as Sam slammed his hands down, looking a mix of panicked and furious. “He can’t.”

Dean arched a brow. “He can and he is. Charlie’s already in the process of purchasing the house he wants. They’re picking out furniture today to be delivered. Charlie and Claire are forging his paperwork and photoshopping him into the family history. And, at some point, Cas is going to remove his grace so he can live his life out as a human.”

Sam shoved to his feet, glaring at him. “I thought he’d remove his grace, but he can’t do it like this, though! What about—” he seemed to choke, struggling to keep words from spilling past his lips before he lowered himself, with effort, back into his chair. The muscle in his jaw flexed and twitched too much for Dean to believe the poor attempt at a calm disposition. “He told you last night?”

“You asked everyone to give you space; he invited me to the aquarium because he wanted to talk. He told me while we were there. Charlie and Claire have known for several days.”

“How’d you react?” He looked to the elaborate healthy breakfast spread across the table. “…you seem to be handling the news better than I would have expected.”

Dean leveled him a cool stare. “You were expecting day drinking?” Dropping his gaze, Sam gave a jerky shrug, retrieved his fork, and began poking at his omelet. Dean took a drink from his coffee, keeping his gaze downcast. “…Cas told me he loves me.”

Sam’s eyes flew open wide, expression otherwise carefully blank. “…what did you say?”

He flicked him a glance, a small frown between his brows. “You don’t seem surprised.”

That earned him a full-body eyeroll as if Dean were being intentionally annoying and knew it.

“The guy has been tortured and killed enough times for his loyalties, call it an educated guess on my part. Also, I have eyes.” He tried to catch Dean’s gaze, but he wouldn’t let him. “What did you say?” Pushing out his lips, Dean gave a slight shake of his head. His brother’s expression darkened, lips curling as he gripped the edge of the table. “He tells you he loves you, and you didn’t say anything? Dean, what the f–”

“I didn’t exactly get a chance,” he snapped. “He dropped a lot of bombshells on me last night, and I practically begged him not to go, Sam, so do not come at me like I’m the one who made the choice to leave!” His brother winced. “…He asked me to come with him,” Dean admitted. He felt
Sam staring at him with wide eyes again. “Said the house has several rooms and one of them could be mine if I wanted.” He gestured with an open hand. “Lotta bombshells, like I said.”

He knew he had nothing to feel guilty for, but that didn’t change the way his posture slumped and he grimaced, knowing it must be as obvious as his brother’s wordless shock. Dean hadn’t done anything! None of this was his doing, but even still it felt like a betrayal, both to Cas for considering staying behind, and to Sam for thinking about going. He was being expected to choose! To choose between his baby brother and his-- and Cas. To choose between their home, their routine, the familiar, the only life he’d known... and something he lacked all context for what to expect.

Suddenly he wished he’d called Max first. That way he could panic and freak out, and Max would let him, waiting patiently before asking questions he already knew the answers to and waiting for Dean to just admit them or realize them for himself. Max could have helped him come up with the best way to have this conversation with Sam. Would have helped him figure out what to say next time he saw Cas. What was Charlie going to say? If she was helping Cas with all this, had she already known he was planning to offer for Dean to move out with him? What was her reaction going to be if she didn’t know?

“Dude, that is awesome,” Sam said. Dean’s head jerked up. He brother was looking at him excitedly. “So, are you gonna do it?”

Recoiling, Dean held up a hand. “Back up. Rewind. One of us missed part of this conversation. What?”

Head angling to the side, Sam pursed out his lips and tried again. “You. Moving in with Cas. Normal life. Completely awesome.” He frowned. “I was being mostly rhetorical in asking if you were going to do it, since I’d assumed you would. Are you not?”

A series of aborted noises escaped Dean’s throat as he gestured widely, looking around, and then back at his brother. “You think I would just abandon you? Sam! C’mon! This is my life! Our life! What are you gonna do if I’m not here? What am I gonna do if I’m not here?”

Sam winced. For a moment he wanted nothing more than to clock their father in the jaw with everything he had. The rest of him was too tired and exhausted to deal with another reminder of how screwed up John’s rearing of his brother had been. John and Sam had butted heads and fought like cats in a bag. Dean never had that luxury, already too indoctrinated in John Winchester’s Mission and too scared of their father for reasons Sam only suspected but never confirmed. He loved his father, but he hated him so much, too.

“For normalcy? A chance at a life and being happy?” Sam tossed back, leaning forward with hands flat on the table. “Run, Dean, don’t walk. Seriously, how is this even a question? If anyone deserves retirement, it’s you two. I mean, my God. After everything you’ve been through, everything you’ve sacrificed? I will pack your bags!”

Dean gaped, thought process having come to a complete stop, we interrupt your regularly scheduled program to bring you a whole lot of white noise and confusion. Sam stared back at him.

Dean shook himself. “You think I would just abandon you? Sam! C’mon! This is my life! Our life! What are you gonna do if I’m not here? What am I gonna do if I’m not here?”

Sam winced. For a moment he wanted nothing more than to clock their father in the jaw with everything he had. The rest of him was too tired and exhausted to deal with another reminder of how screwed up John’s rearing of his brother had been. John and Sam had butted heads and fought like cats in a bag. Dean never had that luxury, already too indoctrinated in John Winchester’s Mission and too scared of their father for reasons Sam only suspected but never confirmed. He loved his father, but he hated him so much, too.

“Dean... it isn’t abandonment. It’s... it’s how normal families work. I’m an adult! I am in my thirties! I am fine on my own, not to mention I have Charlie, Dorothy, the Roadhouse crew, as well as Jody and everybody else making sure I stay alive, and it’s not like I’m actively hunting anymore either, remember?” He gestured wildly to his entire person. “Director Fury? S.H.I.E.L.D.
headquarters? Alex and Claire moving in come the new year as junior agents in training? Here come the Men In Black? Any of this ringing a bell with you?”

He recoiled, hurt more than he wanted to admit, and dropped his gaze, picking at his nails. “Sam, you were always the one eager to get away. Dad raised me to have no other purpose than to look after you. My outlook on life was to end up dead in someone’s basement on a suicide mission he’d assigned me.”

Sam winced. “...Dean, you hated hunting growing up. You wanted out. You just... you never said it like I did. It was like you didn’t know how to get out, too loyal to Dad even when he couldn’t be bothered to answer the phone.” And too scared of him, too, he thought. “You have options now. You can literally have anything you want, including Cas-- you just have to decide what you want, or y’know, figure it out along the way.”

The stifling silence of the kitchen after that was disrupted only by the rhythmic ticking of the clock on the wall above their heads. Neither of them looked at the other, Sam focusing on his barely touched breakfast, and Dean with high spots of color on his cheeks and tinting his ears.

“I don’t know how to be normal or how to be what Cas--” He cut himself off, wiping a hand over his face and holding it to his mouth as his words cracked and he felt his eyes prick with sudden anger and frustration in a dozen different directions.

Sam watched him, expression crumpled and brow furrowed with sympathy and pity as Dean struggled and failed to get himself together.

Dean kept his face turned away, but his voice still shook, “I don’t know how to be what he deserves, Sam.” He swallowed. “I don’t know how to...” Love him. How to let him love me. How to not be scared by this. Terrified by it. God, what would his father have said? He tried to laugh, the sound bitter and forced, barely giving his brother a glance. “How’d you even know about... you know.”

The sad expression fell further, Sam reaching up to tuck a lock of hair behind his ear as it came loose. “I grew up in the backseat of a car with you, Dean.” He poked at his breakfast some more. “I know the look on your face when you see something you want but think you can never have.”

They sat in silence for a long time, Sam half-heartedly returning to his breakfast while Dean chewed on his thumbnail on the other side of the table.

“You really think I should?” he finally asked, chancing a look at his brother.

Sam nodded. “Yeah, Dean. I really think you should.” He shrugged. “Part of you loves hunting, sure, but a huge part of you hates it. It’s why I always got mad when you would side with Dad. First time I remember you admitting it as an adult, you just talked about how tired you were. But we kept going because what other choice did we have? We had demons left, right, and center, and that was before we knew what we were in the middle of. After Cas walked into the lake? I thought I was gonna lose you. You didn’t just want to just quit anymore. I know you, Dean, at least in this. When your attention drifts off while driving or cleaning guns or, hell, doing research, you’re seeing-- wishing for-- something else and then stuffing it down and trying to forget, convincing yourself those are things other people get.” He waited until Dean looked at him before insisting, “You could be happy, Dean.”

Glaring off to the side and feeling the way his face heated, Dean snarled, “You’re such a frikkin sap.”
Rolling his eyes, Sam returned to his breakfast in earnest. “Says the guy who’s been pining for… how many years? Also, you got excited over memory foam. You want this.”

Dean scowled and turned back to his brother. “How would that even work?” he demanded. Sam raised questioning eyebrows. “You know. With both of us living under the same roof? Isn’t that… It’s too fast. It’s weird. I can’t.”

He shook his head. “You can date while living under the same roof. He offered you your own room and space. Also, trust me on having insider knowledge regarding this subject, but Cas wants to go slow. This is his first… well, basically, everything, even outside of this with you. Taking everything a day at a time I think would be smart; he's struggling with everything else enough, as is. Also, he values romance and intimacy and would really like it if you’d just hold his hand. And he likes flowers-- which you may remember.” Dean blinked, straightening to frown. Sam held up a hand. “Don’t ask. I’m not telling. Just trust me.” He waved dismissively. “Besides, Dorothy and I are going to be doing the exact same thing. Plan date nights. Don’t put too much pressure on yourselves. Jess and I dated while living together, sometimes just by planning to order Chinese take-out and play board games in our pajamas. Married couples still date each other. That’s essential, or so I’m told. You and Cas can date while living in separate rooms under the same roof, figuring it all out as you go.” He settled back, tilting his head to one side and grinning. “When do we get to see the house?”

Knocking, Dean pushed open the door to Charlie's office to the sight of Charlie and Cas behind her desk. The wide-eyed, curious expression on Cas’ face paired with the annoyed look on hers at the interruption made him smirk, as did the fact she’d clearly worked all night- again- and was still dressed in her clothes from the day before.

His smirk widened to a grin as he held up the mug he’d brought. “I thought I’d find you here. Still wearing yesterday’s outfit, I might add. I’ll make you a deal,” he offered, before inclining his head toward Cas, “let me borrow him for a few minutes while you go get a shower and change of clothes… I’ll let you have this tea as well as bring you breakfast once you’re finished. Deal?”

“We’re in the middle of something,” she argued.

“And I’m sure you’d be a better voice of reason with some caffeine and breakfast in your system, as well as smelling better.” He winked at Cas, making the angel drop his gaze and blush. Dean met her eye again. “I promise to give him back.”

She glared at the computer, then to the mug he held, before heaving a sigh. “Fine! My eyes could use a break anyway.” She pushed away from the desk, stretching and causing her back to pop and crack. “On second thought: shower, breakfast, and a nap.” She patted Cas on the back as she stepped by, arms outstretched for the tea. She sipped on it while peering at the angel. “You can keep shopping, obviously.”

“I think I’ll wait for you. You have a better eye for this.”

She gave a curt nod and headed out of the office and down the hall. “I’ll set an alarm!”

When Dean looked back, Cas had already moved around the desk, leaned against it, then stood, then leaned again, awkwardly attempting casual. Dean grinned at him. Oh yeah. He was so far gone on the angel it wasn’t even funny.
Cas lifted blue eyes, brows raised. “You needed me?”

Dean wanted to crowd between Cas’ legs, tilt his head back and kiss him until he looked drunk and dazed. He glanced around her office, shrugging.

