Stand Still and Breathe

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Summary

Sam and Dean are brothers again. That's what matters, right? They just need to figure out a way to pull Sam back on his feet now. Except this time, it's not that easy. Then there's Castiel, who is now human: a broken human. Soon, the two most important people in Dean's life are fading away, and there's nothing he can do about it.

This story takes place after episode 8.23: Sacrifice, and is AU after.

Notes

**DISCLAIMER:** I don't own anything you recognise. I really wish I did, but nope. Kripke is the one who created them. We owe him. If Sam and Dean were mine, though…

**A/N:** The fic idea came to me while I was studying internal medicine and DDx-ing Sam in my mind. And I decided to make a story out of one of the conclusions I drew about what he could be suffering from. This fic, therefore, will focus mostly on Sam's health, and Sam and Dean's (very brotherly) relationship after episode 8.23, Castiel being human, and
Destiel. However, please remember that this is pretty much AU. There are angels and tablets and everything else, but that's not very important to this plot. There are brief mentions and appearances at best. I'm taking a very different turn with this.

A lot of time has passed since 8.23 in the prologue, but chapter 1 will pick up from where the episode ended.

Also, the story focuses on a potentially fatal illness, and will feature a very ill Sam, and if that is bound to trigger anything, please don't read it. Some parts in the end are from a dream I had a while ago. The dream sent shivers through my spine when I woke up, and I noted the idea down, hoping to use it some day - so here goes.

Basically, this story serves no moral other than the fact that sometimes, you can love some people so hard, that nothing else in the world matters beyond that. You'll find more angst, heartbreak and drama than action in this story. It's more emotional than physical and if that's not your type of thing, please turn around. I don't want to disappoint anyone.

This story contains slash. The ship will be Dean/Castiel, which I have built up slowly because I want to get the dynamics between those two clear. You might need patience, but I promise it will be worth the wait.

That said, please read through the tags for triggers. This fic can get upsetting in parts. Also, when I wrote a lot of this fic, I was still a med student -- meaning, I knew a lot of theory, and not so much of the practical stuff because all we did for four-and-a-half years, was history taking. Of people with pneumonia and asthma, and stable patients. I am now almost done with my internship, but they still don't let us handle critical patients, so I have better practical knowledge, but am still lacking. What kind of a medical student am I? Google MBBS lol. Basically, the medical info here is mostly accurate, but might be off the mark sometimes, and I strongly recommend not using this fic as medical guidelines for... anything. LOL.

Thank you, BohemianMoose and quickreaver - both of whom joined me as betas in the later chapters, and have been amazing help! :) And thank you to SPNxBookworm the (entirely awesome) angel who became a great friend and cheered me on through the hard spots in this fic, and my life.

Banner by my dear friend, Nadia/majestic_ginny from Mugglenet Fanfiction. Weird digital art below that is by me. :)

Prologue
Prologue

Agony. Fucking agony.

"Come on, Dean!"

Dean could vaguely hear Sam's encouraging words as they shuffled forward, trying to find their way out of the house. Everything ahead of him was blurred; muted, somehow, and even Sam sounded like an out-of-tune radio.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could make out Sam's hazy figure twisting around to cast a look at him now and then, his arm curving around his elder brother's waist in order to hold him up. The elder Winchester had one arm looped around his brother's neck, and his other hand clutched the wound at his abdomen, which was oozing little rivulets of blood, dampening his clothes and leaving a trail on the grimy floor.

"Come on, man," Sam said again, as Dean's knees buckled, "don't pass out on me. We need to get out of here."

"C-Cas…"

"He's on his way."

"D-Did he…?"

"He did," said Sam, and Dean could feel worried eyes on him again, "we just saw the ghost flame away, remember?"

"T-Then why… why are we… here?" He struggled to formulate complete sentences through the pain.

"Dean," Sam breathed. "We came to rescue those teenagers. They were going to camp in here for the night. We sent them away… You don't remember?" Dean could hear the apprehension seep through Sam's voice. Yes. He was supposed to remember this, wasn't he? He was supposed to remember this. But somehow, his memory couldn't grasp on to anything.

Had it been a simple haunting? Maybe. Had he and Sam come to the help of some foolish teenagers, while Castiel had gone off to salt and burn the remains? Maybe. Had Sam and Dean helped the teenagers escape, before getting trapped in the house themselves because the ghost got angry with Castiel for trying to get rid of it? Maybe. Dean couldn't remember much, really. But from what his brother said, this was the gist of what had just happened.

"Nearly there… just a little more…"

Dean nodded weakly at his brother, his eyes rolling in and out of focus. "Dean, stay with me," Sam said in a pleading voice, and the other man tried to concentrate on the faint rectangular outline at the end of the room.

Finally, they were at the door. Someone was already trying to open it from the other side — Castiel, no doubt, having done his job.
"Dean!" came Castiel's muffled voice, as Sam tried to open the door from their side. It wouldn't budge.

"Okay, just a minute… wait here," Sam said to Dean, depositing him against the wall before trying to pull the door open with all his might. Nothing happened.

"Cas?" Sam called out to the former angel, "it won't move from here. Get the axe from the Impala. And hurry!" He bent over and slid the car keys under the door.

"Okay," replied Castiel. Dean heard the jingle of the keys being handled from the other end, muffled footsteps, and the sound of the Impala's trunk opening, then slamming shut.

Castiel was back after a couple of minutes. "I'm breaking down the door. Stand back."

There were two thumps and then a crashing sound as the door gave away, wood breaking and splintering under the impact of the blade. Sam came back to Dean and helped him stand up again. "Almost there, Dean," he encouraged again, "almost there."

Dean was cold and nauseous. The pain was numbing away, though, and blackness was settling into the corners of his eyes. The blood was still seeping out; the wound was too huge and deep to facilitate quick clotting. But Dean wasn't worried. He had his brother. He had Cas.

"Almost there," Sam whispered again. The hole through the door finally opened enough for a man to pass through, and Castiel came in immediately.

His blue eyes widened at the sight of the elder Winchester. "Dean!"

"He's injured pretty bad," Sam explained unnecessarily, as Castiel came forward to help. Together, he and Sam moved Dean outside, Sam still whispering the same two words over and over again. "Almost there."

Dean leaned his head against Castiel's shoulder and sighed, causing the latter to tighten his hold on him, pulling him closer. He let the added warmth ease him. He was happy. There was nothing else that he wanted.

"Almost there," said Sam, again, reiterating the two words like a refrain, tears breaking his voice. That was when Dean saw his Impala. His beloved car. It stood there, glinting in the sunrise. The white glow of the new day began to overtake black and Dean glanced at Sam, who went ahead and opened the door to the vehicle.

"You're going to be okay."

"Yeah," Dean whispered, "I… k-know."

He turned to Castiel, who was evidently on the verge of tears as well. "You have to hold on, Dean. Please."

"Cas…" said Dean, "L-Love… you, man…"

And then the former angel's face melded into the sunlight as Dean let go of the reins. He was safe. Safe with Sam, safe in Cas's arms. They'd never let anything bad happen to him. He had nothing to worry about.
Well-Trodden Paths

Chapter Summary

After the incident at the church, Sam is taken to the hospital.

1. Well-Trodden Paths

A few months ago

"What is happening?"

Dean was a little shocked, but relieved at the sound of Sam's voice as he watched the sky, mouth slightly agape, trying to drink in the scene before him. A thousand shooting starts were streaking across the night and racing to the horizon — a beautiful sight indeed. Except, it was uglier than that. These weren't shooting starts. It was something far, far worse.

"Angels," Dean replied to Sam. "They're falling."

"What…?" Sam gasped, wheezing, trying to draw in a breath; and Dean's attention snapped back to his brother as he realised that the angels were the lesser of his worries at this moment. After everything that had just happened, after getting Sam to come out from the brink of death again, Dean couldn't bear to lose his brother another time.

He laid a hand on the younger man's shoulder as Sam clutched at his chest, continuing to struggle. "We'll deal with that later. But right now, we've gotta get you out of here," Dean said to him, trying to remain calm. "You have to stand up, okay? I'll help you. Come on."

Sam didn't argue with Dean. He just nodded and made an effort to stand, and Dean realised that Sam complying so easily was a mark of how bad his condition was. Wordlessly, he supported his little brother and together, they got to their feet. An arm still holding Sam up, Dean stumbled to open the back door of the Impala. It creaked as he pulled the handle, and he struggled under Sam's weight before finally managing to sit his brother on the seat.

"Lie down," Dean instructed him, as he lifted his brother's legs into the car. Sam obeyed him, hugging his chest and coughing again. Minute droplets of blood spurted on the upholstery.

Dean cringed, but he bent over and patted Sam on his knee. "Hang in there, buddy, we'll be in the hospital in no time."

"Not… hospital…" Sam gasped as Dean got behind the wheel.

"I don't think we have a choice there, Sammy," Dean replied sadly as he turned on the ignition. "You good? Shall I start driving?"

"Mmm."

Sam coughed wetly again and Dean shuddered as he began to drive. He definitely remembered having seen a hospital situated about ten minutes from the church, and that was exactly where he was taking Sam. This wasn't the moment for home remedies. The abandoned trial seemed to have
hit Sam really hard, and at this moment, Dean just found himself hoping that the damage wasn't permanent or fatal. He'd never be able to live with himself if that happened. But he knew that his hopes were probably too high. They were the freaking Winchesters, and they just had to be in trouble.

The roads were unusually quiet as Dean sped his car through them, the only sounds around him being the purr of the Impala, and Sam's heavy breathing. Dean had read somewhere long ago, that if you could hear someone breathe, it wasn't a good thing. And right now, he could not only hear Sam breathe, he could also hear him wheeze, hack and struggle.

He stopped outside the ER in exactly ten minutes and got out of his car, pulling his brother out after him. Sam was losing consciousness now, his head lolling and his chin to his chest, while Dean walked him into the ER as quickly as he could. "Hold on, hold on, we're almost there. Sammy, you with me?"

There was no response from his brother. Dean hurried and burst in through the automatic doors. "Need help here!"

A nurse took one look at Sam's distress and ran forward to their assistance, as a few of the staff came behind her, pushing along a stretcher. Dean half-lifted his brother onto the gurney and Sam's eyes were rolling in and out of focus as the nurse tilted his chin upwards to allow maximum air inside. When they began to wheel him into a cubicle, Sam coughed, and a spurt of blood alarmed them all.

"Sit him up," the nurse instructed, and Dean propped up his brother's weight as swiftly as he could. The nurse held Sam's head forward so that the blood could drain out of his mouth, and he wouldn't choke on it. Sam coughed again, trying to take deep, gasping breaths in between.

"Hey, hey, easy," Dean said to his brother, placing a hand on his forearm. "You're going to be okay."

They hurried Sam into a cubicle in the ER and the nurse worked quickly, holding a basin out to Dean, who put it in front of Sam's mouth in case he needed to spit again. Sam let out a loud gasp when they placed a suction tube into his mouth in order to aspirate the remaining blood from his previous coughing fit. They hooked him to a nasal cannula, the prongs holding firmly to Sam's nasal septum as oxygen flowed in. He started to cough again, spitting blood into the basin this time. Dean was alarmed at the sudden intensification of the symptom, but he tried to keep the worry out of his face and voice as he handed a tissue to Sam from the cabinet. "Easy, brother."

The nurse — Melody, as her name tag read, had started an IV line on the back of Sam's palm, and was injecting something through the catheter. Sam gasped once, and his breathing slowly eased as the nurse added another injection. "Just a little bit to calm you down," she said. One of the other staff came to them with a small table fan and Melody quickly switched it on and directed it to Sam's face. "Better?"

He took a deep breath, his eyes half-open, and nodded. "Try to relax. The doctor will be over in a minute," the nurse said, when she had finished attaching Sam to a monitor. She added the pulse oximeter to Sam's finger, and glanced at the numbers flashing on the screen. "How long has he had these symptoms, Mr—?"

"Wilson," Dean replied, remembering the name on his insurance card. "Dean Wilson. This is my brother, Sam."

She nodded. "Like I said, Mr Wilson, I've informed the doctor, and she will be here soon. Before
we start treating, though, we will need a history of his symptoms. How long has he had the bloody coughing?"

"A few months..." Dean trailed away as Sam started to cough again. He held the basin under his brother's chin again, watching him spit out strings of blood fearfully, as Melody rubbed Sam's back. Finally, Sam finished coughing, and sagged forward, exhausted. Dean handed Sam a few more tissues and helped his brother recline against the bed as the nurse placed the fan closer to Sam's face. His breathing eased again, and Dean almost let out a sigh of relief.

"Acute dyspnoea and haemoptysis?" a female voice asked, as the curtains were ripped open. A tall woman walked in — a doctor. She wasn't much older than Dean, and she had her dark hair in a tight bun. Knowing brown eyes shone behind thick-framed glasses. The name on her tag read Dr D. Pittman, MD. Her eyes travelled to Sam. "Good, he's stable. Have you taken blood for sampling?" she asked the nurse, glancing at the file.

"No, I was just about to," Melody, replied. "The dyspnoea is a little under control. Is there anything else I should add?"

"We need his tests so I can get to a diagnosis," Dr Pittman replied to Melody.

"Okay, I'll get you a CBC ASAP, then." Melody proceeded to draw out a sample of Sam's blood, but frowned when she lifted his arm. "Dr Pittman?"

The doctor bent over to inspect Sam's forearm, and Dean realised they were looking at the needle marks. Great. That would look very good indeed. Melody also proceeded to remove Dean's bandanna and the other handkerchief from Sam's arm, revealing a cut mark and another bite mark. Both doctor and nurse didn't know how to react to it. Dean noticed it. "Did Crowley bite you?" he whispered to Sam incredulously.

Sam nodded, his eyes half-mast, and before Dean could open his mouth, the doctor straightened herself. "You know what to do," she said to the nurse. The nurse nodded, asked Sam to make a fist, took blood, and was gone.

The doctor turned to Sam. "Okay, Sam, I'm going to check you up now. But before that, you have to tell me what you've been using. It will help me with my diagnosis."

Sam just shook his head.

"Don't worry, you're safe," the Dr Pittman encouraged him. "It will be more helpful if you tell us."

"He wasn't taking anything," Dean replied for Sam.

The doctor looked suspicious, but she reached for her stethoscope. "All right, but Melody is getting a tox screen done, just in case." She put the stethoscope to her ear and tapped the diaphragm twice. "I'm going to listen to your heart sounds and breathing. Ready?" she asked Sam.

The latter nodded tiredly as the doctor bent over, placing the diaphragm on a few parts of his chest first, listening, and then instructed him to take a deep breath. Sam did as she instructed, and Dean cringed slightly at the discomfort on his brother's face.

"Almost done, almost done," soothed Dr Pittman. "Can you sit up for me, just for a minute?"

Dean helped Sam sit up again as the doctor put the diaphragm to the younger Winchester's back, listening some more. After a few seconds, she took the stethoscope off and instructed Sam to lie down. Then she percussed his chest, her face in a frown at the sounds.
"I think we might need to keep you here a while, Sam," she said, once she had finished the percussion. She glanced at his monitor and took the file, before proceeding to write something. "I'm ordering a chest X-Ray for you, and Melody will be back with your blood report in a few minutes. I also want a bronchoscopy done after a while, so I can find out what exactly is going wrong for all that blood to be present in your sputum. In the meantime," she turned to Dean, "Can I talk to you outside?"

This never meant anything good, Dean realised, as he nodded and got out of the cubicle with the doctor. She shut the curtains behind them and led him to a quiet spot where they could talk. "I need Sam's symptomatic history," she told Dean without preamble. "When did the symptoms start?"

"The… the bloody coughing started a few months ago," Dean replied, glancing at Sam's cubicle.

"How many months?"

"A couple of months, I suppose." Dean replied to her. "I didn't know… I didn't find out for a while."

"So I take it, Sam didn't see a doctor about it?" the doctor asked, putting her hands into her pockets.

"No."

"And the breathlessness?"

"Just now," Dean replied. "About twenty minutes ago."

"Anything else I should know of? Chest pain? Fever? Vomiting?"

"He said his body hurt, but not specifically his chest," Dean replied. "And he had a fever too — a few weeks ago. He wasn't hurling, but he said he was nauseous. He was also quite tired, and — and kinda weak on his legs."

The doctor pursed her lips. "How has his appetite been?"

"It's not all there," Dean said to her truthfully. He hesitated. "What's wrong with him, Doc?"

"I don't know for sure yet," Dr Pittman replied to Dean. "We need to conduct tests to find out." She turned to the closed curtains. "Why don't you fill out some forms for him in the waiting room, while we get his blood results and X-Ray? I'll get back to you in a while."

Dean opened his mouth to argue, but thought better of it, and nodded. He walked to Sam's cubicle and opened the curtain. "Sammy, I'm in the waiting room, filling forms, okay?" he said. "I'll be back when they're done x-raying you. Have the nurse call me if you need anything." Sam nodded at him, his face gaunt and pale.

Dean gave him a small smile and swallowed a lump in his throat before proceeding to the waiting room. He took a seat, running a hand through his hair as he did so. He hoped, once again, that whatever the doctors would find would be curable — treatable, at least. He knew it was expecting too much, since Castiel had said right after Sam's symptoms had started after the first trial, that he was damaged in ways that even the angel couldn't heal.

Angel. Oh God, angels. Naomi had been right about Metatron's plan. It was no wonder that Castiel hadn't heard Dean's last prayer to him — he probably wasn't an angel anymore.
No. Considering what he had witnessed outside the church, Dean was very sure that Cas wasn't an
angel anymore.

*Cas was human.*

*Oh, God.*

Dean needed to find out where Castiel was. He pulled out his phone, intending to call Kevin, but
was surprised to see a few missed calls on it. How hadn't he heard the phone ring? He checked the
identity and realised that it was Kevin. He dialled the teenager's number.

"Hello?" said an anxious voice after a single ring. "Dean?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Did you …? What just happened?"

"You saw that?"

"Yeah," Kevin replied. "These alarms went off in your bunker and… I d-don't know… is
something wrong?"

"Wait, alarms? You didn't see the angels fall?"

"The – the angels *fell*?" Kevin asked incredulously. "What is happening?"

"Metatron lied," said Dean. He paused. "I'll talk to you about it later, okay? Have you seen, or
heard from Cas?"

"No, I haven't. Where's he?"

"I have no idea," Dean replied.

"Where are you?"

"In the hospital."

"Is it Sam…?"

"Yeah."

Kevin took a deep breath. "How is he? Did he finish the trial?"

Dean felt guilt weigh down upon him as he remained quiet. Kevin had sacrificed six months of his
life, his mother and his girlfriend for the demon tablet, and—

"He finished the trial, didn't he?" Kevin's voice was calmer. "Dean?"

Dean sighed. "No."

"He didn't complete the trials," Kevin repeated, emotion draining from his voice as it became
calmer still. "You're kidding me, right?"

"I'm sorry, Kev."

"How come?" Kevin asked, his voice now frighteningly calm.
Dean cringed at the teenager's voice. "He – he… listen—"

"You asked him to stop because Naomi told you he'd die." It wasn't a question. Kevin had deduced it for himself.

"He's my brother." Dean could offer no other explanation. There was silence.

"Screw you, Dean," said Kevin bitterly, breaking it. "What do I look like I am? Some sacrificial lamb? I – I lost my mom and my girlfriend over translating that tablet for you! You couldn't have Sam complete one more trial?"

"He'd die, Kev—"

"Yeah, yeah, and what about me losing my mom? That was okay?"

"I know, I know," said Dean. "And I'm sorry. But…" he trailed away. What could he tell Kevin? That he couldn't, for the life of him, bear to lose Sam? But Kevin already knew that. "I'm sorry," Dean reiterated, knowing there was nothing else he could say except for that.

"Just… stop, okay?" Kevin sighed. "Screw you," he repeated, and disconnected the call abruptly.

Dean held the phone to his ear for a few more seconds before pushing it back to his pocket. He washed a hand down his face. He would have to talk to Kevin again. And where was Castiel?

Son of a bitch, he thought, burying his face in his hands. Sammy, just be all right now. Please.

~o~

Castiel's eyes were still trained on the sky, even though the lights had stopped streaking across a while ago. He stared into the night, fists clenching and unclenching the material of his trenchcoat as he did so. He could barely make out the wetness on his cheeks. All he knew was that his brothers and sisters had just been banished out of heaven; cast out of their homes, and that his gullibility had caused it. How could he have trusted Metatron, when he knew what angels could be like? How could he believe that Metatron was any different, when he was aware of the kind of games that his kind was used to playing?

His kind. That didn't exist. He was not an angel anymore. He was a human being.

His knees hurt, and he realised that he had been kneeling on the hard ground. He had no idea for how long, but the physical sensation of the ache; the visceral sensation of hunger, emanating deep in his stomach, and another strange sensation — an emptiness, were indicative of his humanness. There were so many perceptions in him at once — so many nerve synapses firing away different kinds of signals — physical and mental— that Castiel didn't know how humans dealt with them on a regular basis. It was no wonder his father loved them so much; they were stronger than they looked. They bore more than what was visible.

He stood up from his place and wiped his eyes. Dean was going to be looking for him. The Winchesters would know of what had just happened. He needed to get to them.

He started to walk, wondering at the same time if Sam was all right. The last he had seen the man, he was able to detect an irreparable damage in him. The damage was small after the first trial, but after the second one, it had got worse. Much worse. Castiel had sensed the sheer change at once, but decided not to tell Dean unless asked, because he knew Dean would be worried, and he didn't think the elder Winchester could bear to take up any more worries. Either ways, he knew Dean would be worried enough — even if Sam wasn't dead already. And he wanted to be there for his
friend.

His feet were heavy as he found his way through the woods. The leaves crunched under his shoes and he kept walking, listening dully to the rustling, cracking sounds. He was tired in a way he'd never been before. And the only times he'd felt close to this were the times that he was almost human a few years ago. However, at the moment, the exhaustion was different. It was not only his body that was fatigued. It was his mind too.

He reached a road once he had walked some, and a little ways down, he could see a grocery store. His stomach let out an involuntary rumble. He was familiar with food, with his vessel's craving for red meat at the time when Famine had attacked, but he was not familiar with this intense, basic human perception that was hunger. At this moment, he realised, a sandwich and some coffee would very much please him.

Castiel rummaged the pocket of his trenchcoat and extracted a few crumpled bills that he had remaining from the shopping expedition a few days ago. He didn't care about the hunger at this moment; he just wanted to get to Dean first. And for that, he'd have to call the other man.

There was a tinkle as Castiel opened the door to the store. He headed straight to the cashier. "I need to use your phone," he said.

The other man looked up. "Excuse me?"

"Your phone?" Castiel asked, pointing to the landline.

"Uh… yeah, sure," the man replied, running his eyes up and down Castiel's form. He gestured to the phone. "Go ahead."

Castiel picked up the receiver and dialled the foremost phone number in his mind.

~o~

Dean's phone was ringing. Hoping it was Castiel this time, he removed it again. It was Kevin.

"Kev?" he asked, accepting the call.

"Dean…" the teenager paused. "I… just called to say… I'm sorry."

Dean sighed. "It's okay, Kev, I—"

"No, you were right to do what you did," said Kevin. "I'd have done it too. Sorry I got all pissy on you. Hope Sam's fine."

"Yeah, yeah, he's better," said Dean. "They've taken him for an X-Ray, and they say he might have to spend a couple'a days here, but I guess he's going to be okay."

"False hopes, said Dean's mind again. He had a nasty feeling it wasn't about to stop at that.

"That's – that's good," said Kevin. There was brief silence.

Dean's phone suddenly started to beep and he took it off his ear to see an unknown number flashing on his screen. He told Kevin he'd speak to him later, and took the second call.

"Hello?"

"Dean."
The voice sounded shaky, worried and scared. It sounded sad and relieved. Dean, however, was happy just at the sound of his name. "Cas? Cas, where are you, man? You okay?"

"I…" Castiel paused, and Dean could hear him take a deep breath. "I…" He just sighed. Castiel had never sounded this way to Dean, and the latter felt a pang of sympathy for the former angel, despite all the anger he had felt against him in the last few weeks.

"Hey, I know," said Dean. "I saw what happened. I'm sorry. Where are you? Can you get to the bunker?"

"Are you at the bunker?"

"No, Kevin's there. I'm in a hospital. With Sammy."

"How is he doing?"

Dean bit his lip as he felt it tremble. "Not good, Cas. But they say he's going to live…"

Castiel seemed to have nothing to say to that. Instead he said, "I'm coming to the hospital. Give me the address." His voice sounded stronger this time.

"You don't—"

"I want to, Dean."

"Okay." Dean paused, and narrated the name of the hospital and address to Castiel. "Do you have money?" he asked the other man.

"Yes, I have some in my pocket," Castiel replied. "I will catch a bus and get there as soon as I can."

Dean nodded. "Thanks, Cas—" The phone, however, was disconnected and Dean leaned back against his seat for a minute before bending over and filling the rest of Sam's forms.

~o~

Sam was moved to a room upstairs after his X-Ray, since Dr Pittman insisted that she wanted to monitor him awhile and conduct a few more tests. He felt a little better from how he had been feeling at the church. Breathing wasn't very easy, but he wasn't struggling for his breath anymore thanks to whatever cocktail the nurse had given him (he thought he'd heard morphine). There was, however, a dull ache in his chest. He felt extremely tired too, and his head throbbed slightly as nausea trailed the corners of his senses.

"They've called your brother here," his nurse, Tammy said, adjusting an IV bag on the stand. "Your X-Ray result should be out in a few minutes."

Sam swivelled lazy, exhausted eyes to her. "What's wrong with me?"

"Well, your doctor will be talking to you about that once your test results come through. How are you feeling? Still breathless?"

"Not really, better," Sam replied, just as there was a knock on the door. Tammy opened it to let Dean in, who immediately pulled up a stool next to his brother's bed.

"How are you feelin', Sammy?"

"Same as I was fifteen minutes ago when you left," said Sam, cracking a weak smile, as Tammy
left to give them their privacy.

"Don't be a smartass," Dean scolded him. He paused. "Kevin called."

"And?"

"He hopes you get better," Dean said, "He's probably getting back to working on the angel tablet."

"He wasn't pissed?" Sam asked him.

Dean didn't reply to that. Sam sighed. "You should have—"

"No."

"Dean." Sam paused. He wished Dean would understand. He wished Dean would realise. There was no use now. No use for coming to the hospital, or discovering whatever it was that had been plaguing his body for the last few months (if it wasn't something supernatural and inexplicable, that is). Sam could feel the damage inside him. He could feel the change, and he knew it wasn't something that could be chased out by a couple of drugs, or scooped off by some scalpel.

"I wasn't going to let you die," Dean said. "I'm not going to let you die."

"Everybody dies."

"Not you. Not on my watch."

Sam gave up, breathing a little at the nausea that seemed to have intensified slightly. There was no use for having this conversation with his brother. He knew Dean was smart enough to make out from Dr Pittman and Nurse Tammy's expressions that they weren't exactly happy with Sam's condition.

A pang of fear passed through Sam. No matter what he said to Dean, he didn't want to die. Not now, after abandoning the trials, and after the renewed reconciliation with Dean.

"Cas called too," Dean said again, breaking the silence.

Sam turned to him. "Is he…?"

"Yeah, he's human," Dean replied, running a hand down his face. "He's coming here."

"He didn't have to."

"I asked him to go to the bunker, but he said he wanted to come."

Sam swallowed again at the rising nausea. "That's incredibly nice of him, then. Considering… ugh," he groaned, swallowing again.

"What is it?" Dean asked him, alert.

"Feel a little sick," Sam admitted to him. "No, I'm not about to throw up," he told Dean when he began to reach for the emesis basin.

"Okay, hang on, I'll call the nurse," Dean replied, getting up and leaving the room. He was back in a couple of minutes with Nurse Tammy following him. She came up to Sam and felt his forehead.

"Queasy?"
"A little," Sam said to her.

"Hmm," she glanced at the IV bags. "They gave you low-dose morphine to ease your breathing. That could be it. It's just transient. You'll feel better, but I'm informing the doctor anyway. Let me know if you vomit."

Sam nodded and just as Nurse Tammy was about to exit the room, Dr Pittman came in, X-Ray in hand. "I just got your results," she replied, hanging up the film on the light box and switching it on.

"Your tox screen is clean and your blood work wasn't bad," she said. "You're slightly anaemic, but not all that much — it's mostly because of the chronic bloody sputum. I can't find signs of an infection right now, so it's probably trauma. Anyway—" she frowned at the X-Ray, "You have a pleural effusion, Sam. Know what that is?"

"Fluid in my pleural space," Sam replied, nodding.

"Yes," said Dr Pittman. "Now you say that the chest pain just started before you came here?"

"That's right."

"Hmm…" she paused. "Pleural effusions actually take time to show extreme symptoms, and I can't figure out why yours was sudden, but I can extract some fluid and get it tested. That way, we'll catch the actual culprit behind all these symptoms."

Sam nodded, swallowing again through the nausea. Dr Pittman turned to Tammy. "Can you get me a tray for his pleural tapping? I'll be sampling some for the labs before I drain him."

The nurse nodded and left as Dr Pittman took a stool on Sam's other side. She looked at Dean. "You can get a coffee if you want to. The procedure isn't very pretty."

"I'm good," Dean insisted, and Sam felt unexpected relief at that. Nurse Tammy came back with a tray. Dr Pittman loaded a syringe. "Okay, Sam, you need to sit up, lean forward and face your back to me."

Sam obeyed her, and Dean helped him sit up and turn. As Dr Pittman undid Sam's gown to bare his back, Dean put his hands on his brother's shoulders to support him as he leaned forward. Sam, for once, didn't swat Dean away. He knew Dean was as confused and scared as he was, and was only trying to do whatever he could within his power to help Sam. He decided to let his brother have that liberty.

"You ready?" Dean asked Sam. The latter nodded, and the doctor took that as her cue to swab an area on Sam's back.

"I'm going to anaesthetise the area, so you won't feel the bigger needle," she said, and Sam inhaled sharply at the tiny prick. Dean's fingers squeezed his shoulder slightly, and Sam felt numbness spread over a small part of his back, slow and steady. Then he felt a prodding, pulling sensation, that he could only guess was the needle being withdrawn, and then pressure.

"Give me the syringe," said Dr Pittman's voice and Sam heard the nurse move to obey. The doctor's breath hitched slightly, but she didn't say much else, except for, "Collection bag."

Sam immediately felt some of the pressure in his chest relieve and he took a deep breath, feeling better and better as he realised that the fluid was draining away. There was silence, and Sam wondered why the doctor wasn't saying anything. Then Nurse Tammy spoke.
"He was nauseous. I assumed it was the morphine."

Sam wondered why she sounded low. Dr Pittman didn't reply for a few moments. "Get me serum electrolytes," she said thoughtfully. "And I'm scheduling him for a CT scan."

Sam saw Dean look up at this. "Wait, what's wrong?"

"I think I missed something in the chest X-Ray because of the fluid clouding his lungs. I'm ordering a CT just to know if it's really there."

"Really what is there?"

She crossed over, to Sam's line of sight, and placed a hand on Dean's shoulder, and Sam saw that the syringe in her other hand was filled with bloody fluid.

"We will take care of him as much as we can," she promised, before giving the syringe to the nurse and leaving the room.


**Diagnosis**

Chapter Summary

What is Sam suffering from?

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**2. Diagnosis**

Dean didn't like the expression on Dr Pittman's face as she left the room. What had she deduced, and what was she hiding? Would Sam be all right? Was it bad?

He realised he was still been gripping Sam by the shoulders, when Nurse Tammy shook him out of his reverie by speaking to him. "Lay him on his side. The fluid is going to take a while to drain away."

He looked down at Sam, who stared at him with tired eyes and nodded his consent to be lay down. The nurse bent over at this and redid the strings on Sam's gown, allowing space for the tube. Dean then eased Sam gently onto the bed while adjusting the pillow for his brother. The tube sticking out of Sam's back looked nothing less than creepy. Sam uttered a small 'thanks' and shut his eyes, and Dean could hear his brother's cogwheels whirring at the doctor's words as well.

"You will experience pain from the incision and the sutures once the anaesthesia wears off," Nurse Tammy said to Sam.

He opened an eye. "Incision?"

"How do you think she put the tube in?" she asked him. "Anyway, give me a tinkle if it gets bad, and I'll pump you up with analgesics."

"Thanks," said Sam, "but I doubt I'll need that." Dean realised with a pang that after all the stitches they'd had through their lives with nothing but a splash of whiskey and gritted teeth, Sam must not have felt this one at all. He wondered sometimes how messed up he and Sam had to be, for the kind of pain threshold that they possessed.

"If you do need the medicines," the nurse insisted, "you can always ask."

"I will."

She made to leave the room, but Dean stood up from his place. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"You can talk right here," Sam spoke, before Tammy could reply.

"Sure," she said, glancing at Sam, then Dean, looking like she wanted to avoid questions. "You can call me by my name, by the way," she told Dean. "I'm going to be here for Sam till you can take him home."

"So I can take him home."

She hesitated. "Yes, but I don't have the diagnosis, if that's what you're after. The doctor knows best."
"But..." Dean's eyes wandered to his brother for a moment, before they were trained on Tammy again. "What did the doctor mean?"

Tammy licked her lower lip as she fidgeted with the syringe in her hand. "Well, she just meant that Sam seems to have some electrolyte imbalance. That's what's been causing the nausea, and the body aches and tiredness that you told her about earlier."

"Are we supposed to worry about that?"

"Not really," the nurse replied, but she didn't meet eyes with Dean. "I'll get his serum electrolytes tested and the doctor will put him on saline according to how deficient he is."

"That's it? What's the CT for?"

"Just further diagnosis," shrugged Tammy.

Dean didn't believe her. He couldn't forget how Dr Pittman had reacted after aspirating the fluid in the syringe. It looked like something was wrong there. He pointed to the syringe and the tube poking out of Sam's back. "That normal? Is all the blood supposed to be there?"

She took a deep breath. "You should ask the doctor. I'm sorry. I'm not supposed to be talking about this. If there's a problem at any time, press on the call button." Before Dean could talk further, the nurse was out. He shut the door behind her and came back and sat next to Sam.

"I don't think the blood is supposed to be there, Dean," Sam breathed faintly. He coughed, and Dean reached for the basin, fingers clutching it just in case.

"I'll be fine," said Sam, rejecting the basin. He had been on cough medication since his admission into the hospital, and the bloody coughing had mercifully stopped. His voice was a little hoarse from the single cough, though. "You should get some sleep."

"Yeah, say that to yourself," Dean replied. He adjusted the blankets around Sam, being careful not to touch the tube. "You cold?"

"No," said Sam. "I'm okay, Dean. Go to sleep."

"You sleep."

"All right. I'm tired anyway," Sam admitted, shutting his eyes, and Dean watched his brother for a while as his breaths evened out, and moved over to the armchair at the other end of the room. His eyes still on Sam, he yawned and settled himself against the cushion, just as the door opened and Tammy entered the room again, followed by Dr Pittman. The moment he saw them, Dean got up from his armchair and went ahead to talk before they could wake Sam up.

"Well?"

"Sam is suffering from hyponatraemia," the doctor said. "The sodium levels in his serum are low — too low."

"So... you can put him on saline for it, can't you?"

"Yes, and we will," Dr Pittman replied quietly. "But I'm afraid that this, along with the blood found in the fluid from his pleural effusion isn't a very good combination." She looked sympathetic as she said this.
Dean's heart began to beat fast. "What is it?"

"Well, from just the fluid, my first diagnosis would be trauma — which fit, seeing he was coughing up blood."

"But…?"

She sighed. "I asked for the serum electrolytes to close in on a more accurate diagnosis. Trauma shouldn't cause sodium imbalance, and there's just another reason for all of Sam's symptoms."

"Which is?"

More sympathy radiated out of Dr Pittman as she spoke out the answer. "A malignancy."

Dean felt the ground shift from beneath his feet. He knew what that was doctor garb for.

_Cancer._

~o~

Sam woke up to a dim hospital room. Yawning, he licked his dry lips as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. It was still dark outside, as he could make out from the window. A single lamp illuminated his room, and the only sounds he could hear were the snores of his brother and the beeping of the cardiac monitor behind him.

The side he was sleeping on was sore, and the sensation on his back was returning. He could already feel the dragging pain from the sutures, and the sharp one from the incision. The nausea and the headache from earlier were almost gone, and he guessed he had received the extra bag of saline after all. However, Sam was quite thirsty at the moment.

He saw the covered glass of water on his nightstand and propped himself on an elbow as he reached out to it. His hand was shaking when he took it and put it to his mouth, but the cool water felt great against his dry throat. Just as he was trying to put it back, the glass fell from his hand and shattered.

It had barely touched the floor, when Sam heard Dean stirring. "S'mmy?"

"It's okay," Sam said. "Dropped the glass."

Dean, however, was already up from his armchair and beside Sam, on the stool. "How're you feelin'?"

"Better," said Sam. "I take it, they gave me the saline?"

"Yeah," Dean replied.

"Did they say anything about the bloody fluid?"

Dean hesitated. "No… they need a CT. They'll take it in the morning after they get you off the tube."

Something was off about the way Dean was talking, Sam realised. As he observed his brother's face closely, he could see the vestiges of worry lines across Dean's face. And his brother had put on that mask of his, albeit it was a rather thin mask this time. Sam swallowed. "What did she say, Dean?"
"Nothing," Dean insisted. "Now go back to sleep."

"You do realise that I'm going to find out, right? Eventually?"

Dean paused. "Let them give us a confirmed diagnosis. There's no use for worrying about what it could be."

"So they told you what it could be."

Dean didn't reply to this. Instead he got up from his stool. "I just realised we left Crowley at the church. Do you think we should keep him there for someone else to find? I somehow don't think so." Dean was rambling.

"Dean." Sam's voice stopped him mid-sentence, and his shoulders slumped. "Dean," Sam repeated. "Tell me. What is it? Am I going to live—?"

"Of course you'll live, what kind of a question is that?!" Dean interrupted him angrily.

"Then why don't you tell me what they said?"

"I told you, Sam, they need a CT to know what's wrong."

"Is that why you're acting so f**ked up?"

"I'm just tired," said Dean, trying to sound reassuring. "I'll be fine. You go to sleep."

"You too."

"Nah, I gotta find Crowley."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "You're making no sense, you know that? Look, just tell me, man. I'm a full-grown person here, and I'm perfectly capable of handling the truth."

Dean shook his head at Sam. "It's nothing."

"Fine." Sam reached for the call button. "I'll ask Tammy then. You go get Crowley. Keep him in the car. We can decide what to do once Cas gets here."

"Don't disturb Tammy, Sam," said Dean weakly.

"Well, you're not telling me…"

Dean stopped and turned around, his eyes catching Sam's and then dropping. There was silence and Sam found that his finger had been hovering over the call button for a while now. He dropped his hand. "Tell me," he compelled Dean.

Dean did not look at him. "They said it could be cancer."

His voice was so low, Sam wouldn't have heard it if he hadn't been paying attention. His hand fist the blanket around him and he blinked, trying to get his voice out. "What?"

"They said it might be cancer, okay?" said Dean, his own voice breaking. "You happy now?"

Without another word, he left the room, Sam staring after his brother as the news sank in.

~o~
"There are two types of malignancies that are known to cause pleural effusions like in Sam's case."

"And those are…?"

"Breast cancer. And lung cancer."

"But… but you've gotta confirm this, right? More tests? It isn't cancer until you confirm it?"

"We do have to get a CT first. And then a biopsy if we see something."

"Then Sammy has a chance."

"Yes…" A sigh. "I'm sorry, Mr—" she paused, "—Dean."

Dean was in his Impala, keys sitting in the ignition as he numbly replayed the conversation in his mind. Cancer. *Fuck*, cancer. Did Sam have lung cancer, then? Because obviously, it couldn't be breast cancer.

Apparently not. It seemed that occasionally, in very rare cases, men could get breast cancer too. But that was too rare and Sam's symptoms didn't suggest it. If it was cancer, it was most probably lung cancer. However, this wasn't confirmed either, and there were 'further tests', as Dr Pittman put it.