“Unless someone else is gonna show me the house so I can pick out my room.”

He stiffened, expression surprised before immediately slamming shut to hide the hope plain in his eyes. “Your room? You mean--?”

He grinned wider, voice soft, “Yeah, Cas. I mean.” The angel moved into his space in an instant, hands finding his waist as Dean settled his on Cas’ hips. Blue eyes stared at him, playing over his features, dropping to his mouth, and then up.

“May I kiss you?”

He huffed, leaning forward to rest his forehead on Cas’ shoulder. “You don’t have to ask, man, geez.”

“This is new for both of us. And too important to me to risk.” Fingers carded through dark blond hair nearly making Dean hum, his eyes falling shut as he lifted his head. Cas dragged his lips over Dean’s jaw and earned a full body shudder for it. “I didn’t want to assume what you’d be comfortable with,” he whispered, gripping the front of Dean’s flannel shirt before covering the hunter’s mouth with his own.

If Dean had expected at any point for their years of mutual pining to accumulate and boil over, he hadn’t seen it yet. Cas kissed him languorous and slow, like they had all the time in the world and there was nothing else he’d rather do than memorize the feeling of Dean’s mouth moving against his. It was heated, yes, but also controlled.

Emboldened, Dean tightened his grip, letting one arm snake around Castiel’s waist, holding their bodies together before licking his way into the angel’s mouth, earning a small, eager sound from Cas, grip tightening as he pressed more insistently against him.

It was Cas who eventually pulled back, eyes lowered as he attempted to compose himself and failed miserably. “Only you, Dean Winchester, could hope to make me happy and so terrified at the same time.”

Laughing, Dean leaned forward, pressing his lips to the thundering pulse under the bolt of Cas’ jaw. “At least that makes two of us. I’ve never been this scared in my life.” He kissed Cas’ brow, holding his lips there as he felt heat rising up his neck and to his face as he admitted, “Or as happy.”

Grinning, Castiel pushed himself up, pressing their mouths together before stepping away. Dean looking around in confusion at the drastic drop in temperature and the sudden appearance of snow and the outdoors.

“Come,” Cas coaxed, “let me show you the house.”

All around them, there were trees with snow weighing their branches. He turned, taking in the light snowfall and long, winding driveway mostly buried, the mountains around them, as well as the valley city in the distance. He twisted, taking in the beautiful multi-story cabin made of gray stone and warm wood, with a wraparound porch and deck over a covered garage. There was a balcony on the second floor.
The hunter craned his neck to take it all in, eyes wide with disbelief.

“You want to live here, Cas?”

Not that there was anything wrong with the house. Dean grew up in a car and shoddy motels frequented by hookers and cops more than actual travelers. Beds with scratchy sheets reeking of dollar store bleach and carpet with patches that couldn’t be anything but bloodstains.

He looked around at the snow flurries drifting down in fluttering spirals. A bright red cardinal took off from the depths of a tree, dislodging a settled patch of snow and sending a weightless powder into the air. The air smelled clean and sharp; he could see the curl of chimney smoke rising above the trees in the distance.

The sun shone off the snow and made the house seem to glow, and Dean knew it must be beautiful at night, illuminated from within by warm lights and life. It was new. The gleam and varnish weren’t a trick of the light or a salesman’s illusion. Looking at the stone that made the carport, the wood of the deck, even the driveway… the house was brand new. New and just waiting for someone to move in and mark it as their own, to make it lived in and more than some architect’s showcase floorplan.

It could be their home.

Cas faltered, halfway up the stairs to the porch, one hand on the railing as he turned back, slow and uncertain. “...unless you have some great objection.” Dean rapidly shook his head and Cas grinned, a hint of gums to his smile and snow in his messy hair. He was beautiful and Dean loved him with everything he had. “Good. Come inside. Let me show it to you.”

Remembering his brother’s words, Dean scaled the stairs quickly, falling into step beside Castiel and gingerly reaching over, sliding his hand over the inside of Cas’ wrist and down, interlacing their fingers. Cas looked down with a start, then grasped his bottom lip between his teeth, biting back a grin as he blushed.

Dean rubbed his thumb over Cas’ knuckle, willing the churning of his stomach to settle. Slow was good, he decided as he let the angel lead him inside. Dean was so scared and overwhelmed, he couldn’t have done anything else.

Arms folded and chewing on his thumb, Sam shifted his weight and looked at the kitchen table-- as if seeing it from a different angle might somehow ease the nervous energy that nearly had him pacing.

Pacing was more Dean’s tendency and had always driven Sam up the wall for all the good it did either of them.

Still. The silver tray on a white tablecloth sat right where he’d left them, with the white coffee cups waiting to be used and Charlie’s decorative tin filled with an assortment of teas. Steam rose in a thin curl from the whistler of the kettle he’d taken off the burner only a moment before.

He’d very much wanted to beg, plead, and bribe Charlie to sit in with him during the meeting if only to be his anchor and keep him grounded while otherwise unsettled by the difference in circumstances, but he’d found her fast asleep after having belly-flopped onto her bed. She’d had one leg dangling off the side and a black kitten curled in a ball by her forehead on the pillow, the small bundle of fluff purring like a tiny motorboat.
He’d arranged her limbs so all were on the bed and covered her with a quilt, giving the kitten’s head a scratch before shutting off the light and closing the door behind him.

Which meant he was going to be presenting his crazy, half-cocked idea by himself to a person who’d been an enemy far more often than an ally, and yet in recent months had struck up what was almost--

“Sam,” Dorothy called out, voice a cool growl of authority that had him snapping to attention as though the warning tone had been from Dean, “we have a visitor.”

He dashed down the hall, heart hammering in his ribs he might not make it there to stop whatever potential disaster was about to go down. He skid to a halt at the mouth of the War Room, wide hazel eyes taking in Dorothy in her khaki slacks and pressed shirt, as well as the gun she held level and steady, centered right at Rowena’s forehead.

For her part, the witch calmly stood with her hands raised, carefully kept nails painted in soft gold glitter. Her carpet bag rested on the map table.

“I thought you were busy looking over city planning,” he blurted to Dorothy.

Hair falling in loose waves and curls down her back, Rowena turned her head toward him enough to fix him with a look, her eyebrow sweeping up with a regalness that didn’t seem to match her simple pencil skirt and black sweater.

“I was,” Dorothy agreed, “until I sensed a witch come by way of magic rather than through the use of a door.” She offered a tight smile, eyes narrowing on the redhead. “In my experience, that never spells fun for anyone.”

“Do you like fun?” Rowena asked, fingers twitching as she smiled.

Scrambling forward, Sam shoved the gun down and Dorothy behind him, facing Rowena. “This is my fault, I had no idea you’d run into each other or I’d have warned both of you,” he assured, keeping one hand on the gun Dorothy gripped, the other outstretched to keep her behind him. Rowena blinked slowly, frosty expression shifting to dismissive tolerance as she lowered her hands and clasped them primly in front of her. He sighed, tension leaking from his form as he stepped to one side, gesturing to the brunette. “Rowena, may I introduce our newest resident: Dorothy Baum?”

Her eyes flashed, snapping to him as her lips pinched, thin and white despite her makeup. “The witch killer?”

He winced and Dorothy winked at her. “Only if they’re wicked.”

Ignoring her jab, he indicated Rowena with more flourish. “Dorothy, I would like to introduce to you Rowena Macleod: renowned witch and Queen Mother of the King of Hell.” He glanced at the redhead as she lifted her chin, managing to peer down at both of them despite their height advantage. “Rowena has aided us quite a few times, most recently in helping us save the world from the Darkness.”

Coy smirk curling her mouth, Rowena peered up from beneath thick lashes and winged eyeliner. “Is that flattery for my benefit or yers, Samuel?”

He should have taken something for a migraine well before he ever put the kettle on to boil. Already he could feel a throb as it began to build behind his eye.
Dorothy relaxed her gun arm, head cocking to one side. “Rowena? Crowley’s mother?” Two sets of eyes swiveled to her. Her blue-gray eyes were taking in the witch from hair to boots and back again, gaze politely curious rather than the action-charged one she’d been wearing earlier. She gestured back and forth with her index finger. “You exchange letters and stories with my friend Charlie?”

“Aye.”

Grinning broadly, Dorothy shifted her weight and offered out her hand to shake. “I’ve heard of you. You helped them save Dean from a Dark Mark and gave Charlie a gardening spell for Cas.” Blinking in surprise, Rowena hesitantly accepted the proffered hand with a frown, flicking a glance to Sam. “Charlie speaks, begrudgingly, well of you. She says you are quite brilliant, very ‘Ravenclaw’, and your stories are top notch.”

Hands falling apart, Rowena folded her arms to clasp her elbows. “It’s always nice to be appreciated.”

Something in her tone and expression made Sam frown. Body held stiff, she swiveled her head around to him, chin held high as the tension shot back up and he mentally scrambled to find the misstep. He looked to Dorothy, but she grinned and stepped in close to push up onto her toes, pressing a kiss to his cheek… and a knife into his palm, tucking it under the hem of his sleeve.

“I’ll leave you two to chat, then,” she promised. “I have paperwork to finish and really should look in on Charlie.”

“I think she finally just went to bed.”

She waved over her shoulder. “Then I’ll turn off whatever alarm she’s set.”

He turned back to Rowena who had one brow raised as she impatiently tapped her brown suede boot. He swallowed, words failing him as he was faced once again with uncertainty. She spun on her heel, grabbed her bag and yanked the mouth open.

“Well, what do you need this time? Some spell or potion? Another translation? That bonnie brother of yers done flit off an’ get himself lost in some fae king’s labyrinth?”

“What? No?”

She glanced over her shoulder, grimoire in hand. “Oh? Pity.” She pivoted back to sort through more items. “What is it then?”

“We don’t- I didn’t--” he fumbled, making her pause and look at him again, perfectly sculpted brow arched with impatience. He sucked in a breath and started again. “I invited you here for tea. So we could talk.”

Her eyes narrowed into thin slits as she pivoted around. “Clap me in irons whilst we do? Some trick or other to capture me so I work fer you? No, thank you, had quite enough a tha’ already, so if tha’l be all--” She began shoving things back into her bag.

“Professionally,” he corrected. “I mean… I wanted to talk to you professionally.”

She eyed him suspiciously, then around. “And just where is yer brother and his bonnie angel?”

“Uh,” he searched his brain, “looking at an investment property?”
Straightening, she looked to the library and Christmas decorations. “...an *investment* property.” He nodded and her suspicious gaze finally swiveled up to him, emerald green eyes glinting in the artificial light. “What’re you up to?”

He motioned her toward the kitchen. “I thought it might be best to discuss over tea?”

Holding herself stiff, she clasped her bag as though she meant to take off running with it and watched him with narrowed eyes for a long moment. Sam shifted, dropping his gaze and feeling like a child who’d gotten in trouble at school. For all their animosity towards each other in the past, her contributions to the fic competition had actually softened his feelings toward her. She was the first of them that could give Jo a run for her money, so much so Sarah dropped out of the competition, as did Kevin and Andy until the whole thing died off. Two of them, at least, started on original writing, but the others went back to their regular hobbies.

He didn’t exactly like her, and there was little trust on either side, but... she wrote short stories that were chaste and focused on devotion and freely given affection. She had helped Dean and Cas prank her son, emailed Charlie semi-regularly, and either she or Crowley had sent them a bottle of wine for Thanksgiving. That was all after having helped them stop Amara and save Chuck and the world. Both the demon king and his mother had been... quiet. Trouble-wise, anyway.

He tried giving her a smile, taking a step back and gesturing toward the kitchen. Lips twisted, Rowena released her bag, body taunt and angled away from him as she nonetheless accompanied him down the hall.