*Further tests, my ass*, thought Dean. She was probably quite sure about the cancer, because she had looked too sympathetic. Plus, Sam just couldn't get off easy, or he'd spoil the Winchester legacy of always being in screwed-up situations.

"Cas…" Dean said involuntarily, but remembered that the angel wasn't coming. Well, technically, he was coming. Just not his usual way — he would arrive on a bus. Dean wondered how Castiel's memory was still intact after having lost his Grace, but he decided to put off the question for later.

He was at the church. He hated the sight of it, as he thought of the gruelling ride to the hospital with Sam in the backseat. It felt like the church's fault that Sam could have cancer. He probably would have been better off not coming here and doing the last trial.

Dean shook the thoughts away. What had happened had happened, and he couldn't change the past now. Yet, he'd always hate this church.

Dean parked the car and got out anyway — he had work to do. He then entered the dark church, flashlight in hand, and flicked it on, just in time to hear a voice. "Is that you, Moose?"

He shone his flashlight directly at Crowley's face.

"Ow!" exclaimed the demon, raising manacled hands to shield his eyes. "Watch where you point that thing, you twat!"

Dean didn't reply to him. Instead, he scraped off a part of the devil's trap under Crowley, and bent over to undo the manacle around his neck. "You're coming with me," he said. "I'm keeping the handcuffs on."

"Ah, charming," Crowley replied. "Are we going to cuddle as well?"

Dean was not in the mood for Crowley's snarky remarks, he decided, as he handcuffed the demon to himself. "Come on."

"Oh, what's the matter, Squirrel? That time of the month?"
"If you don't shut up, I'm going to hit you."

Crowley didn't reply to this, and Dean saw a calculating expression on his face as he sat the demon in the backseat, and undid his own handcuff, before locking it against the door handle at the back. He then shut the door and got behind the wheel.

"Is Moose doing better?"

Dean wouldn't have believed the speaker was Crowley, had he not seen the demon's lips move as he spoke the words. He had to admit, he had never expected to see Crowley like this — in this condition, but thinking of what Sam could be getting in return for changing Crowley…

He concentrated on the road and tried not to be sick. Besides, Crowley didn't need to know anything about Sam — partially cured or not.

Crowley kept quiet as Dean drove back to the hospital. Once he had reached there, he cracked open Crowley's window ever so slightly, and walked off into the hospital without another word to the demon.

When he entered his brother's room, he found Sam talking to Dr Pittman. The chest tube was off and doctor had a concerned expression on her face, and they stopped their conversation when they saw Dean. "Okay," said Dr Pittman, patting Sam's shoulder and giving Dean a comforting look, before leaving the room. The younger Winchester's eyes then fell on Dean, who went ahead and took the stool.

"Sammy..." Dean began, "I shouldn't have—"

"It's okay," Sam replied, before Dean could apologise. "I... I was just talking to the doc," he paused, puffing up his cheeks and blowing a thin stream of air. "Only two types of cancers, huh."

"Yeah," said Dean. "Remember how I always told you self-examination and comfortable bras were important?" He stopped, his own attempt at humour sickening him. Because it wasn't funny in any way.

"You okay?" he asked his brother sadly.

"No," said Sam. He hesitated. "Dean, if it's cancer—"

"Then we'll fight it." Dean deliberately said 'we' instead of 'you', mentioning himself in the fight because no, whatever this was, Sam wouldn't fight it alone. Dean would do it too. He would battle against the thing so hard, no illness would ever think of touching his brother again.

Sam opened his mouth to say something, and then shut it. "T-Thanks..."

"Hey, no problem," said Dean, giving him a wan smile. "Get your rest now. We can worry about this when Dr Pittman actually diagnoses you." He reached forward and patted Sam's knee. "You'll be fine, Sammy."

Sam nodded, before shutting his eyes and drifting away again and Dean got back to his armchair trying not to let all the worries cloud his mind as he shut his eyes to sleep.

~o~

Castiel woke up with a jerk when his stop was announced. He sat up straight and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. He was tired. So tired. He would be very happy to sleep some more, but he was
at his destination, and he had to proceed to the hospital from here.

The sun was just rising and Castiel yawned when he got out of the bus. Yawning. A human act which indicated tiredness. Yes, he was sure he was tired. But there was Dean. He'd be seeing Dean soon, and that caused a renewed sensation of hope in him.

Castiel walked to the hospital from the bus stop. He asked for Sam Winchester at the reception, but they didn't have a Sam Winchester listed anywhere. He realised that Dean might have used one of the aliases, and just asked for a Sam. Thankfully, there was only one patient named Sam at the hospital, and Castiel headed straight for the room indicated by the friendly woman.

The door to the room was shut and Castiel opened it, only remembering to knock after he had already stepped in. But that rapidly filed out of his mind when he saw the sight inside the room. Sam was fast asleep on his side, a tube coming from his back and draining bloody fluid with it, along with a few tubes attached to his hand. A monitor beeped serenely behind him. And then Castiel's eyes travelled to Dean, who was curled up in an armchair in the corner. He licked his lips, approaching the other man.

"Dean."

~o~

"Dean."

*Dean was dreaming of a Wendigo hunt from his teenage. Sam was sleeping in the car, while he and his father were in a woods a mile away, chasing after the creature.*

"Pass me the flare gun, son," said John.

"Dean."

"This thing is a speedy son of a bitch..."

"Dean?"

"Hmm?"

"Dean, it's me."

He recognised the voice... he recognised the voice...

The dream was gone, and his father vanished. Suddenly, the voice that was calling out to him echoed in his head, and he said the name before opening his eyes.

"Cas?"

Castiel didn't reply, and when Dean opened his eyes, he found the angel — *former* angel sitting before him on the stool that Dean had occupied hours ago. Blue eyes looked into green, and Dean saw the pain in there, his pleasure at seeing Castiel alive and well waning, replaced by the feeling of his heart coming up to his throat. Castiel was just alive. He was not well by any means.

What did you say to an angel who had just lost his Grace?

Castiel looked pale and tired, and there were tear tracks on his cheeks. His hair was tousled and his trenchcoat was dirty too. Dean felt sorry for the other man. He glanced at Sam before turning back to Castiel. "How was your bus ride?"
"Tiring."

Dean hesitated. "Are you hungry?"

Castiel nodded, his eyes wandering away from Dean as he blinked a few times. Dean stood up from his place and went over to the other man, resting a hand on his shoulder. "Hey."

Castiel just shook his head, refusing to look at Dean, and raising the sleeve of his shirt to wipe his eyes. Dean sighed, squeezing his shoulder. "Cas…"

Castiel kept looking down, and Dean was at a loss for words. He spotted the stool that the doctor had used for Sam's procedure earlier and left Castiel's side for a moment to go get it. Then he set it next to Castiel and sat down, putting his hand back on Castiel's shoulder, and patting it lightly. "Cas… hey… it's okay."

He had said all of ten words to the guy in the last five minutes, but Dean really had no clue how to make Castiel feel better. He could sense Castiel shaking slightly under his hand, and he started to rub the shoulder gently. "Let's get you breakfast, come on. It's okay. You're okay." He'd been saying this a lot in the last few hours.

Castiel shook his head and reached to wipe his face again. "He betrayed me," he said in a shaky voice. "I should have realised…"

"It happens to the best of us," said Dean. "It's not your fault."

"Heaven has fallen, Dean," said Castiel, looking up at him. "All because of me. I believed Metatron. I went with his plan." His voice was loud, and Dean cringed.

"Shh," he said. "Sam's asleep, Cas. Let's talk in the cafeteria."

He was, however, too late, for Sam was already stirring at the sound. "Dean…" he muttered, his eyes still shut, while his hands grasped at the sheets around him and Dean got up and reached his bed in an instant.

"Hey, don't move, Sammy," he said, holding his brother in his lateral position, the white dressing evident over the sore spot where the tube had been. "I'm right here."

"Mmm." Sam opened his eyes. "Water."

"Sure." Dean reached for the jug on the table and filled a glass, handing it to his brother. Sam propped himself on an elbow and accepted it. That was when he saw Castiel.

"Cas?"

Dean moved so his brother could get a better view of the former angel. "Yeah," he said, "Look who's here."

Sam's expression changed from happiness to sympathy when he remembered what had transpired last night. "Hey, Cas."

"Hello, Sam," said Castiel, swiping away the residual tears before getting up and walking to the other man. "How do you do?"

"Uh…" Sam gestured to the IV bags and the drainage tube. "A little screwed up, but okay."

"Have they told you what it could be?" Castiel asked him.
At this, Sam met Dean's eyes for a moment, but then he shook his head. "Not yet. They'll let us know today, I guess." He paused. "How are you?"

"Human," said Castiel.

"I'm sorry, man."

"Thank you." Castiel looked down. "I suppose I will recover." He didn't sound like he believed his own words.

"You will," Sam smiled. "You've just gotta give it time."

"And while you're at it," Dean added. "We'll look for a way to get your Grace back, okay?"

"I just wish that were possible," Castiel replied sadly. "Unfortunately, Metatron used it for a spell, and it may have been destroyed."

Dean hated the hopelessness in the former angel's face as he spoke. There weren't many times that Castiel got this way, and Dean had certainly never seen him so… broken.

"We don't know that for sure, Cas," he said consolingly, wishing he could make the other man feel better. "So we'll look for it as long as we have to. Kevin is on his way to translating the angel tablet, we might be able to convince Crowley to fight on our side, and like always, we'll pull through. Right?"

Castiel licked his lips, but he didn't seem convinced. "Right."

"Good," said Dean, and put his hand back on Castiel's shoulder. "Let's get you breakfast, now. You look like you're starving."

"I'm just hungry, I won't starve."

"Okay, Webster's dictionary, let's go," said Dean, steering him to the door. "Sam, you okay by yourself for a while?"

"Yeah, Dean," said Sam. "You go eat."

"You want me to get you something from the cafeteria?"

"No, my breakfast will be here soon. You and Cas should eat."

"Okay. I shouldn't be more than ten minutes. But you call me if there's anything. Anything at all, okay?"

"Yes, Dean," Sam repeated.

"And if you need anything—"

"I'll call Tammy."

"No, you call me first."

"Sure, Mom."

"Shut up." Dean turned to Castiel. "Come on, Cas."
"But I don't understand," Castiel was saying. "Does he not realise you're not his mother? He might have suffered brain dama—"

"Cas, are you coming?"

"Yes," Castiel replied, before following Dean out of the room.

~o~

A nurse came back to take off Sam's incision wound a while after Dean and Castiel returned from the cafeteria. Dean offered his armchair to the former angel, who gratefully curled into it, falling asleep almost at once when he did so.

"He seems very tired," said Sam, wincing as Mark, the day nurse, unwrapped the dressing.

"He'll be fine," Dean replied to Sam, hoping he was right.

"You think?"

"Well, he is going to need help adjusting, but…"

"Dean…" Sam paused, and lowered his voice. "He'll get tired, hungry, sick. He can't smite or heal anymore. He'll need a car or a bus to get to places and a cell phone to talk to us—"

"Yeah, well, he'll just have to get used to it," Dean said, noticing the slightly bewildered expression on Mark's face.

"You think it will be that easy?"

"Well, I'm hoping," said Dean. "He seems okay now, but when has it ever been that easy? At this moment, though, I'll just be happy if by some godforsaken miracle, you don't have cancer."

~o~

Sam couldn't keep his heart from beating fast as he lay on the patient table, the CT scanner humming as it took shots of his chest. Dr Pittman worked silently in the small office enclosed by glass. She hadn't said a word since asking Sam if he was comfortable, after he had been made to lie down on the table.

"Okay, Sam, we're done there," said Dr Pittman about ten seconds later. Sam let out the breath he was holding, and let his arms come down to his chest. Mark came with a wheelchair and helped him onto it.

"Dr Pittman will come to your room with the results," he said to Sam.

"You know what's wrong yet?" Sam asked her, but he didn't reply. He craned his neck to get a view of the doctor, but her expression was noncommittal. He didn't know what to make of it.

"Well?" Dean asked, when Sam was wheeled into his room.

"She said she'd drop by with the results in a while," replied Sam. He stood up from the wheelchair and Dean helped him to the bed when Mark left.

"Fingers crossed, then," the elder Winchester sighed; making sure Sam was comfortable, then glancing at Castiel, who was still asleep. "You think we should tell Sleeping Beauty?"
"Let's wait till we get an actual diagnosis," Sam replied, pulling the blankets around himself and trying not to get nervous.

"Yeah, you're right," Dean replied. "No point spreading impending good news." He sighed and took the stool again. "Just be okay, man."

"It's not in my hands, Dean."

"I know," Dean replied. "I just…" he ran a hand through his hair. "Why can't we ever catch a break?"

Sam chuckled. "We both know the answer to that, Dean. We're the Winchesters."

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "I just hope that whatever this is… it's curable."

There was silence. Sam's stomach twisted as he waited for the doctor to come back. A gruelling five minutes passed and he watched Dean fidget about, pulling at this and that, tugging at Sam's blanket every ten seconds, playing with the tear in his jeans, until…

"Sam?"

Sam's heart almost jumped out of his chest when he heard Dr Pittman's voice. She was at the door, and behind her stood an elderly man — another doctor. As they entered the room, Sam read the other man's name tag.

*Dr A Tanner, MD*

He was a specialist. Oh God, that was never good.

"This is Dr Tanner," said Dr Pittman unnecessarily, switching on the light box and hanging up the CT scan beside the X-Ray from the previous day. "He will explain your condition to you."

Dr Tanner took the stool next to the younger Winchester. "Sam," he said kindly. "How do you feel?"

"Uh… okay," said Sam. "What's wrong with me?"

His expression was grim. "You presented to us with the breathlessness, chest pain and bloody coughing. And you've had some transient symptoms like high-grade fever, nausea, body pain, fatigue, loss of appetite and weakness, correct?"

"The weakness wasn't transient," Dean replied to the doctor, before Sam could reply. "He's been having it for weeks."

"Okay," said the doctor. He turned back to Sam. "Any other symptoms you'd like to add?"

"No," Sam said quietly.

The doctor nodded. "Sam…" he paused. "We've found a mass in your left lung." He walked to the CT and pointed to a spot with his finger — a white ball-like structure in a sea of black.

"See that?"

"Yes," Sam replied, his voice barely coming out. Beside him, Dean had stiffened.

"Now, look, we still need to get more tests done—"
"More tests, my ass!" Dean exclaimed suddenly, getting up from his place. From the corner of his eye, Sam saw Castiel wake up. "Why don't you just say it straight?" Dean continued.

"Because, Mr Wilson, it could be a number of things."

"Yeah, but from what I understand, the bloody fluid thing in Sam's lungs only happens—"

"— if it's pneumonia, tuberculosis, trauma, or cancer," the doctor replied. "And Sam's symptoms point towards cancer the most, but we still need to diagnose further."

"What else do you need to diagnose?" Dean asked him. "Isn't it enough that he has cancer? Does he have to have some other disease—?"

"Dean," Sam interrupted him, glancing at Castiel, who looked shocked. "Let the doctor talk."

"No, you *don't* have cancer, Sammy," Dean said to his brother. "You're not dying. This is all a fraud. They're trying to con us!"

"Dean," Sam raised pleading eyes to his brother. "Please."

Dean looked at him, and Sam saw the pain in his expression when he sat back down and reached out to grip his younger brother by the forearm. Sam reached his other hand to pat Dean's lightly, and turned to the doctor. "I'm sorry, Dr Tanner… please continue."

Dr Tanner looked sympathetic. "I know this is not the best news, and I understand why you are reacting in this way. But I'd just like to say — the further tests are to estimate the type and extent of the cancer. There are two types — non-small cell lung carcinoma, or NSCLC and small cell lung carcinoma — SCLC. Both have different treatment regimes, different ways of spreading around the body and separate prognoses. So these tests are very important."

"Okay, so which one has a better prognosis?" Dean asked the doctor.

"NSCLC," the other man replied. "But it all depends on the stage and Sam's response to the treatment we offer."

"What tests are you going to conduct on him, then?"

"A number of them," the doctor replied. "Another CT, an MRI of his brain, organ function tests, a biopsy and a bronchoscopy."

Dean cringed. "When are you starting the tests?"

"As soon as you will allow us to."

Dean looked at Sam and squeezed his forearm. "Whenever you're ready, okay?"

Sam turned to the doctor. "As soon as possible, then."

"All right," said Dr Tanner. "I'll be in charge of your health starting now, okay? You can ask me any questions."

Sam turned to Dr Pittman, who gave him a sad smile. "Thank you, doctor," he said to her. The woman nodded, and left the room, leaving the brothers and the former angel alone with Dr Tanner, who, Sam realised, was obviously an oncologist.

"I'll send the nurse along when we are ready," said Dr Tanner, exiting the room.
Sam let out a deep breath as the doctor left, feeling Dean's fingernails dig into the flesh of his forearm as the other man stared at a spot on the wall, apparently deep in thought. Castiel, who had been quietly watching from the armchair all this time, stood up and sat on Sam's bed. Dean looked up at him.

"Cas, maybe you should go back—"

"I'm staying right here."

"It could take a day or two."

"Doesn't matter. I can help you and Sam."

Sam saw Dean's lips twitch slightly before he looked down. "Thanks, Cas."

~o~

For the next day or so, all Sam remembered was being wheeled into, and out of this test and that, being pricked here and there, and being made to drink things. They collected samples of every single bodily fluid from him and each time, he only saw the same grim expression on Dr Tanner's face. He wondered how bad it was.

He didn't have to wait long for an answer as on the second day, the doctor came to visit Sam with all the results. Sam had been asleep at the time, his chest, his back, and every possible part of his body sore from the medical prodding, and Dean woke him up from the disturbed slumber, looking incredibly guilty about it.

"Sammy?"

Sam opened his eyes to see Dr Tanner standing over his bed and Dean raised it to a reclining position for him. Castiel seemed to have gone for a meal, or to the john, or something, but in the last twenty-four hours, Dean and Castiel had made sure that at least one person was in the room with Sam. He appreciated it, especially as he didn't like being alone with his thoughts right now.

The doctor kept a file on Sam's bed. "Sam, before I say anything else, I want you to know that we will give you utmost care, okay? We will fight along with you, tooth and nail."

Liar, Sam thought. The only person who would truly fight with him was Dean. But he nodded at the doctor.

"So, according to your tests..." the doctor sighed. "You have extensive-stage SCLC."

It was like a brick falling into his stomach. SCLC was the one with the bad prognosis, wasn't it? Sam licked his lips, trying to stop himself from trembling. Dean saw this, and a hand was immediately on Sam's shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly.

"Extensive stage..." Sam said. "What stage is that?"

The doctor hesitated. "Stage four."

Sam almost laughed at this. Stage four. The worst of the worst. Great. So much for coming out of that church alive... he was going to die anyway...

"What are the chances he'll make it?" Dean asked the doctor quietly, interrupting Sam's thoughts. Sam almost laughed at that too.
Don't you see, Dean? I'm not making it from here! I'm dead. I'm gone!

The doctor sighed again. "With his condition… and the fact that there's no metastasis in his organs… I'll give him a year… maximum."

A year, Sam thought. Beat that, Winchester! Your life just got crappy again.
Hello, everyone!

So, um. I need to apologise. I forgot to update this fic on here.

I am so, so terribly sorry. With FFN and this and LJ, things slip my mind and I have no clue how I forgot I had posted this here already. I didn't abandon this, though, and this fic is complete and my confidence has been boosted by the kind people on FFN.

So, here's the rest of the fic. It's got 25 chapters, so I'll be posting it over three days because my fingers really need some reprieve. Anyone who was reading this before might notice that I've added some extra tags, and YES, please notice them, and read it carefully, and please, PLEASE go to my A/N on the prologue and read that, because this is important. This fic can get greatly upsetting, and I don't want anyone to read something they hadn't signed up for, so please pay heed to the warnings.

Thank you! Off to the rest. ;)

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3. Hopes and Fears

"I… need fresh air."

Sam barely registered his brother getting up from the stool and exiting the room as he leaned against the bed, his head spinning with all the information he had just received from the doctor.

Dr Tanner had spoken about the cancer, and Sam could vaguely remember the details. SCLC was the more notorious of the two types of lung cancer. It spread fast, symptoms usually began eight to ten weeks before diagnosis of the disease, and most patients presented with stage three or stage four of the cancer when they arrived at the hospital — both categorised under extensive stage SCLC. The median survival was up to a year with treatment. Also, the most common cause of this cancer was smoking.

It wasn't fair, thought Sam. He had never touched a cigarette in his life. He had tried to save the world, to shut off demons in Hell, and this was what he was getting in return. He didn't deserve this. Why did it have to be this way?

He must have drifted off again — he had no idea, because when he woke up, Dean was rummaging through Sam's duffel and pulling out clean jeans and a shirt. He then explained to Sam that he had spoken to Dr Tanner, and requested for the treatment to be continued at Lebanon, in a hospital that was closer to the bunker. Dr Tanner knew an oncologist at Webster County General, and he would send over Sam's information to the other doctor.

Castiel had heard of the news by this time too — Dean had told him, no doubt, and the former angel did try to be as comforting as possible without lying.

"I have spoken to the souls of several cancer-inflicted people in the past," he said. "They have
"assured me that the intense pain was fairly brief before death came along."

"Thanks, Cas," said Sam, trying to look comforted by the thought. By this time, Dean had thrust Sam's clothes into his hands.

"Change up. We're leaving as soon as possible."

Sam obeyed him and as soon as he was out of the hospital gown in into regular clothes, Dean signed the discharge papers, and they were on their way to the Impala.

"Ah, about time," said a voice when Dean unlocked the car. "I thought my legs would fall off from the lack of circulation."

Sam stopped dead in his tracks. He hadn't noticed Crowley in the backseat. Beside him, Castiel seemed surprised as well. "What is Crowley doing here?"

"He's mostly cured," Sam explained to the other man. He turned to Dean. "I didn't know that you seriously brought him back from the church."

"Well, I thought better us than Abaddon," Dean reasoned. "He could be useful."

"I'm right here, you know," Crowley spoke. "And I'm not exactly appreciative of having been locked down like this."

"Yeah? Tough," said Dean, getting behind the wheel as Sam sat beside him. Castiel reluctantly seated himself at the back with the demon. Dean turned to Crowley. "You're not hungry, are you?"

"No," he said. "I'm still a demon."

"Good, because this is awkward enough," Dean replied. He turned on the ignition. "Gosh, I can't wait to get back to the bunker. It's been a shitty few days."

~o~

Kevin was rather shaky and on edge when Sam and Dean reached the bunker. When the teenager saw Crowley again, he flinched and rushed to pick up one of the swords from the library.

"What's he doing here?"

"Relax," said Dean, raising a hand to show Kevin that Crowley was handcuffed to him. "We're putting him in the dungeon."

"You are?" Crowley asked him. "You wouldn't seriously—"

"Yeah, we would," Dean replied, smirking at him. "Consider it repayment for all the crap you've given us."

"But – but..." Crowley sighed. "I shouldn't have done that. I know I shouldn't, and I'm ready to do anything, anything else to pay for my sins. But not this. Don't lock me up!"

"What's wrong with him?" Kevin asked, sword still held high.

"He's mostly cured," Sam replied.

"Yeah, but he's still a demon," said Dean, before anyone could begin to sympathise. "He stays in the dungeon. Come on."
He began push Crowley in the way of the dungeon, and the demon turned to Sam, his eyes beseeching. "Moose? You won't tell them? I've changed!"

Sam shook his head. "Still doesn't make up for what you did."

The demon gave up and let Dean lead him into his prison. Once he had locked Crowley up, Dean came back to the library to see Sam, Castiel and Kevin sitting at one of the tables, deep in conversation.

"I'm sorry about your Grace, Cas," Kevin was saying. He looked up at Dean on hearing his footsteps. "I got some takeout when you said you guys would be returning tonight. It's in the kitchen."

"Thanks, Kev," said Dean, and he made his way to the kitchen, followed by Kevin. The teenager had bought burgers and a six-pack, and he helped Dean carry the food items to the library. Once everyone was settled in with a burger and beer each, Kevin spoke again.

"Dean?"

He looked up at the teenager. "Yeah, Kev?"

"I'm really sorry I got pissed at you the other day—"

"Nah, it's all right. Don't apologise," said Dean, managing a small smile.

The boy looked down and nodded, and then spoke to Sam. "Are you better now?"

Dean realised that they hadn't told Kevin about Sam's condition yet. He turned to his brother who looked so pale and unwell as he nibbled at his burger, his eyes sunken and his appetite basically destroyed. What would the chemotherapy do to Sam if the disease in itself was so bad?

He didn't want to think about it. Sam had an appointment with a Dr Greene at West County General the next day, and they'd be briefed on Sam's treatment plan there. Dean was aware of the many side-effects and problems that arose from chemotherapy, and he could only hope at this moment, that Sam wouldn't suffer as much as people seemed to suffer in all those movies and books. That was fiction, right? Drama had to be there in fiction. It was exaggerated. Sam, on the other was real and was receiving real chemotherapy, and maybe the non-dramatised version of it wouldn't be so bad?

"I've been better," Sam had replied to Kevin. "I have another doctor's appointment tomorrow."

"Have they figured out what it is?" Kevin asked him.

"Yeah," said Sam. "Yeah. It's –" he licked his lips. "It's actually cancer."

Kevin dropped his burger and a slice of tomato escaped the layers. "Cancer?"

"Small cell lung cancer… or something. Stage four." Sam was being freakishly calm about it, but Dean knew of the havoc in his little brother's head.

Kevin was very shocked. "You're – you're kidding me, right?"

"Uh… no, actually… I have an appointment at a local hospital tomorrow so we can figure out treatment plans."

Kevin picked up his burger, eyes still widened in shock. "But they can cure it, can't they? I-It has a
cure? A good five-year survival rate?"

"Yeah, really good. One per cent," Sam said sarcastically. "Quite good." he repeated, and Dean felt goosebumps rise all over his body at Sam's tone. "They say I have a year, though."

"I'm – I'm s-sorry," said Kevin. "I… if… Sam…" He evidently didn't know what else to say.

"It's all right, Kev," said Sam, putting his burger down. "I'm okay." He pushed away his plate and stood up. "I think I'll turn in."

"At least finish the burger," Dean told him, looking up at his brother.

"No… I'm not hungry," he replied, collecting his jacket from the back of the chair. "I'll be fine," he added unconvincingly as he walked away and headed towards the bedrooms.

Dean looked down at his own half-eaten burger, and then at Kevin's shocked face.

"I think he was lying about being 'fine'," Castiel provided from his place. "I mean, clearly—"

"I think I'll turn in too," Dean said, interrupting his friend. He picked up his and Sam's plates, trying to ignore the nausea that threatened to bring the burger back up. "See you guys in the morning," he said again, before rushing away to do the one thing he could at this moment.

~o~

Sam lay on his bed with the covers pulled around him, staring into the darkness of his room. He ran his fingers through the wound left on his palm by the knife blade as he had just been about to cure Crowley. A small part of him wished, right now, that he'd done it. Because, honestly, what use did not doing it have for anyone? He hadn't wanted to die — he still didn't want to, but at this moment, after everything, all they had were pissed off fallen angels walking the earth. Plus, the demons had just lost their king, and there was scope for havoc everywhere without someone controlling them, especially with Abaddon on the loose. On top of everything, it wasn't as though not completing the trial had done much to save Sam's life. He was still dying; only a year later than what was slated.

It would have been easier if Sam had just completed the trial. The way things were going now, once again, Dean was going to give up everything else just to be there for Sam, and Sam really just wanted Dean to enjoy a life without having to worry, or take care of someone else. For the last few years, with the absence of his soul, and consequently his mental breakdown, and now the illness from the trials, Sam had only given Dean countless opportunities to worry. He was slowly turning into a burden for his brother, whether Dean realised it or not. And for the next year, Sam was going to get worse and eventually die, and as if everything else in Dean's life hadn't been bad already, the elder Winchester would also have to watch Sam die in slow motion.

If the illness wasn't fair to Sam, it was even worse for Dean, he realised. Dean didn't deserve to give up his life and freedom for someone else like this — most of all for Sam, who hadn't even found the decency to try and look for him when he had disappeared on him last year. And Dean had said that there was nothing he would put in front of Sam, and Sam knew he was so dead serious about it, if the need arose, he would most definitely give up everything — everything to be there for Sam through his illness. And that wasn't fair to Dean.

Just as the thoughts wisped in and out of his mind, there was a mild knock on the door. "Sammy?"

He didn't reply. He didn't want to talk to Dean. He didn't want Dean to ask him if everything was all right, because it so fucking wasn't. The knocks repeated themselves.
"I know you're awake, Sam," said Dean again. "I'm coming in."

He remained under his blanket, in the same position even as the door opened, and Dean let himself in. "Sam?"

In a moment, there was a hand pulling back Sam's blankets. Dean reached forward and switched on the lamp, and Sam found himself blinking up at his brother who held two plates in his hand, one of which Sam recognised as his own, with the barely-eaten burger.

"Sit up," said Dean. "Eat."

"Not hungry," Sam muttered, refusing to meet eyes with his brother.

"You have to eat, Sam. Going hungry won't sort anything."

"Easy for you to say." Sam paused. "You should have let me die, Dean."

His brother was quiet at this, and taking the opportunity, Sam continued. "Leaving that trial halfway hasn't helped, you know. I'm still dying."

Dean sighed. "Sam... you're not dying, okay? We'll figure this out."

"How?"

"We're in a nerd home here. They have books and files on anything and everything. I'm sure—"

"Reversing death isn't that easy, Dean," said Sam. "Most of it includes black magic or demon deals. Even if angels could heal, Cas stated long ago that my condition was way too bad to be healed miraculously."

Dean didn't say anything, and Sam finally mustered the courage to look into his brother's devastated eyes. Dean knew as well as he did that this was probably the real deal — that Sam was mostly going away for good this time, and that there was no way back.

"I'm not letting you die," said Dean anyway, the determination in his voice incomparable to anything else. Sam took another glance at his brother and sat up slowly in his bed as Dean spoke on. "I'll find a way to keep you here, alive and healthy. I promise you that. But you have to promise me something first, Sam."

There was something about the conviction in Dean's voice — something about the surety of the way he was talking. Sam didn't really want to die — he just thought he should have died, for all the trouble his condition would now cause. But having Dean be so reassuring... he didn't want Dean to look for ways to save him, abandoning everything else, but he also didn't want to die. Not like this.

"Okay," he said quietly. "What?"

Dean's green eyes found his and remained fixed on him. "You have to fight from your side too."

~o~

"Mr Wilson... Sam."

Dr Greene skimmed through Sam's file, soft brown eyes moving over the test results and other details. She looked up at Dean. "You're his brother?"

"Dean Wilson."
"Okay," said the doctor, shutting the file and looking up at the brothers with interlinked fingers. "The first thing you should know about this cancer is that it spreads and worsens very quickly, which means, we need to start treatment as soon as possible. Preferably this Monday."

Monday was two days away, but Sam agreed to it. "I'm ready."

"That's good," the doctor replied. "I'll draw up a schedule for you, then. But before we start, I want you know about, and expect a few things from this treatment. First of all, it doesn't matter what we do, and how we treat you. You should have the willpower to fight this. You understand?"

"Yes, Dr Greene," said Sam.

She smiled encouragingly. "We're all here to help, and could be times when you might need help. From me — from your brother. At that point, I don't want you to try and be a hero. Come straight up and admit to your requirements, okay?"

"Okay."

"Good. If you're willing enough, you can fight anything. I have seen a few miraculous recoveries myself. So no giving up in between. It will get bad, it will get hard — for you, your family members — but you have to hold on."

"I will."

The doctor's eyes sparkled as she turned to Dean. "That's quite a brother you have there. Most patients I get lose their determination just after being diagnosed."

Dean smiled fondly at Sam. "What can I say, Doc? My brother has always seen the light at the end of the tunnel." He didn't talk about how Sam had almost given up just the previous day, and how it was a promise to Dean that was holding him up right now.

"That's fantastic attitude," agreed Dr Greene. "Now," her eyes were on Sam again. "Shall we discuss your treatment?"

Sam nodded, and she continued. "Small cell lung cancer, as Dr Tanner must have told you, is inoperable in itself."

"Yes, he said that."

"So that leaves us with chemotherapy. You're lucky enough not to need therapeutic radiation, because of the lack of metastasis into organs, but you will still receive prophylactic radiation at the end of your chemotherapy, depending on how you have progressed. That is mainly to prevent the cancer from spreading to your brain."

Sam swallowed. "It could get to my brain?"

"Unfortunately, that is a risk," the doctor replied. "Which is basically why we're offering you the prophylaxis. But before that, you will have chemotherapy. For SCLC, we offer combination chemotherapy. It consists of two drugs: cisplatin and etoposide. The combination in itself is abbreviated as 'PE'."

"This combination will be given to you for four to six cycles, depending on how much you need it. Each cycle will be three weeks apart, meaning you'll be doing this on an outpatient basis. You will have one day of cisplatin with etoposide, and then two extra days of just etoposide — so that's totally three days of chemo every twenty-one days. Then we let your body recover, and start the
"And as effective as these drugs are," said the doctor, "they're also basically poison to your body. This means you'll be experiencing quite a few adverse effects — nausea and vomiting being the most prominent ones. We will inject you with anti-emetics before the beginning of your sessions, and even give you anti-nausea and vomiting prescription to take home with you, but cisplatin is one of the more emetogenic drugs that we have, so you might find the prophylaxis less effective. The drugs we give are sure to curb majority of the vomiting, and probably even all of it, but it's not uncommon to still have up to four or five episodes a day. However, I assure you that it won't be as bad as it could be without the anti-emetics.

"The nausea and vomiting from cisplatin lasts about a week, and that from etoposide lasts about five days. The symptoms will wane as the days pass, and you shouldn't be experiencing as much trouble after about a week.

"Apart from this, another major adverse effect would be hair loss, but I assure you that they will all grow back once we finish chemo. You will also have fatigue and dizziness, and maybe even mouth sores, abdominal cramps and diarrhoea, but you will be fine once we finish a few cycles. Plus, like I said, we will give your body time to recover between two cycles, and you should be better once ten days or so have passed from the administration."

Sam drank in her words, glancing at Dean, who looked a little disturbed and horrified at the side effects. They sounded terrible, Sam thought, but he wanted to fight this. He had to fight this. For his brother, if for no one else. And also for himself, because he really didn't want to die.

"I will give you a printed list of all the other side-effects that you can expect, but I want you to keep a check on the intensity of them," the doctor continued. "You throw up more than five times in a day, you come straight to me. You spike a fever that's more than a hundred degrees, you come right here. There are other things, and everything will be there in the list I give you. Keep it with you, and monitor yourself carefully."

"I will."

"Apart from this," she said, "There are many ways to keep your adverse effects to a minimum. I will instruct you about those too, and help you through this."

Sam nodded again, trying to remember everything that she had said. Was there any part of his life that was ever going to be normal again?

The doctor sighed. "You need to watch yourself, Sam. You need to eat; you need to get small amounts of exercise every day. And you need to do this without me or your brother having to persuade you. Don't think of this as a terminal illness or a death sentence, okay? Because I believe that there is nothing better than will power to fight a disease."

Sam could feel a lump in his throat as fear rose in him. The whole path — the entire thing as Dr Greene narrated it sounded scary — terrifying, in fact. He looked at Dean again, who was nodding vigorously, as though all of Dr Greene's instructions were for him. We'll fight this, Dean had said, and Sam would never forget that, because he was one of the few people who knew how serious Dean was, when he'd said that.

~o~
"Hey, you okay?"

Sam was quiet at Dean's question. Because, what could he say? That 'not okay' didn't even cover it? That he wanted to run, hide, get away from this world, and enter another one, where he wouldn't have to suffer; where he didn't have a death sentence upon him? That he wanted to live so bad; he had wanted normal so bad, and now, his life, and the last remnants of his normalcy — his physical health — were being ripped away from him, and it was as far from 'okay' as possible?

It was as though Dean could read Sam's mind. The elder Winchester gripped the steering wheel tightly. "I'll get you out of this, Sam," he assured his brother for the second time in two days.

Sam turned to him, as Dean continued. "Like I said last night, I'll get you out of this. I'm sure there's some way — some spell, some method, something to heal you hidden in one of the books we have. I'll look for it, and I don't care if I become a geek like you in the process. I won't let you die."

Thanks, Dean, Sam said in his mind, his throat so constricted that he couldn't even say it out loud, but he knew Dean had heard it when the latter reached over and patted Sam's shoulder reassuringly.

~0~

Dean was aware that his relief at finding that Castiel relatively was all right would be short lived, but he allowed himself to be at peace with it as long as it lasted. He even let himself believe that maybe Castiel wasn't going to suffer lastingly from whatever had happened. Maybe he would really adjust and recover.

Dean couldn't have been more wrong.

It was late on Sunday night. Dean was in the library, poring over a thick, leather book full of ancient spells for all sorts of things. It was really old, and it didn't look like indexes were popular during that time period. Sam had gone to sleep early after nervously prodding about at his dinner, and Dean had pushed Castiel to get some sleep too — as the angel was still ridiculously tired from the loss of his Grace. Plus, he was starting to get more and more withdrawn and he hadn't gotten out of the bunker since they'd been back, until Dean had forced him to come out and get some regular clothes for himself. Dean could smell trouble in the way Castiel was behaving, but he decided he didn't want to poke at it.

That night, Kevin had offered to help with the research, but Dean asked the kid to get some sleep as well, to compensate for everything he'd been through while translating the demon tablet. Kevin had read some segments of the angel tablet, but nothing there had mentioned anything about Metatron's spell, and they'd decided to put off translating the angel tablet until later because at this moment, it was of no use with just one angel in Heaven.

Dean was reading through an ancient text on some debilitating illness that didn't have a name, but had symptoms, and was trying to match it with Sam's condition, when he heard footsteps from the hallway. Someone entered the war room. Dean looked up, to see Castiel make his way towards him, looking odd without his trenchcoat and in sweats instead.

He raised an eyebrow at the other man. "Hey, Cas."

"Hello, Dean."

"You were supposed to be sleeping."
"I was, but I woke up and thought that you might need help."

"Thanks, but I'm perfectly fine on my own," said Dean, sipping his beer. "You can go back to sleep."

"I want to help, Dean," said Castiel and came forward, seating himself on a chair beside Dean's. "I need to do this."

Dean suddenly realised what this was about. It was the chain of guilt cycles that he was so familiar with. Castiel thought Heaven had fallen because of him, and he was trying to prove his worth by helping elsewhere.

"Cas," he said. "I've got this. You've been tired. You get some rest and when you get better, I promise you can help."

"No, Dean," said the former angel. "You don't understand. I must help. Now."

"Cas…"

"I'm going read another book while you search this one," declared Castiel, before heading to the bookshelves. Dean sighed and watched him look amongst the volumes on the shelf and finally draw out another book like Dean's — thick and ancient.

There was silence as the former angel re-joined Dean at the table. Dean watched Castiel read for a while, before lowering his eyes to the fine print of his own book. They went on, for an hour, or more, and Dean was now desperately looking for something — anything that resembled Sam's condition. That was when he heard the sniffle.

It was so quiet, so small, that he would have missed it, had the bunker not been dead silent. He looked up, to see Castiel desperately wiping at his blue eyes, which were evidently wet. Oh God, what now?

"Cas…" Dean moved his chair closer to the other man. He took the book from his hands, and shut it. "Okay," he said, putting it away, "Talk to me."

Castiel tried to take back his book, but Dean held it away. "Come on, man," he said. "Tell me what's going on. I know you feel guilty, and I know it's bad, and believe me, I understand, because I've felt the same way more than once. But you've gotta talk to me. What's wrong? Did something happen just now, after dinner?" The former angel had probably discovered another part of his humanness that he didn't like.

Castiel shook his head. "I j-just tried to sleep," he said. "And…" he sniffed again. "Dreams…"

Dean bit his lip. Castiel had had a nightmare. He sighed. "What did you dream about?"