Sam coughed lightly. “Uh, so... how have you been?” She raised a brow that spoke volumes. He shrugged. “You email Charlie. Aside from your fics, I don’t know what you’ve been up to. Which, by the way, I really liked your last one about Dean helping a hurt Cas get a bath and wash his hair and then help him to bed. It was... really sweet, actually.”

She waved off the praise, but her mouth curled at the corner. “I told Charlie: had a boyfriend, then dumped the miserable, lying bastard. Got another boyfriend, then *got* dumped-- d’you know he ran a *background check* on me? Then found out was leaving me for some young toty he had on tha side!” A flicker of fondness passed over her features before she sniffed, lifting her chin. “Fergus exploded him. *Sweetest* thing he’s ever done.”

He stepped into the kitchen, looking back when he noted she’d hesitated. She was frowning up at the garland around the door frame, the mistletoe tied with a red ribbon.

“Does that mean you are living with Crowley again? Or still?” he asked.

She regarded him. “I never took you Winchesters fer the festive sort.”

“It’s a new development.”

The tablecloth and tea set received the same suspicious consideration before she gracefully lowered herself to sit. Sam took the seat across from her as she lifted the tin and carefully picked through the different options.

“This is starting to look an awful lot like a *bribe*, Samuel. Or *bait*.”

“Consider it more a *peace offering*,” he insisted, accepting the tin when she held it out.

She made a noise in the back of her throat, reaching for the kettle and pouring water into both their cups. “In answer, yes, Fergus and I are living together again. I suppose you could say our trying not kill each other is a ‘new development’.”
“What’s that like?”

“Quiet mostly.” She toyed with her tea bag and kept her eyes lowered. “We keep to ourselves for the most part. He runs Hell, the Crossroads, and most of Hollywood while I stay busy reading and doing research.”

His brow wrinkled. “What kind of research?”

“Magic’s not just musty ole’ tomes in archaic languages, Moose,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “Especially for a born witch. It’s very scientific, if you must know. Always something new to learn or discover. Theories and ideas to test. Someone else’s research to study and learn from— not to mention translate.” She began spooning cream and sugar into her tea, stirring as she looked at him from under long lashes, eyes flashing. “Alright, to business then. What do you want?”

Biting his lip as he prepared his own tea, Sam wished again he had Charlie for the conversation. “It might be easiest to start at the beginning.” She watched him with a frosty expression as she sipped her tea. He plowed ahead, unable to think of a concise way of explaining it all. “I’m trying to restart the Men of Letters,” she went ramrod straight, eyes widening only marginally, “and combine it with the hunter community.”

“So is this meant to be a warning or a threat?”

He blinked and shook his head. “What? Neither. I’m… We’re going to turn this place not only into Command Central, but also a place where teens and young adults who’ve been affected by the supernatural can come and learn about this world in a healthy and safe environment, hopefully helping them cope, as well as properly educate them and give them closure or options, or whatever they decide. One of the primary functions of the bunker will be to house, educate, and train hunters.” He gestured. “We have a full facility here, including classrooms and labs dedicated to research and development. If you want, I can give you a tour.”

Her eyes narrowed, flicking back and forth over his face. “Why?”

Licking his lip and swallowing, he admitted, “W-well, I wanted to see if you would be interested in joining our faculty as a teacher of history and magic. That would include room and board, of course, as well as having use of the Magical Research and Development laboratory.”

She jerked and blinked rapidly at him. He waited and tried not to fidget as she stared, mouth forming a series of soundless vowel shapes.

Touching the tips of golden nails to her chest, she asked, “Y-you want me… to take on students?”

He nodded. “The Men of Letters is offering me, a witch… you want me to teach?”

“Well, this is something we’re just now attempting to start up, and the only students you would have to start with are Claire and Alex. But, uh… yeah. We’d like you to come and teach for us.”

Her lips, pressed in a line, quivered, wobbling at the edges as high spots of color flooded her cheeks and she began blinking rapidly.

Cold horror and fascination filled Sam as he watched her eyes well up. She bit her lips and turned her face away just as he dropped his gaze in embarrassment. Of all the possible reactions for her to have, that was never one he would have predicted. She wasn’t crying but was too dangerously close for Sam’s comfort, tears balanced precariously on her lashes.

He saw her move on his peripheral, a hand lifted quickly to her face, before she lightly cleared her throat, daring him to glance at her.
She waved a hand dismissively and picked her tea up with both hands. “I would have to think it over, Samuel.”

“Of course.”

“But I suppose I have time for a quick tour since I’m already here.”

He grinned widely. “Good.”
Dean’s hand slipped from Castiel’s as soon as they walked inside, mouth dropping open and eyes wide. Cas stepped to the side, fidgeting with his fingers and watching his every movement. Green eyes trailed over the massive living room, the large windows looking out to the snowy landscape and mountain backdrop. From the fireplace to the open kitchen and then up to the high ceiling and the overhanging loft. Dean stared in disbelief.

Shifting, Cas hedged, “Do you like it?”

Dean blinked, looking at him with surprise. “Like it? Dude, this place is **awesome**. We would get to **live** here?” Cas nodded and Dean wiped a hand over his mouth breathing out a long breath. “Wow. This is… this is…” He clicked his tongue.

Cas motioned to him. “Let me show you around.” Dean nodded, trying to take it all in. Castiel indicated a door in the kitchen for a walk-in pantry, another that led to the basement area and garage below. He led him down the hall, pointing out the utility room, bathroom, and then into the master suite.

Sucking in a breath, Dean’s brows shot up. “Oh, dude.”

He moved through the space, carefully, determinedly trying **not** to think about the fact this might one day be a room they **shared**. If he did, he’d panic.

It was a **room**.

It was **Cas’** room.

The windows and glass doors leading out onto the deck made him forget to breathe for a moment, the view beyond something from a movie scene. “That has to be **amazing** to wake up to. You’ve certainly got taste, Cas,” he said, dazed.

Cas shrugged, embarrassed as he tried to articulate what drew him to the house. “As an angel, I’m used to space, to being untethered. The openness makes me feel less... **claustrophobic**, I think would be the word, while suddenly being... **confined**.”

Dean looked at him, studying him with concern. “You mean once you give up your grace? Cas, you don’t have to if you don’t want to. If it makes you—”

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**MERRY CHRISTMAS!!!!!!!**

I hope you have a wonderful holiday with friends and/or family and that it’s full of love and laughter.

I hope you enjoy this update, and in case you didn't notice the chapter numbers.... this is the next to last chapter!!! She's almost finished. I am so excited about it, and I hope you are, too.
“I want to,” Cas insisted. “Even if the thought scares me at the same time. I want this. It doesn’t make it any less daunting.”

Brows furrowed and lips pursed, Dean gave a slow nod.

Cas forced a smile. “Check out the bathroom. Charlie saw the bathtub and said she is going to introduce me to something called ‘bath bombs’.”

“I’m just not sure this is wise, Sam, that’s all,” Dorothy insisted. “I will, of course, stand by your decision– but I would first voice my concern as well.”

She was leaning against the archway leading into the library, hands grasping her elbows. He moved to sit on the table’s edge, folding his arms.

“Oh, okay,” he allowed. “And I get that it’s risky. It is a risk, I get that. What are your exact concerns, though?”

“She’s a witch, Sam.”

“And I have demon blood and am Lucifer’s True Vessel.” He waved a hand. “Former demon blood junkie right here. The Boy King of Hell who set Lucifer free and started the Apocalypse.”

She blinked and drew in a deep breath through her nose, letting it out with a sigh as she pushed away from the wall to sit beside him.

“You can’t expect me not to worry,” she said. “Not only is she a witch, but she’s been your enemy more often than not.”

“I know.”

“Does Dean know you offered her a job?”

“No.”

“Why did you not discuss this with any of us first?”

He shrugged. “Because the majority vote would have been ‘no’.”

“Then why do it?”

He looked at her, hazel eyes playing over her frustrated features. “Because I believe there’s good in her. I don’t believe Rowena is inherently evil. She uses magic to protect herself, she’s suspicious of the whole world all the time, constantly vying for power as though that will not only make her happy but also keep her safe. She’s got more walls up than my brother.” He made a frustrated noise. “She befriended God, Dorothy. When Chuck was literally dying and the world was ending and she had nothing to gain... she made him tea and stayed by his side telling him stories, using her magic to ease the pain he was in. She went toe-to-toe with his sister, has helped us willingly and unwillingly numerous times, and she writes fics about Dean and Cas falling asleep together while watching movies!” He looked down, digging his thumb into the scar on his palm. “I have to believe we can be more than our pasts.”

They were quiet for a long moment, Dorothy staring down at her scuffed boots and Sam worrying
his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Do you think she’ll accept the job?”

He nodded. “She’ll act like she’s doing us some big favor, but yeah. She’ll take the job.”

She looked at him. “And you believe we can trust her?”

Drawing in a deep breath, he let it out, waggling his hand from side-to-side. “Mmmm, seventy-thirty.” He hesitated, then bumped his shoulder against her admitting, “She cried.”

“What?”

“Rowena *clarified* and then *teared up*. And it wasn’t fake. I blindsided her.”

Touching her fingers to her temple, Dorothy sighed and ran a hand over her hair and braid before pushing away from the table. “Alright, well, I’ll support you when the time comes. Meanwhile, I’m going to add some warding to the bunker to make it impossible for her to use her magic against any of us while within these walls.”

He grabbed her hand, reeling her back in so she stood between his knees. His eyes searched her face. “What do you think? What is your advice?”

Smiling, she reached up, carding both her hands through his hair, cradling his skull and rubbing her thumb across his cheekbone. “I trust your judgment of the situation, Sam. I think you should follow your own heart and your gut and believe in yourself just as I do.” He closed his eyes and she leaned forward, touching their foreheads together. “You can do this, and I’m going to make sure you succeed.”

Following Cas up the stairs to the second story and loft, Dean’s eyes kept drifting around them, unable to conciliate that this place, this house, would belong to them. He kept trying to take it in as a hunter, as though they were scoping out a job. But, no. This… they would *live* here.

“--would be a second seating area. I’ve entrusted most of the furniture shopping to Charlie, of course, and-- Dean, are you alright?”

He blinked out of his daze to find Castiel’s worried expression focused on him. He waved. “Yeah, no, sorry. I’m good.” Intense blue eyes watched him, uncertain, and Dean rubbed his neck. “It’s just… I’m having a hard time processing, I guess.”

“Processing?”

He met his eye. “Cas, I haven’t lived in a *house* and really called it ‘home’ since I was four.” He looked around. “It doesn’t feel real. It… I don’t know. It almost feels like we’re pretending or something. Maybe like we’re going on some sort of vacation.” He frowned. “Not that I’ve ever been on one.”

Cas offered him a smile that was sad. “I know what you mean. It doesn’t feel real for me either.” He dropped his gaze and shrugged. “Charlie assures me it will pass.” Drawing in a breath, he forced a brighter expression, gesturing to a larger area with glass doors and covered balcony. “This is going to be the study. Dr. Grey is somewhat insistent on self-expression as a form of catharsis, and since I’ve no artistic measure to speak of, both she and Charlie suggested I try my hand at writing.”
Dean blinked, mind offering images of book-lined shelves and Cas behind a desk with that penetrating focus furrowing his brow.

“I can see that,” he said. “What would you write?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Dr. Grey suggested I start with what I know, that I write my own story, or either the story of you and I since it was the beginning of this. With your permission, of course. Then, as part of my therapy, I have to share the story with someone else-- naturally Dr. Grey since I’m a non-human patient.”