"M-My Grace… Metatron…" Castiel said in a low voice.

He was being too difficult for himself, Dean realised. If Castiel was dwelling on this hard enough to give himself nightmares, this was going to roll downhill quicker than any of them could say 'Metatron'. And he didn't need Castiel to slip away. Not now, not ever.

"Cas…" he said, "you have to catch a break. I know it's hard, I know it must hurt … hell, I can't probably even imagine half of it, but you've gotta forgive yourself. And whatever it is… you can tell me, man. I can help you. Hell, if Sam weren't sick…" His own breath hitched at the thought of the chemotherapy schedule stuck to his wall.
He had never seen Castiel react to anything in this fashion, though, and he wasn't sure if it was just the humanness overwhelming his friend, but he didn't like seeing him this way. But then again, Castiel had never had to sleep as an angel, so maybe the nightmares were freaking him out more than normal.

"Hey," he said, "tell you what? Stop thinking about everything for a while, okay? Just try and relax. Try to get to sleep without thinking about everything that's happened."

"I – I can't, Dean."

"Yes, you can," said Dean. "You have to try."

"I don't want to go back to sleep."

He was terrified, Dean realised, and Castiel reached to take his book. Dean gave it back to him this time. They would take this slow. He'd help Castiel go back to his dick self in no time, and everything would be okay. Or so he hoped. He seemed to be hoping a lot of things lately. But then again, when had so many things gone wrong all at once? This had to be a first, in that respect.

He read for another half-an-hour, occasionally glancing at Castiel, who, after a while, got tired again, and rested his head on his book. In due time, soft snores emanated from the former angel, and Dean almost breathed a sigh of relief.

He didn't disturb Castiel after that, but then in an hour or so, his own eyes began to burn with sleep, and he decided it was time for him to hit the sack as well. He put his book on the shelf and came back to Castiel, before patting his shoulder lightly.

"Cas."

The former angel woke up with a start, and Dean took the book from under him to return it to the shelf. "Go to your room and get some shuteye," he said. "Come on, I'm heading the same way. I'm sleepy too." Castiel nodded and they started heading to the bedrooms.

Dean's room was adjacent to Sam's, and both were at the far end of the hallway, more for privacy during this time. Castiel's room, however, came first on their way back.

The latter gave Dean a glance as he opened the door to his room. "Goodnight," said Dean, starting to make his way to his own room, when he felt a hand clutch his wrist. He turned around.

"I feel fear, Dean," said Castiel, genuine dread reflecting off the blue of his eyes.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Dean assured him, feeling as though he were talking to a child. "We're all just a few rooms away. Kev's here, Sam's here… you don't even need to walk that much to my room."

Castiel's eyes widened, and he shook his head. "I can't sleep."

Dean sighed. Honestly, it was like handling a scared kid. But Castiel wasn't a kid. He was distressed, and that was what this was. "Go in and lie down," Dean said finally. "I'll sit with you on that chair till you sleep." He chuckled. "I still owe you for all the times you've gone Edward Cullen on me."

Despite the joke, the other man looked comforted as he went into the room, followed by Dean, who took the chair and sat down beside the bed. He watched Castiel drift off as he leaned back, sleep taking over his own senses, and before he knew it, he was fast asleep right there on the chair.
Dean jerked awake the next morning with an ache in his neck from the awkward position that he had slept in. Castiel was still curled up under a pile of blankets and was mercifully asleep, and the fact that he hadn't woken up again signified the absence of any more nightmares.

Dean shuddered as the events from last night replayed in his head. He didn't know how many such episodes he would witness, and he didn't want to think about it.

He looked at Castiel for a long moment, feeling lonelier than he ever had. Up until now, whatever it was with Sam or the world, or anything, there had always been Bobby or even Castiel sometimes, but right now Dean was in a situation with a very sick brother and a possibly disturbed friend, and there was no one to help — no one he could look up to for any kind of support. He was supposed to handle this alone.

He left Castiel's room and headed straight to Sam's, where his little brother was still in a peaceful slumber. After reluctantly waking him up, he headed to the bathroom to shower and dress himself. When he came out, Sam was waiting outside for his turn, with his towel and clothes, and Dean tried to give him an encouraging smile before heading to the kitchen.

Castiel woke up for breakfast, which was a quiet affair. Kevin was still asleep, and the adults decided not to wake the kid up. He deserved all that rest. Sam played with his food and Dean told him off for it. The doctor had said that a good meal was recommended before chemotherapy, and Dean reminded Sam of that. Castiel was quiet all through, but just as Dean finished his breakfast, he spoke up.

"I'll come with you and Sam."

Dean, who had been on the way to put his plate in the sink, stopped. "Uh, it's okay, Cas, there's no need for that. You should get some rest anyway."

"No, I think I should come," said Castiel. "Perhaps you and Sam will be better comforted with a friend around."

Dean turned to Sam, who shrugged. They both knew that Castiel needed to get out of the bunker for a while, that he'd feel better if he did that, but going along to the hospital wasn't the best way to get fresh air. Sam didn't know about last night's episode, though, which was probably why he was agreeing upon letting Castiel uproot himself from the bunker. But despite what Dean said, the former angel seemed stubborn about his intentions, and the Winchesters gave up and decided to let him join them.

Before long, Dean and Castiel were sitting on stools next to Sam's bed in the oncology ward, and Dr Greene paid a visit to reassure Sam that his kidney function test and blood test from Saturday were just fine, and offered to clear any questions that he would have about the treatment. When he had none, she beckoned to the nurse to begin the session.

Sam didn't flinch when the IV catheter was inserted into his vein. The nurse, Cecelia, explained that the IV line would stay even after Sam left the hospital, so they wouldn't have to prick him for three continuous days. And since Sam's chemo was just three days per three weeks, he didn't have to get one of those central lines inserted, and regular, peripheral IV was good enough.
After instructing Sam on care for the line at home, Cecelia injected a cocktail of anti-emetics and placed a bag of saline to hydrate Sam before the actual treatment began. For several moments, Sam, Dean and Castiel were staring at the colourless fluid dripping from the bag into the cannula.

"Perhaps we should start entertaining Sam," said Castiel, interrupting the silence. Dean tore his eyes away from the saline bag and gave Sam a weak grin.

"Want a bedtime story, Sammy?"

"Shut up," said Sam, chuckling at him. "Jerk."

~o~

"Dean."

Sam knew his voice was faint — almost a whisper. He could hear Dean's breath hitch a little, and he also knew that Dean's mind was filling up with possibilities as to why Sam was calling his name, and was settling on the most obvious one. The younger Winchester had been tired, queasy and dizzy after all those hours of chemotherapy, and Dean had let him drift off in the backseat while Castiel rode shotgun.

"Do you want me to pull over?" Dean asked Sam, sounding like he dreaded the answer.

Sam was angry with himself, and with everything. Why the fuck was it that he was receiving one of the few drugs that the anti-emetics couldn't completely work on? If he had to have cancer, couldn't it be one of those with a less emetogenic chemotherapy or whatever? But no. Here was his Winchester luck. He had to get the medicines that made you sick the most — which made puking about five times a day look normal.

"Mmm," Sam replied anyway, getting rid of the thoughts. It was no use cursing everything now. He had, however, confirmed Dean's suspicion. His stomach was churning terribly and he couldn't bear to open his eyes.

"Okay, hang on." Dean stopped the car.

"What's wrong?" Sam could hear Castiel asking him, and Dean didn't reply to him. In a jiffy, Sam felt his elder brother's arms helping him sit up.

"Come on, buddy."

Oh God, this was embarrassing. He was about to barf on the side of the road, and Dean was actually supporting him so he wouldn't face-plant onto the asphalt. He hated this. He so hated this. But he let Dean steer him about anyway, knowing that if he resisted, he was bound to fall on his ass. Or his mug.

He was led to a patch of trees on the side of the road. Oh good; trees. He clutched on to one of them, his arm winding around the trunk as he doubled over, his other hand on his knee. His stomach roiled and he spat out a vat of saliva.

"Sam…” Dean sounded concerned, but Sam was grateful that he wasn't rubbing his back or something, because this was awkward enough. Dean was acknowledging Sam's own strength to handle this, and was trying to reduce Sam's mortification, and Sam was appreciative of that. Because, oh God, he really just wanted to run away.

He swayed dangerously. "Easy, man,” said Dean, placing a hand on his shoulder to keep him
standing. "Do you want to kneel down?"

Sam shook his head as he spat out saliva again. Kneeling would mean admitting he was weak. He wasn't weak — just dizzy. And nauseous as hell. Lord, he was going to puke. He gripped the tree tighter and coughed, his stomach heaving as he did so.

It was horrible. Every retch, every cough was strained. His stomach hurt, his head hurt, his throat hurt, his eyes hurt, and every fucking part of his body fucking hurt. Cold sweat was forming on his forehead and back, dampening his hair and his shirt. He could still feel Dean's steadying grip as he threw up again and again, hardly able to hold himself up from the pain, but then, after what seemed like hours, thankfully, mercifully, it was over, and he wasn't sure what was happening, but he thought Castiel was there with a bottle of water… and, oh, this was so fucking embarrassing. He wasn't letting Castiel come for any more of his chemo sessions.

"Sam, drink this," said Dean, cracking open the bottle and holding it out to the younger Winchester.

"No…" he wasn't sure if he had really spoken.

"You have to, Sam. The doctor has said so, remember?"

Whatever. Sam didn't have the strength to argue. He took the bottle from Dean, rinsed and spat out the first few sips, and then forced down a few more. His stomach roiled, and he knew it was happening again. He wanted his dignity this time, though, so he managed to open his mouth and speak.

"Dean… go…"

"What?"

"Be fine… go… car…"

Dean didn't argue with him, and the hand slid off Sam's shoulder, patted his back twice, and Sam shivered a little when the touch was gone. But he appreciated this because Dean understood what Sam was going through. He really was a very good brother, and Sam would thank him for it when opening his mouth didn't mean puking again. And then, in five minutes, the horrible pain and nausea were back. He was doubled over, trying not to faint as he retched and threw up and spat, his eyes stinging, and tears blurring his vision. It was worse this time, for he was just dry-heaving through most of it, and when he knew he was done, and that he couldn't take it anymore, he slid down against the tree in a crouch and shut his eyes as he rested his head sideways on the bark.

Oh God, why him?

~o~

"Is he all right?"

Dean looked incredulously at Castiel, and then at his brother, who was in a crouch on the grass. "Yeah, Cas," he said sarcastically. "He looks peachy, doesn't he?"

"Not really."

Dean sighed. "Stay put. I'll check on him, okay?"

"Okay."
Sam seemed to be muttering to himself when Dean reached him and squatted beside him. "You done there?" he asked, a hand going to Sam's back. He could tell that Sam was really embarrassed of being sick this way, which was why he had not objected to Sam requesting to be left alone.

"Hmm," Sam murmured, side of his face still rested against the tree.

"Here," Dean said, handing him the bottle of water.

Sam accepted it from him with shaky hands and rinsed and spat out the vileness in his mouth. They waited some more, Dean still crouched beside his brother, and Sam finally handed him the bottle. "'M okay."

"Yeah, you are, Sammy," said Dean encouragingly, helping him up, and leading him back to the Impala. He took out Sam's anti-emetic prescription from the glove compartment and gave him a pill. "Take that."

"Like that'll help," Sam muttered crossly, but he accepted the pill anyway, and then took a swig of the water to wash it down. He swallowed while Dean ran wads of tissue paper on his mouth, chin, and then his cheeks where the tears had fallen, and when he was comfortable again, he nodded his okay to be driven back to the bunker.

Sam wasn't very nauseous anymore, thanks to the medicine, and Dean managed to coax him to eat a sandwich and some crackers, and wash them down with Gatorade. Sam lingered on the brink of throwing them back up again, but then his stomach seemed to settle, and soon, he was sure that he would be able to keep down his lunch. Dean heaved a sigh of relief at that.

In the next hour, Sam was in bed and Dean left the room, with a last glance at his brother's face, which had grown even paler after the episode on the side of the road. A long arm shot out from under the blanket, and he saw the IV cannula, secured to the back of Sam's palm with transparent taping. Gosh, how comfortable could that be? And looking at Sam that way, he was determined to go back and continue with the research from last night. He left the room without another word, swallowing down his own nausea from watching his brother this way. Sam so didn't deserve this.

He was making his way down the corridor to the war room, when the door to Castiel's room opened. The former angel stepped out, sympathy in his blue eyes. "Is he asleep?"

"Yeah," said Dean, pressing a palm to his forehead and rubbing it. His hand fell to his side and he looked into Castiel's eyes. "How're you doing?"

"I'm fine," said Castiel. "I slept well last night." He paused. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Dean replied to him. He hesitated. "Look, man, if there's anything…"

"I assure you," said Castiel, "That I'm doing better. Are you going to continue with your research?"

"Yes."

"Then I will assist you."

"If you want to," shrugged Dean, but he was secretly thankful to all the support that Castiel was showing, despite having his own world of problems. Kevin joined them in the library and the three men embarked on their latest mission — to find a cure for Sam. It wouldn't be easy, Dean knew, but he also knew that nothing would take Sam away from him. He would most definitely find a cure for this fucker of a cancer.
Sam was in a world of nausea and distorted thoughts when Dean shook him awake. Moaning disapprovingly at the disturbance, he turned to his side and tried to sleep again, but Dean was persistent. "Come on, Sam, you've slept an hour already."

"'M tired," Sam complained, his stomach making him too uneasy to face the world. He instantly regretted his lunch. Dammit, he was going to throw up again. He grumbled. "Go away, Dean."

"I'm not going anywhere. Now wake up."

"It's only been an hour."

"And the doctor said that your naps weren't supposed to exceed an hour. Come on… get up and eat something."

"Don' wanna eat." Ugh. Who would want to eat with all this nausea?

"That's not an option."

Sam moaned again, reaching for the hand that was patting his shoulder (trying to get him to wake up), and swatted it away. "Go, Dean," he said, realising that he sounded about five at that moment.

"No."

Sam sighed and dragged the blanket over his head, but Dean pulled it away. Sam shivered. "Stop treating me like I'm a kid. I'll wake up when I wanna."

"Doesn't work that way," Dean insisted. "Look, I'm gonna keep trying until you listen to me. Dr Greene was very clear about this — the more you sleep, the more tired you get."

"Can't get more tired. Can't get more nauseous either."

"I know," Dean sounded sad. "But remember what you've told me and the doctor? About being ready to fight all these things?"

Sam opened his eyes ever so slightly and turned around to look at Dean, who seemed desperate. "Yeah," he said, trying to sit up. His head spun for a good minute and he had to clutch on to his sheets, but it passed, and he was sitting up against his headrest.

Dean smiled at him. "What do you want to eat?"

"Nothing." His stomach was churning now. Terribly.

"That's not on the menu. Small, frequent meals, remember? There's toast, soup—"

Sam swallowed down nausea. "Can't eat, Dean," he said earnestly, hoping his brother would let this go. "Gonna be si—" he clamped a hand over his mouth just at the thought, as bile came rising up his throat.

Dean's eyes widened. "Hey, hey, whoa! Hang on…" He rummaged for a garbage can, but there didn't seem to be one. "Shit, Sam, how don't you have a fucking trashcan in your room?" he asked, coming over to Sam and helping him up. "Come on."

They barely made it to the bathroom before Sam dropped to his knees and started to heave into the toilet. The pain was so much worse this time, that he half-choked and half-sobbed as he retched.
again and again.

"Dean..." he managed to gasp out between spasms, the agony too much to bear. He hated himself at once for saying it, because what was he, a child? He couldn't help it, though, for so many years of always having Dean around to solve all his problems had had an effect on his expectations from his brother even as an adult. He never really did this anymore, not after Stanford, but the reaction had been involuntary today.

Dean knew this too, for Sam felt his brother move behind him at the call of his name. "Hey, hey, it's okay, buddy, I'm right here." Dean hand was on his back in a jiffy, rubbing swiftly, and he was saying something else too, but Sam's ears were ringing from the effort of being sick. Another spasm attacked his muscles and he reached out a hand blindly, finding the edge of his brother's shirt and fistig it. Dean didn't flinch at that, though. He just concentrated on trying to make Sam feel better.

He heard hurried footsteps. "Is he okay?" Kevin's voice asked.

"He will be," Dean said.

"Is – is there anything I could do to help?" Kevin asked, sounding startled as Sam let out a particularly violent retch. His muscles cramped, and he fistined Dean's shirt tighter.

"G-Get me some of ginger ale from the kitchen, would you?" Dean instructed Kevin, sounding equally startled. "Keep it with you in your room. I'll come and collect it." Sam heard Kevin walk away, and Dean began to speak to him. "It's okay, Sam, it's okay, just breathe..."

After a few long moments, Sam raised his head, his eyes blurry with tears of pain and exertion. He gasped once and coughed, releasing his grip on Dean's shirt and Dean, who was still trying to comfort him, turned so he was at Sam's side. "You done?"

"Think so."

The elder Winchester straightened up to flush the toilet and went over to fill a glass with water. "Don't get your cannula wet," he said, pulling Sam's arm away from the bowl, and giving him the water in his other hand. His voice softened as Sam grimaced at another cramp. "I know it hurts, Sam, but just breathe, okay? You're going to be all right."

Sam nodded meekly and proceeded to rinse, taking deep breaths to settle his knotted muscles. The nausea, however, sprang back up and he groaned, setting the glass down. He rested his elbow on the bowl and his forehead on his palm, facing the toilet once again. Dean seemed surprised.

"Again?!"

He nodded — for a second time — and Dean swore — something about 'fucking chemo', but Sam wasn't listening. Dean spoke another time. "Want me to come back after a while?"

"Stay." Sam wouldn't normally ask him of that, but he had embarrassed himself too darn many times that day and what the hell, Dean was his brother. Plus, at this moment, Sam's mind was only full of pain, hopelessness and fear — and he'd be lying if he didn't think that Dean's presence seemed to alleviate some of that. Because, right now, Dean wasn't sympathising or freaking out like regular people would. He was joining in and trying to share the pain.

Dean, unsurprised from Sam's request, crouched back down, as they waited for the next episode of disaster to occur. Sam was wondering whether this would be considered his fourth episode, or if it was still just the second one. Would he have to be rushed to the hospital if he puked again?
Another cough escaped him and he felt Dean stiffen behind him, hand going up and down Sam's back, and then proceeding to rub swiftly between Sam's scapular spines when he coughed again and spat. "Take it easy," Dean said quietly, patting some, then rubbing again, trying to figure out what helped Sam the most. Sam, on the other hand, didn't care as long as his brother was there at that very moment.

Dean hadn't done this on the roadside earlier that day — because at that point, Sam had wanted to handle it himself — he was embarrassed of the world watching him, weak and sick on a patch of grass. Right now, however, Sam knew that this was a sign of Dean letting him seek comfort if he wanted to — telling him that there was absolutely nothing to be mortified about, that they were alone, just brothers, who had grown up together and had seen each other's moments of weakness — physical or otherwise — more than anyone else. *It's okay, Sammy. It's just me.*

"Dean."

Dean's hand continued its motions on his back. "Yeah, Sam?"

"Dn't … feel g'd."

"I know. I'm sorry, Sammy."

*Not your fault,* he thought, coughing again and beginning to throw up another time. His abdominal muscles were on fire, sore with each spasm, and his throat was burning by the time he was done, but Dean being there to help him made it seem less painful. He gulped down some water at the end of it and managed to keep it down, but Dean didn't let Sam go back to sleep once he had washed his face and changed into some non-sweaty clothes. He led Sam out of the bunker instead and they took a short walk in silence, which, Sam wouldn't deny, was actually refreshing, and did a good deal to reduce the fatigue.

That evening, Sam was feeling much better, the nausea having been at bay. He had soup and toast for dinner, and actually kept it all down. He had taken another dose of the anti-emetics to achieve this, of course, but it kept his food in his stomach, and he was thankful for that. All-in-all, when he went back to sleep for the night (Dean telling him in advance that he wouldn't be allowed to sleep beyond eight hours), Sam felt hope rise in him. Ninety-nine per cent chances were that he was dying, but maybe… just maybe, he could fight this if he tried hard enough. It was hard, it was uncomfortable, but it was better than his expectations. If he followed Dean's lead, he could probably be the one per cent that survived.

~o~

"Sam is better."

Dean raised his eyes at Castiel as the former angel took his place for the continuing research. He shut his book, placing a bookmark in the page he had reached, and looked at Castiel. "You don't know how grateful I am for that, Cas."

"Very much, it seems."

Dean washed a hand over his face. "The kid really just needs something to hold on to, you know. I keep telling him that he's not alone, and I mean it, I am ready to take every shred of pain that I can take in his stead. Hell, if there were a way I could take up all that cancer and chemo instead of him…" He sighed. "If the chemotherapy doesn't make him feel all that sick and weak, maybe he will fight more willingly."
Castiel opened his mouth to say something, and shut it. Instead, unexpectedly, he reached for Dean's hand and took it in his, warm, firm fingers intertwining with Dean's and squeezing his hand comfortingly. Dean was taken aback, but he pulled his own hand away as though an electric current had passed through it. And he proceeded to get even more startled as unbidden warmth rushed up his cheeks.

"What are you doing?" he asked the other man hoarsely.

Castiel seemed a little hurt and a little confused at Dean's reaction. "I was of the idea that holding someone's hand was a comforting gesture," he said genuinely.

Dean chuckled nervously. "Cas... you know, y-you don't..." he licked his lower lip, the feel of Castiel's hand still not leaving his mind. "You don't do the – the finger thing, okay?" He said. "You just..." He swallowed. "Oh God, why are we even talking about this?" he asked no one in particular as he stood up. "I – I'm tired."

Castiel was still confused as he looked at Dean fumble around with the book, his hands shaking while he put it away in the shelf. He started to leave, but Castiel's voice stopped him again. "I'm not sure whether you're angry or embarrassed."

"No... it's just hot in here," Dean huffed too soon, assuming that Castiel was referring to the fact that he had coloured. "Darn summer. I'll see you in the morning." But even as he walked away, Castiel's observation kept plaguing him. Why the hell had he reacted like that?

Weird, his mind said to him. But it isn't like you haven't thought about...

Shut up!

It was like a conflict in his head, and by the time he had changed into his nightclothes, he had his hands on his ears, futilely trying to block out all the thoughts. But they kept flowing in and out of his head. What was Castiel to him? Family? Yes. But what kind of family? Sure, he had called Castiel a brother a few years ago, but Castiel had ceased to be like a brother long back. Brother meant Sam, not Cas. Cas was something else — someone else. He occupied a position in Dean's life that the latter couldn't quite place.

What does Cas mean to me? Is he just a friend?

Don't go there, another part of his mind argued.

Why did I react that way, then?

Isn't it obvious? This is a reaction to your dry spell.

It was true, he thought. He hadn't had sex in ages. If an unsuspecting incident of hand-holding by a friend (who was male) had caused this reaction, then he, Dean, seriously needed some action. And God, after Sam's first chemo cycle, Dean was going straight to a nice bar and addressing this issue. What had happened just now was fucking embarrassing and it couldn't (and wouldn't) happen again.
5. The Start: Part 2

Sam's eyes flew open in the middle of the night, his sleep breaking away and drawing his attention to a cramping sensation in his abdomen. He changed his position and drew his knees closer to his stomach with his hands feebly massaging the aching area. It didn't help, though, and the movement was just aggravating the cramping. It also didn't help when he tried not to think of the pain and just go back to sleep, because it just seemed to be to increasing in intensity with each passing minute.

Wishing he could have stayed asleep, he sat up. The cramping was getting worse each second, and he wrapped his arms around his stomach, taking deep breaths. Sam already hated the chemotherapy drugs at this moment. The side effects were worse than anything he had experienced even from the trial and he was glad that the drugs were only going to be administered to him three days every three weeks and not more than that. That, in itself, was a pain.

He had ticked out the side effects one-by-one that day. The nausea and vomiting were there, all right, and then he had been dizzy. And now the abdominal cramps were getting worse. Great. Was there anything else that was about to happen? Any other side effects that wanted to make themselves apparent, so he could be tortured some more?

It wasn't as though all the symptoms from the disease itself had vanished anyway. The blood in his cough had gone — they had controlled it in a procedure at the hospital itself — an embolisation or something, and that point, Sam had been so fed up of pricked and prodded, that he hadn't cared to pay attention to what they were doing. He just knew that they had done it through his leg. The coughing in itself was still there, though, sometimes accompanied by chest pain too.

Also, the most annoying symptom of all hadn't gone yet — Sam's jelly legs. The doctor had attributed this to the prolonged fatigue caused by the cancer and Sam hated this more than anything else, because it made him keep stumbling about, and it still earned concerned glances from his brother. Dean had offered him help a few times too, but he had refused, for as far as possible, he wanted to be able to walk about without support. Yes, he knew Dean would always be there to help him, but he hated needing help with anything. Either ways, after the chemo session, he had been out of it enough to require Dean's help, but he wanted to be independent while he could. He was over thirty and he definitely didn't want to be reliant on anyone at this point.

He let out a breath. His stomach was starting to cramp pretty badly. Reclining against his bed, he tried to think of something pleasant, but he couldn't. The cramps were too distracting. He licked his lips, thirst making itself evident, and he eyed the bottle of water on his nightstand wearily.

The doctor had recommended about four quarts of water a day and Sam hadn't kept up with that either. He blamed it all on the nausea because it was annoying how it was so persistent, the only change in it being the increase and decrease in its intensity. And he never knew at what point he'd blow it. Last night, the nausea hadn't been bad, and he had been able to eat, but he had struggled with it enough for the day, and thing was capable of escalating within seconds, irrespective of whether it was followed by vomiting.

The thirst won over everything else and Sam reached for the bottle of water at his nightstand and cracked it open. He was cautious with the first two sips of water. They settled a little heavily, and he knew that it was a mistake the moment he had taken them. He sighed, emptying the bottle anyway, sip-by-sip, because he was really thirsty, and maybe, just maybe, it wouldn't come back up again. Fucking chemo, he thought, remembering Dean's words from the previous day. He was
going to hate this, he knew; he was going to hate all four or six months of the chemotherapy. However, he had to fight. He had to be the one per cent that got into remission. He had to survive.

He felt the nausea attack just on time, just the way he had expected it to, and he stood up from the bed, before making his way to the bathroom, stumbling all along. He hated his life right now, but if he just fought, he could make it better. He knew that.

~o~

Dean had an odd dream that night. It included a lot of awkward hand-holding with Castiel and when he woke up; he was still considerably embarrassed at what had happened. He wondered what he'd tell the former angel when he saw him at breakfast, but then he remembered his hurried explanation from the previous night, and thanked whatever god was out there, that Castiel rarely understood human things. He would buy Dean's reasoning for all the fumbling.

He was awake pretty early, though, having gone to bed a little earlier than he usually did. He glanced at the huge, glowing numbers on the digital clock on his nightstand. It was just a little after four in the morning. He yawned and stretched, deciding it was time to continue with his research. He was three-quarters done with his book, and it had nothing yet. Kevin and Castiel hadn't found anything either, but there were plenty of books in the library, and Dean was somehow confident that he'd find a way to fix his brother.

There was a knock at his door. God, don't let it be Cas, he thought, as he picked up the book he was reading from the floor beside his bed and called out, "Come in."

It was Sam. Dean raised an eyebrow. "You up so soon?"

"Yeah," said Sam, coming in and sitting on Dean's bed. "Couldn't sleep anymore."

"Well," said Dean, glancing at the clock again, "You still have three hours to go before you have to be up anyway, so think about it."

"No, I'm good," said Sam. There was something odd about his voice. Also, there was something wrong with the way he had walked when he had covered the distance between the door and Dean's bed.

"You okay?" Dean asked Sam.

"Besides the fact that I have cancer? Yeah," Sam replied wearily.

"Not that, smartass," Dean said seriously. "How are you feeling?"

"Been better," said Sam truthfully, putting his elbows on his knees and hiding his face in his palms.

"What is it?"


Dean washed a hand over his face. The cramps were back. Great. Exactly what Sam needed when he was trying to sleep after a long day. He reached for the water bottle on his bedside table and handed it to Sam. "Small sips, deep breaths."

"Did that," Sam replied. "Threw the water back up too."

Dean swore. Sam looked at him and smiled wanly. "It's okay, Dean, I'm fine."
"The cramps are why you can't sleep, isn't it?" Dean questioned him.

Sam nodded and yawned, as though to prove just how tired he was, and how much he would like to sleep. Dean sighed. "We'll get the proper meds for it from the doctor today, then," he said. He paused. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't think so," said Sam, "but thanks." He yawned again. "Your bed is really comfortable," he said, bouncing on it and smiling up at Dean.

His brother grinned at him. "What did I tell you about choosing your mattress carefully?"

"Nothing."

Dean made a face. "You're an ass."

"You have a really bad habit of projecting, you know."

"Very funny," Dean replied.

Sam chuckled. "See? I'm funnier than you are."

"Sure," Dean replied, sitting on the chair beside his bed and opening the book as he put it on his lap. He looked up at Sam. "I'm going to read now. Wanna lay down here for a bit?"

"I could read too," Sam offered. "I'm bored, Dean."

"You get your rest," Dean insisted. "I'll handle this." He smiled. "You think the mattress is comfortable to sit on? Try lying down on it."

Sam yawned a third time and considered Dean's offer. "Okay," he said quietly, and slowly but reluctantly, he lay down on Dean's bed. The elder Winchester got up from his chair and picked up one of the spare pillows, putting it over Sam's abdomen.

"Here, hold that close," he said. Then he sat back down on his chair, pushed it back, and propped his legs up on the bed, beside Sam, as he turned to the page he had been reading.

"Hey, Dean," said Sam, turning to his side, "this really is very comfortable."

Dean chuckled at his younger brother. "See how I'm always right?"

"Sure," Sam yawned. Yet again. The kid was really very tired.

"Okay," said Dean, putting the book down for a minute. "I'll finish this page, and then we'll talk away your boredom. Deal?"

"Deal," said Sam, rubbing at his eyes and sighing comfortably. He then shut his eyes and smiled, taking a deep whiff of the bedding. "Smells like the 'Mpala…" he slurred, already sleepy.

Dean grinned and started to read again but by the time he had got to the end of the page, Sam's breaths had evened out and when he looked up, Sam was sleeping on his stomach, body curving awkwardly at the pillow below his abdomen. His hands were gripping the pillow at his head. Sam's face was turned to Dean, and though small pain lines were visible on the younger man's forehead, he was asleep.

Dean licked his lips before moving to the bed and throwing a blanket over his brother. Then he wet a washcloth at the bathroom and placed it on Sam's forehead. Sam sighed again and murmured
something, pulling up his legs, so that he was almost in a foetal position. At that moment, he looked like an overgrown five-year-old.

"Aw, Sammy." Smiling fondly at his brother, Dean put on a robe and made his way to the kitchen to obtain a cup of coffee for himself. It was going to be a long, hard day, and he needed to prepare for it.

~o~

Castiel was sipping on a cup of coffee in the kitchen when he heard footsteps approach in his direction. Putting the mug down, he wondered who it was, but at the back of his mind, he already knew — Sam was too ill to be awake at this hour, and Kevin never woke up this early; which left only one person.

Dean came into the kitchen with a hot water bottle in his hand and stopped short when he saw Castiel. "Hey, Cas," he said, not quite meeting eyes with the former angel. "Morning."

"Good morning, Dean," Castiel replied, taking another sip of his coffee. He gestured to the coffeemaker. "I didn't consume all of it, so if you want some, you don't have to prepare any."

"Thanks," Dean said, pouring some water into the kettle and putting it to boil. Castiel presumed he was going to fill the hot water bottle with the water. The elder Winchester then picked up a mug and came over to take coffee while the water boiled.

As he watched Dean move about, Castiel realised that the other man was being guarded around him — cautious. He remembered the previous night, and wondered what was so wrong with what he had done. He knew he had made Dean uncomfortable several times before by unknowingly invading his personal space, but as far as he was aware, holding someone's hand wasn't invading personal space. Plus, in the previous times he'd done this, Dean had been quick to forgive Castiel. The discomfort never lasted so long.

Unless it wasn't discomfort. Was Dean angry?

There was silence as Dean and Castiel leant against the counter and sipped on their coffees. Castiel finished his mug and looked at Dean for a full moment, until he started to see Dean's ears grow red. Dean brought down the mug and looked directly at the other man. "Uh… something you wanna say, Cas?"

"Not particularly."

"Then would you please stop staring?"

Castiel looked away and licked his lip. Dean was definitely angry. "How is Sam doing?" he asked Dean.

"He's been better," Dean responded to him.

"Is the chemotherapy session at the same time today as well?"

"Yeah," said Dean.

"I'll come along."

Dean put down his empty cup. "About that, Cas…" he hesitated. "I think it would be better if Sam and I go for the session alone."
"I could help — Sam may not keep too well after the session and you might need help."

"I know you could help," said Dean. "Believe me, I do. And I appreciate your offer. But I think Sam would prefer it if it's just me."

"Why?"

"Try to understand, Cas," Dean reasoned.

"But I thought we're family," Castiel replied. "Aren't we?" His heart fluttered.

"Yes, yes, we are," Dean replied, washing his mug. "Sam thinks so too. But…" he licked his lips. "How many times has he been sick, Cas? You've known him a few years now — how many times have you seen his health take a dip like this?"

Castiel thought about it, and the answer came up at once. Apart from the occasional cold or the flu? Never. The Winchesters were pretty good health-wise. They almost never got sick. But he didn't understand what how that was related to this. "I don't get what you're saying," Castiel said to Dean.

Dean sighed. "Cas, no illness he's had has ever been something he wasn't able to handle by himself. He's always been independent, you know. He's never liked being coddled or being paid too much attention to. But at this moment, he's not good and he needs help, and he's having a hard time asking for it because that's not him. This sudden dependence is killing him — and he really doesn't need other people looking at him this way — as though he's weak."

"I don't think he's weak," replied Castiel.

"He isn't," Dean said, "And I'm glad you think so, but with more people around him, treating him like he's sick — it's only going to upset him further. I think he should get some space."

"But you're taking care of him," said Castiel. "You're always there."

Dean chuckled. "Believe me, Cas, if the kid weren't feeling so crappy, he'd have gladly flipped me off and taken care of himself."

Castiel knew, however, that Dean was lying. This had nothing to do with how bad Sam's health was. He knew that the pre-trial Sam would have declined Dean's help; no matter how ill he was, even if it came to his current condition because Dean was right, the younger Winchester liked his independence. But after the trial, something had changed between the brothers. Sam seemed to be letting Dean take care of him. Why so? What was it between them that had been altered?

Dean interrupted Castiel's thoughts. "What are you doing up so early anyway?"

"I need a plan, so I can track them…" Castiel licked his lips, thinking about the other motif in his
mind — the reason he had woken up early. He wanted to conduct a discrete research on his hunch, and he didn't want to tell Dean about it because it would raise a flicker of hope in the other man, and Castiel didn't want to disappoint him, in case his assumption turned out to be wrong.

Dean's eyebrow was raised. "What aren't you telling me, Cas?"

"N – Nothing," Castiel lied, but he knew his stuttering had increased Dean's suspicions.

"Dude, you were always a crappy liar. Out with it," Dean demanded, drying his mug and placing it in the shelf. He took Castiel's empty mug too. "You done, or are you having more?"

"No, I will not have more," said Castiel, and took his mug back from Dean, intending to wash it himself. Their fingers, brushed, and Dean pulled his hand away as though the mug were hot, causing it to almost tumble out of Castiel's loose grip. The former angel, however, managed to catch it.

"Dammit," said Dean, and Castiel could swear the other man's ears were red again. "Sorry, Cas. I didn't—"

"It's okay," said Castiel, turning to the sink and starting to wash the cup. Without a doubt he knew now, that Dean was angry with him. There was no other explanation for this. Anyway, he, Castiel, would be out of the Winchesters' hair soon. They needed their privacy, and Dean needed time to forgive Castiel for whatever he was upset about.

"So, what is it?" Dean asked, breaking the silence and absently rubbing at the parts of his hand that had touched Castiel's.

The latter pressed his lips together and turned his eyes to look into Dean's long-lashed ones. Blue bled into green for a whole minute, and Castiel tried to convey his sentiments on how much he didn't want to let Dean down. Dean blinked and looked away, and Castiel sighed. "There might be a way to cure your brother."

The green eyes were looking into the blue again, widening, as Dean's lips parted. "Say what?"

"Well," said Castiel, looking away this time, "Although all angels have fallen, I have reason to believe that some of them have not lost their abilities yet."

"You mean there are still some of you who can heal and smite?"

"I believe so, yes," said Castiel. He paused, a pang of jealousy washing over him at the thought of some of his brothers and sisters still retaining their powers.

"And – and…" Dean ran his hand through his hair, tousling it up. "They won't want to…?" He didn't look like he wanted to say it.

"They wouldn't want to what, Dean?" Castiel asked him.

"Well," Dean hesitated. "They might not be very happy with you, y'know."

"I am aware, yes," the other man replied. "But a little bit of risk is essential. And what's the worst that could happen anyway?"

"Uh, I don't know, Cas," said Dean, making one of his sarcastic pouts, "You could die, for starters."
Castiel chuckled. He looked up at Dean, back into the green eyes which gave him so much comfort, which made him feel so serene. "What do I have to live for, Dean?"

The green eyes were filling up with pain now. Pain and worry. "Cas," Dean said quietly. "You…" he sighed. "Look, man, don't think like that, all right? It can't be all that bad…"

Castiel gave him a wan smile. "My father is gone. The whole harmony of heaven has been destroyed. All the angels have fallen. My brothers and sisters want revenge for what I've done." He paused. "And… You seem to be upset with me about something…"

"Hang on," said Dean, "What?"

"I have clearly upset you and your brother," said Castiel. "You don't want my help. You have been different with me since last night—"

Dean licked his lips. "Cas… I'm not upset with you. Neither is Sam."

"Then—"

"Sam genuinely doesn't like being coddled," Dean replied. "He hates needing help, and he hates, more than that, other people watching him take help. I just want to let him keep his dignity. I wasn't lying when I said that."

"And you?"

"I'm not angry with you. Not anymore. I was, before the third trial, but then you were there for me and Sam at the hospital, and you are offering your support despite your own problems… I couldn't be angry with you, okay? In fact, I'm really grateful for what you're doing for us. I just want you to take a break, man."

The kettle started to steam and Dean made his way to it, opening the hot water bottle and slowly filling it with the water. He added a little bit of cool water to it so the bottle wouldn't scald and checked the temperature with the back of his palm. Then he turned to Castiel. "I've gotta go now. Sammy isn't feeling well. You stick around."

It was an order, Castiel realised, as Dean exited the kitchen. He looked at his sopping mug and began to dry it, feeling very lucky to have Dean as a friend. The number of things that the elder Winchester had forgiven Castiel for… it was unbelievable. Castiel's own kin hadn't been as kind to him as Dean Winchester had. He didn't know what he had done to deserve this, and he thanked his father for the fact that he had been the one to raise Dean from perdition.

~o~

Sam reclined against the hospital bed as Cecelia came with the silvery chemotherapy bag and placed it on his IV stand, adjusting the pump. He had already been hydrated and provided with anti-emetics, but that did nothing to quell the anticipatory nausea that was bubbling in his stomach. While the nurse worked on hooking him to the drug, Dr Greene paid a visit to Sam's room.

"Good morning, Sam," she said. "How are you doing?"

"Okay," Sam replied, as Cecelia finished adjusting his IV. Dean pulled his stool closer to Sam the moment the woman was gone.

"Any nausea or vomiting?" Dr Greene asked him seriously.
"Yeah, both," Sam replied. "The nausea is almost always there."

"How many episodes of vomiting have you had?"

"Two yesterday," said Sam. "One this morning."

"That isn't bad," she said, "But let me see if I can slip you something else to reduce it further — though I'm afraid this might be the maximum we can go to."

"Okay," said Sam.

"Anything else?" she asked him.