A blush, hot and coursing, flooded his face, recoiling from the sudden onslaught of exposure and panicked shame. Their story? No, there was no story… it wasn’t-- he wasn’t-- they weren’t…

Except… except they were.

They were, and this was real, and oh God, the look on John Winchester’s face were he alive to know. His father had clocked him one good just for looking at a guy too long, but this…? Forget turning tricks in secret to keep food on the table and a roof over his and Sam’s heads. That had been by necessity, a means to an end. This would be part of his life. He was going to be living with… in a relationship with…

He choked.

The looks. The judgment. Not just from his father, but the glances, sneers, whispers Dean had heard his entire life, the insinuations, the degrading commentary. And now he was going to be what he’d been accused of, he’d be assigned the weakness and inferiority assumed, the way he would be looked at would be everything he’d fought against, the way he’d always had to be on the defensive and overcompensate, emulate his father’s rugged looks and behavior just to try and counteract, to not disappoint, to be--

“Dean,” Cas said firmly, body swelling with righteous anger as he stepped into Dean’s space and the hunter stepped back on the stair, leaving the angel looking down at him as Dean tried not to panic. “There is nothing to be ashamed of in our story. There’s nothing to be shamed for regarding us. And I will not let the ghost of your father to beat you down or steal anything else away from you.”

Swallowing, Dean was vaguely aware Cas had curled a fist into his sweater, keeping him one step below him as Dean looked up with wide green eyes.

“Mind reading is rude, Cas,” he said automatically, voice weak.

The thunderous expression softened, eyes crinkling on a sad, yet fond smile. “You panic very loudly,” he said by way of apology, leaning forward as he drew Dean in for a kiss.

Dean melted when their mouths met, locked muscles going loose as he swayed forward seeking that touch. He curled a hand around the back of Castiel’s neck, fear washed over and drowned out by perfect want and contentment, the way his body hummed, thrilled and relishing in the soft, perfectly sweet affection.

God, he loved him. So much.

Cas pulled away, a soft, please hum in the back of his throat and eyes closed, the look so soft and unguarded Dean stared, mesmerized he had caused it.

Blue eyes slid open, thumb stroking over Dean’s cheek. “I love you, Dean Winchester.” He tilted
his head, eyes detailing Dean’s features as though committing them to memory. “Never let anyone take that away from you.” He straightened with a jerk of his head. “Now come. You can choose one of the rooms.”

Words caught, clogging in his throat, blocking off his air as he stared impotently, desperate to say what he couldn’t.

God, how was he so weak? How could he do this if he couldn’t even say what he felt?

Cas held out his hand, waiting.

Dean took it, calloused fingers sliding over his to curl around his palm, allowing Cas to lead him forward.

Dean had a nightmare. He dreamt of the bunker’s hallways splashed with blood. Bodies littering the floor and spilling out of doorways like puppets with cut strings laying in crimson puddles so fresh they were still warm. Their weapons had been useless to save them, even Rowena’s magic hadn’t been enough, her riotous curls splayed over her outstretched arm.

The hallways stretched in that impossible way of dreams. Even though he ran shouting his brother’s name, past dozens and dozens of doors, boots splashing through a floor covered in blood, past the bodies of Dorothy, Charlie, Claire, Alex, Jody, Donna, their faces all hidden from view and turned away, looking in the same direction. He ran for miles, screaming for Sam until his voice was the next casualty, throat raw as broken glass, heart racing as cold dread gripped so tight he couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe. His legs burned, chest heaving as he pushed himself to go faster, but his feet slogged through the deepening macabre horror, a nauseating squelch and splash as each footfall landed and the suction noise as he pulled free of the coagulated blood.

The walls fell away, blood and bodies spreading out into blackness in every direction and a spotlight shone on a figure barely managing to struggle, blue plaid stretched taut over his shoulders as he dragged himself through blood and the bodies of their friends.

“Sam!”

His brother jerked, spasmed, and then slumped, too still and unmoving. Dean staggered to a halt, stricken and horrified. He had gotten there too late! Had been too slow! Not only had failed to save Sam but to see him, to be there. It wasn’t supposed to happen, not like this.

Tears welled up and spilled over, face crumpled as he gasped for air.

“This is my fault,” a low, gravel rough voice stated. The spotlight on Sam clacked off and then back on as he turned to face the speaker and found flat blue eyes and a tan trenchcoat illuminated in a column of light. “I should never have asked you to come with me,” he said, turning and walking away. “I’m sorry, Dean.”

The light cut off, his form quickly swallowed by shadow even as Dean took off at a run after him. Darkness swept in, leaving him cut off and alone, standing in a sea of blood. He spun wildly in every direction.

“Cas! Sam!” No, no, no, no. It couldn’t-- this couldn’t-- he-- “SAAAM!” he screamed, the raw, broken sound ripped from his throat as he jerked to a sitting position covered in a cold sweat and
sucking in quick, aborted breaths, blind in the pitch black.

His head jerked in the direction of a slam, then several more in other directions as his panicked mind tried to--

“Dean? Dean!”

The door crashed open, a too tall form silhouetted in the blinding light of the hallway, gun searching for a target in every corner. Dean nearly sobbed in crushing relief as he pushed his legs over the side of the bed, fingers clutching the edge of the mattress and struggling to suck in weak gulps of air.

Holding up his hands in a quick show of non-threat, Sam passed his gun off to someone before stumbling forward to drop to his knees, arms wrapping around Dean’s waist as he wrapped his around Sam’s shoulders, fingers curling so tight in the material of his sleep shirt that his knuckles creaked as he continued grappling with air.

“I’m here, I’m here, I’m here,” Sam crooned, too large hand hot through the material of his shirt where it rested in the center of his back. “I’m okay. We’re all okay.”

Face buried in his shoulder, Dean could only shake his head, because no. No, he hadn’t been. He hadn’t been and Dean hadn’t gotten there in time to save him or even see him one more time.

He could still feel the phantom blood soaking his denim and coating his skin, the way it made his feet drag and slowed him down as it rose higher. The countless bodies he’d run past, their lifeless eyes all staring toward the same horizon. Could see Sam’s lifeless form just beyond his reach, the final beats of his heart echoing to stillness as he collapsed in a splash of blood.

Movement, the forms crowding the doorway slipping back to their rooms, had Dean push back, his hyperventilation more controlled as he turned his face away. Shame and embarrassment swept in to replace the panic.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Sam said, falling back and sitting with legs folded, granting Dean space as he studied him with concern. “Was it Alastair? Hell?” Dean shook his head. Biting his lip, Sam looked down at his hands in his lap. “Did I die because you weren’t here?”

Flinching, Dean first instinct was to deny it, brush him off with some generic excuse of just one more nightmare but found the words that escaped him were, “Everyone did. And then Cas left me because he blamed himself.”

Sam winced, then nodded and said nothing.

Self-loathing flared hot and bright inside Dean, anger that he wasn’t stronger, that he was reduced to panic attacks and hyperventilating as a grown adult over something as trivial as his subconscious. He’d died more times than he could keep count of, had spent thirty years enduring every torture and indignity a person could suffer, another ten dealing them out. He had helped save the world how many times over, and had seen too many horrible, God-awful, unspeakable things in his years as a hunter to wake up screaming like a scared child! He was more than this!

He shoved to his feet in disgust. “I’m gonna go get a shower.”

His brother pushed himself up quickly. “Dean--”
“Leave it, Sam,” he snapped, faltering in the doorway with a backward glare. “It’s my damage and shortcomings, not yours. I know you- and the others- can handle yourselves.” He stalked out into the hall. “Sorry I woke you.”

He was halfway down the hall when he heard the soft, “It’s not just you that has nightmares, you know.” He wavered, fighting the urge to look back at his sibling. He did know, but that didn’t quell the sense of impotent weakness and failure. Swallowing thickly, he offered only a curt nod before continuing down the corridor.

Rather than putting on his sweat-soaked shirt, Dean walked bare-chested through the bunker to his room, faltering in the doorway.

Honestly, it wasn’t a surprise. He should have anticipated finding Charlie curled on her side and fast asleep in his bed.

Shutting the door, he was grateful for the bedside lamp she’d left on as he retrieved a worn thin sweatshirt. He shut off the light and slipped under the covers.

She stirred lightly, a deep inhale of breath as one hand searched for his beneath the sheet. He moved his hand and she clasped it, the touch familiar from the nights when their situation was reversed.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” she murmured.

“No.”

“You wanna to talk about somethin’ else?”

“No.”

She gave a soft hum of assent, shifting so that she was snuggled deeper into the blankets but also closer to him, their bent legs nearly touching, and the heat of her body comforting. She was safe and there. They all were.

“G’night, Dean.”

He swallowed, giving her hand a gentle squeeze as he felt his eyes well up once more. “Good night, Charlie.”

“Not that I am opposed to helping,” Max said, hands buried in the closet as he hung up and arranged clothing, “but when you asked me for coffee and to hang out and meet Charlie, this was not what I expected.”

Folding newly bought and freshly washed sheets on the other side of the bed, Dean shrugged. “I owed Charlie for tinsel.”

The Zanna faltered, twisting to frown first at Dean, then down to Charlie who was removing books from a box and arranging them on the dresser shelves. He looked at Dean. “In what way did that
make any sense?”

“I think I’m getting cheated out of our deal here, Dean.”

“You and Cas are the ones in a rush to get us moved in and settled. Sam’s meeting with Dorothy and Garth. Cas is at an appointment with Dr. Grey.” Dean slid her a look. “Though you threw Chuck only knows how much money at getting all this furniture bought and delivered so quick, and a tree put up and decorated, there’s some stuff we actually have to do.” He set aside the crimson fitted sheet, neatly folded into a perfect rectangle, and pulled the flat sheet from the basket. “Besides, we have coffee downstairs in the kitchen. There’s even a closet filled with all kinds of games. It’s almost like we took you to Common Grounds.”

“First off: Lesbian. Benefiting off a bunch of sexist white guys. I enjoyed myself immensely with all this. Two, your kitchen is not a coffee shop geared toward queer people.”

He lowered the sheet. “What?”

Max hung up another plaid shirt. He seemed to be arranging them by color. “You had to have noticed.”

“Uh, no?” He looked at Charlie again. “And how do you know?”

“I googled it! It sounded fun. If there was one nearby, I could stop by on one of my trips to the finance firm or-- erm, breakfast.”

“I didn’t think Cas was really able to enjoy coffee.”

She peered into the box, fiddling with paperbacks and an invoice slip as her hair obscured her face. “I go to breakfast by myself every week.”

“Oh. Oh.” He flicked a glance at Max and then back to her. “...uh, same place?” She nodded and he set the folded sheet down. “Charlie, I would have gone with you.”

She waved him off. “Cas offered. I kind of like being alone afterward, though. Go to a coffee shop.” She straightened, lips pursed out. “Not gonna be able to do that now. Cas was my ride. Mm, Skype’s a thing, I guess.” She turned to him, face twisted. “You really didn’t realize it was a queer space?”

“It’s a coffee shop.”

“With table tops that are the different pride flags,” she said slowly. “Coffee and board games are the common grounds, Dean.”

He shot an accusing look at Max. “You were taking me to a gay coffee shop?”

“As opposed to...?”

His face grew hot and he snatched up the sheets to put in the drawers on the other side of the bed. “You know what I mean.”

Max returned to hanging up clothes. “And yet, despite multiple visits, the blatant pride-themed tables, various art on the walls, and even the other patrons... you never realized it was anything other than an ‘acceptable’ place to be.”

Grinding his teeth, Dean snapped, “You know what I mean.”
“You would have been uncomfortable had you known. I was acclimating you.” Max cast him a soft
glance over his shoulder. “No longer being in a closet you’ve spent your entire life in is
understandably hard, Dean. I get it, but you need to make peace with yourself.”

Snatching up the stone on the bedside table, Dean turned it in his palms with sharp, angry
movements. “I hate when you break out words of wisdom on me.”

“Kinda the basis for our entire relationship.”

Charlie had stilled in her organizing and was considering him. Lips pursed, Dean drew in a deep
breath.

“I’m not giving either of you a coming out speech.”

Charlie shook her head. “Dean... I don’t think you can even say it in a sentence. You’re bisexual.”
He flinched at the word and dropped his gaze. “It doesn’t change anything. You’ve always been
bisexual, just never admitted it to yourself or anyone else. You were when you went to Hell, you
were when you met Cas, when you saved the world time after time after time. Max is on-point
though: you need to make peace with yourself, which I get is not easy.” She inclined her head
toward Max. “And talking to someone can help by leaps and bounds.”

“If you say ‘safe room’ I will toss you over the balcony and into the snow, Charlie.”

She snorted and pulled another book from the box. “Trust me, I hate the condescending,
understanding BS as much as you.”

Unsatisfied, he dropped his head, reaching back to scratch his neck. “I hate myself for this already,
but since- apparently- we’re being honest here...” he met her eye and gestured with a hand toward
the man behind him, “Max is my Zanna.”

Both their brows shot up in surprise, Charlie’s eyes snapping to Max, while Max regarded Dean.
Dean could do nothing but turn over the stone in his hands, gaze fixed on his bed's plaid comforter
as he blushed, deeply uncomfortable with the admission that was somehow less painful than the
previous topic.

“Oh,” she said. She sat back, head tilted. “So that’s why you can teleport. That makes so much
more sense than secretly being a superhero like I thought.” Dean looked at her, face creased with
confusion. She turned to him, lips pursed. “If two people lose the same bet, does that mean nobody
gets money?”

“You were betting on me?” Max asked.

She nodded. “Yeah. I thought you had superpowers or something from an accident because
seriously, those stories have to be inspired by some truth, right? Dorothy, on the other hand,
thought maybe your father was human and your mother was not since typically genes are passed
through the mother.” Her face scrunched up. “You being Zanna makes perfect sense, because you
basically showed up after Sam introduced me and Jo to Sully.”

“You met Sully?” Dean asked.

“Jo made him cry. He got really upset she was dead, as well as having to pass the news onto her
Zanna, since apparently, that was something she would want to know.”

“Jo had a Zanna?”
“Pretty sure every lonely kid had an imaginary friend, Dean.” She shrugged. “And hey, come to find out? They’re real. Sully wouldn’t tell us if you had one. Apparently, that’s confidential. Me, though? Michelle and I would spend hours playing dress up and acting out favorite scenes from books or secretly reading under the covers with a flashlight when I was supposed to be asleep.”

Dean gave her a flat look. “Max and I don’t play dress up.”

“We could though.”

He blindly struck out behind him, missing the grin that earned him when he smacked Max in the side. “Creeper here has stalked me my whole life- we drink coffee, he gives life lessons no one asked for.”

“And I put you to shame at Chinese Checkers.”

“You cheat.”

“Do not.”

Dean waved a hand through the air and carefully replaced the stone on his nightstand. “Back to the honesty thing, I have a situation I need your opinions on.” He sat on the corner of the bed. “Dr. Grey asked to have a meeting with me. ...I’m kinda not sure what to think about it.” He twisted to Max. “I was going to ask if you’d take me. It’s in a couple of hours.”

“So you’re leery, but still going?” Charlie questioned.

He shrugged. “It matters to Cas. And he trusts her. So do you. Still not sure what to expect, though.”

“She may just want to meet you since she’s heard… well, a lot about you.” He flushed hot across his neck and face. “And meeting with family members isn’t uncommon. Are you meeting with Cas?” He shook his head. “She’s very nice, Dean. I wouldn’t be worried. It may just be courtesy or curiosity.”

“I feel like I did something wrong, like she’s going to tell me I’m an unhealthy influence on him. She’s asking only now that I agreed to move in with him.”

“...you think she’s going to try and talk you out of it.” Silence as he stared intently down at his interlaced fingers. She scrubbed her face with one hand. “You are going to hate me for saying this, but maybe you should consider seeing her, too, Dean. Do not give me that look, Winchester. Your dad failed you royally as far as your outlook on life and sense of self-worth. She probably just wants to meet you and give you an idea what to expect from Cas once he’s experiencing the world in a completely different way.”

He snorted, wishing his life was that easy.

Max said. “Charlie has a point. And you said it yourself: Cas trusts her. As does Charlie. So, maybe trust their assessment?” At Dean’s scowl, he raised his hands. “Hey, you asked for our opinions.”

After his meeting with Dr. Grey, Max dropped Dean off at the cabin- at home. He faltered walking
in, stopping at the sight of the Christmas wreath made of fir and holly decorating the door. It was simple and cheerful, the smell mixing with that of cold air and fresh snow, welcoming him inside to warmth and a fire and home.

This was going to be their home. He was struggling to wrap his head around that.

The plan was to stay for a couple of nights, sort of acclimate them to the idea, as well as giving Cas time for his new anti-anxiety medication to be in his system before he removed his grace. Charlie (and her cat) would be staying with them until they went back to Kansas, in part, to ease the tension and weight of what they were doing, as well as to get out of the bunker while Garth and various influential figures throughout the hunter community came together to hear Sam’s pitch and then negotiations and collaborations were made.

Cas would transport all of them to the bunker in a few days to remove and safely store his grace. Then, once they knew Cas was safe and up to the trek, he, Cas, and the Impala would make the fourteen-hour drive up to Yellowstone Country.

In another week, they’d head East to Sioux Falls to spend Christmas with everyone. Honestly, Dean was already anxious for them to all be under the same roof again. It was a nagging and illogical paranoia he knew he needed to overcome.

He knew it didn’t make sense, but logic didn’t do much in easing the tension, sharp and crawling, beneath his skin as he turned the knob and stepped into the inviting warmth and scent of the cabin.

Music and voices drew his attention to the living room where Cas and Charlie both looked up from their spot on the couch watching Frozen, Cas with an arm across the back of it and Charlie tucked into his side, popcorn poised at her lips.

“Welcome home, Dean,” she chirped.

The fondness and warmth shining in Cas’ eyes made Dean blush and drop his head on a laugh. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Charlie made soup if you’re hungry,” Cas offered, jerking his head toward the kitchen.

Chewing popcorn, Charlie brightened. “You wanna come watch Frozen with us? It just started.”

He drifted closer to them, eyes flicking the screen as their eyes tracked him. “Gonna have to pass, but the soup I want in on.”

Standing over them behind the couch, Dean tilted his head, smirking as they blinked up at him. With a playful grin, his lifted one hand to fold over Charlie’s eyes and leaned down, pressing his mouth to Cas’. She chuckled, cheeks lifting with her grin when Cas hummed against Dean’s lips. The pad of Dean’s thumb stroked across the stubble of his jaw.

And yeah, he thought as he straightened, flooded with warmth at the smile on Castiel’s face, he could definitely get used to being a civilian if home meant this.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Author's note: I cried. You've been warned. Feels ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cold was surprisingly dry. Despite the piles of snow cleared from the roads and sidewalks, it wasn’t nearly as bad as they’d had back in Kansas.

Dean shoved his hands into the pockets of his wool jacket, too distracted to even look in the storefront windows as he and Charlie walked through the town.

“I just… I dunno.” She hmm’ed beside him, head bent as she rapidly texted. The pom-pom of her yellow and black knit beanie bobbed with her absent head nod. Scowling, he snatched it off, earning an indignant squawk as he held the hat arm’s length away. “Charlie, this is serious, can you please focus?”

Jabbing her elbow into his stomach, she grabbed it, tugging it on over her twists and curls with a cross look. “You’re nervous, Dean, I get it.” She returned to texting. “You don’t have to be Grabby McGrabsome.” He frowned, opening his mouth just as her head snapped up. “I recant that statement. I recant. It sounded less groovey in my head.” She pocketed her phone and patted his arm kindly. “You have my attention. Coffee is needed, but you do. You have a lot on your plate and a lot of pressure to not screw any of it up. Let’s start with the easier part: do you have an idea of what you want to get Cas for Christmas? Tomorrow we’re leaving for the bunker and then straight to Jody’s: Time. Essence.”

He looked around, overwhelmed and lost. Colorful shop awnings pecked out under the accumulated snowfall. Wreaths and lit decorations hung from power poles and doorways. The street was lined on either side with charming stores and carefully crafted window displays to pique curiosity, coaxing shoppers inside.

He’d never bought Cas a Christmas present before. Hell, he and Sam rarely bought each other Christmas presents, and if they did, it was generally liquor or necessities wrapped in newspaper. They didn’t do holidays. Ever.

“What am I doing?”

“It’s just Christmas shopping, Dean.”

“It is more than that. It’s our first family Christmas. It’ll be mine and Cas’ first Christmas since we’ve been a kinda thing--”

“You’re putting too much pressure on that--”

“And in a few days, he’s removing his grace and it’s gonna be us, doing whatever this is we’re doing--”
“Just call it dating, Dean.”

“See, it’s not *dating* without an actual date yet, which we have not had--”

“Then *ask him out*. It’s not hard.” She pointed across the street. “See, look. Italian.”

He took in the red and white checkered tables, the trellises draped in greenery to frame the windows and turn the restaurant into something quaint but simple, like a family-owned restaurant.

“I *can’t,*” he stressed, shoving his hands deep into his pockets and scowling at the sidewalk as they walked. “*Molecules.* And besides, there is no way to gracefully eat Italian.”

She rolled her eyes and shoved him. “He’s seen you covered in monster bits, he won’t care about eating pasta. Ask him out for once he’s human. It might make him less anxious knowing he already has something good to look forward to instead of so wound up worrying about all the potential bad. And you’re still dating even without an official date.” She tilted her head, looking at him. “You could make that his present.”

“A date is *not* a Christmas present.”

“No, that’s not wh- I mean, he’s gonna be human and everything is gonna be new. You could do like a Welcome to Humanity starter pack, with all the things for him to try and look forward to.” She craned her neck around. “Where can I get coffee?”

He followed her as she darted across the street. “I’m still not sure that qualifies as a Christmas present. Not a good enough one, anyway.”

“You qualify as driving me up the wall, Dean Winchester. It’s like Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Too Big or Not Big Enough, and constantly worrying about how it reflects your feelings and if you are going to either insult him or scare him off, well let me tell you,” she reeled, index finger in his face, “*you can’t.* He loves you. Would die for you. Would *live* for you, which I can tell you is a *hell* of a lot harder some days. And he has spent Chuck only knows how long just hoping you’d look at him, *finally see him,* and maybe- *maybe* love him in return so whatever you decide to get him- even if it’s *socks and a chocolate bar* he would love it because he has you and a *family* and a *home* and a *chance at a life* and *that* is the one thing he never thought he’d get!”

He swallowed thickly and pointed. “Coffee’s that way.”

“Good.”

Once they were sequestered in a corner table, sipping hot drinks and sharing a cranberry muffin, Charlie spoke again.

“Are you still anxious about Cas becoming human?”

He used his fork to cut into the moist pastry, chasing a piece of red berry with the tines. “It would be a problem if I wasn’t. We changed the timetable so that we’ll just head up to Jody’s once
his grace is removed. I’m hoping being surrounded by family might make it easier-- do you think he knows we did that on purpose?”