"Keep up your electrolytes," the doctor replied. "For the cramps, I'd suggest fomentation and rest. I'd rather not prescribe too many drugs on the side, as the chemotherapy drugs can interact wrongly with them. We don't want you having a reaction to anything."

"I did the fomentation," said Sam.

"Did you feel better?"

"Yeah," Sam replied, turning to Dean and silently thanking him for the help. He could feel the etoposide course through his veins, it was warm; it burned slightly, and he could feel a tingling as the drug climbed into his body and entered his bloodstream.

Dr Greene stood at the doorway for a minute and gave the brothers a smile. "You are really lucky that you have a brother to watch over you, Sam," she said. She put her hands in her pockets, her eyes reverting to the IV stand. "Okay, so far, I presume?"

"I'm good for now," Sam replied, returning her smile. "The session isn't as long as yesterday's is it?"

"No," she said, "but the side effects could hit you sooner today." She eyed the bucket that Cecelia had placed below Sam's bed, just in-case. Apparently, the emesis basin was a misnomer for the kidney dish, as Cecelia had explained to Sam before the session had begun, when she had put the bucket.

The doctor spoke again. "Take care, and come to me if anything gets overwhelming."

"Yes, Doc," said Sam and with a nod at Dean, Dr Greene left the room. Just as she did so, Sam reclined against his bed, shutting his eyes against the tiredness creeping up on him.

He listened to Dean unzip the duffel and in a few moments the crackle of pages of the ancient tome could be heard. Sam licked his lips and turned to his brother, opening his eyes a little as he watched Dean read the book. He had rarely seen the other Winchester this way; concentrating on a book so hard, read so seriously, and he couldn't help the wave of gratitude that washed over him.

He lay like that, napping a few minutes, staying awake a few minutes, until the nausea rose again. He fought it down for a while, but it won, and he realised that he was going to be sick. He swallowed. "Dean."

Dean looked up from the book and deciphered the look on Sam's face at once. "It's okay, Sammy," he said, putting away the book and propping Sam up on his bed with one hand, helping him bend
over, as the other hand picked up the bucket. "I'm here," he said quietly and he held the bucket in place for Sam, cringing a little at the helpless retching that followed; his hand still steady on Sam's back.

Once again as he struggled to coax his stomach to settle, Sam thanked God for his brother for the umpteenth time in his life.

~o~

"Sam, come on, you have to eat."

Dean pushed the plate of food towards his brother, feeling helpless as Sam rested his elbow on the table with his forehead in his palm. It had been a few hours since the chemotherapy, and they were at the bunker, having lunch. Kevin had gone out somewhere and Castiel was still there, just the way that Dean had asked him to be. Sam hadn't vomited again after the hospital, but he still seemed mighty apprehensive about eating, and Dean found himself wishing again, that he could do something to help.

"Sammy," he pleaded.

Sam swallowed. "I can't, Dean. I'll throw up again if I do."

"You won't puke," Dean assured him. "You've taken the meds, and Dr Greene has even added something else to help you more. Just try eating now."

"No," Sam replied, as Castiel looked between the brothers from his seat.

Dean sighed. Once Sam had set his mind upon something, it was difficult to deter him. But Dean kept his hopes up. "Will you eat later, then? Once the meds have worked their magic?"

"I'll try," Sam promised. He looked at Dean with tired eyes. "Can I sleep for a while?"

"An hour," Dean said. "And then you have to eat, okay?"

"'Kay," Sam replied, standing up from his seat and stumbling a little, but righting himself at once. He was about to say something, but he hesitated.

Dean raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"Nothing… it's nothing." Sam licked his lips, apparently embarrassed, and Dean understood his implications at once.

"All yours," he said. "If you're comfortable on my bed, you can keep my room. I'll stay in your room in the meantime, okay?" He tried to say this as sincerely as he could, trying to assure Sam that his request wouldn't be used as ammunition in any future sibling fights.

"Thanks," Sam said, looking relieved.

"But I'm claiming it back when you get better, Sammy. You'd better not ruin the memory foam," Dean added lightly. Because Sam would get better. He had to. There were no two ways about that.

Sam nodded, apparently too tired to respond and shuffled away from the library. Dean heard him descend the two stairs into the hallway that led to bedrooms. Just as the elder Winchester took another bite of his burger, though, there was a loud crash from the hallway, followed by the unmistakable thump of someone falling flat on the floor.
Dean was on his feet, his burger falling out of his grip and landing on his plate as its various layers slipped out sloppily. Castiel, who had been silent until now, had heard Sam fall and had realised that was something was wrong too, for he was at Dean's heels as the duo rushed to the hallway, Dean leaping down the flight of stairs and turning sharply to find Sam lying face-down on the floor.

"Shit, Sam!" he exclaimed before going down on a crouch and turning his brother over. He had a sense of déjà vu as he pressed two fingers to Sam's carotid, feeling, checking…

…How many times had he found Sam passed out like this in the last month itself?

Twice. Not good.

Unlike the last time, though, when he'd been flushed with fever, Sam was deathly pale. His lips were almost white and his pulse was weak and rapid. Dean placed a hand on his brother's forehead to find it clammy and sweaty. He swore. He thought he knew what this was, and it wasn't good.

"Cas," he called out, and the former angel approached him. "I need your help here," he said, easing away Sam's shoes, ripping off his socks and starting to rub his large feet.

"Yes, Dean," Castiel replied, crouching beside him, "tell me what I have to do."

"Come on, Sammy," said Dean, rubbing Sam's feet some more. He took Sam's wrist in his hand and felt the pulse. Still not great. He turned to Castiel. "We've got to raise his legs for a while." He clutched on to Sam's right calf with both hands, and Castiel copied him, holding the other leg.

"Ready?"

The other man nodded, and together, they stood up, each holding up one of Sam's legs.

"His blood pressure's low," Dean explained to Castiel. "This will get the blood to his head, and he'll be able to wake up."

Castiel did not reply, and Dean pressed two fingers on the artery curving under the skin on Sam's foot, but he couldn't make it out as well as the other pulses, so he bit his lip.

"Listen, I know he's heavy," Dean said, "but could you hold the other leg? I need to check his pulse."

"I can do that," said Castiel, and he took his hand away from one of Sam's legs, taking the other from Dean's grip as the elder Winchester knelt next to his brother and took his wrist again. He sighed, noting a stronger pulse.

"Hey, wake up, now," he said, feeling Sam's forehead again. "Sam."

Sam gasped softly, and Dean felt relief wash over him. "Sammy?" He placed a palm on his brother's chest and rubbed softly. "Sammy, can you hear me?"

Sam sighed, and Dean checked the pulse again, noting that it was slowing, returning to normal. He
could see the sheen of a thin film of sweat on Sam's face as his eyes opened slightly, rolling upwards with just slits of white visible between the lids.

"That's enough, Sam," said Dean, rubbing the palm of Sam's cool hand this time, "open your eyes."

There was no response, and Dean continued rubbing his brother's cold palm, waiting for him to wake up, as Castiel stoically stood holding up Sam's legs. After a few long moments that really seemed like hours, Sam's breath hitched and his eyes flew open.

"Thank God," Dean whispered, sitting back, and Castiel slowly lowered Sam's legs. "You scared us there."

"W-What happened?" Sam's voice was faint and hoarse.

"I heard you fall and when we came, you were passed out. We had to hold your legs up to get you awake."

Sam licked his lips and swallowed. "Must've been dizzy…" he said, "don't remember."

"It's okay, now," Dean replied, "let's get you to my room." He turned to Castiel. "I have a few bottles of Gatorade in the kitchen. Can you get us one of them?"

"Of course," Castiel walked away as Dean helped Sam sit up. The younger man swayed on being moved and immediately reached out to fist his elder brother's sleeve.

"Take it easy," said Dean, holding Sam up in the same position for a while, noticing that the pallor hadn't gone yet. "Think you can move yet?" he asked after a few moments.

Sam shook his head just as Castiel was back with a Gatorade. Taking it from the former angel, Dean unscrewed the cap and brought the bottle close to Sam's mouth. "Drink up, you'll feel better."

Sam promptly shook his head. Dean sighed. "Come on, Sam. Just two sips. I'll let you sleep after that."

Sam shook his head again, swallowing convulsively. His breath hitched again and his hand fist ed Dean's sleeve tighter. "Sick…" he rasped weakly, swallowing again, and Dean was terrified at the tone and the lack of urgency, meaning Sam felt too crappy to actually move quickly.

"You're not going to be sick," said Dean. "Take deep breaths."

Sam shook his head, tears springing in his eyes as he swallowed again and gagged. "Dean…" he breathed, before clamping a hand over his mouth and gagging for a second time.

"Okay, okay, just breathe," Dean said, his heart racing at his brother's condition. He moved, putting an arm around Sam's shoulders. "We're going to get you to the bathroom, all right? Can you do that?"

Sam took a deep breath, nodded, and let go of Dean's sleeve as the latter helped him up. Together, they staggered to the bathroom and Dean deposited Sam in front of the toilet slowly, as the younger Winchester put his arms across the bowl and rested his forehead on them, too dizzy to stay upright for long.

Dean put a hand on his brother's back and rubbed slightly. "Take it easy, Sammy," he murmured, feeling almost as awful as Sam. He wished his brother didn't have to go through this.
Sam coughed weakly in reply, and then dry-heaved for a good ten minutes, the retches too feeble to actually trigger vomiting. He ended up just spitting out saliva, and Dean's heart broke as he sat there next to his brother, trying to soothe him — make him feel better in any way that he could. The bouts stopped and when Sam wearily raised his head, he was still white, and he ran a shaky hand across his face to wipe away the sweat and tears.

"Better?" asked Dean, knowing the answer. It was a hypotensive attack, and Sam was just dangerously nauseous — Dean had known he wouldn't actually throw up — that he couldn't really throw up, but this seemed to satisfy Sam, and slowly, he nodded his head, while Dean started to rip off wads of toilet paper.

"Look here." Sam turned to Dean, but snatched the napkins from his hand and started to wipe his own face. Dean smiled at that. If Sam felt independent enough to stop his brother from interfering further, he was definitely feeling better. He flushed the toilet, crouched back down and put a hand on Sam's shoulder. "Back to the room?"

"Yeah," Sam rasped, and stood up by himself this time, albeit a little wobbly, with Dean at the ready to catch his brother if he fell again. They turned automatically to Dean's room and Dean pulled back the covers while Sam dropped himself onto the bed, eyes shutting as he laid an arm across them.

Dean opened one of his cabinets, finding the sphygmomanometer (they had always kept one because of the risk of internal bleeding in their line of work) and stethoscope. In a jiffy, he was rolling up his brother's sleeve and wrapping the cuff around his arm. He felt the brachial pulse, put the diaphragm of the stethoscope over it and began to inflate the cuff.

He waited to hear the thumping sounds on the stethoscope as he let out the air, and they started at hundred. However, something clenched in his chest when he noted that they only stopped at fifty. Without further ado, Dean unwrapped the cuff and rushed back to the hallway to fetch the Gatorade. Electrolytes. Sam needed them now.

When he returned, Sam was shivering, eyes open again, and Dean pulled out two pillows and placed them below Sam's legs so they'd remain raised. He then threw the blanket over his brother. "You need to drink this," he told Sam.

"N-no," said Sam, still cold under the blankets and Dean withdrew to Sam's room to get him an extra blanket, which comforted him more.

"Not an option," Dean said plainly, addressing Sam's refusal to have the Gatorade, as he sat on the bed, next to Sam. "You have to get some electrolytes in you. You won't throw up," he told his brother, before he could protest, "your BP is low, Sam, you have to drink this."

Sam sighed, propped himself up and accepted the drink. Dean kicked the trashcan closer to his bed, but he was right; the Gatorade made Sam feel a little better. He didn't throw up; in fact, he drank up half the bottle before giving it back to Dean.

"Now go back to sleep," the elder Winchester said, as he lay back down on his pillows. "You get two hours, okay?"

"Thanks," Sam croaked, shutting his eyes again as sleep took over his senses almost immediately. He shivered a little, once again, and Dean wrapped the blankets around him tighter, and also bumped up the thermostat a few degrees to make Sam more comfortable.

Castiel was in the war room when Dean returned to his misshapen burger, and Dean couldn't stop
his hands from shaking while he ate.

Chemotherapy.

Day One: Terrible.

Day Two: Scary as fuck.

There was another day of this, and then nine more, and Dean didn't know how he'd be able to live through it all.

~o~

Sam was feeling better when he woke up. His head spun a little and he felt shaky all over, but he was better than before. He turned to his side, his throat dry, and saw the Gatorade still sitting on his nightstand, which he drank up thirstily. Some of the jitter left him and he sighed, sitting up further.

He ran a hand through his hair as he pulled the blankets closer around him. Dean hadn't come to wake him up yet, which meant that his two hours weren't up. He contemplated going to the library, where he had no doubt he would find his brother, but he wasn't sure of himself now. At lunch, he had only felt a little dizzy and had headed to the room to get some sleep, but it turned out that his health had other plans for him, for he had woken up a few minutes later to Dean's anxious face lingering above his, and Castiel awkwardly holding his legs up.

Seriously. Was there anything else that was left to happen now?

"Sam?"

Sam looked up to see his brother enter the room with another bottle of Gatorade in his hand and relief on his face. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Better," said Sam truthfully.

"Can you drink this?" Dean asked him, holding up the bottle.

"Yeah," he replied, and accepted it from his brother. Dean sat down on the chair next to the bed as Sam started to gulp down the sweet liquid, instantly feeling a little more energised. Once he was done, Dean took his blood pressure again and this time it was a hundred over sixty. "Thank God," he said, deflating the cuff and putting it away. "You wanna sleep some more?"

"No, I'm good," Sam said to him, pushing back the blankets. "What are you up to?"

"Well, I was thinking we could go on a walk once you woke up…"

"Were you researching?"

"Yeah."

"And Cas?"

"Cas too," said Dean, "he's in the library. Want to go for that walk, then? We could ask him to join us."

"Uh… okay," said Sam.
Dean left the room and Sam washed his face in the bathroom, changed into a new set of clothes and went to the war room, where Dean was waiting for him with the food that he had put away earlier. Sam ate without complaining — the nausea was in control at that moment, and Castiel joined them for the walk after that.

As they walked past the Impala and together down the lane outside the bunker, Sam couldn't help but notice that Castiel was unusually quiet. He remembered his discussion with Dean about how Castiel might take time to adjust, and so far, after Sam's diagnosis, he couldn't remember speaking much to the former angel at all. Well, Sam had spent a lot of time sulking, puking and sleeping, but even then, he felt he owed Castiel some gratitude for being so supportive.

He cleared his throat. "Hey, Cas?"

"Yes?" Castiel looked past Dean, at Sam.

"I never said," Sam replied, "thanks. For everything."

"I haven't done anything."

"No, well, this afternoon…" Sam hesitated, "and you've been there since the start too."

"It's not a problem, Sam," said Castiel, smiling faintly at the younger Winchester. "You and Dean have done a lot for me too. You've forgiven me when you shouldn't have. You two are probably the only ones who still accept me despite everything."

Sam realised then that Dean had abruptly stopped on his tracks. Sam was a step ahead, along with Castiel, when Dean spoke up. "Hey, wait a minute."

Sam and Castiel both turned to the elder Winchester, who was frowning at the former angel as he started to walk again. "How many times have I told you not to talk crap like that, Cas? What's happened has happened, and you can't keep punishing yourself for it, okay?"

"Yes, and the damage is done," Castiel said quietly. "If only it were reversible…"

"Come on, man," Dean sighed, "you've gotta stop dwelling on that. We will find a way. I told you."

"How, Dean?" Castiel asked the other man sharply. "How exactly are we going to do that?"

"Jeez, Cas, do I have to say it to you too? We're in a fucking geek home, and they're bound to have something there. You and Sam should seriously get married, you know, with the way you both brood and wallow."

"We have resources," said Castiel, obviously ignoring Dean's next comment, "but there's not much time. Metatron knows who you are — and what we all are capable of now. Even if my Grace hasn't been destroyed already…"

"He will do no such thing, Cas."

"You don't know that, Dean."

Dean stopped again, and this time, Sam and Castiel stopped too. The elder Winchester washed a hand over his face. "We'll hurry up, then."

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, we're losing Sam, and we need to concentrate on that first,"
"Boy, don't I love it when you get all touchy," said Dean blandly, and Castiel started to walk again. Dean moved forward and clutched at the latter's shoulder. "Hey, I've promised I'll help, and I will, okay? I'm not giving up till you can smite, heal and zap about again."

"You're awfully kind," said Castiel, finally smiling sadly and patting the hand on his shoulder. Dean drew it away, bewildered, as Castiel continued to speak, "But you don't know when to stop trying. I think it's time to accept, my friend, that nothing can be done about my situation."

Dean stepped backwards, looked down, fidgeting with his hands, and Sam puffed up his cheeks and let out a breath. He hadn't realised until now, what other responsibilities his brother was giving up, just so he could get Sam out of his illness. He licked his lips, thinking again, of how much he hated what he had been reduced to. That was when an idea struck him.

"Hey guys," he said quietly, so Dean and Castiel looked towards him, "I have an idea."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Not healing you isn't an option, Sammy."

"No, don't worry — that's what I'm talking about — maybe there's a quicker way, and we just forgot about it."

"Yeah? What?"

Sam smiled at his brother. "Crowley."

"Crowley." Dean looked exasperated.

"Yes," replied Sam, "he healed Bobby once, didn't he?"

"Yeah, and you think he'd help? Even if he has the mojo?" Dean had now crossed his arms in front of his chest, which meant that he wasn't sure of Sam's plan, but his expression told Sam that he was ready to give it a go.

"He's lost a lot of his powers," said Sam, "but he might just not have lost his healing abilities. He's still a demon."

Dean swallowed, his duck-face making an appearance, and Sam smiled, realising that he hadn't seen it in a long time. "Well," said the elder Winchester, "we could give it a try. Certainly beats reading all those fugly books."

They finished their walk because Dean was still stubborn about Sam's health, and when they got back, Sam and Dean headed to the dungeon where they had held Crowley, Sam crossing his fingers and hoping that the demon would help.

~o~

Dean could feel his heart racing as he and Sam unlocked the storage room, and then the dungeon. Thankfully — in a way — Crowley was demon enough not to need a lot of human things, which meant they could just hold him in the dungeon without many facilities. The demon, however, spoke the moment the door to the dungeon was opened.

"Ah, I know I was irresistible." Crowley was sitting in the devil's trap, cross-legged. His facial expression suggested he was bored as he fiddled with his handcuffs.
"Yeah, right," said Dean, shining his flashlight at a spot near the demon, so he could see him and Sam. "We couldn't wait."

Crowley raised an eyebrow. "You're not just here to flirt with me, are you?"

"No, we need a favour," said Dean, moving forward, and getting to the point.

"Yes, and I'm about to grant it to you after all the kindness you've shown me," said Crowley exasperatedly, standing up from his place.

"This is enough kindness," Dean snapped, "we can leave you to Abaddon, if you'd prefer that."

There was silence. Crowley sighed. "What do you want?"

Dean pointed his flashlight to Sam and cocked his head in his direction. "Still got your healing mojo?"

"Oh," said Crowley, "want me to make Moose as good as new, do you? Sorry, Squirrel, I can't do that."

"Hey, we can—"

"I said I can't," Crowley replied, "not that I won't. My powers aren't strong enough."

"You can still try, can't you?" Dean asked him, realising that he sounded desperate. Whatever. This was Sam, and there was nothing he wouldn't do to get him okay.

Something lodged itself inside Dean's throat. He hadn't realised how much he had been relying on Crowley the whole time, during his walk with Sam and Castiel. This had to be it… Crowley had to have these powers. Maybe he just wasn't sure enough about them, when they were really there.

Crowley opened his mouth, probably for another sarcastic reply, but then he nodded. "I suppose I could, yes."

"Good." Sam and Dean stepped into the devil's trap and Dean pulled out the key to undo Crowley's handcuffs. "No tricks, okay?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Crowley replied, and Dean took off the handcuffs. He stepped away as Sam went and stood before the demon.

Crowley shut his eyes, and Dean crossed his fingers inside his pockets as the demon reopened his eyes and clicked his fingers. There was a moment of silence.

"Well?" questioned the elder Winchester. He saw Crowley's expression change into an unfamiliar one, which, Dean realised, was sympathy.

_Sympathy_. Oh no. No. "Sam?" Dean whispered. Sam hadn't moved. He was just looking at Crowley, and then, Dean saw the tiny nod that escaped his younger brother.

"Well?" Dean asked again.

Sam turned around. "I think we should find another way."

Dean was sure he heard something shatter inside him. He wondered how Sam or Crowley didn't flinch. Stoically, he went ahead and put the handcuffs back on the demon, who looked genuinely sorry. Dean, though, didn't have the emotional capacity or the patience to listen to any demonic
apologies, and quietly, he guided Sam out of the room by grabbing the other man's wrist.

They made their way to the war room, Dean not saying a single word. Sam looked oddly calm, and he wondered how Sam was taking this so much better than he was, since Sam was the one who was suffering. But then again, his brother never got angry at the right times. He always used his anger in the wrong places.

Sam wanted to help with the research. Dean wanted Sam to rest, but he begged, fought and bitched his way into the library, finally threatening not to drink any more Gatorade if Dean continued to treat him like a child, and Dean, tired of his complaining, let him sit in the library with him and Castiel.

He placed a Gatorade before Sam as he took out his book. "You know," Dean said, "I wouldn't treat you like a kid if you didn't behave like one. Now drink up, or you don't get a book."

Sam drank half a bottle, frowned at Dean, and then flipped him off before running to the bathroom to nullify all of Dean's efforts.

~o~

"You good?"

"I'm fine, Dean."

Sam huffed as he leafed through the book, trying to find something to get a lead on the spell that Metatron had used to cast the angels out of Heaven. He had decided that since Dean and Castiel were looking for ways to keep him alive, he might as well help the former angel from his side. Castiel shut his book and receded to his bedroom, leaving the brothers alone in the library. There was silence after that, for half-an-hour, as Sam read on, and then again, he was interrupted.

"You okay, Sammy?"

Sam looked up at Dean and crossed his arms. "What do you want from me?"

"Don't give me your bitch-face, Sam, I'm just concerned," said Dean, glaring up at his younger brother from his book.

"Well, you might just smother me to death with all that concern," Sam snapped at him.

"Yeah?" Dean said, leaning forward and putting his hands on the table. "Now correct me if I'm wrong, who is it who has fainted once and puked thrice today?"

"If you don't shut up, the same person might make sure they puke on you when it happens for the fourth time," said Sam irately. "And I didn't faint. My BP was low. There's a difference."

"And that's not a big deal at all," muttered Dean, returning to his book. "Sure, it's just cancer. It happens to everyone."

"You two should stop fighting," said a voice, and Sam turned to see Castiel enter the library with a bag in his hand. Dean's eyes widened at this and he stood up.

"Cas, where are you—?"

"I'm not leaving for good, Dean," said Castiel quietly, coming forward. "I'll just be going away for a few days."
"Where?"

"To locate my brothers and sisters."

Dean sighed. "I thought we agreed it isn't a good idea, Cas. They might want to kill you."

"I'm aware," replied Castiel, "but I'll give it a try. Maybe one of them can heal Sam."

"Cas…"

"Don't thank me, Dean," said Castiel, "you have done too much for me. This is my gratitude. I promise I'll be in touch." He reached into his bag and drew out his angel sword. "Here," he said, handing it to Dean, "this might be useful to you."

Dean didn't take it. "What about you?"

"I don't need this anymore," Castiel replied simply. "I have another."

Dean swallowed. "Don't die, okay?"

"I won't," said Castiel. "Keep me informed about Sam's health, and if you find a cure before I do."

"I will, Cas."

There was silence. Castiel licked his lips. "I should leave, then."

Wordlessly, the Winchesters followed him out of the bunker, and walked with him to a distance to which he could find a taxi. They stopped a cab, but before he got in, Castiel turned to the brothers. "I'll see you." Unexpectedly, Castiel's arms were around Sam after that, and though Sam was taken aback at first, he returned the hug.

Castiel broke away and turned to the other Winchester. "Dean."

Simultaneously, he and Dean were leaning in, hugging as Dean slapped Castiel's back twice, and then they broke away, their eyes never leaving each other, as Castiel nodded at Dean.

"You take care, Cas," said Dean, as the former angel got into the waiting taxi. They waved him goodbye as the taxi drove away, and the brothers turned to get back to the bunker together. Sam kept quiet all the way that they walked, a very funny, unexpected thought lingering in his head.

He had never quite figured out the bond between Dean and Castiel, but what he had seen just now had triggered some of his doubts from before. He had no idea about Castiel, but having known Dean all his life, he sometimes suspected that his brother nurtured some more-than-just-friendly feelings for Castiel. Of course, the way that Sam and Dean had been raised, there had been no room for them to explore their sexualities, but when Sam teased his brother for being butch enough to be mistaken for being overcompensating, he hadn't just been teasing — he had hoped that Dean would give it a thought.

Sam took pride in having known Dean all his life — in being one of the few people to be able to see through his brother's mask and his tough exterior, and this too, he was quite certain about. He wondered if Dean thought about it sometimes — if Dean questioned his feelings for Castiel. But Dean being the way he was, he probably ignored any doubts that sprang up.

"You done daydreaming, or should I physically shake you out of it?" Dean's voice cut through Sam's thoughts and he turned his attention back to his brother, who was looking at him with a
raised eyebrow. "Earth to Sammy."

"Very funny," Sam muttered as they reached the bunker, but Dean didn't respond. Sam just heard him let out a breath instead and he wondered if Dean was feeling lonely without Castiel. But then he pushed away the thought and prepared his weapons for the next banter with his brother as he entered the bunker, reminding himself that Dean was an adult, and that he could act on any feelings that he had to, without Sam's help.
Nadir

7. Nadir

Nadir.

The term 'nadir' means low point — any low point, and that was what Dr Greene used for the period when Sam's blood counts were bound to be low. It meant easy infection, easy bleeding and anaemic symptoms. For the doctor, and from the perspective of Sam's illness, it was a purely physical term. However, as the treatment progressed, Dean thought of it differently. For him, Sam's nadirs eventually started to mean something else entirely. Something far from physical. And soon, he'd come to dread those moments.

Meanwhile, day three seemed to arrive and go by very, very slowly. It was routine, as Dean waited with Sam through the third and last chemo session, relieved when the nurse disconnected the cannula and removed the catheter. And then he sat by his brother and tried to comfort him and help him through the side-effects, which were just as bad and terrifying as they had been on the first two days.

For a week after that, Sam suffered with constant nausea, bouts of vomiting that often turned nasty, making him sore all over; dizzy spells, and stomach cramps that kept him up at night. The IV site was red and swollen and it caused pain, and Dean found himself handing Sam warm compresses to ease it. But then, none of these things seemed permanent and they got better with each passing day — Sam felt better too. Even from his primary disease, the coughing was mostly controlled, and Sam was eating and exercising and cooperating with Dean and Dr Greene. So Dean was optimistic — almost optimistic, until the other side-effects started to show up.

It started with him getting sunburnt off the evening sun. The skin on his neck was red when they got back from their walk, and the chaffing of his collar against the tender area didn't help much. It was a painful night for him when combined with the residual cramps, and Dean dozed off of on a chair next to Sam's bed, not wanting his little brother to be all by himself.

They bought sunblock the next day, but that wasn't before Sam had woken up to a sore in his mouth, which turned into many sores over the next few days. To minimise Sam's pain, Dean bought him lots of soft foods and kept him on purees, oatmeal, rice and mostly just liquids. There was no optimistic side to this — none, but then Dean remembered that Sam was at least drinking enough water, so his kidneys wouldn't get banged up from the treatment. Soon enough, Dean had learned home remedies for things he wouldn't have imagined even bothering with.

Sam, on the other hand, came quietly to the clinics, and let the nurse poke and prod him some more. His sodium levels seemed stable, and he seemed to be reacting well to the drugs as of now. When he felt too sick, he let his brother help him, and when he was better, he bitched and whined and gave Dean the finger, but let him help anyway. Every night, before going to bed, he thanked Dean, and Dean asked him not to be silly, because why would anyone thank their brother for doing his duty? That was stupid. Sam, however, courteous as he was, didn't stop thanking Dean and after a few days, Dean accepted the gratitude and asked Sam to shut the fuck up and just sleep.

Kevin left to stay with Garth a few days after the last chemo session, and he explained frankly to Dean that he wanted him and Sam to have their privacy. Dean reluctantly let him go, knowing that Kevin could be in danger, but then the kid wanted to go, and he couldn't stop him. So finally, it was just him and Sam in the bunker. There were good days where they'd sit down and watch a movie or practise together at the target range, and then there were days when both of them would
be frustrated, and there would eventually be a fight. It was on one such day — a bad day for both their moods, that Dean snapped.

He had made oatmeal for Sam, who was in some kind of a whiny mood or something — he wasn't sure what it was — so when Dean put the oatmeal on the table before Sam who had been researching Metatron's spell, the younger Winchester pushed it away. "Not hungry."

It was ten days since chemo and Sam hadn't thrown up in a while, so Dean wasn't taking any of his fussing this time. "Eat, Sam."

"I hate oatmeal."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Okay, someone's being picky about their food today. Should I make you something else? Pureed carrots?"

"I'm not a baby."

"Yeah, but you've got a sore the size of one in your mouth."

Sam put down his book and sighed. "I want to sleep."

"Sam, just finish eating this. Then you can do what you want."

Sam glared at Dean. "Who are you to tell me what to do?"

"Your older brother," said Dean easily, "anything else?"

Sam rubbed his forehead. "Just go, Dean."

Dean felt concern wash over him. "What is it, Sam?"

"Nothing," Sam insisted. "I just... let me be, okay?" He stood up from his chair and gestured to his lunch. "I'll have that later."

Dean licked his lips. "Sam, is there anything—?"

"Oh, God, enough already!" Sam snapped, shutting the book and tucking it under his arm. He paused. "I'm sorry. I..." he let out a puff of breath, "just go take your time, Dean, I'll be fine."

"Okay," said Dean, "you'd tell me if something was wrong, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah," Sam pinched the bridge of his nose, and Dean frowned at that.

"Headache?"

"Yeah," Sam sighed, "it's all right, really. It should be gone with some sleep."

"I'll ring up Dr Greene," Dean replied, pulling out his phone.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because she said—"

"It's a headache, Dean," said Sam exasperatedly. "It will go. I have had loads of these before." He turned around, and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'die sooner'.

"What was that?" Dean was quick on the pick-up.
"Nothing."
"Spit it out."

Sam faced Dean and looked into his eyes. "I said, if it's something else, at least I'll die sooner."

Dean felt a jolt of frustration rise in him. Why did Sam have to do this? "You're not dying, Sam."
"Sure."
"You said you'd—"
"Yeah," Sam replied, interrupting Dean. "I said I'd fight. But guess what, it's not easy."
"And you didn't know that?"
"I did, but apparently, you don't."
"Sam, I know—"

"Dean," Sam said, clenching his jaw, "you know nothing. You're just trying to be encouraging. But you know what? You don't have cancer — I do. And I should be allowed to decide whether I want to fight or not!"

"So what is it then?" Dean asked, his anger getting the better of him. "What do you want to do? What do you want me to do? Do you want to stop chemo? Should I call the doc and ask her to cancel your treatment? What, Sam?"

Sam stood there, frozen, and Dean realised what he had just said. He took a deep breath and threw his hands up.

"I'm going for a walk. You sleep, and we'll talk about this later." He picked up his jacket and drained his beer, heading to the stairs that led to the balcony, but heard Sam's voice a moment later.

"Maybe you should cancel it."

Dean huffed at his brother's dramatic reply and took another step, but Sam spoke again. "I'm serious, Dean."

He turned around, raising an eyebrow. "Sure," he said, his heart coming up to his throat.

His brother shook his head. "You don't get it, do you? I…" Sam licked his lips. "I can't…" He averted his eyes from Dean and looked down.

"Sam…"

"No, please… hear me out," said Sam, taking a step towards Dean, but the latter raised his hand.

"Go get some sleep. You're out of your mind."

"No, I'm not."

"You are too. Go inside. I'll take that walk. Then I'll throw away the oatmeal and fix you chicken soup once you wake up. You like that, don't you?" Dean was babbling.
"Dean, please listen to me."

"Later, Sam." Dean took the stairs, his heart thumping, and as he opened the door to go outside, he heard Sam head back to his room. Once he had shut the door behind him, though, Dean sank down onto one of the stairs outside and buried his face in his hands, forcing himself to breathe. No. No. Sam wouldn't discontinue treatment. He'd change his mind. He was just tired and frustrated, and it was understandable.

But was Dean being fair? He was literally going back on the same path with Sam — forcing him to live up to his own expectations. Forcing him to fight. He was being his dad. And like Sam said, it was his life, his health and his body, and he had a say in whether he wanted to fight or not. The chemo was painful for Dean to watch, and he couldn't imagine how much worse it was for Sam. And he didn't want to cause his brother any more agony.

Dean stood up about ten minutes later, his legs slightly shaky, when the door opened, and Sam was standing there. The younger man opened his mouth, and then shut it. "I'm sorry."

"What are you apologising for?" Dean was holding on to the railing, still willing himself to breathe. "It's—" he swallowed, "it's your choice, okay? You're right. I won't stop you."

"No, I thought about it," replied the younger Winchester, "and I... I'm not discontinuing treatment. I just... I was angry, y'know? It was a hasty decision. But I also know..." he chuckled, trailing away, "well, you're going to be a pain in my ass for as long as you can, so I might as well try and stick around to return the favour."

Dean sighed. "Sam... I'm not forcing this on you. I don't want to. I need you to know that."

"I know."

"And if at any point, you don't feel like carrying on..." Dean licked his lips, "you're not letting me down by giving up, okay? I'm always going to..." He swallowed, unable to say it. "You know, right?"

Sam averted eyes from him, looked down, and nodded. "Yeah. I know."

"I don't want any of this pain for you either, man," Dean confessed to his brother. "It bugs me. I wish I could do something — believe me, I do... I just... don't want you to die, Sammy." It came out as a desperate plea. Dean looked away. "But – but..." there was a lump in his throat, "I don't want you to be in pain either."

Sam's eyes were shining, and he blinked a few times before nodding. "I should... I'm tired," he said in a slightly raspy voice. "See you later."

Dean nodded, giving him a wan smile. "Get your ass to bed. I'll be back in an hour."

Sam smiled back and returned inside. Dean waited for the door to shut and sat back down on the stairs as an unexpected tear fell out of his eye. He swiped it away with the heel of his hand, biting his lip against another one and gasping as a third one came. Burying his face in his palms and trying to calm himself after that, he thought of what his brother had just said to him.

_You're going to be a pain in my ass for as long as you can, so I might as well try and stick around to return the favour._

It was Winchester code for the fact that Sam knew Dean would always be there for him, and for that, for Dean, he would fight.
After his walk, Dean apologised to Sam. It wasn't their first fight since the chemo had begun, it wasn't their first fight with regard to anything, but Dean apologised anyway. They didn't talk about it again, but Dean sat with Sam as he ate the chicken soup, because he was scared — so scared that the time he had remaining with his brother was decreasing drastically, that he didn't want Sam to hold anything against him. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if that happened.

He had, however, decided one thing: if this went downhill, if there wasn't anything they could do for Sam and if Sam ended up — Dean swallowed as he thought of it — dead, then he, Dean would follow the kid. Because, really, he didn't want anything to do with anything anymore. This was the last straw and if it were meant to be that way, it would have to be the final one for both Sam and Dean, and not just one of them.

~o~

The days passed, some pleasant, some unpleasant; and then came the time for Sam's (physical, as Dean would classify it later) nadir. It was in the middle of the second week for etoposide and in the third week for cisplatin, and Sam had to start being very careful with everything — he wasn't allowed to get hurt, or fall sick. Getting hurt was unavoidable, though, and when Sam did injure himself one day, Dean was alarmed at how much he bled, and almost called the hospital, but then the bleeding mercifully stopped, and it was all okay. Sam's regular toothbrush was replaced by a soft one for kids when he injured his gum while brushing one morning, causing it to bleed like a bitch.

Dean kept his brother away from all kinds of places that were bound to have a lot of people, and prepared Sam's food with Sam-like OCD because Sam couldn't afford to contract an infection, like the doctor said. That was all good — it worked well, and Sam even stopped whining about it. And then a bad bout of flu started to go around, and with all the Winchester luck that he had, Dean caught it.

It was a terrible attack. Dean had a scalding fever, blasting headaches, and he sat up all night coughing and wheezing, his nose stuffy. He bought surgical masks that very day, miraculously getting to the drugstore with the fact that his eyes barely remained open from the stickiness in them. He also bought a new thermometer that he could use, since he didn't want him and Sam to share one. He then wore the masks around the bunker, trying not to suffocate from the way they seemed to restrict the air supply, because, no, Sam couldn't fall sick.

Once Sam had gone to bed after the first, particularly bad day with both of them being sick, Dean fell asleep in Sam's previous room, the door open so he could get up at his brother's slightest beckoning, his fever-addled brain bringing up a memory from his childhood in the form of a dream.

Sam was four months old. He could turn over now, and Dean would sit in his nursery and talk to his brother just to see Sammy shriek with delight and pound his little fists against the mattress every time Dean made a silly face. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world to make Sam happy and Dean would feel like a true big brother every time his baby brother looked up at him with those large, adoring eyes.

One day, however, Dean fell sick. He had a cold, and he was congested, and his parents wouldn't let him very close to Sam that day. "He could fall sick, sweetheart," Mary explained to the elder brother when he sulked in his room. And then she made Dean a bowl of tomato rice soup and sang him to sleep, so Dean was feeling better later on. Dean always remembered her words and kept the notion in his head that he wasn't supposed to make Sam sick.

But now, right now, Sam was sick because of him. He had known that he was dying, and that he
would die if he completed the trials, but he did it anyway, so Dean wouldn't be disappointed in him. And then it had all led to this mess. And now Sam had cancer, fucking cancer and he was really sick. Dean had made him sick. So sick…

"Dode…"

He could feel wetness on the corner of his mouth, hot breath hitting against the pillow. His nose was blocked and his throat hurt. He smacked his lips. Ugh. Was he drooling?

"Dean?"

"… Dode bake Sabby sig…"

"What?" A large hand felt Dean's forehead. There was a sigh. "You're burning up."

"Go," Dean said irately, swatting the hand away. "Bob said… dot to bake…"

"Bob? Not to bake what?"

"He'd turd over ad…"

"You aren't making any sense." There was bright light in Dean's eyes, and he pulled the blanket over his face.

"Saaab!"

"Pull the blanket down for a minute, Dean, I need to check your temperature."

"Doe. You go." Dean's nose was stuffy again. And what was Sam doing in the room? He was supposed to be asleep.

"Okay," said Sam. Dean's blanket was forced down and fingers pried his mouth open to push in a thermometer. "You leave me no choice. Put that under your tongue." Dean obeyed and opened his eyes to see Sam standing over his bed, frowning down at him. "You look awful," he stated. The thermometer beeped and Sam took it out, sighing and heading for the Tylenol on Dean's nightstand.

Dean groaned and rubbed at his forehead. "Ged outa here," he said, sniffling and reaching for a tissue.

"I heard you coughing," Sam said.

"I'b fide. You go."

"Sure." Dean was still blindly reaching for the tissue, but Sam took it out of the box and gave it to the other man.

"Adleast wear a bask," Dean said, blowing his nose into the tissue and throwing it into the dustbin.

Sam didn't argue. He just opened the chest of drawers where Dean kept the masks and pulled one on. "Happy?" he asked, his voice muffled under the fibre. He came back to his brother and sat down on the chair next to the bed, removing two Tylenol and handing them to the elder Winchester.

Dean sat up and swallowed them down with the water that Sam handed him. His headache was just awful and his throat was really sore. "How're you feelig?" he rasped at Sam.
"Okay," Sam shrugged.

Dean sank back into his pillows. "Good. Dow go back ad sleeb."

"Yeah. Just wanted to check on you."

"That's by job."

"And sometimes, mine too."

There was silence. Dean raised an eyebrow at Sam's tender expression. "You're dot goig to hug be, are you?"

"Nah," said Sam, standing up. "You're too gross anyway."

Dean narrowed his eyes at his brother, and when Sam turned around at the door, Dean spoke. "Bitch."

~o~

Sam drifted off to sleep once he had made sure that Dean was medicated. Sure, he was in all sorts of pain and was struggling enough, but that didn't mean he couldn't take care of Dean if that needed to happen. Besides, Dean looked just horrible. His fever was at a hundred and two and the way he was breathing from his mouth, Sam was sure that his nose was stuffed.

The younger Winchester let out a sneeze of his own before pulling the quilt over himself and turning over, taking in the smell of the Impala from Dean's bed. It made him so comfortable… like he was home. He knew that Dean considered the bunker his home, but for Sam, it was more of an exciting library of information.

For him, home meant the Impala… because that was the only thing apart from Dean that had been so constant for him — so permanent. Home meant him and Dean in the Impala — in the backseat during their childhood either bantering, or sometimes getting into miniature scuffles. They’d got older after that and sometimes Dean drove and Sam was still at the back, but they still bantered. And then, after Stanford, after Jessica, it was the Impala again. Going around and hunting, pranking each other… and most importantly, Sam wouldn't forget that the reason he was able to beat Lucifer was the Impala. That, and Dean. So yes, these were the two things that said home to him. And while he was in pain, being in Dean's room, among Dean's things and dwelling in the scent of the Impala was the biggest comfort he could have, apart from his brother physically being there.

He didn't realise how long he had been asleep — how long these thoughts had been drifting in and out of his mind, but he was jerked awake at the beeping of his phone. He stretched, and turned over to the nightstand where his phone lay. He yawned, squinting at the screen, which informed him that it was seven in the morning. Also, he had a text message from Charlie. He slid down the notifications bar and opened the message.

You guys home? In the neighbourhood and thinking of dropping by. :) xx

Sam smacked his lips and sat up on the bed with a groan. His body felt a little sore and his head was throbbing mildly but overall, he felt all right. But he needed to check on Dean and ask him what to tell Charlie, because a lot had changed since the last time, and they still hadn't broken the news of Sam's illness to her, and also because both Sam and Dean weren't in the best of health.
He entered his brother's room to see him asleep, breathing heavily through his mouth and snoring slightly. There was a thin layer of sweat on his forehead which suggested that the fever had probably broken. Sam knocked at the door open door. "Dean."

"Huuuhhhhh."

"Dean, wake up, Charlie just messaged me."

Sam entered the room, immediately heading to the drawer with the masks and pulling one on before Dean could freak out. He drew the chair beside Dean, who groggily opened an eye. "Why'd'ya keeb cobig here, Sab? Go, before you catch this thig."

"Charlie texted me," said Sam, ignoring Dean and placing a hand on his forehead. Dean swatted it away again but he was cooler, as Sam had expected. The younger brother extracted two Tylenol for his brother and handed it to him anyway. "Here."

Dean accepted the pills. "You feelig fide?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," said Sam, grimacing at his throbbing head, but Dean couldn't make it out, thanks to the mask covering half of Sam's face. "Just a slight headache, s'all. So what should I tell her?"

"Who, Charlie?"

"Yeah. Apparently she's in the vicinity."

"So tell her to drob in!"

"You sure?"

"Yeah, why dot?"

"Because…" Sam hesitated. "What are we going to tell her?" He gestured to himself. "And I don't think you should be running about very much either."

"Ab fide," Dean said, pushing himself up on the bed roughly. "Ad we'll tell her the trudh."

Sam nodded. "Okay. I'll ask her to come," he said, and started to type a reply. He stood up. "Let's get ready then. We need to look less sick if we're expecting a guest."

~o~

Charlie reacted exactly the way Sam was expecting her to. She was speechless for a few moments, and then she pulled him into a hug, keeping him that way for a long time. He let her hug him and wrapped his arms around her. When she pulled away, she seemed to be swiping a finger under her eye.

"Well," she sniffed, "at least you look better than Dean."

"Hey!" Dean protested, and Charlie turned to him. He had taken a few nasal decongestants in the last couple of hours and had more or less lost the nasal twang.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

He chuckled weakly. "How would it have helped?"

"I…" she shook her head, "God, Dean, you guys such idiots!"
"We didn't ask for it, Charlie," Dean said to her quietly, and Sam could see the sadness reflect in his brother's eyes.

"Yeah, I know, I know..." Charlie swiped at her eye again. "I just..." she exhaled shakily. "So both of you are sick right now, huh?"

"Yeah," said Dean. "I caught the flu and Sam's on his nadir."

"You make it sound like he's on his period."

"Well, thankfully, they don't coincide," said Dean, shooting a glance at Sam, who gave his brother a disapproving look. "Imagine my plight if that happened."

Charlie smiled for a moment. "Well, then, I could stay for a day or two and help," she shrugged, "make sure you don't sneeze into Sam's soup."

"It's okay. I got it."

"Dean, I know how you think taking care of Sam is your job and all, but really, I wasn't joking when I said that Sam looked better than you. Take a breather."

Sam had been hoping that someone would come up and say this to his brother, and he was glad when Charlie took the step. After much persuasion, Dean agreed very reluctantly, to let Charlie help, and the trio sat at the library for a while, enjoying the lunch that Dean had made for them. Afterwards, Sam was tired again, and he retired for his siesta.

He slept an hour before Charlie came to wake him up. She told him that she had coaxed Dean to take a nap of his own, and Sam thanked her for it. His body felt sorer since the morning and the headache had risen a notch. Sam could also feel a slight churning in his gut, and he hoped he wasn't catching the flu like his brother, because that would really suck.

By evening, though, the stomach cramps were back, and he had to fight the urge to cough in front of Dean, who was scrutinising him as though he knew that something was wrong. The trio took a walk together later on, and they had some of Charlie's delicious spaghetti for dinner. After some more chit-chat in the war room, Sam was thankful when it was finally bedtime because he was tired — very tired, and his head and body were aching more than ever.

He went to bed and woke up what seemed moments later with something cool and damp pressed to his forehead. He was about to sit up, but a hand placed itself on his chest. "Just relax, Sam." It was Charlie.

He opened his eyes and she was sitting on the chair that Dean usually occupied. "Dean noticed that something was off," she said quietly. "He asked me to check on you."

Sam felt his stomach churn at that moment, and a cramp went down his gut, sending pain and nausea through his system. "I'm fine," he rasped.

"You have a slight fever," Charlie whispered. "Ninety-nine. If it rises, we're taking you to the hospital."

Sam pushed away the washcloth and sat up on the bed. Charlie moved back. "You okay?"

"Yeah..." he swallowed. Gosh, that hurt. "Just..." he cleared his throat, "I need to use the bathroom." He tried to say it as calmly as he could.
"Sure," said Charlie, making way for him, and Sam exited the room, shutting the bathroom door behind him as he entered. He was very nauseous, and his head was bursting. His stomach was cramping too, and he tiredly sank into his knees in front of the toilet, unable to prevent the frustrated tears from building in his eyes as he leaned over.

~o~

Dean wasn't sure what woke him up, but he didn't feel good. Well, physically, he was hell, but something was tingling in his gut, and it wasn't the flu. He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath. He needed to check on Sam. Sure, he had asked Charlie to do it, but he would never be able to rest until and unless he was confident that Sam was okay.

He stumbled out of Sam's room and into his own to see Charlie sitting alone on the chair. Sam was missing from his bed. "Where's Sam?"

"Washroom," said Charlie, fingering her hair. "How are you?"

"Is he okay?" Dean asked her, ignoring her question about his own wellbeing.

"Well, he's feverish," said Charlie, and Dean's heart missed a beat. "But you said it wasn't a big deal unless it was a hundred, so I didn't bother you. Why?"

Dean shook his head. "Did he say why he wanted to use the bathroom?"

"Why do people use bathrooms, Dean?" Charlie asked exasperatedly. And then her eyes widened. "Oh."

"How long has he been in there?"

"Not long."

Dean made his way to the bathroom and knocked at the door. "Sam?"

There was no reply. The elder brother put his ear to the door, but heard nothing. "Sam, you all right in there?"

Silence. Dean sighed. "Sam, I'm coming in. You'd better not have your pants down or—" Oh, fuck it, thought Dean, and just opened the door to see his brother sitting against the bathtub with his head in his hands.

"Sam, you okay there?" he asked softly, knowing the answer very well.

Sam shook his head. "Threw up again," he said in a muffled voice.

Dean let out another sigh. His flu was a bitch, but at least his stomach wasn't dicking with him. However, Sam seemed to have caught another version of it. Seriously, couldn't the kid catch a break? Slowly, he went up to his brother and sat beside him on the floor, against the bathtub. Sam looked up from his hands, his eyes red-rimmed, and filled with pain and frustration. Dean felt Sam's forehead. "You're warm."

"So are you."

Despite everything, Sam just had to worry. "I'm fine," Dean paused, "d'you still feel sick?"

Sam swallowed. "Maybe."
Sam had an air of helplessness around him; an aura of defeat, and that was when Dean understood the true meaning of *nadir*. He realised how much he needed to be there for his brother — how much reassurance Sam required to get through this. When Sam's hopes reached their low point, when he wanted to fight, but was just too frustrated to do it any more, Dean needed to make sure he was around to walk his brother through it.

He cupped Sam's neck and gently eased his brother's giant, stupid head onto his shoulder, pressing his own cheek onto Sam's hair. "You're going to be okay, Sammy." He realised he was saying as a consolation to himself, more than Sam. Charlie had come over to the door, and she glanced in, met eyes with Dean, and left immediately.

Sam's stomach seemed to have settled, but later on when Charlie brought the thermometer into the bathroom, his temperature had risen by two degrees. Trying to remain as calm as possible, Dean requested Charlie to get a blanket, helped Sam up and walked him out of the bathroom. Charlie came back and they both wrapped the younger Winchester in a couple of blankets and Dean looked into her eyes, realising that she could see his worry.

"We need to get Sam to the hospital."
Spoilers for the HP Deathly Hallows Part II movie. I'm a Potterhead, and can't keep the references out. :)

8. Attacked

Ever since Charlie had read the 'Supernatural' series and had got to know more about Sam and Dean's lives, she had allowed herself to fall in love with their broments and had always hoped to see one of those while she was in their vicinity. Like the Winchester brothers, she too had been without parents for a good part of her life, but she didn't have a sibling to ride out the pain with. She had been really, truly alone. But Sam and Dean — she loved how they were always there for each other — how it was always the two of them against the world and no matter what happened, no matter how many mistakes either of them had made, they were back to being brothers at the end of the day. It really touched her.

At this moment, however, Charlie felt like she was intruding upon something private as Dean snatched a bucket from the bathroom and walked with Sam, holding an arm around his brother and following Charlie. They got outside the bunker and Dean tossed the keys of the Impala over to her. She caught them, and was astonished for a moment, knowing that Dean would have never let her drive unless he wasn't in his right mind. But then Sam let out a shiver and Dean tugged the blankets tighter around him and nodded at Charlie to open the door to the Impala; confirming that she hadn't got him wrong.

She obeyed and Sam got into the backseat, Dean climbing in beside him. Charlie turned on the ignition, watching in the rear-view mirror as Sam went back to burying his face into Dean's shoulder. Dean looked at his brother for a moment before resting a hand on the back of his head. Charlie realised then that she was actually witnessing some of the biggest broments ever, but she wished then that it hadn't been under such circumstances.

The brothers were quiet, except for Dean, who occasionally muttered directions to Charlie to get them to Webster County. He was still sick as well, he coughed and sniffed, and he was flushed with fever, but he had a mask on so as to not get Sam any sicker by any chance. They finally reached the hospital, and took Sam in through the ER. Dean had already called Sam's doctor from the car and thankfully, she happened to be on-call. When the nurse asked Dean what treatment Sam was on, Charlie was not surprised to hear drug names roll off the elder Winchester's tongue, professionally enough to teach a pharmacology class.

"Cisplatin and etoposide for his chemo and ondansetron and metoclopramide for the nausea and vomiting. He has extensive-stage SCLC and is on his nadir."

The doctor came after a while, checked Sam up, got him x-rayed, and told Dean that he had brought Sam along on time — that Sam could be cured effectively with high-dose antibiotics. Sam's throat swab was taken for culturing, just for confirmation, but the doctor seemed perfectly confident that Sam had an upper respiratory tract infection, and that it wasn't progressing to pneumonia yet. Sam was moved to a room and kept for observation after being given some food
Charlie and Dean both let out collective sighs of relief after that, and Dean slumped down onto a chair, just as Charlie remembered that he was quite ill as well. She sat down beside him and put a palm to his forehead, which he seemed too tired to swat away, and he felt warm. Charlie called the nurse, who had one of the doctors check Dean and prescribe him antibiotics of his own.

Sam slept soundly with the antibiotics and some other medicines providing symptomatic relief, and Dean snored on the chair beside him. Charlie stayed up, surviving on caffeine and watching over the brothers. She felt incredible sadness creep up inside her at watching the brothers the way they were — in a situation that made them so helpless. It was like slowly watching Sam slip away; Charlie had seen it in Dean's eyes, and she knew he thought the same. She had helped him a little with the research on bringing Sam back on his feet, but for some reason, it was very difficult to find a supernatural cure for cancer.

By afternoon the next day, Sam was a little better and Dr Greene said that he could be taken home. He had to take the anti-viral twice daily for ten days, and then a prophylactic dose every day for ten days after that. Dean had taken two doses of his own antibiotics by then, and was better too. They got Sam’s discharge forms filled and while Sam was being wheeled out of his room, they almost bumped into some medical staff running into one of the rooms nearby, discussing something about someone finally being awake. Charlie smiled at that, because maybe someone had awoken from a coma; maybe they had given hope to their family — somebody was going to live.

She just hoped; as she got to the passenger seat on the front, watching Dean help Sam into the backseat before coming over to take the wheel, that the Winchesters would find that kind of hope soon too. She was lost in thoughts as they drove back. Dean was silent as well, his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road, and Sam was gazing out of the window from his own seat. Finally, Charlie cleared her throat. "Want to watch a movie when we get back?"

Dean smiled. "Why not? We can rent something on our way back. What do you say, Sammy?"

"Sure," Sam rasped.

"Which one do you propose?" Dean asked, turning to Charlie.

"Harry Potter?" she suggested.

"I'd like that," Sam replied. "I missed the last one anyway."

"And you?" Charlie asked Dean.

Dean shrugged his shoulders. "You heard the dork."

"Hey!" Sam protested.

Charlie chuckled. "Harry Potter it is. I have the movies back at my apartment, so we don't even have to rent them. We could make a quick stop and I could pick it up."

"That works," said Dean, and took the detour to Charlie's apartment. They stopped while Charlie grabbed the blu-ray disks and came back. She took all the movies, in case they ended up having a marathon, though Charlie knew that the boys were too sick to watch that much in one go without falling asleep. After that stop at Charlie's apartment, Dean started to drive back to the bunker.

He was in a lighter mood, making Harry Potter jokes to pull Sam's leg, while Sam protested or
insulted his brother before finally falling asleep. They were making their way down a deserted road, almost back at the bunker now, when unexpectedly; a woman appeared on the middle of the lane, right in the way of the Impala.

"Hey, whoa!" Dean exclaimed, swerving the vehicle to avoid the woman, but the car suddenly came to a screeching halt and Dean's eyes widened, making Charlie realise that he hadn't stopped the car on his own. "What the hell?" he muttered, grabbing a gun from the glove compartment and getting out of the car. "Charlie, stay here."

"No way!" Charlie opened the glove compartment again and took out the other gun, scrambling to join Dean. He was standing outside, pointing his gun at the woman. She was smiling at him.

"Who are you?" Dean asked her, his finger on the trigger.

"Oh, my," she purred, smiling wider at the look on Dean's face, "I'm surprised you don't recognise me, Dean." Her eyes turned black, the smile still intact.

And Charlie saw Dean's eyes widen as realisation struck him. "Abaddon."

~o~

"What do you want?" Dean kept his gun pointed at Abaddon while she tilted her head at him, still smiling.

"You know," she said.

"You're not getting it," said Dean, narrowing his eyes. His hand shook slightly and he held the gun with both hands, but the demon noticed.

"My, my, not up to mark, are we?" she asked. "You know the gun won't work on me, Dean. What's wrong with you?" She waved her hand in one easy motion and Dean felt himself being flung away. He hit a tree on the side of the road, pain bursting on the back of his head as it made contact with the hard trunk. He slid down, his head spinning, and scrambled to get back on his feet as Charlie fumbled with Abaddon.

"Shit," Dean muttered to himself. What was he thinking, aiming a gun at her? And how would they get rid of her now?

That was when he remembered the angel sword that he'd tucked away in the boot after Castiel had given it to him. Would it help?

Charlie was thrown away in another moment and Dean rushed forward as Abaddon started to make her way to the car, where Sam was still sleeping, all his reflexes numbed because he was too tired and sick. The demon opened the door with a wave of her hand and the younger Winchester woke up with a start.

"Hey!" said Dean, aiming the gun at her and shooting anyway. It distracted her for a moment, but he was flung off his feet again, and he landed beside Charlie as Abaddon proceeded to attack Sam, who had got out of the Impala and was holding his hands up, defenceless, since Charlie had his gun.

Dean turned to the redhead, who was bleeding. "Come on," he said, giving her a hand and helping her to her feet. "I need to get something from the trunk. Distract her, okay?"

"Yeah," Charlie sounded breathless as she brushed her hair away from her face, picked up
something from the ground, and ran towards Sam, who was still tentatively stumbling backwards as Abaddon walked towards him, smiling and enjoying herself.

"I liked my old meat, you know," Abaddon said, "you shouldn't have used the holy fire on it."

"Bite me," Sam responded, as Charlie joined him.

"Hey!" she said to Abaddon, and threw something at the demon — a pebble, Dean realised exasperatedly. Great. That would help a lot.

Abaddon turned to her. "Really, you think—?" There were two gunshots as Charlie shot at her uselessly, still walking backwards.

"Oh, now you're just annoying me," said Abaddon, and Dean managed to reach the Impala just as the demon tossed his brother and Charlie into the air.

"SAM!" Dean exclaimed, grabbing the angel sword from the trunk, hiding it in his jacket and charging towards Abaddon, who turned around and hurled him back at the Impala.

There was loud, sickening thud as Dean's back went crashing against the Impala, and he was hit near the shoulder blades, after which the back of his head hit the door handle, and his neck was suddenly wet with a trickle of blood. He pushed himself away from his car and tried to stand up, but couldn't. "Get me, bitch," he gasped from his place on the ground, hand going into the jacket and clutching the handle of the angel blade.

"I already got you," Abaddon replied coming over and crouching beside Dean, cupping his face. Her firm fingers crushed his cheeks. "Give me the key," she said.

"Sure," said Dean, and brought his hand out of the jacket — only to extract the angel sword with it and stab her right in the chest. She fell back with a thunderous scream and Dean crawled to her, getting to his knees and stabbing her again. And again.

Abaddon let out another scream and a trail of thick black smoke rushed out of her mouth, swirling about, circling him as he sat down and moved back, his head and back in agony. The smoke swirled skywards, and then it was gone as the woman whom Abaddon was possessing fell to the ground.

Dean stood there for a moment, panting, his head spinning and throbbing with pain, and then he headed towards the patch on the roadside where Charlie and Sam had been thrown. When he got there, he found both of them unconscious and entangled with each other. He kneeled beside them. "Hey. Sam? Charlie?"

Neither responded. Dean shook Charlie. "Come on, kiddo. Wake up." She was bleeding from her lip and her cheek, and Dean lifted her head slightly, running his hands through her scalp, but finding nothing. But that didn't mean she wasn't hurt. He turned to Sam, who had a stream of blood seeping out of a wound on his arm, which was stretched out above his head. He'd had the good sense of blocking his head from being injured when he was flung away.

Dean patted him on the arm. "Sam." The blood hadn't clotted yet, and Dean knew it was because of the nadir, but he was very worried. Would his brother need the hospital again?

"Sammy?" Dean checked Sam's scalp for injuries just as he had done with Charlie, but there was nothing. Sam only had one visible wound — the cut on his arm, which Dean realised, though not deep, was wide enough to need stitches.
"Sam?" he said again, hoping his brother would regain consciousness. Sam, however, didn't open his eyes and Dean fisted his shirt. "Hey, I can't carry both of you. Open your eyes, Sam, come on."

There was still no response from either.

Sighing, Dean slowly disentangled Charlie from his brother and his back protested against the movement, streams of pain shooting up his musculature, but he lifted her anyway, biting against his lip so he wouldn't pass out as he covered the distance between the trees and the Impala to deposit her in the backseat. He then headed back to Sam, whom he seriously couldn't carry. Not on this back anyway. He knelt back down and tried to awaken Sam again. He failed.

Dean sighed as he changed position to move and turn Sam to his stomach. He then put his arms below his younger brother's armpits and stood up, dragging Sam up to his feet as well. Sam grunted and fell forward, so his face was resting on Dean's shoulder.

"Sam?"

There was no reply.

"Yeah, and this you can do," Dean grumbled, as he wound an arm around Sam's waist and started to walk, trying to drag his brother along. He had hardly covered two steps, and Sam slumped powerlessly, his knees buckling and making Dean's task more difficult.

The elder Winchester shot a glance at the Impala, which seemed too far away from where he was standing. "What am I going to do with you, you big jerk?" Dean sighed exasperatedly at Sam. Sam obviously didn't respond.

Dean looked at the Impala again, licked his lips and took a quick decision. Ignoring all his pain and with a sudden rush of adrenaline, he pulled Sam closer to himself and put Sam's arm around his neck. Then he bent over, winding his own arm around the backs of Sam's knees and gripping his legs. In one go, he had hoisted the younger man off the ground and was sliding him into a full-fledged fireman's carry. His back objected and his head spun, but he couldn't see any other way in which this could be done. He started to trot towards the car — the faster he got rid of Sam's weight, the lesser were his chances of passing out on the way.

He almost dropped Sam on the ground when he reached the car and Charlie's eyes fluttered at the sound. She opened them groggily, just as Dean was busy trying to get Sam back onto the earth without causing him to fall over and smack his head somewhere.

"D-did you carry him?" Charlie asked in a faint, but astonished voice.

Dean was too out of it to reply. He only just managed to stuff all of Sam into the car, beside Charlie, before flopping to the ground, his vision going black for a few moments. Charlie's head peeked out above him.

"You okay?"

"A moment," Dean panted, shutting his eyes, his neck stiff from all the dried blood that had caked around it. He breathed evenly through his mouth, convincing himself not to pass out, and his mind to concentrate. He ran over everything that he had to do next — drive back to the bunker, check on Sam and clean him up, check for a concussion and if the bleeding doesn't stop, haul his ass back to the hospital.

Gosh, Dean so hated the situation they were in at the moment.
Either way, Dean's head finally stopped spinning and he ran a tired hand over his face. This was just great. Getting attacked by Abaddon on top of everything just had to be the icing on the cake. He wondered how permanently they'd managed to get rid of her. Evidently she was weak to everything that angels were. The information was certainly useful for the future. But how had Abaddon even found them? That was a very disturbing question.

Dean got back to the wheel and Charlie came up to ride shotgun anyway — perhaps she could sense Dean's worry, for her presence next to him was slightly comforting. Sam regained consciousness in a while, but Dean was still worried as his brother's speech seemed to be slightly slurred. Twice, he pulled over and checked Sam for a concussion, but there was none. Sam's wound did stop bleeding, though, and Dean could have cried in relief.

Finally as he saw the bunker come into view, Dean was comforted. It was time to get Sam cleaned up. He couldn't bear the thought of the wound on Sam's arm getting infected. That would just be the cherry on top. He pulled the Impala to a stop in front of the door, only to notice a figure sitting on the stairs in front of the door. And as he got out of the car, Dean's relief was fourfold — for the person waiting for him was none other than Castiel.

"Cas?" he opened the car door and walked up to the other man, his back and head hurting like crazy. Tiny pinpricks of black were clouding his vision, but he was just so happy to see the other man again — he needed to tell him…

He opened his mouth to say something, but everything got enclosed in a shroud of darkness as Dean slid out of his consciousness instead, as though the blackness had just been lurking about in the corner all this time, waiting for Dean to give in to the pain.

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Sam watched, his vision blurred as Castiel's arms reached out to catch his falling brother. Charlie was on the passenger seat in the front. Shocked, she reached out to open the door on Sam's other side, as Castiel guided Dean to sit down on the backseat, who slumped forward, his head brushing against Castiel's belly. The former angel was about to push him back but he frowned, and Sam watched as he placed one hand on Dean's neck, pulling him forward, and ran gentle fingers through Dean's hair.

"He has cut himself," Castiel declared, when he was done. "Does he need the hospital?"

Sam's head pounded and he wished it would stop. Rubbing his eyes, he reached forward to the spot that Castiel was pointing at, placing a finger and feeling the cut. It wasn't deep. "No," he said, speech being a huge effort for him. Then he helped Castiel ease his brother backwards into the seat.

"What happened to you?" Castiel asked, noticing the wound on Sam's arm.

"Abazzon…" Sam was so tired. He couldn't even speak properly.

Castiel came over to Sam's side and opened the door. "You need to go to the hospital."

"We just came from there," replied Charlie's voice and Sam moved a lazy gaze to her when she came over to Castiel and held out her hand. "I'm Charlie."

Castiel took it and introduced himself before turning back to Sam. "He needs the hospital."

"J'st need cleaning up," Sam muttered.
"It seems to be deep," said Castiel, taking Sam's arm and inspecting the wound. "And you have bled a lot."

"Nazir," Sam said, "j'st wanna rest… Dean can clean up n' sew m'wound… will be okay."

"Dean is not conscious," Castiel insisted. He looked at Charlie. "Do you think he needs the hospital?"

"Dean said he'd keep a check until evening," the redhead shrugged. "The cut is not bleeding anymore, but Sam does need stitches, according to him."

Castiel licked his lips. "Hospital," he decided, "you drive," he said to Charlie, and was about to make his way into the car, to sit with the brothers, when there was a groan from Dean.

"Zean?" Sam said, reaching out to his elder brother and shaking him by his shoulder, as Charlie and Castiel watched. "Hey…"

"Mmmm." Dean took a sharp breath and opened bleary eyes. "Sammy?"

"Yeah," said Sam, "m'okay, Zean. You?"

'I'm — I'm fine…' The elder Winchester took another deep breath and turned to his brother sluggishly. "You're still slurring."

"M' tired," Sam admitted to him, each word rolling off his tongue heavily. His head throbbed again and he just wanted to sleep.

Dean licked his lower lip. "I'll check your wound… then you can sleep." Gosh, he sounded so tired himself. Sam wanted to ask him to take rest — he wanted to tell Dean that he'd sew up the wound himself, and Dean needn't stress, but somehow, it was very difficult to talk, and before Sam knew it, Dean was already trying to stand up.

The elder Winchester began to get out of the car, stumbling slightly as he got his grip. He started to make his way to the other side — Sam's side, and Castiel went forward to help him, but he shrugged off the angel.

"I'm all right. Let's get the Sasquatch fixed, and we'll catch up, okay?" Dean's voice was faint and Sam didn't like it, but Dean was Dean. He'd never admit to needing help. The elder brother then looked at Charlie. "You doing good there, Charlie?"

"I'm fine," she said, "I'll help you."

"I'm good," Dean said tiredly, making himself visible to Sam. "C'n you walk?"

"Think so."

"Good… 'm too tired to carry you again."

Sam couldn't remember being carried, but a blush crept up his cheeks at Dean's words and he pushed himself up, out of the car. His knees almost gave away, but he held on, hoping Dean didn't see how unsteady he was. "Lez go insize."

Dean stared at him suspiciously, locked the car and the party headed to the bunker, each step tiring Sam so much, he had an urge to sit down right where he was and nod off. Yet, determined not to let anyone help him any more, he trailed along, and when they reached his room, he slumped onto the
bed.

In a few seconds, he felt Dean's rough palm on his forehead. There was a sigh. "This is gonna hurt just a bit, Sam," the elder Winchester said, his voice still fatigued. Sam then heard Castiel's voice.

"Dean, I got you and Sam some Gatorade."

"Thanks, Cas," said Dean, and Sam could hear him gulping down the liquid. His voice stronger now, he spoke to Sam. "Here, drink this."

Sam lifted his head a little and opened his mouth to accept the drink and instantly felt a little better too. Then Dean spoke again. "Ready?"

Sam nodded, eyes still shut, and firm hands grasped his arm, after which he felt damp cotton rub against the cut. He hissed, and the hand grasping him tightened reassuringly. Suddenly, Sam was fighting consciousness again. As he opened his eyes, he could see pinpricks of black, and everything was blurred.

"Let go," said Dean, noticing Sam's unfocussed eyes. "You'll be better when you wake up."

"Hmm." Sam felt Dean's palm on his arm, Castiel's weight on the bed and his hip against his knee, and he knew that Charlie was crouched in front of his bed. The last thing he felt after that was her hand on his shoulder, before he let the darkness take over.

~o~

Dean knew of the exact moment that Sam had slipped back into unconsciousness. He could recognise those unfocussed, tired eyes anywhere and the moment his brother had opened them, Dean had realised that he was on the verge of passing out again. He encouraged it, though, for he knew that it would mask most of Sam's pain. Dean's back and head still hurt, but he felt that it was trivial as compared to what Sam was going through, and as he diligently cleaned the cut on Sam's arm, he felt a pang of hatred for Abaddon. That bitch. Attacking Dean was okay, but why did she have to touch Sam?

Well, thankfully, Sam's wound had already formed a plug of clot — but Dean was sewing it up anyway, because otherwise it would take a lot of time to scab over and it would leave a worse scar than the stitches.

He dabbed more peroxide on Sam's wound and when he was happy enough with the cleaning, he reached for the box of sterile gloves and pulled on two of them on before tearing open the suture pack. The brothers didn't normally wear gloves while patching up wounds, but one of them didn't normally have cancer either.

Dean heard Charlie draw in a sharp breath when he found the edge of Sam's wound and plunged in the curved needle, pulling out the other end with forceps and starting to knot it. He did a few knots, cut the suture, and plunged in the needle again. For a while, it went in a rhythm.


Dean's head was spinning again, and everything hurt, but he went steadily with Charlie and Castiel staring intently at his handiwork. Finally, when he was done, he closed the wound with come more antiseptic-soaked cotton and gauze, and went ahead to check if Sam had any other injuries. He was relieved to find that he had righted the single wound, and he and Charlie fixed themselves after that.
Once he had instructed Castiel on taping the bandage to the back of his head, Dean excused himself from Charlie and the former angel, asking them to go ahead and rest themselves, before going to his temporary room and almost passing out on the bed. He couldn't bear to sleep on his back, so he slept on his stomach instead, but as he lost it to his fatigue, he didn't hear the footsteps of someone entering his room. He didn't feel gentle fingers on his slightly warm forehead — fingers that longed to heal with a touch and make it all better. And he didn't notice Castiel get up from his side and leave the room, sadness on his face.
This particular chapter contains spoilers for Harry Potter — DH Part 2. I hope all you guys have watched the movie (it did come out more than two years ago), but it will make sense even if you haven't. The spoiler isn't so much for the book, though, just the movie and scene from there.

9. Just a Headache

"Okay, so here goes!"

Charlie inserted the Blu-ray disk into the player and settled back as Dean pushed a few buttons on the remote control. Beside him, Sam was curled in a blanket, face peeking out pallidly from the warm material. Dean gave him occasional concerned glances, but Sam pretended not to notice those.

He had woken up after the incident with Abaddon, sore all over from being flung, and only to find he didn't remember anything that happened between him getting attacked. He felt like he was waking up after a really long time, but he was assured that it had only been a couple of hours. Dean and Charlie were wounded too, but they had tended to themselves. Dean had popped in a few Tylenol for his back, and begrudgingly promised Sam that he'd get help if the pain didn't go away. He had, however, asked Sam to talk the moment his eyes had opened and bewildered, Sam had obliged. Later, Dean had explained how Sam was slurring during the brief period that he'd woken up, which had caused his brother to think that he might've had a concussion.

Sam ate, took another dose of the anti-viral, and then Charlie had waved her Harry Potter movie at them, which Sam had agreed to watch immediately. Dean and Castiel had agreed too, and few minutes later, they were sitting on the couch, three sets of eyes at the screen and one pair darting towards Sam every thirty seconds.

The movie went by uneventfully — Sam and Charlie seemed to be the only ones interested enough to gasp at the right places, and Sam could swear there were parts where Charlie was practically whimpering. Soon, they were at the part where Harry was about to go to the Forbidden Forest in order to let Voldemort kill him. Sam watched as the character descended the stairs of the war-struck castle and reached his best friends. They spoke, and Hermione seemed to figure out what Harry wanted to do.

"I'll go with you," she said, her eyes filling with tears, and Sam heard Dean take a sharp breath beside him. He turned and he grinned at his brother.

"Getting too involved in the movie, are we?"

Dean looked back, but he didn't retaliate. Sam didn't think much of it until they finished the movie and sat in the library for a while. He had opened his book on spells as Dean, Charlie and Castiel opened other books to look for ways to cure Sam.

Castiel hadn't breathed a word about his expedition, which made Sam realise that none of the
angels were ready to help him. This meant that if no one found a cure for him, he'd probably die. He licked his lips. It felt so… final. His heart fluttered. They had run out of one more option, and he, Sam, was a step closer to dying. Dean had figured it out too.

That was when Sam understood his brother's reaction to the dialogue from the movie. No, he thought, horrified at the implications. Just… no. He wouldn't let Dean do that. And he was about to let Dean know right now.

Sam cleared his throat. "Hey, Charlie, you know what Hermione told Harry when he was going to get himself killed?"

She looked up and smiled. "Yeah. Adorable, wasn't it?"

"It wasn't in the book," Sam shrugged, fingering one of the frail pages on the leather-bound tome in his hands, "they shouldn't have added it. Hermione wouldn't do anything so stupid."

"It wasn't stupid," Dean replied to this in a low voice, as he looked up from his own text. Their eyes met, and Sam realised that Dean had understood his context. The older man continued to talk. "Harry was like a brother to Hermione. She didn't want him to be alone."

"If Harry wouldn't have come back, she and Ron would've had to finish off Voldemort," Sam pointed out, "so she was better off staying back and fighting. Plus, she had a future with Ron. She had a lot to live for."

"There were plenty others to finish off Baldie," said Dean. "It wouldn't have mattered if she hadn't stayed back."

"Wow, you guys are getting analytical," Charlie commented, but Sam interrupted her.

"It would have mattered, Dean. It would have made a difference to Ron. He would have lost his best friend and the love of his life if Hermione had gone along."

"So I guess she had a better reason to stay back. There isn't always a Ron in everyone's life, you know. It isn't all the same."

"What isn't the same?" Charlie asked the brothers. "What are you two talking about?"

Sam ignored her again, anger rising up in him. Why wouldn't Dean understand?

"Damn right, it isn't the same, Dean," Sam snapped at his brother irately, "because that's fiction. Harry isn't always going to come back. Sometimes, Hermione has to realise that there's only so much she can do to keep her friend. She can't be so selfish — she can't stop fighting the war just like that."

"Yeah? So after being selfless all this time, she doesn't get to be selfish this once?"

"Not for such a reason."

"Fuck you, Sam," said Dean, standing up from his chair. "You can't just sit there like that, and expect it all to be okay, all right? You have no say in this. You don't get to decide for others!"

Dean's jaw clenched and Sam thought he saw a slight, wet glimmer in his brother's green eyes before the elder Winchester took his book and stormed out of the library.

There was silence. Charlie and Castiel were both looking at Sam, and the spot that had been occupied by Dean, a moment ago. Castiel shut his book and made to get up. "Should I talk to him?"
Sam shook his head. "No, Cas, you stay. I should probably—"

"Is he serious?" Charlie whispered, before Sam could complete his sentence.

"Yeah," Sam replied to her quietly. He licked his lips. "Yeah."

"Sam…" her eyes widened. "He can't…!"

"I know," Sam replied. "I'll talk to him." He shut his own book and stood up. "I should probably do it now."

"Should I come along?"

"No, no, thanks—" Sam said to Charlie. "I think I should talk to him alone."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

Sam was leaving the library, when he heard Castiel's voice. "Sam?"

He turned around. "Yeah, Cas?"

"Were you referring to me when you were talking about the redheaded boy from the movie?"

~o~

"Dean?"

There was a loud thump on Dean's door but he stayed where he was, arms crossed and eyes narrowed. He didn't want to talk this through with Sam. He didn't need to. Sam had no say in Dean's decisions — not when Dean had so recently promised Sam that he wouldn't push him to do anything — that Sam wouldn't be forced into more treatments or pain just because Dean wanted so desperately for him to live. So if Dean wasn't allowed to persuade Sam to live, Sam wasn't allowed to do it either.

The knocks came again. "Dean! Open the door, dammit!"

"Why don't you just go away, Sam?" Dean called out crossly.

"We need to talk—"

"No, we don't."

The knocks stopped. "Please."

"No, Sam."

There were footsteps, and Dean heard Sam sigh. "Okay," he said, his voice still determined, "I'm not letting this go, so you can decide when you want to talk about it."

"Try me," Dean muttered, and that was when he heard Castiel's voice.

"Should I do it?"

"That's probably not a good idea, Cas."

There was a knock anyway. "Dean." It was Castiel this time.
"God, why don't you two go match your period dates and leave me alone, huh?"

"He seems to be angry," Castiel was telling Sam.

"Go, and I won't say it again," Dean replied, frowning at the door.

"We should leave," Sam said from outside. "I'll talk to him later."

"Yes."

Dean sat where he was, listening to the footsteps recede. He then sank into his pillows, letting out deep breaths and eventually falling asleep without realising it.

~0~

Dean never came out of his room, and later when Sam knocked, he could hear Dean's muffled snores, so he let his elder brother be. God knew — Dean needed his rest. He had been injured enough in that fight with Abaddon, aside from fighting a nasty flu of his own.

Soon, it was time to go to bed, and Dean still hadn't come out. Before he retired to his own room, Sam knocked again at Dean's door — loud knocks this time, and his brother answered the door groggily. "If you're going to—"

Sam interrupted him by holding up the bowl of soup that Charlie had made. "You need to take your medicine."

"What are you, now, my caretaker?"

"Just your brother."

Dean's lips curled into a smile at that and he took the bowl from Sam's hands. "Go, sleep."

"Yeah." Sam's headache from earlier was back, but he needed to know that Dean was taking his medicines too.

"Go, bitch."

"Fuck off."

He headed to the next door, to his room — or Dean's room — or whatever, it didn't matter, and he lay down on the bed. The headache had changed from a pounding type of pain to aching pressure behind his eyes. Sam threw an arm across his forehead, hoping that the slight weight and pressure of it would help ease the pain. It helped and he dozed off. Until it got worse.

He got up in the early hours of morning with one side of his head pounding thoroughly in sync with his heartbeat — or so it seemed. Anyway, it didn't matter if it had a rhythm or not. He couldn't have cared less if it was an erratic pounding because it was just too painful.

He sat up, the movement feeling only worse, but the weak tendrils of light creeping in from the hallway through the small gap were just too bright and he needed to shut the light off. He felt sudden nausea rise in him and he swallowed it down, relived when it disappeared, because the last thing he needed was to puke. There'd be plenty of time for that during his second chemo cycle in a few days.

He tried to lie down again but his head hurt too badly. He grit his teeth against it, his breath coming in sharp gasps. At one point, it escalated and his hands fisted the bedspread while his
socked toes curled underneath the blankets. God, what was happening? He started to sweat in pain and he tried to breathe again but that didn't help.

Another sharp bout of pain shot across the existing agony — pressure over the pounding — as though something was pressing against his meninges and his skull. He let out an involuntary yelp, bringing a palm to his mouth immediately after that, hoping that he hadn't been too loud. He hissed, his ears ringing as he felt terror run through him. What the hell was happening? Was he dying? If he was, he hoped it would be over soon.