“Possibly. I’m sure he’d appreciate the consideration.” She shrugged, hands curled around her coffee mug. “Then again, with as crazy as everything has been, he may not, what with rushing to get you moved, Sam starting S.H.I.E.L.D., Rowena moving her stuff into the bunker, paperwork for the MOL and y’all, not to mention meetings, appointments, and medications. I think we did it well enough he thinks it a coincidence.”

He balked. “Rowena’s not gonna be alone in the bunker while we’re at Jody’s.”

“No, she’s coming after. I think she and Crowley are attempting a Christmas of their own- or maybe just a gift exchange. He had her a dress made and asked me about choosing the color. I helped her pick out cufflinks and a tie.”

“Our lives are so weird.”

“No arguments here.” She splayed a hand to her chest. “I plan to get everyone books, then all of you can swap them around like a gift that keeps giving.”

“What if I got him a stone?” She blinked. “You know, something cool like the one he got me that he could set on the nightstand.”

“I know the stone you’re talking about.” Her tone was carefully guarded making him frown.

He narrowed his eyes, then continued explaining the sudden idea, “See, yeah it's simple, but what if I burned or carved protectives into it? A protection charm to not only to keep him safe but keep away bad dreams?”

“Is that possible?”

“The protectives? Yeah. The dreamcatcher? Not sure. I only read about it; never used it.”

She dropped her attention to the muffin, picking up her fork to poke at crumbs and berries with a face that was the worst of poker tells.

“Charlie…?”

“I think it’s a great idea.”

“But…?”

“No, ‘but’. It’s very thoughtful, Dean.”

“You’re thinking something else. What is it?”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“It was just a thought.”
He gestured with an open palm, impatient. “Pray tell, share with the class.”

Huffing, she fidgeted and blew an errant curl out of her face. “First off: I love the idea. It is very considerate. Cas would love it. He will love it. Just, uh...” she scratched the back of her head and studiously looked past him, speaking slow and deliberate, “Cas is an ancient being with vast knowledge, and see, there’s this thing with birds when it comes to presenting each other with a stone, or well, pebble that’s kind of significant in a, uh, sort of ‘I choose you, please choose me, too’ kinda way, y’know?”

His back straightened, and honestly, wasn’t that just his life by now?

“Are you telling me I’d be proposing bird marriage?”

“Not technically, but this is definitely a subject me, him, and Sam have talked about before, since bowerbirds and penguins are a thing, and, uh... yeah.” The shifty, caught look remained in her eyes and expression when she braved glancing at him. “I do think it’s a great idea, but you need to know the message regarding commitment you might send with it, considering he already gave you one. That you are choosing him.”

“Oh.” He drummed his fingers, gaze drifting past her and out the window tucked into the corner as his mind turned over.

It wasn’t that he so much minded the possible implications of the gift; he just doubted there was any way someone would make that choice, to want to share one life and grow old side-by-side with him. No one ever had. He'd always been the choice for the moment, for a while; convenient and available, but not long-term. In the end, they either left or told him to leave.

He got it. He did. The problem was him, as it always had been. His past, the job, his flaws and screw-ups. People left; he stayed, and rather than looking ahead, life was always growing smaller in the rearview. It was what it was, whether he liked it or not.

And what did it matter if that was what Cas thought? Wasn’t that basically what they doing anyway? What was the point if either of them thought this was anything other than long-term? Turning their lives upside-down, moving in together, trying this... it may have been new and terrifying, but it certainly wasn’t casual. Didn’t that say they were already pretty committed? That he was?

He waved and looked back at her. “Did you notice if this town has a candy store?”

Charlie snatched back her hand when Dean slapped the top of it. He gestured to the Harry Potter cloth bag in the Impala’s trunk.

“That one has the presents you brought. These are ours.” Hefting his and Cas’ duffles, he grabbed a red bag. “No peeking. You are not as sneaky as you think.”

“I’m offended both by the idea I would peek as well as that I couldn’t do it successfully!”

Her gaze slid past him, and he looked over his shoulder at Cas’ listless posture, the distant, unseeing gaze. His chest twisted tight. It hurt to see and feel helpless in doing anything.
“Hey, Cas, it was a long couple of days driving.” He jerked his chin to the front door. “Why don’t you go ask Jody if there’s a spot you can catch a nap?”

Blue eyes swiveled, first to the house then to the bags. “I should help.”

“Cas, go get a nap. We’ve got this. See? All the bags.”

He used his elbow to shut the trunk from emphasis.

Nodding, Cas headed toward the house while they hung back watching him.

“I’m not sure how worried I should be,” Charlie admitted.

“I think he’s mostly exhausted right now. Using his powers for a protection spells, both at home and the bunker, right before removing his grace wiped him out. Then we’ve basically been on the road since. We could probably all use a nap.” He stretched and his back popped.

“True that. C’mon, Winchester, let’s get unloaded and find a place to crash proper for an hour or so.” She jerked her chin to the vehicles parked in the drive. “Looks like everyone else is already here.”

Jody greeted them at the door, cheek out for a kiss as they passed. Dean punched out a laugh when he saw the garland and lights anywhere Alex could hang them. Good to know she was consistent in her enthusiasm.

“Presents under the tree,” Jody directed. “Dean, you and Sam are on the sofa bed, so bags down here. Charlie, you, Dorothy, and Cas are bunking in Claire’s room-- Cas has the air mattress. There are sandwiches for lunch and I may need volunteers with dinner depending on what we do. Dean, you’re getting drafted for that.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Whoo. Okay. Donna’s bunking with me, and Claire with Alex. Everybody’s in the dining room working on a puzzle if you wanna say your ‘hellos’. What’s this?” she asked as Charlie thrust a cloth bag at her.

“Candy. We brought lots of different candy.” Dean shot her a look, throwing out his hands. She winced. “Which is for a thing later, and mostly just… yeah. Maybe stick it up on the fridge? Or in the pantry? Hide it. For a couple days. You never saw it.”

“Oookay. Hiding.” She turned away, bag curled to her chest. “That’s about the only way snacks last in this house, anyway.”

Charlie headed to the stairs and Dean directed a thumb toward the kitchen.

“Sandwiches.”

“Nap.”

“Take Cas’ bag.”
She swapped with him, her bag of gifts for Cas’ duffle, then made her way up the stairs humming the Imperial March under her breath.

Dean dropped his duffel next to Sam’s beside the couch, then knelt next to the tree and the already impressive pile of presents wrapped in an array of colors. He arranged Charlie’s first, true to her word, each obviously a book stacking neatly on top of the other. He did the same with Cas’ gifts, grouping them together to make them easier to hand out before he pulled out the gifts he’d brought; arranging them with more hesitation.

His fingers lingered over the two boxes for Castiel, one large and shallow, the other about the size of his fist. Part of him wanted to jump back in the Impala, drive into town, find something different, something better. One seemed trivial now, and the other… Was Christmas meant to be so hard? Sam and Charlie had been easy. Even the gifts for Claire and Jody he’d figured out with little assistance. What else could he do? What could he get? What would Cas even like? How was Dean to know when Castiel wouldn’t even be able to answer the question?

Thing was: Dean wanted to give him the gifts. He wanted to know if he liked them, to see Cas’ face receiving a gift specifically from Dean. It was petty and small, but he wanted that validation. That eagerness to please rearing its head just so he could see Cas happy and be the one to cause it.

And he really, really just wanted Cas to like them. To enjoy his first Christmas as part of their family.

Withdrawing his hand, he stood and made his way into the kitchen, ignoring the itch to take his keys and head out the door as he grabbed a plate and stacked a series of ham and roast beef triangles onto it. Pouring a glass of milk, he took his bounty and had a seat at the table by the window, peering out at the street while trying to construct an argument why not drive himself crazy worrying over it, to not go shopping one last time. Max and Charlie had each already berated him, but he didn’t think they understood how out of his element he felt. He was basically winging it, and while by the skin of his teeth and guns blazing worked on a hunt, being unprepared wasn’t how he wanted to start this with Cas, not on top of everything else.

“You come in and don’t even say hi?” Sam asked, kicking out the chair across from him and stealing a sandwich as he dropped into it. “What’s eating you?”

Dean slid him the glass of milk as he bit into a roast beef triangle. “I want him to love me and I’m scared of ruining his first Christmas with a crap gift.” Sam choked. Dean cast him a look, arching a brow. “Hey, you asked. I’m aware I’m being paranoid, Samantha, but that doesn’t make me less anxious about it.” His gaze drifted back out the window and he grabbed another sandwich. “I should think you worried about what you got Dorothy.”

Sam gave him back the glass of milk. “I mean, a little, but there are so many things to introduce her to. All of it is new and unfamiliar. It’s kind of hard to go wrong. What’d’ju get me?”

“Scissors and a hairstyle magazine.”

He took a gulp of milk and chewed as contemplative silence fell over them, most of it coming from Sam who was studying him like he was trying to figure out what to say and how to do it without stepping on a landmine.

Dropping his gaze to the empty plate, Sam bought time by retrieving more sandwiches, the milk jug, and his own glass, bringing it all back to the table.
“How’s Cas feeling?” he asked as he filled their glasses. “It took you longer to get here than I expected.”

He waved, turning his attention to the plate of food and tucking into another sandwich. “Baby’s gas mileage is a little behind the economically friendly thing you bought to replace her.”

“I feel like I’m being accused of leaving her at the altar for a side piece.” Dean grunted and Sam rolled his eyes. “I am not cheating on Baby with a new car, Dean. You took her with you. We had to get one. It’s even still an Impala!”

“Still can’t believe you sold those cars. They had class and style.”

“They were classics and stuck out,” he argued. “And we only sold a few of them. You’re deflecting.”

“Cas slept a lot of the way. Or was so quiet we thought he was asleep. Me and Charlie swapped back and forth driving rather than stop in a motel overnight, and in all honesty, I’m trying very hard to convince myself he doesn’t have buyer’s remorse… not that we couldn’t undo it, what with his grace stored in the bunker, but still.”

“He doesn’t, Dean, trust me. I mean, he went from one species to another! I figure that’s pretty taxing on a body. He’s probably just adjusting and overwhelmed. Maybe even suffering a bit of shock and dissociation.” He huffed a laugh, corner of his mouth stretched in a crooked smile. “Gotta admit I’m not used to you not being there. I keep going to find you or calling you only to remember you can’t answer.”

“It’s not the first time you’ve lived without me.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s the first time where it wasn’t me who did the leaving.” He chanced a shy glance, a tinge of pink to his cheeks. “I’m really sorry I put you through it the way I did.”

“Sam--”

“And I am really happy for you right now. You deserve this, Dean.”

He dropped his gaze, rubbing the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip as his stomach twisted. “Thanks, Sam. You, too. Really.”

The moment passed into silence until Dean straightened.

“What are we doing for dinner?”

Sam’s brows rose to his hairline, open palms toward the once again empty plate. “This wasn’t enough?”

“Thinking ahead.”

Blinking, Sam frowned and shrugged. “Uh, I think Jody mentioned something about making things easy and getting pizza. Since tomorrow’s Christmas Eve and most of the cooking starts then.”

“I want a large supreme.” Sam opened his mouth to argue and Dean cut him off by pushing up
from the table, snatching the plate to put in the dishwasher. “Sam, just make sure it happens, okay? Please? I’m tapping out and getting a nap.”

“Alright.”

The roof shingles were rough and cold, but free of snow, allowing Cas to sit with his knees drawn up to his chest and head tilted back.

He heard nothing beyond the cars driving down Jody’s street, the sound of someone’s dog barking a few doors down. Somewhere nearby, a group was trying- and failing- to sing carols because none of them could stop laughing long enough to get the lyrics out.