"Sammy?"

Someone opened his door and Sam hissed again as it hit against the wall, the sound shooting more pain through his head. His body was arched and rigid from agony, and he hadn't realised that until he felt Dean's hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, hey, take it easy. Relax. Tell me what's happening." The sudden burst of light flooded through Sam's clenched eyelids and everything lost meaning again. Dean had opened the door to let all the hallway light in, not knowing that it was a bad idea.

"L-Light…" Sam grit his teeth, his jaw clenching and unclenching, and he felt Dean move again, so the light was gone. He felt better after that, though the pain didn't decrease. His teeth ground against each other, locked and clenched, and his body was taut — rigid. He could barely move from the torture in his head alone.

"Sam, talk to me." Dean's hand was squeezing his forearm. "Where does it hurt?"

"Head… eyes… everywhere…" A tear slid out of each of Sam's eyes from the sheer pain, and he felt Dean's hand squeeze him tighter.

"Hey, what can I do?" Another tear fell out and Dean patted Sam's forearm. "I'm right here. It's okay. Just tell me."

"M-n-n-not crying, j-jerk," Sam managed, before hissing again. He didn't know what he needed. He wasn't sure what was to be done. "T-Think… migraine." There was no other explanation for it.

"A migraine? Did you have a vision?"

"No… actual… m-migraine." Because the headaches from visions weren't really migraines. They were very bad headaches, yes, but not real migraines. Sam knew what a genuine migraine was. Jess used to get them. He knew all the classical symptoms. And this was a migraine. But… how?

"I thought those were genetic," said Dean, mimicking Sam's thoughts. "And don't they start earlier in life or something?"

Sam just groaned. "I don't know… oh G-God…" Something was amiss. Even apart from the whole headache thing, Sam didn't feel good.

"Okay… I don't… would Tylenol help?"

"Advil."

"You can't take that, man. No aspirin or ibuprofen, remember?"

Sam gritted his teeth another time, frustrated at that. He was definitely dying. He wasn't sure he could survive this. He turned to his brother with pain-filled eyes, his breath still coming out sharp
and erratic. Dean bit his lip. "Will a head massage help?"

"N-No..." Jess had never let him touch her head during her migraines. Now he knew why. He practically shuddered at the thought of anyone laying a finger on his head. It hurt that much.

"Tell me something, Sam — help me here, man... please."

"Just need to sleep."

"But you can't?"

Sam shook his head, biting his lips through more pain as another tear fell out of his eye. Dean rubbed his forearm briefly. Sam could practically hear his brother thinking. He let out another gasp, feeling Dean rub quicker, in a more fevered pace, and then some of the pain left, but it was still bad.

Dean's hand suddenly left Sam's forearm and the younger man felt his brother stand up. "I'll be right back."

He left the room as quietly as he could and Sam tried to sleep, but he couldn't.

It was ten minutes before Dean came back, and when he did, he patted Sam's shoulder. "I need you to open your eyes and sit up for a bit."

Sam obeyed, finally opening his eyes, though it was far too bright in the room. Dean had a small pill in his hand along with a glass of water.

"What...?"

"Alprazolam," Dean answered. "I called the doctor. It won't fuck with any of your chemo stuff, and we still had some in the medicine kit."

Sam remembered the pills. They were from the days of Dean having disappeared off to Purgatory. He'd had trouble sleeping and had grudgingly visited a doctor under Amelia's insistence. The pills were apparently mild and non-addictive, which was why the doctor had prescribed them without much hesitation. And they'd helped Sam sleep. Dean had questioned their presence once, but Sam hadn't really replied.

"Are they still good?" he asked his brother.

"Yeah, I checked."

"Thanks."

He took the pill and popped it in, gulping down all the water with it. Then he lay back down on his bed as Dean went about shutting every sound and light source that was bound to hurt Sam. The headache was still there, and it was still bad, but Sam felt a calming sensation come down on him like a blanket as he yawned and fell asleep.

~o~

"Dean, we need to talk."

Dean had been standing at the library, staring at a heavy book and wondering, simultaneously about Sam's migraine, when he heard Castiel speak. He looked up and gestured for Castiel to come over.

"I'm fine, Cas," he said, knowing what the former angel wanted to talk about.
"Sam thinks otherwise. Charlie and I agree."

"Cas…"

"Sam won't die, Dean. And neither will you."

Dean sighed. "Thanks, but—"

"You are a pessimistic son of a bitch."

Dean almost dropped the book he was holding, as he looked up at the former angel. "What?"

"You heard me," Castiel said, and he looked almost angry as he said it. "And you are selfish, Dean. Very selfish."

"Okay, Cas—"

"You have no right to throw away your life like that!" Castiel folded his arms, his eyes narrowing at the other man. "People — angels have worked hard for you! I brought you back from perdition, fought my way through, along with the garrison, for forty years to do so and this is how you're repaying me!"

Dean wanted to remind Castiel that he'd died once even after that, but it didn't seem like the best moment to do so. "Cas, listen—"

"No!"

"Wow, you're hormonal."

"Stop it!" the other man snapped. "I don't care what happens to me after that, but if you take the step you're willing to take—"

"—you'll do what, Cas?" It was Dean's turn to interrupt him. "Kill me?"

Castiel's eyes widened. He swallowed, sharp breaths coming out of him. Then the pools of blue sank, below Dean's eye level, down to the ground. "Dean. Please."

Dean didn't know what to say. Castiel raised his eyes again, pleadingly. "Even if the worst were to happen, that isn't what Sam would want."

"Sam doesn't want a lot of things—"

"For me."

Dean suddenly realised who 'Ron' was supposed to be from his and Sam's argument earlier that say. But Castiel was anything but the love of Dean's life. The elder Winchester sighed. "Cas…"

"Dean. I'm begging you." Castiel's eyes were bright, and he tilted his head. "I'm begging you."

Dean took a deep breath. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, okay? Right now, I'm not going to let Sam die. Are you?"

"So you don't promise."

"No." It was Dean's turn to look down now. "I'm sorry." He licked his lips. "But Sammy isn't going anywhere either. Not on my watch."
"I know that."

"So why are we having this discussion?" Dean asked Castiel.

Castiel looked away, a tongue wetting his pale, dry lips. "I'm in the danger of losing one friend already. I don't want to lose both."

Dean was silent. He opened his mouth, then shut it and pressed his lips into a line. Then he spoke again in a voice that was stronger than he felt. "It's going to be okay, Cas."

Castiel nodded. "If you say so."

"I mean it."

Just then there were footsteps from down the hallway and Dean's head automatically turned towards the war room as he caught Sam make his way towards them. "Hey," said the younger Winchester.

"Hey," Dean replied to him, smiling. "How're you feelin'?"

"Better," Sam shrugged, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands, "headache's almost gone. You?"

"I'm peachy as always," Dean shrugged. "You hungry?"

"Kinda. Yeah."

"Good. Charlie went into the kitchen about half-an-hour ago and refused to let me inside, so I'm guessing food should be ready soon."

"Oh. Sure."

Dean lifted the book and seated himself on one of the chairs. Castiel followed him after he'd retrieved his own book. After a few moments, Sam sat down too, without a book, though from the corner of his eyes Dean could make out that his younger brother wanted to talk about something. Oh God, not again, he thought.

"Dean—"

"—Sam." It was firm and final, and Dean indicated to Sam that they didn't need to talk about it.

"No, listen."

"I've heard all I wanted to hear."

Sam licked his lips. "It's not about that."

"Then what is it about?"

The younger brother sighed. "I was just thinking—"

"—and that's always a bad thing, of course…"

"Shut up and let me talk."

Dean gazed at him exasperatedly. "What?"
"I just — why don't you go out tonight?"

Dean raised his eyebrows. "Okay. Why?"

"Hit a bar. Meet some girls. Take Cas with you."

The elder brother shook his head. There was something off about this. "Again, Sam. Why?"

Sam looked at him earnestly, his long fingers interlacing with each other as he rested his hands on the table. "Ever since the chemo began, you really haven't had time to yourself. And I want you to have that."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "You okay, Sam?"

"Yeah," Sam stood up, crossing his arms. "Yeah. I just — the second cycle is beginning in a few days."

"And?"

"And you'll be stuck taking care of me again, which is basically what you've done ever since the entire thing began."

Dean made a sour face at his brother. "Don't be an ass, Sam."

"Yeah, right. I'm an ass for wanting you to have some fun."

The other sighed. "What do you want me to do?"

"I told you."

Dean shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever, man."

"So you'll go?"

He bit his lip. "Fine. But... you're okay, right?" His gut had suddenly begun to tingle. Something was wrong with Sam. He had never spoken like this before. Not even when he'd planned to jump into Lucifer's cage.

"Yeah, of course," said Sam, smiling at him. The smile looked odd to Dean. "I'm as good as I can get."

Dean nodded slowly. He'd weasel the truth out of Sam before he would have to hit the bar. "Okay."

~o~

Charlie left soon after lunch, though reluctantly. She had to report back to work and she couldn't miss another day, but she didn't leave before making the Winchesters promise that they'd stay in touch about Sam's condition. Dean promised her that he would keep her updated and after squeezing both the brothers in tight hugs, and a goodbye handshake with Castiel, Charlie left.

Sam, Dean and Castiel then headed back to the bunker and Sam was reminded of the times during the Apocalypse when it would just be the three of them, sitting up, plotting, planning, and thinking of ways to try and stop all the shit that was happening. They were doing the same now. Except this time, it was very different from the Apocalypse.

Truth be told, Sam far preferred the Apocalypse. But then again, at least he and Dean didn't have
trust issues now. It had all come at a cost, but they were brothers again.

Dean let Sam go back to sleep after that. The younger brother didn't have much of a headache anymore, but he was tired anyway. The flu wasn't completely gone — he was still sniffling and sneezing here and there, and was slightly warm, though nothing above a hundred degrees. Dean was better — like he'd said, but he didn't have a busted immune system, so the first few doses of anti-virals were enough to get him all better.

Apart from feeling tired, though, Sam felt something else. The same irrational panic from the migraine that morning had lodged in his stomach when he'd woken up. He didn't know what it was, but he felt all wrong. And that was why he had asked Dean to hit a bar and enjoy in the evening, because he had a feeling something was going to happen very soon, and that wasn't going to be good. He just didn't know what it was. He knew that Dean had smelled a rat, even if not immediately, and he hoped that Dean's instincts wouldn't keep him from enjoying an evening, because his brother truly deserved that.

Sam had a disturbed sleep once he retired to bed for the afternoon. Dean had told him that he couldn't have more than an hour — yet again, but something was coming. Something ominous. He opened his eyes in just forty-five minutes, unable to sleep anymore, but also due to a wave of nausea making its way through his body.

He sat up in his bed and swallowed against the nausea. It went away in a minute, but not before cold sweat had broken all over him. His head suddenly began to spin and the nausea was back, and then gone again. His vision blurred slightly. Sam blinked. This didn't feel good in the least. Something was terribly wrong.

"Dean?" he called out. Except, it didn't sound like 'Dean' at all. It didn't sound like...anything.

"D-Dean?" he called out again, but all that came out was something that sounded like 'jaan'.

"Dean!" Sam called out, louder, and his brother's name still didn't come out right. Waves of panic travelled through his fibres, hitting against him again and again. Why wasn't he able to speak properly? What was going on with him?

"DEAN! HELP!"

It just sounded like he was yelling gibberish, but he was yelling... he was...

"SAM?"

He heard his brother's voice, the sound transmitted thoroughly even through the ringing in his ears, and then, everything was blissfully black.

~o~

At first, Dean wasn't sure about the sound he heard from Sam's room as he entered the hallway from the war room. He was certain, though, that Sam was fast asleep, and these days, his brother rarely woke up halfway through his naps.

There was another noise, and Dean frowned. He didn't know if Sam needed to be checked on, because his brother would holler if he needed Dean and it didn't sound like he was calling out to him — just as though he was sleep-talking. His younger brother was never one to do that, but sickness made everyone do weird things...

... And that was when Dean heard Sam yell. Properly. It wasn't Dean's name, it wasn't anyone's
name, but somehow, he knew. *Something was wrong.*

"SAM!" He called out and rushed to his old room, throwing open the door, only to be met by a horrible sight.

Sam lay on the bed, body thrown in a slight arch, going up and down frantically, beating against the mattress while his arms were splayed on either side, doing the same. His eyes had rolled upwards and his breath was coming in erratic gasps.

Sam was having a seizure.
10. It's Complicated

"I need you to calm down, Mr Wilson. Tell me what happened."

"Where is Dr. Greene?" Dean asked the nurse impatiently as he watched Sam's pale form on the bed in the ER, covered in blankets. Castiel was beside him, his face mirroring the panic in Dean's mind. They had rushed Sam to the hospital as soon as the seizure had stopped, Dean driving through sun-kissed roads at breakneck speed. Castiel, in the meantime, had sat at the back with Sam, letting the younger, unconscious Winchester lean against him, staying there in case Sam needed anything.

"She'll be here in a minute," the nurse — Edith, said calmly as Dean fidgeted with his phone. "Until then, please tell me what happened."

"He – he had a seizure," said Dean, placing the phone in his pocket. He put his hands to his head, gripping his short-cropped hair, his eyes widening. "He had a fucking seizure, and I—"

"Dean." Castiel's hand was on his shoulder, and he felt a light squeeze.

Dean licked his lips. "Is he all right?"

"He will be taken care of," the nurse assured him. "How long did the seizure last?"

"I-I don't know… about t-twenty seconds after I found him."

"Did he regain consciousness after that?"

"Several times," replied Castiel. "I was in the backseat with him. He was conscious for very brief periods."

"And how was his mental state?"

"Confused."

"Make way," said a familiar voice, and Dean turned to see Dr. Greene manoeuvre her path through the bustling nurses and head straight to Sam's cubicle. He wasn't, however, even remotely comforted at her sight — there was only a foreboding sensation making its way through his body.

"He had a seizure?" the doctor asked Dean the moment she had reached Sam's cubicle. She didn't look very happy.

"Y–Yeah…" Dean sighed, "what's wrong with him, doc?"

"I'll find out and let you know. Where did that cut on his arm come from?"

"We – we got into a small accident the other day when we were returning home from the hospital," replied Dean, "I know my bit of first aid, so I cleaned him up at home."

Dr Greene nodded and opened Sam's gauze. "The wound is clean and the stitches look good. So
apart from the seizure, any other symptoms? Odd ones?

"He couldn't speak properly," Dean said, worry seeping through him. "Called out for help, I think, but couldn't get my name out."

"Was it gibberish, or did he just make sounds without being able to say anything at all? Or did he speak random words with no connection?"

"Gibberish," Dean replied. "And – and he had a headache — a migraine. Was it supposed to be there?"

"Yes, you called me about that, I remember," said the doctor, narrowing her eyes at Sam. "Migraines can present anywhere between puberty and until the person is fifty. But I doubt this was a real migraine. You said the time you got him here for his flu that though you didn't have any nausea or vomiting, he experienced an episode, right?"

"Yeah." Dean was bewildered. "Has this got something to do with the flu?"

"I don't think so." Dr Greene shot intelligent eyes at Dean and then turned to the nurse. "Get me the percussion hammer."

The other woman walked away, only to be back with a hammer-like instrument. The doctor took it from him and started to strike it firmly against Sam's biceps tendon. Dean could see a muscle on Sam's forearm jerk in response. The doctor moved to Sam's triceps and then tested several other reflexes before handing back the hammer and turning to Dean.

"His reflexes are normal, but I won't lie to you. All the symptoms you've described to me indicate neurological involvement, and I need to get a head scan to determine what's wrong. I'll check him up and stay in touch." She hesitated and gave Dean a sympathetic pat on his shoulder before writing down the test on Sam's file and walking away.

~0~

Warm… cold… weird.

Sam's brain flashed him a list of sensations and feelings as he came to. He swallowed thickly. "Dean…?"

"Sam, we need you to stay still," said a disembodied voice and Sam smacked his lips, his eyes still shut. He was on a hard table of some sort, and cool, air-conditioned breeze blew past his exposed legs…where were his jeans? He had no idea where he was. Something was letting out a low hum.

"Dean?" he whispered again, turning to his side, only to feel something restrain his face — as though it was in a cage. His eyes opened just a little.

"Sam, please calm down," the voice said again, and he realised it was Dr Greene. Sam realised then that he was in the hospital. How did he get there?

The doctor spoke again. "I'll explain everything to you once I'm done scanning you, and you can meet Dean."

"Hmm," he replied and shut his eyes again, understanding that he was getting an MRI scan. The doctor had switched off the mike and there was silence, except for the sounds from the machine, and the buzzing of the air-conditioner. He started to feel nauseous and a slight pain seared through his head.
Why was he here? He didn't understand what had happened. Hadn't he just gone off to take an afternoon nap? Why was he suddenly getting his head scanned? It didn't seem to fit. Unless… something happened in between that he couldn't remember.

He waited for the scan to get over, the nausea still boiling at the bottom of his stomach. He didn't feel well — his body hurt like hell, and there was an unsettling feeling in his gut, even apart from the nausea, like something wasn't quite right. His head and eyes were hurting slightly. Finally, the MRI machine stopped humming and the table under him moved slowly, sliding him out with it. He opened his eyes to see the nurse lean over him as she undid the cage-thing from around his face. She transferred him to a room after that and Sam lay there in his bed, waiting for someone to explain the situation.

He shut his eyes for a moment and opened it, only to see Dr Greene at the door.

"How do you feel?" she asked, coming over to him.

"Not good," he rasped. "Where's my brother?"

"I'll call him in a while. Are you having trouble getting any of your speech out?"

"No. Why?" Sam paused. "What happened to me?"

She sighed. "Your brother brought you here because you had a seizure. And before that, I think you felt it coming on and tried to call out to him, but you couldn't speak. Do you remember this?"

"No."

"It's not uncommon," she said.

"What went wrong?"

The doctor licked her lips. "I did your scan and I've ordered for the results to reach a neurologist."

"But… you have an idea…?"

She was about to speak, when Sam heard a voice at the door. "Sammy?"

~o~

Castiel sat next to Dean in the waiting room as the elder Winchester held a cup of coffee in his hands without having touched it in the last five minutes. Sam had been wheeled off to the scan a while ago and there was still no word from the doctor.

Dean sighed, putting the cup away and then burying his face in his hands. Castiel had an urge to put his hand on the other man's shoulder again, to offer comfort, but he could never be too sure as to what Dean would consider a breach of personal space. Dean sighed and finally lifted his head while turning to Castiel.

"You think he'll be fine?"

He looked tired and defeated, and Castiel felt sadness creep through him. "Of course, Dean," he replied.

The other man shook his head. "You know, I'm trying to deal with it — I really am — but… I can't, Cas… it's just getting worse every day…"
"Sam will be back on his feet soon. We will find a cure." Castiel hoped that his words would come true. But he needed to comfort Dean right now.

Dean swallowed. "If – if this is something else… I can't—"

"Mr Wilson?"

Castiel didn't get to hear what Dean couldn't do, but he suspected he already knew as both their heads turned to the nurse.

"Sam is awake in a room upstairs," she said, "you can go see him now."

~o~

The doctor looked at the happiness on Sam's face on hearing his brother's voice and turned to the door to follow Sam's line of sight. Sam himself was relieved — very relieved, and he smiled at Dean who stood outside with Castiel.

He diverted his eyes to Dr Greene. "Uh, doc—"

'I'll be back later," she assured him, "as such, it would be wrong to give you a diagnosis without being absolutely sure."

"Yeah, okay," said Sam, his heart racing at the thought. He watched as the doctor left the room, nodding at Dean and Castiel as she did so. The two men then came in and Dean took the chair next to Sam's bed. He looked like hell. His hair was dishevelled — probably from running his hands through it repeatedly, and worry lines etched his face.

"I'm okay," Sam lied to him.

"You gave us quite a scare, man," Dean confessed. "You remember anything?"

"No."

"I mean, you were talking — and I don't even know—" Dean sighed, "what did the doctor say anyway?"

"Nothing yet," Sam replied. "She's still waiting for the neurologist's opinion on my MRI scan."

"I just hope everything's okay."

"Me too." Nothing seemed okay, though, but Sam didn't tell Dean that. None of the symptoms he had experienced could mean anything good. Not if they needed a head scan and a neurologist.

"Cas is here," said Dean rather obviously, jerking his thumb towards the former angel. "Helped me haul your unconscious ass in here. Man, you know what a pain you are when you're passed out?"

Sam turned his head to Castiel. "Hey, Cas. Thanks for helping."

"It's no problem," replied the former angel, "hope you're feeling better."

"Yeah, I'm good. Just sleepy."

"Then sleep," Dean replied, "we're right here."

There was silence. No one wanted to talk about what had happened — what the possibilities were.
Sam rested his head against his pillow and shut his eyes for a minute. Dean started to talk in a low voice again, trying to lull Sam to sleep, but Sam never heard half of it. In fact, Dean sounded as though he were talking from the other end of a tunnel. It sounded… funky.

The tunnel.

_The Impala passed a long tunnel, bars of overhead lights rushing by, and finally an exit came into view. Sam was always happy to see the exits of tunnels because he didn't like them very much; it meant danger and distrust… and it was like being confined in the dark. As the car came out from the other end, he blinked against the sudden light and turned to his brother. They were both in the backseat with their father driving. Sam was fifteen and Dean was nineteen, and though Dean could drive, he was tired and had opted to doze off for a while beside Sam, who was in a bad mood. The hunt hadn't exactly been smooth._

"Man, that was some hunt," Sam said, "I can't believe we're always so close to dying."

"It was normal, I guess," Dean shrugged.

"Normal? In what way? You could have died, Dean!"

"Quit your whining, Sammy, I'm fine. I didn't die."

There was silence for a while, as Sam sulked, turning to the window and watching the sunlight glint off it, and Dean huffed at him. "What is it?"

"Why do we have to keep switching schools?"

"You know why."

"You should be in college."

"Yeah, but stop feeling so bad. I don't wanna be there, okay?"

_Sam made a face and turned back to the window. Dean seemed irate. "Stop it, Sam."

Stop it, Sam…

Sam.

Sam?

"Sammy?"

Someone was calling out to him. He realised he should respond. He was so sleepy…

"Sam." A hand shook him. "Sam, what's wrong?"

He could hear it clearly. Dean's voice. And then it all came back to him. The hospital. Dean and Castiel. John was dead. He'd died long ago. Now it was Sam who was dying and if he didn't do anything about it, Dean would, too.

He opened his eyes. Dean was leaning over him, and he looked scared. Sam blinked.

"Cas has gone to get the doctor," Dean said, his face still concerned, "you don't seem right, man, I'm worried."
"Why, what—?" He couldn't continue, as bile rose up his throat. Sam shot up on his bed, bending over, and Dean took one look at his face before jumping back just on time as Sam got sick, still managing to spatter Dean.

"S-Sorry," he muttered, his vision swimming.

"Sam?!" Dean didn't seem concerned at his ruined clothing.

Sam hardly heard that as he collapsed forward and strong arms caught him, manoeuvring him to lie back down, holding him sideways. "It's okay… relax… the doctor's coming…"

Sam, however, shivered and fell back into unconsciousness, the last thing he heard being the screeching of the machines he was attached to.

~o~

Sam was seizing. Again.

Everything was a blur to Dean as he held his brother in recovery position for a while — seconds, minutes, hours… he didn't know… and then the doctor was there with Castiel, and she hurried to Sam.

"Get me four milligrams of lorazepam!" she called out to the medical staff that had rushed in after her, and then she got a loaded syringe in her hands after which she pushed the needle into the IV catheter, injecting slowly…

"Dean?"

All was quiet. It had been a while since Sam had been injected with the anticonvulsant and Dean stood at the large window, wondering what was going wrong, wondering how he would get through this. He had changed into new clothes — a pair of scratchy, uncomfortably loose scrubs provided very kindly by the hospital staff. He felt absolutely crappy.

"Dean…"

Castiel's gravelly voice cut through his thoughts. The former angel hadn't spoken in a while, and Dean had barely registered the hand on his shoulder. He turned to the other man, unbidden tears coming rushing in to fill his eyes as he blinked vigorously.

Castiel looked sympathetic at this and his hand slid down Dean's arm, squeezing his forearm. "It's going to be fine."

Dean shook his head, letting out a watery chuckle. "You suck at lying, you know."

"I'm sorry."

He looked up at the angel's face, and then turned away. The fingers gripping his forearm let it loose and suddenly, he craved the touch. But the hand was back, this time on his chest, on his heart.

"I put you together," Castiel whispered, "I brought you to life. I am responsible for you. I won't let anything happen to either you or Sam."

Dean took Castiel's wrist and gently eased his hand away from his chest. He let out a small sniff of laughter. "Jeez, Cas, that's gay even for you."
"You tell Sam all the time that you'll protect him."

"Yeah, because it's my job. Dad handed him to me the day Mom died, and I've been responsible for Sam ever since."

"Yes and my father allotted the same responsibility to me, Dean. The garrison was ordered to fight through Hell and when I got to you first, I was given your charge. I don't plan to forget that."

The angel looked at him earnestly. "I will do anything, anything to get you and Sam out of this. We will get back to research immediately, and I will sit night and day to find a cure if I have to, Dean, but like you, I won't let Sam die."

Dean nodded and sniffed. "Thanks, Cas."

"You thank me too much."

There were footsteps outside Sam's room. "Mr Wilson?" said an uncertain voice.

Dean turned around, to see Cecelia at the doorway. Her eyes swivelled over to the scene in front of her. "I'm sorry if I'm interrupting something... but Sam's results are here. The doctor would like to talk to you in her office."

Dean looked down, realising he was still holding Castiel's wrist and let go of it immediately. He cleared his throat. "Yeah. I'm coming." Dean started to walk, but Castiel remained where he was. The elder Winchester turned to the former angel.

"Cas?"

Castiel stayed silent for a moment, and then seemed to understand that Dean was asking him to come along. "Yes, Dean, I will accompany you," he said, and he walked forward as they followed the nurse.

~o~

"Your brother and I need you."

Sam stood in the living room of the old, dilapidated house, facing his father and trying to stop the lump in his throat from overwhelming him. "I'm just going to college, Dad."

"And what are we supposed to do? We can't hunt one man down, Sammy, you know that."

"You hunted alone before I was old enough."

"It's not the same anymore."

Sam licked his lips. "Look, Dad, I'll come back during breaks — I can help with research!"

"We don't need any of your favours. As for the breaks — if you go, stay gone."

He felt tears fill his eyes as his vision blurred. "Are you serious? You aren't even proud that I got into Stanford? A full ride? And I wasn't doing any favours, Dad, I was offering to help because I care."

"There are far more important things that I was expecting you to participate in. Things more important than college."
"Like hunt the thing that killed Mom?" Sam asked angrily. This was going to end badly. He just knew it. "Because yeah, we're so much closer to it than we were eighteen years ago!"

"Don't talk to me like that."

"I will talk however the hell I want," Sam spat. "I'm not your soldier. I'm not Dean."

His father's eyes were like hot coals. "Don't even compare yourself to Dean. He's nothing like you."

"Thank God," Sam huffed, knowing Dean was listening, knowing he'd feel terrible about saying this later on. He was just too angry and upset at the moment. How could his father be this way?

"You think you're better than your brother, do you?" John asked Sam in a stony voice.

"No," said Sam simply, "I'm just different." He hesitated. "Please. I need this."

John was silent for a while, but Sam didn't like the look on his face. "Let me get this right," his father said, "college is more important to you than us, is it? Or forget me, even — more important to you than Dean?" He paused. "But I think I know the answer to that already. You think you're better than us all."

"-No..." The tear fell out and Sam scrambled to wipe it off. "Listen to me, Dad."

"No," said John, "you listen to me, Sam." He paused, and it was the loudest silence in Sam's life. Then his father said in a low, menacing voice, "If you walk out that door today," he said, pointing at said door, "don't even think of coming back. You get me?"

Another tear fell out of Sam's eye as his heart broke. Why did it have to be like this? A third tear followed, and soon, Sam was shaking, standing there, the whole room silent except for his quiet sobs. He was looking down at his feet as tears fell thick and fast, but then, after a while, he dared to look up, one last time. "Fine. I'll be out of your hair first thing."

His father clenched his fist and for a moment and Sam thought his father would punch him, but John only narrowed his eyes. "You ungrateful son of a bitch," he said, before walking over to the door and leaving the house, slamming it behind him to reflect his true anger. Sam picked up one of the empty beer bottles from the table and threw it at his father's direction, but the older man had already left.

The youngest Winchester left for his shared room with Dean, where his elder brother was sitting on his bed, Sam's Stanford acceptance letter in his hand. He handed it to Sam wordlessly, having heard everything that their father had said.

"Fat load of support you are," said Sam crossly, wiping his face.

"Yeah, and what was I supposed to do?" Dean asked him, "Get stuck in the middle in one of your fights again?"

"You know, Dean," said Sam, looking up at his brother. "You're my brother — you said to me when we were kids, that it's you and me against the world. You seem to have forgotten about that."

"Dad's not just the rest of the world, Sam," said Dean, "he's family. And both of you are important to me, okay? Don't expect me to choose. Please."

"I'm not asking you to," said Sam, "but you could have said something. Dad's being
unreasonable!"

"I think it's high time you and Dad learned to sort out your own fights," Dean huffed. "Plus, I seem to remember my name coming up. You think I'm dad's soldier, huh?" He sounded hurt as he said it.

Sam didn't know how to reply to that. Instead, he walked over to the rickety wardrobe that the brothers shared and began to pull out his clothes.

"Wait," Dean said to him disbelievingly. "You're leaving?"

"You heard Dad," Sam replied. "If I want to go to college, I have to leave."

"Yeah, I heard that, Sam," said Dean, coming over to him. "And he wasn't serious. I thought you knew better than that."

"He sounded dead serious to me." Sam said, tears threatening to fall again. "He said it twice, even."

"He's just angry. He'll come around."

"Well then, he can call me and tell me that. I'll be happy to visit during holidays and breaks," Sam said flatly, swallowing against his emotions.

"Sammy…"

Sam had gathered his limited possessions in his arms and he shut the wardrobe before depositing them on his bed and fishing for his duffel bag. He swiped the back of his palm over his eyes and started to fill the bag, tucking all his things neatly even in his hurry. Finally, he zipped it up and swung it over his shoulder. "You coming?" he asked Dean.

His elder brother widened his eyes. "What?"

"To California," Sam replied. "We could work a few small jobs before the start of term and use the money to rent an apartment."

"What about Dad?"

"I told you," Sam replied, "if he's ready to take back his words—"

"Come on, Sam, don't do this. Let Dad come. We can talk this out. All three of us."

"There's nothing more to talk about, Dean. As for Dad, if he cares, he'll make an effort."

"He's our dad."

Sam sighed. "Are you coming or not? I think you should apply for a course too — you're brilliant, Dean. You deserve better than this."

"Better than this?" Dean asked him incredulously. "I save lives, for fuck's sake. We save lives, Sam. I'm better off like this, than being in some prissy lecture hall with a few douche-y kids."

Sam licked his lips, a stray tear falling out of his eye. "You're not coming with me."

Dean hesitated. "I just want to help Dad out." He blinked a few times himself, turning away. "Sammy, don't leave, man. Not like this."
Sam sniffed and shook his head. "I guess you've made your choice, then."

"Sammy, please." There weren't many times that Dean let his tears fall, but he did this time.

Something was wrong with Dean. His face was melting, filling with black.

"Sam, wake up, man. This is not cool."

He wanted to tell Dean that he wasn't asleep, but he couldn't. Where was he? Everything was just black.

"Sam, don't worry, okay?" There was a light hand on the back of his palm, not holding it or squeezing it, but just there — feather light, gentle and calloused. "Nothing is going to happen to you," Dean promised in a voice that brought a lump to Sam's throat. He took a deep breath and took in the smell of antiseptics. There was a bleeping sound in his ear and someone was being paged for an emergency…

Sam was in the hospital. Why was he here?

He opened his eyes slowly to see white all around. White… it was so bright. What was wrong with him? He could remember an MRI scan, the doctor, and then Dean coming to talk to him… and everything was unclear after that. What was happening to him?

He turned his head, his eyes wet, to notice something on the expanse of his pillow at eye level. A single hair lay there innocently — dark and long. And then he spotted another. And another. His hair. From the chemo, of course. He had forgotten about that.

And then he saw Dean, who had his face buried in the single hand that wasn't covering Sam's palm. His breaths seemed to come in short gasps. Almost as if…

"Hey," Sam croaked.

Dean looked up, the erratic gasping stopping at once as his Adam's apple bobbed and he discreetly wiped his face, trying to smile. The smile didn't quite reach his red-rimmed eyes, which were tearing up again.

"Don't…” Sam pleaded, swallowing as his own eyes burned in sympathy. "'M okay."

Dean chuckled, and then reached for his eyes again, wiping them with the heel of his hand. "Yeah — yeah."

"Where's Cas?"

"Dinner. He was so hungry, his stomach was making noises. The son of a bitch stuck around till I kicked him out."

Sam smiled weakly. "Did the doctor talk to you?"

Dean nodded, but didn't speak.

"What did she say? What is it?"

Dean pressed his lips together and averted his eyes from Sam. And from the expression on his face, Sam finally lost his own battle as a tear came rushing out of the corner of his eye down his temple, and fell onto the clean pillow.
The bar was not very crowded. There were no noisy college kids, no violently drunk people — just the sounds from the pool table in the other room, and mild chatter mingling with the music all around. Dean sat on a stool, watching as the curvy bartender filled up two mugs of beer for him and Castiel. She smiled as she placed them at the table.

Dr Greene was at her desk with her fingers interlaced and her expression grim. Dean didn't like the look on her face.

"Dean," she nodded at the Winchester, and she looked at Castiel. "You were here on the first day of Sam's chemotherapy, weren't you?"

"This is Cas," Dean replied, introducing the formal angel to the doctor, "he's part of the family, so you can talk to me in front of him."

"So what brings you here?"

Dean broke out of his reverie when he realised that the bartender was talking to him.

"My brother wanted me and him out of the house," he replied, jerking his thumb at Castiel. "Apparently he needs some time on his own."

"Sounds like you have a bossy brother."

"Well, yeah, he can be a bitch," Dean sighed.

"I hope it runs in the family," she purred, biting her lip, "the bossiness, I mean."

Dean smiled and shook his head. "Thanks… but no thanks."

"Have a seat," Dr Greene said tiredly to Dean and Castiel. She pointed at two florally cushioned chairs before her table.

"What is it?" Dean asked, his shoulders tensing as he and Castiel obeyed her. The chair suddenly felt uncomfortable. Dean wanted to stand up. Maybe he could storm out at the bad news then (yes, he knew it was bad news), and it would all be over. Sam would be okay.

"Sam..." Dr Greene hesitated, "I took an MRI of his brain... and..." she bit her lip, "it doesn't look good."

The bartender looked a little taken aback at Dean's rejection. "Okay, whatever," she said sourly, handing him the mugs. "Enjoy your drink."

"Thanks."

"What is it?" Dean pressed the doctor, his heart fluttering. This was bad... really bad.

"The – the..." she paused, "I'm sorry, Dean, there's no easy way to say this. The cancer has spread to Sam's brain."

There was silence. Ominous silence.

Dean walked back to his table, where Castiel was sitting, and he noticed that the former angel's eyes had been following him back. He handed the tankard to the other man as he sat down. There was silence between them as both took simultaneous sips of their beer. The quiet had been
everything since the last couple of days, probably since it had started at the doctor's office. They had come home with a schedule for radiation therapy, along with the chemo, and Sam's hair had started to fall out — as if everything else weren't enough.

Dean looked into Castiel's eyes as he set his mug down, and then turned his gaze downwards. He was still in shock. He felt so helpless — like a trapped animal…

He felt a hand land on his. He hadn't realised that his palm had been on the table, facing upwards. Not until then. Castiel didn't intertwine fingers this time, though, having taken Dean's advice the last time to distinguish between friendly and romantic hand-holding, Dean only felt a light squeeze.

"How much time?" he asked the doctor, his voice a whisper.

He couldn't think further. He didn't want to remind himself of anything. He couldn't bear to do that. He concentrated on Castiel's hand — how it wasn't rough and calloused like his and Sam's — Castiel was yet to become like that, yet to get scars…

He wondered why he was thinking of another dude's hands. Weird.

His mind went back to that moment with the doctor. No. No…

"How much time?"

The doctor bit her lip. "Four months."

Dean let a single tear fall out of his eye, feeling Castiel hold on to him as he did so, and knowing that nothing would ever be the same again.

|| End of Part One ||

Chapter End Notes

That's it for today! I shall update again tomorrow. All feedback is welcome. :)

11. Looking into the Past

Sam sat on his bed, rested against a few pillows with his knees pulled up to his chest and his arm around them. In his other hand he held a printed schedule — his treatment schedule. It wasn't just chemotherapy now; it was chemo-radiation — a few hours of chemotherapy followed by sessions of radiation. He was too far gone for just chemotherapy.

He licked his lips as he read the radiation schedule. They were twice a day, Monday to Friday for the next three weeks, all incorporated into the plan of his second chemo cycle. The doctor had said they could do it in the third cycle as well, but that it would be preferable to finish it off as soon as possible, and Sam could hear the words she'd swallowed after saying that. He knew they wanted to do it sooner because they weren't sure if he'd be around much longer, and they wanted to prolong his stay.

Basically, he was going to die very soon.

He moistened his lips for a second time and pushed the thought away as he read the booklet he'd been provided about the radiation therapy. It was curative, not prophylactic, like they'd discussed before Sam's treatment had begun. It was the badass motherfucker stuff.

He'd had two seizures in total: one in the bunker and one after he'd been admitted into the hospital. After that, no similar incidents had occurred and he was thankful about it, but then he now had a steady dose of prophylactic anticonvulsants added to his prescription. The anticonvulsant, phenytoin, was making Sam lose his sleep. It got him nervous and jittery and though he was tired as hell most of the time, it took him a long time to fall asleep. He dreaded each dose of the medicine.

The words, 'general tonic-clonic seizures' now adorned his file, along with everything else. He'd gone full grand mal both the times he'd seized, and his case file was accumulating papers — complications upon complications piling on and flashing in neon red colour, four letters:

*DEAD.*

The doctor had explained to Sam, in the hospital, soon after he'd woken up that his cancer had metastasised to his brain. Basically, Sam had more tumours in him now. The single sucker in his lungs that was taking away his life wasn't enough it seemed, for his brain MRI showed white circles here and there, surrounded by dark grey areas — which the doctor said, was oedema. The headache had been due to one of the tumours touching his meninges, which meant they'd grown fast too — which wasn't a good thing.

The doctor also pointed to some areas which were causing him his specific problems and words like *Broca's area, optic chiasma and temporal lobe* came up. At one point, Sam would listen to these things carefully, but he didn't care now. He couldn't take any more medical terms for the life of him. He just knew that that was where the speech issues and the vision blurring and photophobia came from.

As of now, Sam had woken up with a headache almost daily since the detection of the mets (really, did the discovery just make it worse?) and the nausea had been back since the day he'd caught the flu (not that the flu was gone — he was still sniffling and slightly congested, and it was taking very long to completely go away). Sam knew he was in for a bad time with the nausea once the
chemotherapy began, with the radiation to boot. The doctor had said that the radiation could exacerbate some of his neurological symptoms because of the brain swelling it was bound to cause.

There was more medication to reduce the brain swelling — dexamethasone, a steroid would be prescribed to Sam once he was off his course of anti-virals. Until then, he'd just have to power through it all. The other symptoms, like the speech and the vision thing, however, would reduce, and they could even perform surgery on those later on to excise some of the ones that caused more trouble, if Sam wanted that.

Sam wasn't sure what he wanted. Dean had promised that they could stop if it got too bad, and it had got too bad, but Sam didn't want to stop yet. He had come close to giving up several times, in a fit of rage or irritation, but no, he didn't want to die. He ran his hand through his hair at this point and a strand came off. He sighed. This had been happening ever since his last trip to the hospital. Every morning he'd wake up to the unwelcome sight of a few of his hairs scattered over the white pillows, or sometimes, a few of them would have fallen off and landed on his shoulders. Other times, they just came off when he touched his hair. It was mild for now — a couple of strands at a time, but the doctor said it would become worse soon, especially after they began with radiation.