The sky was muted compared to Kansas or the cabin due to light pollution but also because when he looked up he saw only the dim and distant light of long-forgotten stars. Could only see what human eyes allowed him to. So much of what he knew to be there was no longer visible, and it felt like losing his vision or suddenly viewing a world that had its color drained. He knew it was there, so much was there… but he couldn’t see it, was cut off from it and left only with the memory of what it was like when he could.

The night was quiet and dark. Everything was so. very. quiet. The loss of background ambient noise, his siblings and generic prayers suddenly gone left him with a vacuum, with nothing but silence where there'd always been sound. It was as discomfiting as it was grounding.

He was human. Mortal. A man.

For the first time, it was his choice. He had a family and a home and a safety net of people waiting for him. That was a comfort to combat the numbness that had settled into the marrow of his bones. He blew out a breath, watched it catch on the breeze and drift. He was outside of his body watching himself. He didn’t feel the cold or the grit of the shingles. He shifted, making his heel scrap just to hear the sound and remind himself they were there. That he was there and not adrift in a dream.

There was a sound and his gaze plummeted from the stars to the lip of the roof as a window slid open and then closed. Cas relaxed his posture, legs stretching out as a head of dark blond hair and a bright smile popped into view.

“Thought I might find you here,” Dean exclaimed, then bent, reappearing to place a quilt and a box on the roof and hopping up after them. He grinned and nodded to the space beside him. “This seat taken?”

Cas shook his head and angled it as Dean settled himself beside him, arms and legs brushing. “Why are you on the roof?” he asked, realizing as soon as he said it what a ridiculous thing it was to ask given he’d been the one crawling out of Claire’s bedroom window and onto the roof first.

Dean shrugged, busily adjusting his legs and the items he brought with him. “You’re here.”

Warmth spread through his chest and he smiled. “No, I mean.” He looked at the pile made of two quilts and a pizza box. “What are you doing out here?”
Shaking out one patchwork blanket, Dean looked up and then around. “Uh, whatever you’re doing. Stargazing. Watching the landscape.” Whipping the quilt into the air, Dean twisted his arms above his head, curling one around Cas’ shoulders so that the heavy material fell around both them. “Not getting hypothermia.”

Cas reached up, briefly feeling Dean’s hand on his shoulder beneath the quilt as Castiel curled his fingers into the worn material, tugging it closer before the hunter withdrew his arm.

Dean placed the other one over their legs, before twisting with the pizza box on one hand and dramatically lifting the lid with the other. “I brought pizza.” He settled the box on their aligned thighs, heat immediately seeping through fabric and cold denim to warm his chilled skin. Reaching into his coat pockets, Dean retrieved two bottles of water, offering one. “Dinner awaits.”

Cas took it carefully, folding it to his chest as his gaze fell to the pizza. “…I don’t know if I’m hungry.” He swallowed. “I can’t tell.”

Twisting the cap, Dean sipped his water and pulled a slice for himself. “I thought that might be the case. It happens to patients sometimes. Your body just has to learn or relearn how to communicate with you.” He chewed thoughtfully for a minute and shrugged. “Until then, you kind of train it, three meals a day, drink water, all that. Eventually, your body catches on.”

Brows furrowed, Cas grabbed a hot slice, using both hands to support the bottom so toppings wouldn’t fall. “How do you know that?”

Thick lashes fell and the refusal to look at Cas was palpable. “I may have done research.”

Smiling, Cas pressed into him where their arms and shoulders were a line of contact and warmth before biting into the triangle and immediately letting out a long, contented sigh.

“I have never had pizza, but I like this very much. It is very good.”

He felt Dean preen beside him and it made his mouth curl into a wider smile.

“So you can’t tell when you’re hungry yet, but your taste buds work fine, so that’s something.”

Faltering, Cas twisted and cocked his head to the side. “Do you know that every time I’ve become human, it’s always in a different way and with a different feel to it?”

Green eyes studied him contemplatively. Cas appreciated that for the loss of his angelic perceptions, Dean’s eyes were still the same kaleidoscope of forest greens, his every freckle, every eyelash, every feature was as he knew it. So much felt changed about the world, but the people and his place with them had not.

He looked away, back to his pizza and took another bite.

After a long moment, Dean bumped their shoulders. Cas studied his profile. “I’m out here because it’s dinner time and I wanted to make sure you ate,” he admitted, words curling and dissipating in the air. “I wanted to make sure you weren’t in a house full of people feeling alone, and that you weren’t in a house full of people and feeling overwhelmed.” He turned his head and their eyes met. “Mostly... I just wanted to be near you.”
Heart giving a throb, Cas blushed and lowered his eyes.

Dean tilted his head back, throat exposed as he considered the clear open sky of darkness and lights. “And I’m not the best at romantic, but I didn’t think this would be the worst first date idea.”

Cas’ head snapped up, eyes widening as heat flooded his face, unsure he’d heard right until he saw Dean’s cheeks more flushed than the temperature could account for. He melted, warm and soft and overflowing with everything he held for the man who’d changed his whole world, filling it with color and friendship and affection.

He bumped their shoulders, a gentle nudge to make Dean look at him, his green eyes openly fond, but nervous.

Cas gave him a small smile, keeping their bodies touching in a marvelous line of intimate connectivity.

“Not the worst,” he agreed.

Dean smiled.

They settled, wrapped in quilts as they ate pizza and watched the stars.

“-an.”

“-ean.”

A touch to his shoulder made Dean jerk on instinct, eyes flying open to whip out the knife clutched under his pillow, heart rushing like a racehorse.

He blinked, brain registering little else other than: Cas.

Then: Castiel kneeling beside the sofa bed in the dark of Jody’s living room, Dean’s knife poised at his neck.

Breath leaving in a rush, Dean dropped his arm, head falling back to his pillow. “Cas.” He tucked the weapon away, trying to clear the wet cotton of his head, but sleep dragged at him like an anchor. “Baby, what’s wrong?” he rasped, scrubbing at his face, trying in vain to wake as facts and assessments trickled into his sluggish brain.

Lights off. Early morning. No weapons.

No imminent threat in the house.

That was good.

Giving his head a shake, he rubbed his eye. Cas was staring wide-eyed, before… whatever flitted away, panic and fear settling back in. He tried to remember if Cas had answered him. He’d ask what was wrong, right? He thought he had. God, what even time was it?
Beside Dean, Sam snored and kicked at his calves beneath the quilt. Dean scowled over his shoulder, then back, studying his face.

“Nightmare?”

His eyes fell, shame in his expression. “I didn’t… I couldn’t…” He shook the thoughts away, mentally distancing himself to look at Dean. “You said I didn’t have to do it alone.”

“And you absolutely do not,” he agreed, pointing vaguely. It was early morning hours, and he spent half a second squinting before he shook his head, unable to get the gears properly turning. “Dude, tomorrow’s Christmas. Or today’s Christmas. You need sleep.” He twisted. “Sam. Sam. Shove over.”

“Bluh-?”

Dean elbowed him a couple of times. “Shove. Over.”

Grumbling, Sam wriggled over to the edge of the queen sized bed and immediately resumed snoring. Dean followed him, moving toward the center of the mattress and re-arranging pillows. He lifted the quilt in invitation.

Cas pulled back, frowning.

“Dude,” he said, a touch impatient with exhaustion. Blue eyes regard him. “You need sleep. I need sleep. Come here.” He inclined his head. “We’ll all fit better if you lay on your side.”

Hesitant, Cas did as instructed, body held stiff as he laid down with his back to Dean, keeping as close to the edge of the bed as possible.

Dean pulled the blankets up over both of them, hesitating for just a moment before curling an arm around Cas’ waist, tugging him back and snuggling closer until his back was pressed to Dean’s chest, his legs following the bend of Castiel’s.

“This okay?” He nodded. Dean sank back into his pillow, sleep dragging at his eyelids. “Get some sleep, Cas. I’m right here.”

If he responded, Dean never heard it, sinking back into the warm black velvet of unconsciousness.

The next time he bobbed to the surface of wakefulness it was to the soft sound of a woman humming, the shushed white noise of pencil on paper.

He opened his eyes, early morning light peeking through the curtains as he blinked in confusion. Cas was sound asleep beside him, chest expanding with steady breathing, his heart a comforting thrum against the palm of Dean’s hand. Sometime in the night, his arm had moved and Cas slept with his fingers curled around Dean’s wrist, holding him there.

Dean craned his neck around and Charlie cut off humming the theme of Star Wars mid-melody, head canted to one side from her position sitting at the head of the bed. She sat with her back against the cushions, wedged between him and Sam and her knees drawn up. There was a coloring
book across her lap.

“Charlie, what are you doing?”

Flat eyes returned to the page, red colored pencil swishing back and forth. “Couldn’t sleep, wanted my brothers, here I am.” She patted his shoulder. “Go back to sleep, Dean, it’s still early.”

He looked at the pencil then her face, eyes narrowed. “You okay?” She nodded, avoiding his eye. He accepted that and settled back down, nestling into the pillow. “If you wake Cas, I swear to God…”

He drifted off as she began to hum again.

The next time Dean woke up it was on his own.

Cas slept soundly beside him, lines of his face relaxed and peaceful. Charlie’s weight dipped the mattress behind him. He blinked, carefully extracting his hand from Cas’ grasp so he could cover a yawn and push to a sitting position.

Claire was lying on her stomach at the foot of the bed, ankles crossed in the air as she read. Dean looked from her to Charlie, then from Cas to Sam.

“What? We playing a game to see how many people fit in the bed?” he asked in a hush, settling against the cushions beside Charlie.

She offered him her mug of coffee. “Merry Christmas, Dean.”

He took a gulp and passed it back. “Merry Christmas.” His eyes landed on Donna tucked into the armchair with her fluffy pink robe and a mug of coffee. “Didn’t think you could fit up here, too?” She smiled sleepily, hands curled around the coffee mug held to her lips. He jostled Claire with his foot. “What about you, Buffy? You wandering around in the middle of the night, too?”

She turned the page. “We set alarms. Jody and Alex are making breakfast. I made coffee.”

“You wanna hop up and get me some?”

She rolled her head around, giving him a flat look. He gestured to the sleeping people he’d have to crawl over just to get up, impossible to do without waking them. Tucking her bookmark into place, she heaved a sigh and pushed herself up, her plaid bathrobe falling into place around her ankles. Charlie held out her mug. Claire accepted it with a wordless question to Donna who shook her head.

He nudged the redhead beside him, gesturing to Cas. “He didn’t wake you last night?”

“Didn’t even realize he was gone until I got up and came in here. He came straight to you, I guess.”

He looked at her harder, studying her face. “You okay?”
Her coloring book was closed on her lap and she fiddled with the corner, bending and curling it with thin fingers. “My last family Christmas was before the accident.” A jerky shrug. “I had a dream about it. And it hurt. I came here.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of her hair just as Claire came back with a mug in each hand.

“Thanks, kid.”

Alex and Jody came in in their pajamas and house robes, taking seats on the worn brown and orange loveseat. Alex tilted her head.

“Should we wake them up?”

“No,” Jody, Dean, and Charlie said in unison, all eyes darting to Cas.

“Ookay. Sorry.”

Jody patted her knee. “It’s been a long couple of days. Let them sleep, breakfast can wait.”

Fishing the remote from where it was wedged between the cushions, Jody flicked on the tv, the volume just audible so as to not disturb anyone. They settled comfortably, drinking coffee and watching the remake of *A Miracle on 34th Street*, Charlie leaning against Dean’s side, head on his shoulder.

Eventually, Dorothy came down, hair in a loose braid and simple blue robe securely fastened as was appropriate for her time, looking more casual and informal than Dean had ever seen her. She gave a self-conscious smile and settled between Jody and Alex.