There was a knock on his door, and Sam knew it was Dean. "I'm up," he called out. He hadn't told Dean yet that he had trouble falling asleep. The last thing he needed was for Dean to sing him a lullaby over all of this, and based on the way that Dean was determined to help Sam through his disease, the latter was a hundred percent sure that his elder brother would physically sing him to sleep if that was what it took.

"Good," said Dean, replying to Sam, "breakfast is ready."

It was the first day of the second chemotherapy cycle and Sam felt dread as he put away the schedule and made his bed before heading to the war room. Dean had made bacon and eggs for him and Castiel, but for Sam, there was a plate of fruits so that the nausea wouldn't start earlier than necessary. The conversation at the table was stilted and quiet. Sam picked at his food, hesitant to eat, but he ate anyway, because it would be less painful if he actually had something in his stomach to throw up later on. Castiel didn't eat much either — but Dean yelled at him and then he literally inhaled his food before washing his plate and heading to his room. Sam hoped, for everyone's sake, that Castiel was all right. He wasn't sure what was going wrong there at all.

The drive to the hospital was full of stunted conversation too, and Dean looked as nervous as Sam while he clutched the steering wheel so tight, his knuckles were white. They had to wait at the oncology ward, and it was quite gruelling. Dean pretended to read a magazine about cars while he shook his leg nervously and Sam just sat back, his arms crossed, brushing off the occasional strand of hair that fell onto his shoulder. He wondered if he should shave them all off, and then decided to do it once it became worse. Finally, it was Sam's turn to go in.

The IV port was back and Sam reclined against his bed as Dr Greene came to check on him before the nurse started the hydration. The session began and Dean left for lunch in between, by which time Sam was already getting nauseous, but it was under control. He dozed off a while later and was woken up gently by the nurse, only to discover the session was done. His stomach sloshed in anticipation and he felt lightheaded. He also felt a headache coming on. He swallowed, resolving to hold on until the end of the radiation session at least, as he was wheeled out of chemo and into the waiting room for the radiotherapy.

The planning for the radiation sessions had already taken place the last time he was at the hospital, and Sam raised his hand to feel the spot above his ear where the nurse had marked a dot with a felt-tip pen. It was a guide for the permanent radiation tattoo which would later be placed with a needle
above each ear, which would in turn be a guide to see that Sam was positioned properly on the table when he went to receive the radiation. Dean had tried to make a few tattoo jokes when the doctor had told them about it but really, nothing was funny anymore. Not even to Dean himself. And then, after a while of waiting, it was Sam's turn to go for radiation.

The elder Winchester was not happy that he wasn't allowed in with Sam — at this point, he probably didn't care about unnecessary radiation, but Sam wanted him to care because the reversal of survival instincts in Dean at Sam's deteriorating health was downright scary. More than his own death, Sam was worried about the fact that his brother would just leave everything and lie down to die the day Sam kicked the bucket. Of course, Dean and Castiel were trying hard — really hard, and Dean slept two hours per night now and Castiel didn't even sleep that much. At least Dean took another hour off in the afternoons while Sam slept but Castiel seemed awake all the time.

Sam knew that the angel was worried for him as well, but he couldn't shake off the feeling that something really shitty was about to happen. He asked Dean to talk to Castiel, knowing the latter would only open up to the elder Winchester, but Dean had reported back, saying he'd had no luck. Castiel helped, but was mostly just stoic and deep in thought most of the day. It didn't look good.

Dean and Castiel had started spending all their time in the library. Each morning, Sam would see coffee mugs and empty Red Bull cans littering the polished table. It reminded him of exam time at Stanford, except, that was far less stressful. Truth be told, he was beginning to get very worried for Dean too.

The whole radiation therapy took all of twenty minutes and Sam lay down, bored and uncomfortable on the table, the tattoo marks stinging slightly. He had to stay still and couldn't shift about much, so he was relieved when it was over. Dean was waiting outside for him and he rose from his chair at the sight of Sam, patted him once on the back, and wordlessly helped him back to the Impala.

It was a half-hour drive back to the bunker, but Dean was going slow, knowing how uncomfortable Sam was. The younger Winchester rested his head against the passenger window with Dean's jacket acting as a pillow to his head. He had an arm draped over his eyes to keep away the sunlight and he kept swallowing convulsively. Dean reached out to squeeze his shoulder. "Almost there, brother."

Sam turned to the other man, sighing and moving his head slightly so the dizziness wouldn't aggravate. "How are you?"

"You're not sleeping, Dean," said Sam worriedly.

"Yeah, we'll get you better, and then I'll sleep for as long as you're satisfied, okay?"

"No, listen," Sam swallowed again. "You've gotta stop killing yourself trying to help me. Cas too."

"I spoke to Cas. Dude's a stubborn bastard. And I'm fine. Quit your worrying and take rest."

"No," Sam replied. "We need to talk about this, all right?"

"Talk about what?"

"You going suicidal like this, man, this is not okay."

"Yeah, well, we've already spoken about it. And I'm not suicidal," Dean snapped, "I'm just trying to
keep you alive."

"Yes, I appreciate what you're doing, Dean, but we didn't talk. You wouldn't let me—"

"Exactly. It's not your place. Besides, you're not dying, so just shut up and go the fuck to sleep."

Sam wet his lips. "Dean… it's four months."

"Give or take."

"Most probably take."

Dean nodded and pressed his lips together. "We've talked about this, Sam, and I can't bear to have this discussion every ten days, okay? Cut me some slack, man."

"I just… I need you to know…" Sam swallowed, but his stomach chose that exact minute to rebel. "Dean…" he breathed urgently.

His brother threw him a look, realising what was wrong at once and the Impala came to a screeching halt on the side of the road. Sam pushed open the door roughly, bending over and trying not to let the frustration take over as nausea overwhelmed him. He remained that way for the next few minutes, his stomach emptying itself messily, his throat hurting as he retched for probably the millionth time since everything had begun. Dean was there as always, his hand on Sam's back as the younger Winchester clutched at the door of the Impala desperately to keep from falling over. Finally, when he was done, Dan pulled him back and handed him the box of tissues and a bottle of water.

"Take it easy, okay?" Dean said as Sam rinsed. "We can talk later."

Sam leaned back on the seat once he was clean and Dean started to drive slowly again. He took a deep breath. He didn't want to postpone this talk. It had to be done.

"Dean—"

"—Sam."

The tactic almost always worked on the younger brother — Dean calling out his name with finality, signalling that further prodding was unwelcome but hell if Sam cared. Dean would never let him say it if he didn't force this conversation out.

"Dean, I need you to know—" he began, but Dean cut him off.

"—I know everything, Sam. Just take rest, will you? We have to go back in the evening, and I really don't want to see you so sick, man."

"No," Sam breathed, the nausea and emotion working against his throat, "you should know… if…" his breath hitched, "if you're not able to… it's not your fault."

Dean had let Sam complete his sentence and the younger brother saw regret in his sibling's eyes for that. Dean refused to reply to that for the next few minutes, until they were at the bunker, and he had parked the car at the garage. And Sam thought he had won the discussion because Dean hadn't said anything, but he realised he was wrong when a hand placed itself on his shoulder, stopping him from getting out, and he found himself looking at Dean's angry face.

~0~
"If you're not able to... it's not your fault."

The words echoed about in Dean's mind as he steered his beloved car to the bunker. Sam looked on the verge of another episode of upchucking and Dean didn't push him, not wanting to get him to talk forcefully while he was so ill. But as they reached the bunker, Sam's face had regained some colour, meaning he was feeling a little better. Dean parked the Impala and bit his cheek, Sam's words going around in his mind again.

No, Sam was lying. He knew nothing. He thought, he could have his four months and leave and it would be so easy.

He put his hand on Sam's shoulder, anger taking over his senses, and saw his younger brother's bewildered expression when he turned around.

"Let's be crystal clear about this, Sam. If you don't survive, it's my fault."

"Hey, come on—"

"No, you listen to me," said Dean. "I was supposed to do the trials. I was supposed to get this goddamned cancer. I was supposed to be getting chemo and radiation and suffering the side-effects of it, not you."

"I remember taking up the trials at my own will," shrugged Sam. "I remember telling you I wanted to do it and survive."

"And I remember you not caring when I told you that you could die," said Dean. "So you knew all along, didn't you? You were just misleading me."

"How could I have realised...?"

"I don't know, but you well aware that the trials would kill you, weren't you?" growled Dean, and Sam flinched at that. "Weren't you?" he repeated, narrowing his eyes.

The younger Winchester looked away for a moment, and Dean took his collar. "Look at me and answer."

The latter shook his head first, and then nodded. Dean released his brother and punched the Impala's steering wheel. "Dammit, Sam!"

"You wouldn't let me continue with the trials if I told you!"

"So you were just ready to die? Is that what it had to come to? I know I screwed up big, okay? I told you. I've been screwing up for years. But man, Sammy..." he couldn't continue.

Sam shook his head again, blinked, and then swallowed before replying. "I just..." he paused, "I just..." he looked down and didn't complete the sentence. He swallowed again, and opened the door of the Impala. "I don't feel so good." He started to get up, but Dean caught hold of his forearm.

"We're having this conversation, Sam. You wanted it so badly, didn't you? Now tell me. You were so caught up on not letting me down that you were ready to die? You couldn't just tell me about it?"

Sam struggled under his grip. "Dean, please. I really don't feel good. Let me go."
"Once you talk to me."

Sam reached over and pried Dean's hand away, his own fingers clammy and shaky, and Dean realised he was serious, and let go at once as the younger Winchester bolted out of the garage and to the war room. Dean locked up the car and made his own way back, thinking of what his brother had said all those days ago at the church.

"You want to know what I confessed in there? What my greatest sin was? It was how many times I've let you down. I can't do that again…"

So it all came to that. Sam had taken up and continued with the trials, despite knowing what he would be facing, just so Dean wouldn't be let down. And if Sam was dying now, it was Dean who had brought him to this — who had pulled the trigger.

His stomach clenched and he grit his teeth as he entered the war room. He was greeted by the sounds of Sam retching again and was a little surprised to find his brother doubled over the sink just outside the hallway to the bedrooms, apparently not having been able to make it to the bathroom. He pocketed the car keys, removed his jacket and went over; putting a hand on Sam's back again, rubbing slowly.

"Sam," he said quietly, as the other man continued to heave, one hand holding his hair back and the other gripping the side of the sink. His face was way down with his forehead rested against the faucet. Dean sighed and continued to rub his back, trying to comfort his brother through the episode.

"You know, whatever I said… whatever crap I gave you? I never meant it that way, man," Dean said, resuming their conversation. "I was pissed and I didn't think about what I was saying. I should have realised. And now you're sick… it's my fault."

Sam didn't reply, he just retched again and surfaced for a moment, and Dean noticed a tear dripping off the end of his nose. Dean saw his knuckles turn white as Sam clenched tighter to the basin.

"No," Dean said, knowing what his brother wanted to say. "It is. I pushed you into this shit. But hey," he rubbed a little harder, some more, "I'll get you out of this too. God knows, I've said this so many times, I might sound like a broken record. But… I will, okay? No matter what it takes."

Sam didn't say anything as he went down again but once the heaving had stopped, he rinsed, washed his face and got down to the floor, sitting down to regain his bearings. Dean knelt beside him and he turned around to Dean, bloodshot eyes blinking against the droplets of water streaming down his pale forehead. His jaw clenched once and he opened his mouth to say something, but then he came forward and his arms wound around his elder brother instead. His damp face rested against Dean's shirt, just burying itself there, and he could be three years old again.

Dean held his brother close, hand fisting the back of his sweat-soaked shirt, wanting to let go because they could practically be a pair of girls right now, but at the same time, never wanting to let go. Sam spoke against his shirt then, in a muffled voice. "It's not your fault, Dean, never was, never will be. And for everything that happened, all the mistakes — I forgave you long ago. I think it's time you forgive yourself too. And while you're at that, I need you to do something else."

They broke away and Dean sat back, looking up at his brother's earnest expression. "What?"

He pursed his lips. "I know you're doing everything… and I will do everything not to give up. But… if I can't — if I don't…" he swallowed, watching Dean's eyes widen more and more, "if I don't pull through… I need you to forgive me."
Dean looked away, a lump in his throat, but Sam clutched his shoulders and turned him around so Dean was face-to-face again. Sam nodded at once, urging Dean to accept what he had just said, and at long last, Dean nodded back. There was silence as they sat there for a while, waiting for Sam to decide that he felt well enough to get to his room. The younger brother's hand went up to his forehead and he shut his eyes before squeezing the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger. Dean sighed at this.

"Headache?"

"Y-Yeah."

"How bad?"

"Not very."

Dean knew that he was lying, though. He patted Sam's shoulder. "Come on, let's get you to bed. You can sleep it off."

The younger Winchester nodded and with his brother's help, both of them got to Dean's previous room. Once Sam was sitting on his bed, Dean made to leave.

"I'll bring you some Tylenol," he said.

Sam looked up at and chuckled. "I don't think it's gonna help. Besides, I'll just throw it back up. Leave it be."

His brother washed a hand over his face, coming back to the bed. "Anything else…?"

"You've done enough for me, Dean. Go get some rest now."

"Yeah. Yeah, okay, sleep well," the elder Winchester replied. He paused for a moment before sniggering. "Besides, after all of this, I won't be surprised if we grow a pair of boobs each."

Sam smacked him on his side with the back of his hand as he grinned. "Shut up."

"How much do you wanna bet that my boobs will be better than yours?"

"Absolutely not, dude, you're too short and small."

"Hey, you're the giant. But, man…" Dean raised his hands to his chest in a cupping motion, indicating a pair of breasts. "Awesome."

"You are imagining boobs on you, and wondering who the girl here is?"

"That's easy — it's you," Dean replied.

"Sure, sweetheart."

"Aw, Sammy, are you flirting with your own brother now? You really need to get some. The dry spell looks bad."

"Get out and go to sleep," Sam said, his lips twitching into a smile while his eyes tried to look irate. "I wasn't flirting."

"Sure, you weren't, darling. Either ways, I'm going."
"Oh, look who needs to uh... get some now!"

Both of them sniggered at that and Dean watched Sam lay down before shutting the door behind him, feeling much better than before.

~o~

Castiel sat alone at the library, reading his tenth book since Sam had got sick. He hadn't found anything useful yet, but neither had Dean; and Castiel couldn't quite shake off the despair that held between him and Dean in the library each time either of them shut a book after having gone through it. There would be hopelessness for a while, and then the next book would be pulled out of the shelf. The Men of Letters had plenty of information of supernatural healing — just nothing on cancer, it seemed.

Or, Castiel hoped, nothing that he and Dean had found yet.

The human emotions of grief and sadness coursed through Castiel every time he thought of Sam dying, and how Dean would be if that actually happened. He was still new to this, and the sinking feeling caught him by surprise every time. He missed his Grace — he could, perhaps, have handled this situation better if he were still an angel. He could sense, often, that Dean needed support, but he wasn't sure of how to go about it. He felt bad, because Sam would always have Dean, no matter what — but there was no one that Dean could rely on for comfort. The younger brother he'd sought out for such purposes was slipping away from his grasp he now and needed his big brother, so it was natural that Dean didn't want to look weak in front of Sam.

Despite being human, Castiel didn't know how to go about being one. The sadness and hopelessness at the loss of his Grace, and then having to see Sam and Dean's plight were overwhelming. So much that ever since Sam had been given four months to live, over everything else, Castiel could feel all the terrible emotions creep into his senses and steal away his hunger and sometimes — even his sleep. He found it difficult to make conversation with the Winchesters of late — he either couldn't concentrate long enough to listen to what the other person was saying, or he just lacked interest most of the times. He still got nightmares, but he didn't tell Dean because the other man already had too much to worry about.

He wondered, sometimes, if it was normal for humans to feel sorrow and wretchedness to this extent, but he was pretty sure it was. It hadn't all started suddenly anyway. He had felt the impending hopelessness ever since Metatron had tricked him, but it had increased after everything with the Winchesters.

Castiel swallowed and turned the page of his tome when he heard Dean make his way to the library from the war room. The elder Winchester looked like he had enjoyed a well-deserved nap.

"Hey!" he said, coming over to the formal angel. "How come you didn't go to sleep?"

"I wasn't tired," Castiel replied, looking up at Dean.

The other man frowned. "Seriously? I mean—" his eyes swivelled over to the coffee mug next to Castiel, "have you been sleeping at all?"

"Yes, I do sleep, Dean. I'm not an angel anymore." Castiel almost cringed as he heard the hopelessness in his voice. He didn't mean it to come out that way.

Dean seemed speechless for a moment, but then his hand came and patted Castiel on the shoulder once. "I'm sorry, man. I wish I could help more."
"No, Sam is important now," Castiel replied, getting back to his book, feeling his interest in conversation wane slightly. "You're doing the right thing," he muttered.

Dean sighed and took the seat next to him. Castiel could sense, more than feel the other man licking his lower lip, apparently trying to say something carefully.

"Hey..." Dean began, "I..." he sighed again. He did that a lot these days. Tearing his eyes away from the fine print, Castiel turned back to his friend.

"It's okay, Dean."

The latter nodded, his green eyes losing a bit of their colour. "I'm just..." he gulped, "I'm just worried about Sammy. You understand, right?"

"Yes, I do."

"And... and if there's anything..." he shook his head, "sorry I'm ignoring you, man. We're supposed to be friends and... I'm being selfish."

"You're not selfish, Dean," said Castiel quietly, narrowing his eyes. How could Dean even think that way, after everything?

The former angel would never forget the day that he got him out of Hell, and held on to his soul while putting his body together. He remembered inserting the muscle tendons into bone, adjusting the fibres so that they ran right again. And then he recollected adjusting each organ, coiling the blood vessels around them and filling them with blood, righting those lungs, and getting them to work for air, and then getting that heart to beat — that golden heart, before finally smoothing on the skin over it. He'd left the freckles on because those didn't seem like blemishes, but perfections. And then he'd poured the soul into the human body he had just rebuilt, not knowing at the time, that this man and his brother would be the two people he valued the most — above everything else. But he knew one thing. He'd had to do all of this — fight through Hell for forty years, only and only because a man loved his brother so much, he literally sold his soul for him.

Castiel looked back into those sad, green eyes. Dean had been talking about something, but he didn't know what. He wished he hadn't zoned out in between, but it was impossible to concentrate nowadays. So he smiled — he just widened his lips and Dean, seeing this, smiled back, the skin near his eyes crinkling as he did so.

"Glad everything is okay with you, Cas," he said. He glanced at his friend's book and walked over to the shelf, drawing out another one for himself.

"Still got time before Sam wakes up," Dean said, "gotta take him back to the hospital. Poor kid's having a bad day already..." He looked distressed. Castiel had been in his room when Sam and Dean had come back, but he didn't have to be an eyewitness to know how much the chemotherapy would have exhausted Sam.

He did not, however, reply to Dean. Instead, he trained his eyes on the book in front of him, vowing to remove all that sadness of Dean's face and put him back together just the way he had all those years ago.
When Sam woke up from his nap, his headache had partially disappeared. Yet the remnants of it taunted him, and he could feel a building pressure behind his eyes. He looked at the clock on his bedside table and realised that Dean had let him sleep in for another hour, and since he hadn't been woken up yet, his brother was probably about to let him continue for some more time. He felt a rush of gratitude towards Dean as he touched his feet to the floor, resting his elbows on his knees and his forehead on his palms.

He swallowed. He wasn't nauseous, but his throat was itchy from the residual flu. His head also felt heavy. When he looked around at the bedding and the white sheets around him, he could see long, dark strands of hair littering it. The hair loss was getting worse with passing time and Sam honestly didn't fancy the idea of having to shave his head.

He got up from his bed, stumbled a little and made his way to the bathroom to brush his teeth. The taste in his mouth was just gross from the chemotherapy and then the throwing up, and he needed to get rid of it. Once he'd brushed and then washed his face, he walked to the war room, from where he could see Dean and Castiel working in the library.

"Hey," he called out to them.

'It sounded like 'eh', and Sam cleared his throat as the other men turned to him, Dean raising an eyebrow. "You woke up before I came?" he asked Sam. "That's an improvement."

'Not sleepy," the latter explained, and then paused as two sets of eyes looked at him intently. Dean stood up from his place and Castiel's gaze was swivelling from one Winchester to the other. Sam gulped. He knew why they were doing this.

He opened his mouth again. "Dean?"

It didn't sound like Dean. It sounded like...

"Jane?" Sam said again, desperately, trying to speak out his brother's name – but failing miserably. Panic fired through his fibres. What was happening?

Dean had come up to him, his worried expression changing into a calming one with effort. He put a hand on Sam's elbow. "It's okay, Sam, come on. Let's get something inside of you. What do you want to eat?"

Sam shook his head, drawing in shaky breaths. How was Dean so calm? Why wasn't he worried?

"Jane!"

"Dude, you've full-on given me a sex-change," Dean said, flashing him a wavering smile. "Eat something now, so that you don't have to kneel before the toilet all night from the nausea that your other meds will cause you."

It was true. Sam's other medication caused a bit of nausea too, which was why he had to take them after or during meals, but in combination with the chemo, Dr Greene had warned a rough night if he didn't eat right (and she hadn't specified the number of episodes like last time, which only made it sound worse). But how on earth could Dean be so calm, when Sam... Sam couldn't speak?
"Ga weeg..." he whispered, feeling stupid and helpless and annoyed. *Can't speak.* There was a lump in his throat.

"I know, man,' said Dean softly, rubbing Sam's elbow, "and I'm sorry. But the doc said that it would happen, right? It will go right away after some radiation too. C'mere." He led Sam to the table and got him to sit down as Castiel came over with his book. He looked pale and drawn, and his eyes had dark circles underneath them. Sam wondered if Dean had noticed this.

He waited, as Dean got him a tray with toast and soup and placed four small pills with a glass of water on the side. "Eat up, and then you can take the meds."

Sam nodded, wondering if old people needed as much medication as he did as he started to eat. Each bite of toast, each spoon of soup settled heavily, and he knew that it would all come back up soon. The lump in his throat hadn't gone, and Dean was sitting before him, bright green eyes beseeching Sam to eat. The younger Winchester just did as his big brother told him to, and ate, finally taking the pills too. Dean patted him on the shoulder.

"Wanna go back to sleep?"

Sam shook his head. The phenytoin wouldn't let him sleep after a while, and the anti-viral was already making him a little nauseous despite the anti-emetics.

"Walk?" Dean offered.

Sam shook his head again. He didn't know what he wanted to do. All he knew was that he wanted to be able to speak normally. Why was this disease taking everything away from him? Why was he left so damaged, so crippled? What was the point of anything if it was going to be this way?

"Sam." Dean had realised that his brother's brain was working at top speed. "Look at me," he said again.

Sam shook his head, the lump in his throat growing bigger and constricting him. He drew in a shaky breath.

"Sammy," Dean whispered, leaning forward on his seat. "Hey, man, you're gonna be okay. Just give it some time, yeah?"

Sam licked his lips, nodded, but refused to meet eyes with Dean. His brother sighed. "Cas?"

Castiel turned his attention to the brothers. "Yes, Dean."

"You wanna go for a walk?"

"I would like that."

Dean looked at his brother. "Come on, now you've gotta come. Cas is there too."

"Oo oh."

The elder Winchester raised an eyebrow. "No way, little brother, you're coming along. Plus – Cas and I? Alone? We need you for entertainment, man." He winked at Sam, and then smiled, seeing Sam's bewildered expression at the fact that he had been able to decipher the gibberish that Sam had just spoken.

"Come on, Sammy, don't insult me," Dean said mildly, "I've been listening to your babble ever
since you were in your diapers. Think it's any different now? You should stop being so surprised."
He put his hands on his hips. "So you wanna grab your jacket now, or you want me to spew out the
other stuff that I know about you?"

The younger man smiled back at his brother, nodded, and returned to his room to get changed.
When he was ready, his brother was waiting at the door with Castiel at the door and the three of
them headed out together. They had a pleasant walk, after which they even went for ice cream. Sam
ordered a scoop of vanilla, which did a great deal to soothe his stomach, and Dean ordered a
sundae. Castiel was hesitant to try this new human thing, which was understandable, as from his
point of view, Sam reckoned the ice cream just resembled frozen, colourful goo. Castiel did know
the entire history of how human beings had started to consume ice cream, though, and recounted it
wistfully while sharing Dean's ice cream, until the hunter asked him to get his own sundae,
realising that Castiel was liking it. They had a good couple of hours together, many worries
forgotten, and when they got back to the bunker, Dean let Sam go back to sleep.

Soon, it was time for the second radiation session of the day. It went by all right but a few hours
after that Sam's headache had escalated, finally going on to increase fourfold. There were no
steroids to control the brain swelling – the cause of Sam's headache, and this fact made the pain all
the worse to bear. By night, all Sam could do was not hold his head and whimper like a child. To
supplement that, his joints were killing him too, and he couldn't bear to be in one position too long.

He went to bed early and fell into a very disturbed and pain-filled slumber, only to be woken up by
his dinner sloshing about in his stomach. He had to run to the bathroom then and he made it just on
time. By the time he was done, though, he wasn't even sure he could get up from his kneeling
position before the toilet because he was too stiff and dizzy. When he did move his stomach
churned again so he stayed where he was, forehead resting in his hands and his eyes covered from
the too-bright light. He was sore all over and his head was pounding even worse, making him want
to throw up another time.

Sam shivered. He wanted to get back to bed, and nothing else. He was so tired, he just wanted to
pass out. He couldn't, however, move, as the slightest twitch of his body was causing everything
around him to spin. So with much effort he propped himself against the wall and waited where he
was, hoping the horrible sensation would pass, or, a small voice inside his head told him, that Dean
would come and find him.

About fifteen minutes later, Sam found that at least one of his prayers had been answered as he
heard footsteps approach the bathroom. They stopped short right outside the door, and he heard a
gasp. "Sam?!"

A pair of hands was on his shoulders as someone crouched beside him. "Sam, hey, what
happened?"

It was Dean, and Sam opened his eyes to see Dean's concerned face hovering above his as the back
of his brother's palm felt his forehead. Sam weakly reached up to swat it away, but it was gone
before then. "I thought you felt warm for a minute there," Dean explained, "what happened? Head
hurt again? Talk to me, Sam."

Those were too many questions which Sam couldn't answer, so he put a hand to his head, shut his
eyes and looked down, swallowing convulsively, trying to communicate his pain to his brother.
The light was very bright and Sam felt like he was about to puke again as well. But he couldn't
move.

"Throwing up any more?" Dean's voice asked, hands tightening on Sam's shoulders.
"Why..." Sam replied, trying to say 'light'. Frustrated, he tried to talk again. "Why."

"Yeah, okay," Dean replied, and the contact was momentarily gone as Sam heard the light switch flick off, plunging the room into comforting, welcoming darkness. Dean was back next to him. "Better?"

Sam nodded, the nausea having eased slightly, but he still wasn't ready to move, and Dean seemed to have figured that out. "Whenever you wanna," the elder Winchester said, adjusting himself beside Sam, ready to help with anything that the younger man needed. Amazed at his brother's ability to guess what was going on with him, Sam rested his head against the wall.

He never did get to go back to his room, though. Not for the next few hours anyway. The attacks of nausea never subsided and he was stuck in the bathroom, throwing up every ten minutes until he was turned inside out. After the first bouts Dean called Dr Greene and she asked him to try and keep Sam hydrated and take him to the hospital if he was still throwing up in the morning.

Eventually Dean moved Sam back to his room, to the comfort of his bed and how he did it between all the puking and the agony, Sam never knew. He was half out of his mind by midnight, though, and at one point, the frustration reached such a level that he asked Dean to put a bullet in him just then. Dean, though, paid no attention to his babble – he just took care of Sam even more. He pulled up a chair next to his brother's bed, cleaned out the dustbin at regular intervals and kept pushing the Gatorade into Sam's system, despite the fact that it all came back up with a vengeance.

Castiel joined Sam and Dean a little after midnight and helped with all his might. By that time, Sam was so tired, angry and desperate, that he didn't even have the strength to get embarrassed at the former angel witnessing his helplessness. He just wanted it all to stop.

When two o'clock rolled in, Sam seemed to have finally stopped vomiting. His head still hurt, though, but he was able to sleep, no matter how disturbed it was. Dean and Castiel slept there as well – right there in Sam's room. Castiel crashed on the cold floor beside the bed and Dean dozed off on his chair. But then, Sam heard Castiel stir, wake up and leave the room just an hour after he'd slept.

By morning, Sam could speak, but the headache joint pain hadn't waned off completely. He had to go back for chemo after that and that didn't help him any better with the agony. By afternoon, it was a repeat of the previous night's events with Sam sweating, nauseous and in pain in bed as Dean and Castiel tried to help him. At that moment, Sam realised he'd never wished harder in his life for death to come and take him away.

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Dean seriously considered shifting base to the bathroom with Sam after everything that had happened the previous night. But then his brother had been able to regain control for a few hours, only to be inflicted with more chemo and radiation therapy, making him rebuild his fortress in the bathroom. By the time Sam fell asleep for the afternoon, Dean seriously needed a drink or five.

He poured himself some whiskey and sat before Castiel, who was reading as usual. "Cas," he said, trying to grab the other man's attention.

The latter looked up with a questioning expression. "Yes, Dean?"

"Want some?" Dean asked him, raising the whiskey glass.

'No, thanks.'
There was silence, and Castiel turned back to his book, blue eyes darting between the prints as Dean swallowed down the honey-coloured drink, warmth rising up his throat. He could feel a lump work its way up as well – actually, it just permanently seemed to be there these days, ever-present, and always reminding him of everything that was going around. He had no idea how to control it. All he knew was that he was falling apart – bursting open at the seams, and he wasn't sure if there was much he could take anymore. He was barely able to hold it together between Sam and everything else, and he wasn't even sure how to handle himself anymore.

"You seem troubled," said Castiel suddenly, cutting through his thoughts.

"Ya think?" Dean muttered, raising the glass to his lips and draining the last of the whiskey.

"You can talk to me," Castiel replied blandly and Dean looked up at him, shocked at the offer.

"No, it's all right," he said, gulping, "but thanks, Cas."

"I'm serious, Dean."

"I know," he replied, "and I appreciate it. Thanks. Really."

There was a pause, as Castiel flipped over a page in his book. Then he spoke again. "It's not fair, you know. You're always there to talk to me, and listen to me, and you, in turn are not receptive to the same gesture."

"Well, you know me," Dean chuckled softly, "I'm not the talking type."

"And yet, you crave someone to share your troubles with," Castiel pointed out earnestly.

The elder Winchester cringed at this. True, he found himself wishing harder and harder that Bobby were alive – he had always been the person whom Dean could really talk to, apart from Sam, but it was all so hard, and there was no one...

"Talk to me," said Castiel in a low voice, repeating Dean's own dialogue from long ago. "Please."

The other man let out a shaky laugh. "What's there to talk about, Cas? You know what's wrong. Do I have to tell you? I mean..." he swallowed against the lump in his throat, staring at the polished wooden table, and drawing a finger along the willowy pattern on it. He could feel Castiel's piercing gaze on him as he spoke again.

"I mean," he repeated, "it's not like I haven't told you... it's just too much, man. With Sam so sick... four months... it's like the bastard isn't even giving me time, y'know..." He swallowed and cleared his throat. "He doesn't even deserve it, Cas. What has Sam ever done to hurt anyone – knowingly, at least? It's just unfair. And then... you... I don't even know how to help you. And there's Kev and God knows, the kid could be grabbed by fallen angels any time if he isn't careful, but he left, just so Sam could have his privacy and..." he sighed, "I don't even know any more, Cas. I don't know."

Dean felt tears blur his vision and he blinked them away because, fuck, how many times had he cried in front of Castiel in the last week alone? He might as well grow a uterus and a pair of ovaries along with those boobs that he and Sam had talked about – because this was ridiculous.

Castiel didn't say anything, understandably, as really, what was there to say now? Dean reached up and wiped his eyes on his sleeves, looking up, finally, at the former angel.

"Sorry, man," he said, "didn't mean to shoot you with that truckload of shit... I just..."
"I know," Castiel replied. "It's okay, Dean."

The latter licked his lips and nodded, heart fluttering slightly as he looked into the concerned blue eyes, averting his gaze as he felt more tears erupt, and finally bringing himself under control, because he couldn't lose it like this again. He just couldn't. He had to stay strong for Sam. For Castiel. For himself.

~o~

Castiel watched Dean exit for his own afternoon nap as he shut the book and rested his head in his arms. He was tired, and his head felt a little fuzzy, but he didn't think he could afford to sleep, because who would help Sam then? Dean had enough on his shoulders, as such, and there was nothing he, Castiel was doing to help.

He recollected Dean's words from minutes ago. _And then... you... I don't even know how to help you._

This meant only one thing to Castiel: he was being a burden to Dean. He had to stop. He had to stop being one of the causes of Dean's troubles – because he hated it, hated it so much to see tears in the elder Winchester's eyes. It threatened to break him apart, and knowing he was one of the causes for those tears... he had to do something and ease the weight off Dean's shoulders. He just had to. But first, he would help Sam get back on his feet. That was the most important thing at that moment.

He raised his head from his arms, rubbed his tired eyes with his knuckles, and started to read again.

~o~

Sam was feeling positively crappy by evening. The chemotherapy and radiation were aggravating and exacerbating every single pain and problem in his body and he just wanted to rest, but wasn't able to. More than anything, he wanted to be independent, and that was being ripped away from him so ruthlessly, there were no words. He was beginning to get very frustrated at this. Did it have to come to this?

He was in a bad mood after his nap, refusing to go for a walk, or eat, or exercise. Not that he felt up to any of that anyway. His stomach was at constant upheaval and his limbs felt like jelly. Dean tried to persuade him to do all those things, though, and Sam felt like he was behaving like a petulant toddler when he refused, but he reckoned he had the right to be as frustrated as he was. Dean seemed to agree with him on the matter, and didn't push Sam harder after that.

Then, as scheduled, Sam had to report back to radiation, and the headache was back, and God, he was just so pissed, he wanted to throw things when he came home. He lay down on the bed, brushing away strands of hair from the pillow angrily. He shut his eyes and pretended to sleep after that, and wouldn't respond even to Dean, who came to check on him and try to get him to eat soup. His elder brother realised very easily that Sam wasn't really asleep, but he reckoned he had the right to be as frustrated as he was. Dean seemed to agree with him on the matter, and didn't push Sam harder after that.

Then, after a while, Sam actually fell asleep, and wasn't in pain for once, but then again, the bliss wasn't going to last because he was Sam Fucking Winchester and he was destined to take all the crap that the universe threw his way.

So he woke up, nauseous as hell, and thanks to the fact that he hadn't eaten anything, he was reduced to dry heaving in the bathroom, each bout of it hitting him so hard, he was pretty sure his eyeballs were about to pop out of their sockets and roll away. He tried to breathe, tried to get his body to calm down, but then his body had stopped listening to him the day he had completed the first trial, so that was about as effective asking Dean to ditch the Impala.
Dean, he realised, was probably in the war room, thinking Sam was really asleep, and Sam knew that his brother wouldn't venture this way for a while. And for some reason, he felt much, much worse about that than he should have. He flushed the toilet, and shaking, he lowered himself down to his haunches and rested back on his ass, gripping his hair in his hands. After a few minutes, when he looked up, he was staring at a clump of hair in his palms.

Not a few strands, not even a lot of strands, a fucking clump.

That did it. Sam wasn't sure, but something broke inside of him. A mixture of despair and anger made itself evident in him as he pushed himself onto his feet somehow, and stumbled to the sink to look into the mirror. A thin, pale, sweaty face stared back at him, blue-green eyes bright with a slight sheen of tears. There was no evidence that he had just lost a whole clump of hair.

He ran a hand through the long strands again. When he looked after that, there was another clump on his palm, stuck between his fingers. So he repeated the motion, and kept doing it, clusters of hair coming off and landing on the pristine tiles in the bathroom.

Sam could see a bald patch on his scalp a few minutes later, appearing right behind his fringe. He gritted his teeth, tears spilling out of his eyes as he gripped the fringe and tugged, and it came off in an easy rip. And he laughed, suddenly, inexplicably, throwing away the new lock of hair, dusting his hands to get rid of the single hairs littering them.

More tears cascaded from his eyes and he sniffled, letting out a sob, then laughing, and reaching for another bunch of his hair and pulling it free. He put both his hands to the sides of the head and drew off the hair from there, and it hurt now – his scalp burned, and tiny droplets of blood were blossoming over, but Sam didn't care. He had no idea why he was laughing so much — just that it was so fucking hilarious: his life, and him, and now…

He was just about to tear off another clump when there was a voice.

"Sammy?"

Hands gripped his wrists and Sam fought against them, but Dean's voice was in his ear. "Let it go. Let it go, Sam!"

"Nghh," Sam struggled, one hand leaving his hair and trying to pry himself free from his brother's grip, nails digging into Dean's flesh, but his elder brother wouldn't leave him.

"Sam, stop!" he said sternly. "What are you doing?!"

"No, no!" Sam protested, and Dean held on tighter.

"Cas! Cas! I need help!" Dean roared, as his younger brother dug his nails deeper into his wrist, causing him to hiss. "Stop it, you fucking idiot!"

And then, Sam stopped struggling. He halted, gazing at himself in the mirror, seeing Dean behind him, his elder brother's expression reflecting a lot of worry. The younger man dropped his hand to his sides after that and just watched the bald patches with his pale scalp shining through, some parts even red from the abuse. He felt Dean ease away his own grip.

"Let's get you to bed, Sammy," he said, coming forward and putting an arm around Sam as his voice shook. "Come on."

Sam caught a glimpse of Castiel at the doorway before shaking his head. And then he laughed.
He let out hard, loud, barking laughs, his chest heaving, his body shaking, his eyes watering, and he laughed like he never had in his entire life. He laughed until he wasn't laughing anymore and before he knew it, he had crumpled to the floor, taking Dean along with him, and he was still shaking, and his eyes were still watering, but not from laughter.

The next moment, Sam's chest seized up, breath hitching with unbridled, uncontrollable sobs as he bent over, Dean's arms around him for support. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move as each sob ripped through him, wrecking his body, pulling him apart from the inside. He coughed, sputtered, hiccupped and choked while tears flowed down his face, spattering onto the collar and his shirt, dripping off the end of his nose and falling onto the floor that was now decorated with his own hair.

Dean was now saying something – what, Sam didn't know, and he heard Castiel too. A hand moved up and down his shaking back and a voice whispered in his ear as his face was rested against a shoulder. Then the same hand moved from his back and cupped his neck, and he coughed, sobs subsiding a little, as he finally heard Dean speak in a thick voice.

"Sammy, no, please, you're going to be okay..."

Was he? Was any of it going to be okay? And how many times had Dean repeated those words in the last day-and-a-half? Did he believe it himself? Sam sobbed again and Dean was patting his back, rocking him slightly, and Sam couldn't ever remember him doing this since their childhood but then again, Sam probably hadn't cried like this ever since he broke his arm and had it set at the age of six. He knew he was scaring Dean, but he was so, so scared himself, he wanted, seriously to believe that his big brother would fix it for him again, but it didn't look as though it was about to happen this time. No quick fixes and no escape from Sam's impending destiny. No escape from death. He was dying, and there was nothing that Dean could do about it. There was nothing that Dean could do, but watch. It was over.

*Game over, kiddo. You have zero lives left.*

Horrifyingly, that particular voice in his head was Dean's voice, and not Death's. And so Sam melted into his brother's embrace and let him offer all the comfort he could, knowing that Dean needed it as much as he did. And once the sobs had gone, once he had pulled himself away from Dean, all that remained between them was unimaginable, deathly silence.
13. No More Pain

Sam shivered against the cold bathroom floor as he left Dean's embrace and shepherded his emotions, trying to avert his worried gaze. He knew that his brother was waiting for him to say something, but at that moment, he was just concentrating on keeping his breathing even. His chest, throat, eyes and head were all aching from everything that had just happened and his breaths were still hitching, single tears falling down here and there as he leaned back against the wall, his chin quivering involuntarily.