It wasn’t until the won court case that Cas woke up, frown of muddled confusion marring his features as he propped on an elbow, scowling at the room.

“Morning, Sunshine,” Dean greeted, voice warm and fond with the smile he couldn’t hold back.

Castiel twisted, looking at him over his shoulder. He blinked and looked around again, trying to piece together where he was and how he got there, stiffening when he did.

Dean gave him a gentle nudge, still smiling. “Merry Christmas, Cas.”

The lines of his face softened, warmth filling his eyes in a way that made Dean want to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth to make him smile. This was what he wanted for him, for them. Waking up secure in the knowledge they were part of a family, with frivolous, impossible things like a home and holidays to look forward to. To wake up happy and safe.

Patting his leg beneath the quilts in greeting, Cas pushed himself to a sitting position, scrubbing over his face with one hand. “Coffee?”

Claire rolled off the bed and to her feet in a second. “I’ll get it.”

Dean smirked at her back but didn’t comment. “He likes his cream and sugar with a little coffee.”

Donna raised her mug in salute. “Man after my own heart.”
“Charlie, wake Sam.”

She smirked and reached over to shake his shoulder. “Favoritism much?”

“Shut it.”

“Wakey, wakey, Sam. The sun is high and the gifts unopened, wake up.”

“Also, there’s pancakes,” Jody offered.

“And there’s pancakes,” she sing-songed.

He awoke, groggy and swatting behind him. “Bwha-?” Rubbing his heel into his eye, he peered around the room, leaning back to consider Charlie, Dean, and Cas all regarding him. “Like puppies in a basket,” he mumbled, shaking his head to clear it. Claire came back, handing Castiel his coffee, before settling into her original spot at the foot of the bed. Sam leaned against the cushions. “Is this a contest to see how many people can fit up here?”

“There’s room for more,” Dorothy warned, grinning over her mug.

His gaze slid to her, gesturing to his lap. “You’re welcome to try.”

She blushed and Dean grinned.

“So,” Donna began, “breakfast or presents first?”

“Presents,” Dean blurted, heat flooding his face when everyone looked at him. Nervous anticipation mounted in his stomach so that he barely managed not to fidget. The hour of reckoning drew nearer and Dean was tied in convoluted knots of hope and anxiety regarding the two boxes addressed to the man beside him. He shrugged, aiming for nonchalant, but Claire’s narrowed eyes and growing smirk broadcasted his failure. “Breakfast has waited this long, I mean.”

Slapping her thigh, Jody rocked forward and to her feet. “Dean’s right. Presents and then breakfast for the masses.” She pointed at him. “Though if you five think we’re just gonna hand you your presents, you gotta ‘nother thing coming. Up. Up, up, up. Fold up the couch, we need to floor space.”

Claire repositioned so she was facing the tree while the others obeyed, scooting out of the bed. “There’s more seating if we leave it unfolded, Jody.”

Jody narrowed her eyes and Claire heaved a weary sigh as she complied, jerking her head at Alex to help her fold up the contraption. The rest of them settled themselves, Dean and Sam both awkwardly watching then mimicking the actions of others to sit cross-legged on the floor around the tree.

“Donna?” Jody asked.

“On it!”

Jody grabbed a package, checked the label, and then held it out. “Alex. Now when you get them, you can go ahead and open them. Winchester Family.”
Sam and Cas both looked to Dean, and he held his hands out, accepting the cardboard rectangular box printed with a Christmas-y lid. Names and packages continued being handed out, Dean meeting Charlie’s eye to flick a glance to his presents. She nodded, leaning over and dragging them closer with a smile to Donna.

Lid off, Dean barked a laugh as soon as he saw the sturdy, patterned fabric, pulling the top one out and holding it up to properly see.

Jody grinned, corners of her eyes crinkling. “I did warn you, Winchester.”

His teeth flashed on a laugh; he handed the apron to Sam. “Think this one is yours. Cas, you want the blue and black wallpaper or black with white flowers? Wait, why am I asking?” He held one out. “You like flowers. Here.” He chuckled, holding his up proudly. “This is hilarious. I love it.”

Charlie was frowning at the boxes in front of her, pointing to the smaller one with a confused question in the tilt of her head. Rather than offer an answer, he flashed two fingers and she jerked a nod before being distracted by accepting a gift. Dean turned to watch Sam tear the wrapping off his present, immediately jerking his head up with a bitchface that had Dean bursting out laughing.

“That’s not funny, Dean.”

“Oh, come on, dude, it’s hilarious.”

Alex reached forward and plucked the pink box from his fingers, considering it. “It’s... a Barbie.”

Dean winked at her. “It’s a joke. Sammy gets it.”

Sam snatched by the toy and hit him with the package, fighting a smile. “You’re a horrible brother.”

Jody shook another box at him. “This is also from Dean.”

“That’s not funny, Dean.”

“See? I’m an awesome brother.”

Alex raised a brow. “I’m not sure that’s how Christmas presents work, Dean.”

“No, no,” she assured, “this is fabulous. It’s an inside thing. I love it.”

Putting her gifts back into their bag, Charlie then pushed the bigger of the two boxes into Cas’ hands, the smaller one placed in front of him. “These are from Dean,” she explained, before crawling across the floor on hands and knees under the guise of looking at Sam’s gifts in order to watch.

Heat rushing to his face, Dean dropped his gaze, intently focused as he plucked at the tape holding together the wrapping paper on his gift from Sam. A cookbook by the feel of it.

With reverent curiosity, Cas pulled at the ribbon tied around the box. Dean abandoned all pretense to watch, heart thudding in his ears so that all the sound and activity around them was lost to the sight of Cas lifting the lid and blinking in surprise. His blue eyes tracked over all the different
sections normally for assorted chocolates to go into, instead filled with a wide variety of candy and snacks. A single Hershey’s Kiss here, a Hugs there, a few Skittles in one, M&Ms in another, chocolate with toffee, red licorice, black licorice, honey peanuts, even pistachios. A rainbow of color and flavors.

“So you can experience things for the first time,” Dean blurted, blushing even darker when Cas looked up, smiling and happy looking.

“I know. Thank you.” Claire reached past him vying for some Reese’s pieces and he slapped the top of her hand with a scowl. “Not for you.”

Hand snatched to her chest in surprise, Claire tried for affronted. “Greedy.”

Replacing the lid and setting it to the side with all the care of something fragile and sacred, Cas reached for the smaller box and Dean stopped breathing, eyes locked on his face.

Last minute panic and fear raged to life, seizing him and locking his muscles into place. A million scenarios tumbled through his mind, every fear and worry he’d spent days trying to shove down and ignore, roaring to the surface as he was forced to sit there and watch Cas untie it just as carefully.

Oh God, this was a mistake. He never should have... He didn’t know what he’d do if…

Lid removed, Cas folded back the white tissue paper as Claire peeked nosily over his shoulder. Behind Dean, Charlie fumbled a hand into Sam’s sleeve, eyes riveted so that Sam did a double-take, straightening with interest.

Cas froze. Dean forced down the knot in his throat, forced himself to take a breath.

Claire scrunched her face. “It’s a rock.”

Wide blue eyes found Dean’s as Cas lifted his head, fear and blatant hope warring in eyes so very human.

“It’s a pebble,” he breathed in a hush.

Sam’s eyes flew open wide, looking away only when Charlie started pummeling his shoulder with tiny fists, a small high pitched noise climbing the back of her throat, before he looked back again, eyes flicking back and forth between them and holding his breath as the moment played out.

Feeling his hands shake, Dean curled them into fists on his thighs and offered a slow, deliberate nod of affirmation.

“It’s a pebble.”

For the width of two heartbeats, nobody moved.

Then, dropping the box to the side and moving at such a speed it caught Dean off-guard, Cas scrambled to kneel in front of him, hand curling around the back of his neck. Castiel’s mouth pressed hard and insistent against his, kissing Dean with everything he had and didn’t know how to say.
Dean kissed him back readily, head tilted back and fingers touching the bend of Cas’ elbow as he cradled Dean’s head in his hands. Dean nearly laughed with the bone-crushing relief. There were whoops and high-pitched noises beside him. Cat-whistles that had him smiling against Cas’ mouth before the angel pressed their foreheads together, making Dean look up at him.

Eyes squeezed shut, Cas swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. He was trembling.

Dean settled his hands on Cas’ hips.

“I love you,” Cas swallowed and his voice cracked, “so much, Dean.”

He gave his hip a gentle squeeze and whispered, “I love you, too.”

Something like a sob or a laugh escaped Cas, covering it by pressing his mouth once more to Dean’s, fingers in his hair.

Picking up the box, Claire and Alex both peered inside at the green agate etched in runes, sigils, and inscriptions before Claire looked up for clarification, jabbing a hand at it. “It’s a rock,” she repeated, aware she’d missed something.

Grinning with a secret, Donna leaned forward, cupping a hand over Claire’s ear to whisper. Eyes growing wide, Claire looked down to the rock and then to Donna just as Cas extracted himself with an embarrassed laugh and settled back into his seat, holding out a hand for his gift back.

She quickly relinquished it. Cas lifted it from the paper, cupping the green stone in his palm, tracing the intricate lines with his index finger.

Remembering their very public moment, Dean ducked his head, only looking up at a soft chuckle. He looked first to Donna and then to Jody, both of them having returned to handing out gifts, but sharing a look of secret conversation that made Dean wonder if they’d somehow gotten the implication, and how they managed it so fast.

Charlie crashed into him, arms wrapped around his shoulders and cheek pressed to his back as he rocked with the impact, laughing.

“I’m so happy for you.”

He rolled his eyes, feeling Sam clap him on the shoulder, and really, how were they picking up on this being bigger than it’s simple appearance?

“Alright, alright, don’t make it a big deal.” Cas caught his eye and Dean winked. “Thought you guys wanted to open presents.”

She ruffled his hair as she pulled back. “You wanted to open presents.”

He accepted the flat box Jody offered out. “Yeah, yeah,” he groused, taking in Cas’ name on the simple tag, before raking his fingers under the wrapping paper’s tape, pulling out the nondescript box and flipping back the lid.

Further words died on his lips as his heart squeezed, bittersweet and hopelessly fond when his eyes settled on a framed picture lying on a bed of tissue paper. All of their faces smiled back at him, each of them squeezed into the frame per Charlie’s tinsel-hostage demands, the family portrait...
matted and framed. He swallowed around a knot in his throat, feeling his eyes prick unexpectedly. He blew out a careful breath, eyes drifting to the corner of the black frame. Affixed with simple tape, a blue and green key stared back at him, ‘HOME’ written in plain white font across the head. He ran his thumb across the cool metal and lifted his gaze to meet Cas’ shy, hopeful glances.

He had to swallow twice before he could speak. “Thank you,” he whispered, words nearly obstructed by heartfelt gratitude.

Cas dropped his gaze, looking pleased, though embarrassed. “Of course, Dean.”

As more presents were passed out and gifts exchanged, Dean couldn’t stop grinning. He grinned until his cheeks hurt and then he grinned some more, grinning at Cas, at Sam, at Charlie, at each member of his family, feeling so happy and so full he thought he might burst for lack of any way to contain it all.

This was what it meant to have everything. To want for nothing.

They were safe.

They were happy.

They were together.

Finally.

*Finally, they were home.*

**The End**
Author's note: I so hope you enjoyed this journey over the past year and a half as much as I have. You have no idea how much this story means to me, or how cathartic it had been to write, to see the characters grow, for relationships to improve and deepen, not only with each other, but with themselves. You may not have noticed, but I really love to see them happy.

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