When it all finally seemed to be under control, Sam felt tired – drowsy, even and Dean pressed a box of tissues into his hands, presumably brought over there by Castiel. Sam then wiped down his face as the embarrassment finally started to creep in. He handed the box back to Dean, who fixed his green-eyed gaze upon his brother. Sam nodded, conveying to Dean that he was all right.

His face looked swollen and blotchy in the mirror. His eyes were terribly bloodshot and puffed-up. The bald patches on his scalp were still there, and one or two were bleeding slightly. Dean got up, and was standing behind Sam as the latter reached over to finger his sore scalp. Before he could do that, though, Dean had caught his wrist again.

"Don't."

"'M fine," Sam muttered at this, slurring from tiredness (or the tumours, whatever) and sounding as though he had a bad cold. He sniffed. His nose was stuffed up. "N't doing 'nything."

"Yeah, I know," Dean replied calmly, bringing Sam's hand down. "Just don't touch it for now. I'll see what we can put on that."

"N'thing," Sam sighed. "N'thing's g'na help."

"Hey..."

Sam jerked away Dean's comforting hand on his shoulder. "Wanna sl'p," he said.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," Dean replied. "You want me to get you some soup?"

"No," Sam replied as he turned on the faucet to let the water stream so he could wash his face.

"Okay," said Dean, "let me know if you feel up to it." He moved away as Sam washed, wiped his face, and headed back to his room, shutting and locking the door behind him before finally dropping onto his bed and burying his face in his pillow. He tried to fall asleep by pulling the comforter around him and taking in the smell of the Impala from the pillows (no matter how many times the sheets and pillow covers were changed, Dean's room always seemed to smell like the car). Sleep, however, did not come easily.

After a while, there was a knock on his door. "Sam?" It was Dean.

Sam shifted over. His nose was still blocked and his throat felt sore from the mouth breathing. He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. "What?" he called out tiredly to Dean.

"Open up." The elder Winchester provided no other explanation.
Sam sat up on the bed for a moment, letting some of the initial dizziness pass as he went on to unlock the door for Dean. He came back and sat on the bed immediately, as he felt unsteady on his feet, but was surprised to see the sleeping bag in Dean's arms as the other man entered.

"Just in case you need anything during the night," said Dean, squatting as he spread the sleeping bag on the floor. Sam would say something, but he really wanted his brother to be there and there was no use acting all manly about it, because that had already been thrown out of the window thirty minutes ago.

"You sleep at all?" Dean asked him again.

Sam ran a hand through his hair and stopped midway, realising what he was doing. His throat constricted as he took his hand down, throwing away the lock of hair that came off into the dustbin beside his bed. "No," he said, answering Dean's question and feeling his chest tighten. He wondered if he had any tears remaining to be shed at all.

"Hey." Dean came over and sat beside Sam on the bed once he had adjusted the sleeping bag. "We'll take care of it later on, okay?" he said, watching Sam finger the single hair that hadn't fallen into the bin. "It's going to be fine. It will grow back. You know it will."

Sam nodded, more tears springing in his eyes, and then looked away, but not before Dean had noticed. In a moment, Dean's hand was pushing Sam's shoulder, coaxing him to lie down. "Go to sleep now, brother."

Sam didn't resist. He lay down and turned to his side, hiding his face from Dean so he wouldn't see the tears that had started again. For a moment, Dean patted Sam's arm. "Calm down. Try to sleep."

Sam nodded as he shut his eyes and palmed them, letting a few salty droplets slip through to wet his hand, and Dean's weight on the bed was still there, until Sam was able to stop shaking. Then the elder man patted Sam's back once and got down to his place on the floor. Sam could hear his brother's breaths even out in a while. He couldn't sleep, however, from the phenytoin and the headache and stuffed nose, and he continued to stare into the darkness until a third, embarrassing round of tears started. His breath hitched once, and he heard Dean stir.

"Sammy?"

"M o-okay," Sam whispered.

Dean respected this and didn't come back to sit on the bed as Sam cuffed at his tears. There was silence for a while, except for Sam's small sniffles, and Dean spoke again. "You need anything?"

"No."

"Just get some rest then. You have chemo and radiation tomorrow."

"Dn't wanna go," Sam replied in a thick voice.

Dean was quiet for a couple of minutes. "All right," he said after that. "We'll see about that in the morning."

"No. Dn't want chemo. Dn't want raditat'n."

Dean took in a sharp breath. "Okay."

"No... pr'mise m-me."
"What?"

"Let it go." Sam felt another single tear slip as he said it. He really didn't feel well, and he wasn't even sure what the tears were about anymore. It seemed to be everything at once -- Dean's agony over watching Sam this way, and yet the comfort that he was always ready to provide, Castiel stressing over Sam the way he was, Sam's sudden need for dependence, the pain, the hair, the neurological shit, the puking, the fainting, the cramps... and dying despite everything. Sam couldn't even list it all anymore.

"You pr'mise?" he spoke again.

"Don't—"

"Please. Cn't take it 'nymore, D'n."

There was silence again.

"Okay, then," Dean finally replied. "I promise. But you should still sleep."

'C-Can't," said Sam, taking a shuddering breath and burying his face in his pillow again. He heard Dean sigh and move, and the weight on his bed was back.

"Hey,' said Dean, sounding scared and concerned, "what is it?"

"M fine."

"You hurting somewhere?" Dean asked, ignoring that.

Sam sighed, and then nodded into the pillow.

"Where?" Dean sounded like he was talking to a twelve-year-old. "Sam?" he said again, when his brother hadn't replied.

"W'nna sleep," Sam repeated.

Almost immediately, the weight on his bed was gone, and he heard Dean exit the room, only to re-enter a while later. He turned over and looked at his brother, who was holding the bottle of alprazolam pills. He shook his head. "N'seous."

"Just dry swallow one," Dean suggested.

Sam shook his head again. "Make me gag."

Dean pursed his lips, and then sat back down on Sam's bed, handing him the pill bottle. "Hold this."

Sam did as he was told while his brother exited the room again and came back with a bowl and a spoon. He took the pill bottle from Sam, shook one of them out into the bowl and crushed it with the back of the spoon. He then scooped up the powder and poured some water onto it carefully from the bottle.

"Open up," he said, bringing the spoonful of mixture to Sam's mouth. "You can't puke this out. It's just like swallowing down saliva."

Sam put his own hand to the spoon, not wanting Dean to have to feed him, and accepted the medicine. He coughed once as the bitter mixture made its way down his throat and then Dean had
him take another spoonful of water to wash it all down. They sat up for a few minutes until they were sure that the medicine was content to stay in Sam's system.

Sam lay back down after that, feeling considerably rested, the last words he heard from Dean before losing it to sleep being, "It will be all right in the morning, Sam. It will be okay. You just see."

~o~

Dean watched his brother shut his eyes as the nurse attached Sam to his IV. It had been an eventful morning, with Sam waking up all embarrassed about his breakdown, and not remembering how Dean had come to sleep on the floor of the room, and consequently, what he had made Dean promise, or that he'd said he wanted to stop treatment. Turned out he didn't remember anything that had happened after the breakdown. He did, however, mumble a 'sorry' to Castiel as well, and the former angel told him not to worry about it.

The doctor had warned the Winchesters about memory issues with Sam, but Dean wasn't sure she meant whole half hours' worth of memories. Yes, Sam tended to forget small things, like whether he had brushed his teeth, or whether he'd taken his meds, but it never had been so bad. So after the initial panicking in the morning, Dean had decided not to worry Sam, and to just ask Dr. Greene about this one.

Either way, after everything, Sam had been, in Dean's opinion, a little off when he'd gone to his brother's room. Sure, Dean teased Sam for being the softer, more emotional person out of the two of them, but Sam wasn't actually all that overtly sensitive either. He got angry or bitchy more easily – never so upset. His waterworks remained limited to the purely emotionally shitty experiences in their lives. Never... this way. Okay, Dean had been expecting Sam to snap at some point, and the breakdown had scared him, but not surprised him. But what happened after that...

Dean stared for a while at Sam's pale, bald head, remembering their session with the clippers that morning. The younger Winchester had approached his brother with the clippers and asked him to get rid of the unruly, wayward locks of hair that remained. Dean had obliged, heart hammering, remembering with a pang what he'd said to Sam not so long ago.

"Give me five minutes with some clippers..."

_Not like this, Sammy, never like this._

Dean had said they'd pick up a beanie or a ball cap like Bobby's later on, and Sam had waved him off, saying he'd be fine. He didn't need to hide it. He'd be okay. So Dean didn't push him after that.

Meanwhile at the hospital, Dean stayed on in the ward till Sam went off to sleep and then rose to meet Dr. Greene. She was at her desk, writing something, when he knocked. She looked up at him and gave him a small smile.

"Come in, Dean."

He let himself in and took a seat. She leaned forward, hands interlocked, eyes questioning.

Dean cleared his throat. "Um... so... I just want to know about Sam's progress."

"He has to come for his clinics to determine that," she said, "I'll let you know after this round, on Saturday. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, cool," Dean replied. He hesitated. "I... uh..."
"Yes?"

He licked his lip. "You said there'd be memory lapses, right? For Sam?"

"Small things, yes," the doctor replied. "It's just the chemo and the radiation. They mess up with concentration and memory."

"Yeah, but... is it normal to have bigger memory lapses?" Dean asked her.

"Like?"

"Last night," said Dean, waving his hand, trying to explain, "he seemed really off. He wasn't himself. He just... he got real upset and I'm not sure why... and he never gets that upset so quickly. In the morning, he couldn't remember it."

"Getting upset?"

"Getting upset... talking to me, any of it. He wasn't feeling well, so I slept on his floor to be there to help if he needed it. In the morning, he wondered how I got there."

Dr. Greene nodded once and then pursed her lips. After a while, she spoke. "Look, Dean, your brother has multiple brain tumours."

"Yeah, I know," Dean replied, trying not to snap. Why was she stating the obvious?

"And..." she trailed away, "sometimes, behavioural changes can occur in such conditions. Personality changes."

"So, that was because of the tumours?"

"Most likely," she replied. "The fact that Sam doesn't remember it seems to confirm it, although it's pretty rare to be happening episodically. Usually, the behavioural changes are permanent and persistent. Again, depends on what area the tumour is pressing upon, and how much oedema is there. But... there's a chance this might not remain temporary for Sam after a while."

Dean swallowed. "So... you're saying it's possible this could be persistent after some time?"

"Not necessarily, but it's a possibility, yes."

Dean took a deep breath. "So... Sam might not be Sam anymore."

She sighed. "No."

There was silence. Dean looked down, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Dean," the doctor said suddenly, and he looked up at her. "Have you considered the option that he might have been genuinely upset?"

Dean shook his head. No. That wasn't it. Sam had taken on worse – much worse, and, well, yes, there was that thing with the wall, but he had never depended on anyone or been so helpless with anything. Dean knew that the doctor was saying this to make him look at it from another perspective – she was trying to imply that maybe Sam wasn't as bad as they thought he was – maybe there was a way, but Dean knew that this wasn't it. This was definitely the medical shit, and Sam was getting worse. But he appreciated the doctor for being so positive.

"Let me know if it gets bad," she said, "and I could write him anti-depressants or refer him to a
psychiatrist."

Dean nodded, as the doctor spoke again. "Has Sam got a living will?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Why should he have one?" It was obvious. He knew what she was saying. Sam was getting worse. It was time to make arrangements about how he should die. But no. She didn't know what Dean knew. She didn't know that there was still a chance that Sam could come out, one hundred per cent cured. No chemo, no remission, nothing. He could be completely fine.

The doctor hesitated. "It's... just advisable."

"Meaning he's not getting better?"

"I never said that," she replied, "but it's just so there's something... if things were to go in the way that we don't want them to."

"He'll be fine," said Dean shortly, standing up from his seat. He paused. "Anything else?"

"No," said Dr. Greene, sounding a little intimidated, "unless you have something else you want to ask."

"No, thanks."

He walked out of the office and ran a hand over the back of his neck, letting out a deep breath and praying they wouldn't need any of the shit she was talking about.

~o~

Ants. Bugs. Insects. Sam could feel them running up his fingers and wrists and his toes and feet and ankles too. His limbs felt weird and ticklish, and numb sometimes. On other occasions it was like little pinpricks, like his limbs had gone off to sleep. He ignored it; ignored it all, because most of it was just from the chemo or radiation or whatever-the-fuck. And then there was the pain.

It began one night – it had a burning, numbing quality to it and he didn't sleep – couldn't sleep and had a bad day after radiation, thanks to the aggravated headache. And it escalated. Soon, the pain came too easily. He didn't even have to hurt himself much for it. For instance, he got a paper cut off researching about Metatron's spell and it hurt like a mother. He just managed not to gasp, and Dean was already amused at the intolerance. And everywhere he bumped, everything he ran into by mistake sent an exploding, blinding pain up whatever part of his body was in contact.

Sometimes, when he stood up suddenly from sitting for a while he felt incredible, terrible dizziness pass through him and he would have to grit his teeth to keep from passing out. Sometimes, he felt so warm at night; he'd want to sleep on ice. Sometimes he'd sweat so much, from odd places; it was like someone was wringing all the water out of him.

Sam hadn't told Dean anything about his new symptoms, mostly because he didn't want his brother to lose more sleep over him. Already, his memory lapses were getting worse, and the doctor attributed them to the brain lesions. After the hair on his head fell off, the hair all over his body proceeded to fall as well and soon, Sam had no eyebrows, eyelashes, or facial hair. His arms and legs were mercilessly clean too.

Anyway, Sam didn't think these new symptoms were a big deal. It was uncomfortable, yes, but so was everything else, and he'd just have to deal with it all. So he dealt. He didn't make a sound at the pain. Dean, of course, noticed the sweating and everything and kept Sam dosed up on electrolytes just in case. But it only got worse, going overboard on one fine day.
Sam was in the bathroom one evening on a Saturday. He'd just come back from finishing the clinic, and the next day was a rest day, which meant he already felt much better. The tests so far showed no improvement and Dean was getting more and more worry lines on his forehead. Currently, however, Sam was going through his second nadir and they'd stopped his anti-viral and replaced it with corticosteroids, which did help a bit with the headaches. But that also meant that Sam would have to be extra-careful this time because he was more likely to catch an infection.

Presently, in the bathroom, Sam undid his zipper and fumbled with his boxers, one hand palming the cool tiles behind the toilet as he tried to relieve himself. He waited a while, the impulse strong, but then he realised that something was wrong when it didn't happen. Wondering what was amiss, Sam took a deep breath, relaxed, and tried again, but he wasn't able to do it. He stood there for five minutes and tried again and again, but his efforts were in vain so he zipped himself up, washed his hands and left, unnecessarily flushing the toilet after him. His inability to piss didn't help any with the fact that his bladder was full, though, and he hoped this wasn't anything serious.

Dean called him for dinner after that and they ate in silence, Castiel antsy from all his coffee, and then Sam returned to the library with others. He was sweating again after that and he felt warm, so he asked Dean to turn down the thermostat a little.

"It's quite cold, what's wrong with you?" Dean asked him as he obeyed Sam, but then he palmed Sam's forehead against the latter's wishes. "You're not burning up."

"No," Sam replied. There was an uneasy pain in his abdomen from the full bladder. "I'm just hot."

"Don't flatter yourself," Dean replied, sliding a Gatorade across the table.

"No, thanks," Sam replied, trying not to wince at his bladder.

"It wasn't a request."

Sam huffed and cracked the bottle open, drinking up the lemon green liquid after that. "Happy?" he asked, when he was done.

"No, but it will do."

He sighed. After a while, he retired to bed, but made another attempt to pee before that, failing again this time. The urge was so bad, but he couldn't understand why he was unable to relieve himself. He didn't tell Dean about any of it, though.

By next morning, he was in agony. The nightly limb-burning-whatever-shit, and then his aching bladder with the need, but inability to pee were getting him crazy, but he kept it in control. He realised that for some goddamned reason, he was unable to void his bladder and he didn't know why. All he knew was that this could get serious if it continued, as it could mean kidney disease, apart from the fact that all that chemo was excreted via urine over days. It couldn't stay in, unless he wanted to poison himself to death.

He promised himself that he'd tell Dean if it didn't go away in the next twenty-four hours. He wished he'd had the chance to speak out, though, as a few hours later, after lunch when he got up from the table, the abdominal pain, dizziness, heat and sweating got to him all at once along with a terrible ache in his chest, and all he remembered after that was rapidly meeting the floor, Dean calling out to him as he did so.

When he came to, gentle, firm fingers were prodding him – his abdomen, to be precise, poking around his navel. He still wanted to pee and the urge increased, and for a moment, he couldn't
understand why someone was poking his belly. And then it all came to him.

He groaned, and felt a hand squeeze his arm. "It's okay, Sam," said a calm, female voice. Cecelia. He realised then that his shirt was crowded around his chest and his jeans were missing. The waistband of his boxers was pulled down too. He smelt the familiarity of the hospital. An IV ran up his vein, giving more pain than he'd ever realised.

"Relax," Cecelia said when Sam tried to move, to snatch away the IV. Why the fuck was it hurting so much? He opened his eyes to find himself in a cubicle of the ER, as Dr. Greene continued to palpate his abdomen. She looked up at him, stripped off her gloves and sighed.

"How are you feeling?"

"Terrible," Sam told her. "What happened?"

"It's called peripheral neuropathy," she explained, pulling up a stool next to him and sitting down, and gesturing something to Cecelia. "It's from the cisplatin – a late side effect. You passed out when you stood up from a sitting position, didn't you?"

"Yes," he replied, "and... there's been other weird things."

"Tingling? Numbness? A strange, burning pain? Sweating?"

He frowned. "Yeah. How did you know?"

"It's the neuropathy. And your bladder's quite distended too. You have urinary retention."

"Can you correct it?" he asked her.

"I'll have to catheterise," she replied, gesturing to Cecelia to get the equipment. "But the neuropathy, no. I'm sorry. We can give symptomatic relief and decrease your chemo dosage, if you want that. But that would mean..."

"... I'll die sooner," Sam said blandly.

"Don't—"

He shrugged. "You agree."

She licked her lips. "Anyway, I'll catheterise you now, but there could be similar episodes, and if it happens—"

"—I come straight to you," Sam finished for her.

"No, actually," she said, pulling down Sam's boxers all the way as she snapped on a new pair of gloves. Latex, Sam noticed. He hated the stink of latex gloves. They smelled like condoms. At the same time, though, he was painfully aware of being exposed to two people like that, and he couldn't help the redness creep up his cheeks.

"Relax," Dr. Greene said, noticing his embarrassment. "I won't be more than five minutes, okay?"

He nodded and watched as Cecelia stripped open the sterile packaging of the Foley and the doctor carefully pulled out the catheter. She started to spread a jelly on its tip and Sam looked away as she bent over, held him and began to insert the catheter.

"Easy, easy," the doctor was saying and Sam grit his teeth against the uneasiness and pain, and
then he felt Cecelia move before his bladder started to empty suddenly.

"All done, Sam," Dr. Greene said, and he opened his eyes, ears still warm, as Cecelia adjusted the collection bag and threw a blanket to protect his dignity. He could see his jeans and boxers folded up on a chair beside him and he turned to the doctor.

"What should I do if this happens again?"

"You could come here, like you said," she shrugged, "or you could do this at home. Dean—"

"No, Dean isn't doing anything," Sam murmured, "I'll come here. Or can I do it by myself?"

"You can," she said, "but it will be painful."

"That's fine."

Dean was his brother, and they'd been through everything together and Sam knew that his brother had even changed his diapers and everything, but this wouldn't happen. There was a limit to what he'd allow Dean to do for him, and he was pretty sure that Dean wouldn't be thrilled to do this either, and would only agree if it was necessary. And it wasn't necessary, so Sam was ready to handle it by himself.

"Okay, then," said the doctor, cutting through his thoughts. "Let's get your bladder empty for now, and then Cecelia can tell you how it's done. Listen carefully, all right?"

"I will." He'd draw diagrams and take notes if he had to, but Dean would have no part in this.

The doctor smiled as she left, and Cecelia spoke. "Would you like Dean and your other friend to come in now? They're waiting outside."

"Sure," Sam replied, tugging his blankets around him so he could be sure that he wasn't exposed, and waving for her to let Dean and Castiel inside.

As she left, he settled back down and prepared himself to explain to his brother about why he had been hiding the new side effects from him. However, he was in for a surprise as only Castiel entered the cubicle, unaccompanied by Dean.

~0~

Dean didn't go in with Castiel when Cecelia beckoned to them. Instead, he waited, spoke to the doctor and learned about Sam's peripheral neuropathy, which was apparently the cause for his brother's new symptoms. And then he washed a hand down his face as he heard of it all. He was tired of this. So tired of Sam being sicker and sicker.

"Have you asked him what he wants to do?" Dean asked Dr. Greene when she mentioned that the only way to bring the neuropathy under control was to reduce the chemo dosage. And as such, even with all that maximum dosage, Sam wasn't responding very well to treatment, so Dean wondered where this would take them.

"He has until the next round to give me an answer," she shrugged, "so you can discuss it together and see what you agree upon."

"Yeah, yeah," he ran his fingers through his hair. "Thanks, doc."

"No problem," she replied, and turned to walk away, but Dean spoke again.
"Uh, but I think I know what he'd want," he said, causing her to look at him again, questioningly. "He'll never tell me," continued Dean, chuckling sadly, "and he'll never tell you. But I think Sam would want to have the dosage reduced. It's just... I'm pushing him so hard to fight..."

"And he wants to," she replied. "The one thing I've learned about him from the last couple of months of being his doctor is that Sam really, really wants to fight."

"But he's in enough pain already, and that's really eating him up," Dean said with a sigh. "So... even if he doesn't say it, just reduce the dose, okay?"

Her eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Dean nodded. "Yeah. Well, I can't afford to lose my brother – I really can't – but I don't want him in pain either. Just make sure he isn't in any more pain?"

The doctor stared at him for a moment, nodding slowly and losing the resolve in her intelligent eyes for a moment – before turning away and making her way to her office.
14. Marital Therapy

Martha Roberts ran a hand through her long, curly hair as she arranged the papers on her desk. She glanced at the door at the far end of the room – the one which led to the doctor's office, and she could hear muffled sounds of a fight starting between the current clients that the doctor was seeing. She sighed. This was such an everyday occurrence at the counselling clinic, what with the number of broken marriages that she got to see so often. It could be quite sad.

She turned back to her papers after that and opened the doctor's diary, checking the appointments and ticking off the ones that had been kept. She had got through a few of them when she sat back, biting at the end of her pen and wondering if she should call the missed appointments and ask them if they wanted to reschedule, when she was interrupted by the gust of wind that blew in. The door to the clinic room had flown open and the wind was blowing over and reshuffling some of her papers. She swore to herself and caught them as the door shut, tucking her hair behind her ears and eyeing the two men who had just walked inside.

They were clients and the first thought that occurred to her when they started to make their way towards her desk was that if they were indeed clients, it was a pity they were gay, because they were really pretty – both of them. Why were all the good ones always taken?

Both were tall – almost of the same height and one had dark blonde hair and green eyes, while the other had dark hair, stunningly blue eyes and a very clueless expression on his face. He kept glancing at his partner at regular intervals, while the other man steadily made his way towards Martha.

"Hey," Pretty Green Eyes said, flashing a charming smile, "is the doctor in?"

"Yes," Martha replied, "she's busy, though. Do you have an appointment today?" She'd kill Mindy for not telling her about these two — if they'd come in and made their appointment while she was absent.

Martha's murderous thoughts, however, were interrupted by two simple words. "Uh... no."

She quickly forgave her colleague at that, and spoke. "Then you'll have to make one if you want to see her."

He glanced at his partner. "Er... we don't exactly have to..." he swallowed, seemed to think for a moment, "when's the earliest appointment that we could make with her?"

She checked the diary and spotted a slot in the evening. "Seven o'clock this evening good enough for you lovebirds?"

Pretty Blue Eyes opened his mouth to say something but Pretty Green Eyes shook his head at him, eliciting an intensification of confusion on the other's face.

"Oh... yeah," Green Eyes replied, and he seemed a little flustered. "Sure."

"Names?"

"Dean Winchester," he said automatically, and he glanced at his partner. "This is Cas. Cas... um... Cas Novak," he said finally.
"Okay," she said, writing down the names. "Married, or...?" She licked her lips. "You know the doc only sees married couples, right? This is marital therapy." Martha jerked her thumb towards the signboard outside that said in bold letters, *Marriage Counsellor*.

"We are married," Cas stated matter-of-factly. "Dean is my husband."

*Something a lot of girls would love to say once when they lay eyes on this guy*, she thought, thinking of all the gushing that Mindy was going to have to put up with later on. Neither of the men wore wedding bands, though, and Dean seemed to catch Martha's observation.

"We've kinda been having problems lately, so the wedding rings are back home," he said, "but yeah, we're married."

"Then the doctor would like you to get them along. She says that's the first step towards healing your marriage."

"Oh," he said, going slightly pink around the ears. "We'll get them when we come back, then."

"Okay." She smiled. "See you later."

"Yeah, thanks," he grinned back and turned to Cas. "Come on."

They exited the room in a hurry, leaving Martha to wonder about who was on top amongst the two of them. If it were up to her, she'd put her money on Dean, she thought. He looked like the top person.

~o~

Sam was at the library, munching on a salad while Charlie sat across him, a beer bottle in one hand and her iPad in the other. Ever since Sam had been started on the steroids his appetite was increasing steadily — something that made Dean quite happy — but Sam knew from the doctor that this was just one of the side-effects from the dexamethasone. However, that didn't stop him from eating about six to eight times a day, walloping down huge amounts of food each time, and now that the nausea from the radiotherapy and chemo had waned off, he could afford to eat more too.

Charlie had come back to visit the previous day and had been even more shocked at the deterioration in Sam's health and his renewed, hairless appearance. This time, however, she'd come to stay a few more days, with leave from work and everything. Sam was grateful to the fact that she cared so much. The first thing Charlie did after seeing Sam, though, was to teach him how to tie a bandanna over his head, so he wouldn't feel all that embarrassed. It didn't prevent him from looking like an alien but it looked much better than before. Dean had even joked that all hippie styles seemed to suit Sam.

At the present moment, Sam forked some lettuce into his mouth and glanced at his companion, who was frowning at her iPod. She was busy having some of the text translated from a healing book that Dean had found the previous day. Sam licked his lips. "Hey, Charlie?"

She looked up. "Yeah, Sam?"

"Thanks for sending Dean and Cas on that case. They really needed the break, you know," he said truthfully.

"I surmised as much," she said, shrugging. "And you're welcome."
Charlie had come with a case – an apparent haunting two hours away from the bunker. There were mysterious deaths in the lane outside of a counselling clinic owned by a Dr Bollinger, and on researching the doctor's family history, they'd found out that she had a sister who had been raped and murdered at the very spot where the victims were found. The victims were all male and middle-aged, just like the rapists had been. Basically, it all pointed to a haunting, which meant that Dean and Castiel were only looking at a salt-and-burn — once they'd found out where the sister was buried.

So Sam had asked them to go because, in his opinion, they very much needed it. They were both reluctant – Dean, because he didn't want to leave Sam alone, and Castiel because he didn't want to waste time not researching. However, both of them were so stressed, so terribly tired having been cooped up with the depressing sight of Sam being so sick that he really wanted them to leave and get a break. So after much pleading and a return of the puppy-dog eyes, that hadn't made an appearance in ages, Sam was able to convince them to leave.

That didn't mean Dean didn't call every two hours, and, oh, *speak of the devil*, thought Sam, as Dean's ID began to flash on his cell phone, timed exactly two hours after the last call. He sighed as he answered it.

"Sam Winchester died from answering your calls," he said irately, hiding his face in his hands.

"Not funny," Dean snarled from the other side. "You good?"

"How do I sound?"

"Stupid."

"You should get your ears checked."

"Sure," Dean paused, "uh... you er... listen, you know we had those fake wedding rings in the car? Just in case?"

"Yeah." Sam raised his eyebrows as he sipped at his glass of water.

"Where are those?"

"You pretending to be married?" Sam asked, smiling slightly.

"Yeah," Dean blew a string of air onto the receiver. "Me and Cas," he said, and then mumbled the next few words so quietly, Sam had to press the receiver really hard against his ear, "... to each other," Dean finished.

Sam almost choked on his water. "Wh-What?" he sputtered. "Come again?"

"We're pretending to be gay, okay?" Dean said exasperatedly, and Sam could almost feel the heat radiating from Dean's cheek.

"Shut up," the elder Winchester snapped, before Sam could say anything.

"Never," Sam said in a stage whisper, breaking into a wide smile for the first time in ages. Charlie looked up at him questioningly.

"If you don't, I'll - I'll—"

"—marry Cas?"
"Sam, shut up."

"No, I won't," Sam replied, snorting, as he began to chortle.

"It's your fault anyway," Dean accused him. "Why didn't you tell us that this Bollinger woman was a marriage therapist?"

"Is she?"

"Do you really think I want to be married to Cas?"

Sam didn't answer that. "Who asked you to get an appointment, then?" he asked instead. "You could have spoken to her just like that."

"We had to get one, because we can't meet her otherwise, okay?"

"Suuure."

"For the last time, Sam, shut up," said Dean. "Now, where are the rings?"

"In the glove compartment – right inside. You'll have to fish for them a little because the box is hidden under all the papers and photos, but you'll find it."

"Okay. Thanks. You're good, right?"

"Yeah, Dean."

"Ate something? Staying hydrated to keep up with all that neurotic sweating?"

"It's neuropathic, and yes."

"Dork. Go, get some rest. And say 'hey' to Charlie."

"Sure." Sam covered the receiver and looked up at Charlie. "Newly wedded Mr and Mr Winchester say 'hey'."

"What?" she raised her eyebrows. "You serious?"

"Very."

"How?! Can I talk? Sam, let me—"

"Saaam!" Dean's voice cut her from the phone, and when Sam put the phone to his ear, his brother spoke again. "I'm going to kick your ass once I get back," he said menacingly, and then mumbled, "and it's Winchester and Novak."

That was the last thing that Sam heard, before the line went dead.

~o~

"Should have brought Charlie instead of you," Dean sighed, as he fished the glove compartment of the Impala for the wedding bands.

Castiel was hovering behind him, adjusting his jacket while he watched Dean. "I didn't know you had a problem with homosexuality," he said, confused.

"No, no," Dean sighed, as his hands found a small box. He pulled it out. It was red in colour and
when he opened it, two fake rings sat there, glinting innocently in the sunlight. "It's not the gay thing," he said, handing one ring to Castiel. "Try this on."

Castiel took it and slid it down his long finger, holding his hand up for Dean to see. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah, gorgeous," Dean commented, trying on the other one. "Tears in my eyes. Anyway, Cas," he continued, examining his own hand with the ring, "you need to lie. A lot."

"Are you worried that I cannot lie?"

"What d'ya think?"

"I can lie, Dean."

"Okay, then how did we meet?"

"That's simple, you did not try to kill me with Bobby at your side."

Dean licked his lip as he took off his ring. "You're gonna have to do better than that. Sam introduced us, okay?"

"Is Sam still your brother in this?"

"Yes."

"Does he have cancer?"

"I don't think the doctor is interested in knowing that." Dean paused. "Okay, why are we having... uh, marital problems?"

"Because you are really interested in women as well, and you cheated."

Dean pressed his lips together and nodded, impressed. "That's good. If she asks a name, say Charlie or something, okay?"

"But Charlie is homosexual, like we're supposed to be."

"Doesn't matter, Cas."

"Okay."

There was silence as Castiel slid his own ring off and handed it to Dean. They would wear it later, when they got back to the appointment. They headed into the motel room and Dean shrugged off his jacket before sitting on his bed and knuckling his eyes. Castiel made a beeline to the desk, where he opened one of the research books they'd brought along.

Dean saw this, licked his lower lip, and drew out his phone, where Charlie had emailed him something she'd found from the ancient book that morning. He'd asked her not to tell Sam about it – about the healing process she'd found, but he knew he wouldn't mind doing it. Sam's acceptance, however, was another story. Sam would never let Dean go ahead.

"Hey, Cas," he called out to the former angel.

Castiel looked up from the book. "Yes, Dean."

"Charlie... found something this morning."
He frowned. "About healing Sam?"

Dean nodded, and swallowed. "Yeah." He opened Charlie's email, and the attachments, as Castiel came and joined him. The angel sat beside him and looked into Dean's phone as the sides of their thighs touched. The elder Winchester let him read the translations, and Castiel's frown grew deeper and deeper, but he didn't comment until he'd finished.

"Sam will not like this," the angel said quietly, straightening up when he was done. "And..." he frowned, "I don't think I agree either."

"But this is a definite way."

"I know, Dean, but we can find something else."

"What else can we find? Sam doesn't have much time, in case you haven't noticed."

"I know," Castiel repeated, and paused, "but no, Dean... please don't. Don't do this to Sam. Don't do this to me."

Dean sighed. "Cas, try and understand, man. Charlie refused to let me do it, and Sam will kill me if I tell him... but I was hoping that at least you'd back me up."

"I can't, Dean. This is not the solution."

"But it..." Dean swallowed. "It fits. This... everything... it's all my fault anyway..."

Castiel frowned at him. "It's not your fault. It will never be. And I know Sam has said so too."

"He'll never blame me," Dean said, chuckling, "that's just how the bitch is."

"And he has no reason to. I would never blame you either."

Castiel stood up, indicating that he wouldn't carry on this conversation, and Dean marvelled at how human he was becoming so soon.

~0~

Sam could feel a familiar irritation start at the back of his throat as evening grew close. He had been coughing discreetly for a few days now, but the coughs were usually only at night, and he had muffled them into his pillow, so no one would notice. It was a simple cough and, okay, maybe he was a little congested, and the cough was slightly productive, but he didn't have a fever like the last time. He didn't need Dean to worry, as such, which was why he was keeping it a secret. He wondered if he was catching another infection, though, and hoped this would go away soon.

He was downing about a dozen oranges for an evening snack (god, he felt so hungry) when he coughed for the first time when it wasn't night. Charlie, who had taken her job of monitoring him seriously, frowned. "Coming down with something again?"

He spat into a wad of tissues, tossed it into the trash, and cleared his throat. "No. I'm good."

"You sure?"

"Yup."

He downed a bunch of grapes after the oranges and didn't realise it was a bad idea until the very end, when it made him cough twice more. And the expectoration seemed to have increased a tad,
seeing grapes are a known expectorant.

"Sam?" Charlie asked cautiously from her side.

He broke into a fit of coughs, then, and his eyes watered as he tried to keep it together. "Sorry," he said hoarsely, coughing into his hand, "something went the wrong way..." He got up and made his way to the sink, where he spat again.

She looked suspicious when he came back. "You're spitting up phlegm."

"Which is a good thing. It means the cough's clearing up. I'll be fine, Charlie."

"You would say something if you weren't feeling good, right?"

"Definitely."

"Okay." She didn't look convinced, as she went back to work.

By night, however, the coughing and the expectoration had increased. Sam wondered what had brought it on, and hoped, again, that it wasn't a huge infection, because that wouldn't take more than a night to get serious, and he could be in serious trouble then.

He spat into the basin once more before going to sleep, the phlegm only having thickened, and the frequency of coughing having increased. He still didn't have a fever, though, so he reckoned he was okay and lay down to rest, wondering how Dean's hunt was going.

~o~

By evening, Dean and Castiel had a full story for their 'marriage'. When they entered the counsellor's office with wedding rings on and awkwardly holding each other's hand, the receptionist from earlier that day pointed them out to the other receptionist and they had a session of giggles to themselves, which Dean tried not to get irritated about. Finally, it was his and Castiel's turn to go inside.

"Remember," he muttered to Castiel, "we need to find out where her sister was buried. The rest isn't important, so don't get nervous even if you mess up a little, okay?"

"Okay," Castiel repeated.

The doctor was a tall woman in her late forties. Her blond hair was pulled up in a ponytail and her face was oddly made-up. Dean let go of Castiel's sweaty hand and muttered something about shrinks as he sat down. He really didn't like them, and the fact that many could figure out what was going around in his head.

"Make yourselves comfortable," Dr Bollinger said, smiling at the men. She consulted her file, and then looked up, setting her sound recorder to start recording. "Can we have some introductions here?"

"Dean Winchester," Dean replied to her automatically. "This is my... husband, Cas Novak."

She smoothed down her lab coat. "Good to meet you, Dean and Cas. I am Dr Bollinger, as you might already know."

"Yeah."

"So," she bent forward and smiled. "How long have you two been married?"
"Uh... about two years, now," Dean replied, trying to will away the embarrassment that was creeping up his cheeks.

"And when did you meet?"

"In 2008."

"That's charming," she replied. "How do you find married life?"

Dean swallowed. "Peachy."

She turned to Castiel. "And you, Cas?"

"There have been too many lies," the former angel promptly replied, and Dean almost sighed. This wasn't a real counselling and they needed to bolt as fast as they could, and he hoped that Castiel wouldn't actually bring up anything worth discussing with the doctor.

"Do you agree with him, Dean?" she asked.

"I..." Dean scratched at his cheek stubble, embarrassed, "it's a bumpy ride, but we're good."

"And what has made it a 'bumpy ride', then?"

"Like he said," Dean responded, "lies and all. We met through my brother, and..."

"Oh so there was matchmaking involved with you two?"

"Yeah, my brother," Dean replied. "You got any siblings?"

"Yes, and she used to set me up on a lot of dates too," Bollinger replied. She turned to Castiel. "Why don't you tell me about your first meeting, Cas?"

Before Castiel could reply, Dean spoke up. "Your sister doesn't set you up on dates anymore?"

"Well, I'm married, like you," the doctor replied, showing off her own wedding ring. "So no more strange dates," she chuckled. She turned back to Castiel. "So, Cas..."

"What does your sister do?" Dean had spoken again.

"Oh, nothing much," Bollinger said patiently, "but this session is about you and Cas, Dean, so we'll talk about my sister some other time, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Dean. "It's just that, I have a little brother I worry about too, so—"

She raised her eyebrow. "How old is your brother?"

"Thirty-two."

"And you worry about him?"

"That's because Sam is very ill," Castiel replied, and Dean sighed. He had told the former angel not to talk about Sam, and now the doctor would plough on this one.

He was not disappointed. The doctor's face melted in sympathy.

"I'm sorry. Has Sam been unwell for a long time now?"
"A while," Dean replied. 'Unwell' was too mild a word for what Sam was.

"Have you told Cas about how much it worries you?"

"I know about that," Castiel replied, "but Dean doesn't talk. He just lets the worry eat at him."

Dean glared at him. "Well, I'm not the one who doesn't sleep, trying to look for ways to help Sam!"

"At least I'm trying to help him," Castiel said, "you are looking for ways to upset him further."

"Sammy will understand."

Castiel looked angry. "I don't think you get it, Dean. This will never end well, even if he happens to understand. Have you not learned anything since the last time? Do you not value yourself? Are you that low on self-esteem?"

"I'm good, thank you," Dean snapped at him. "You need to stop obsessing, and let me do what I want to."

"I can't let that happen."

"Why?"

"I promised my father—"

"Oh, screw that, Cas, God left long ago."

" Doesn't mean he would want this to happen again," Castiel replied.

They glared at each other for a while, breathing heavily through their frustration. There was silence as Dean turned to the doctor, who, he noticed, was watching them intently. He felt redness climb up his cheeks again.

She cleared her throat. "So we know now where the problem is coming from. You believe in God?"

"Yes," Castiel replied, as Dean simultaneously replied with a 'no'.

"Do you have a problem with each other's beliefs?"

"Not really," Dean muttered.

Bollinger bit her lip. "You two seem to be really angry about something. I can sense some long withheld anger there, and in the next few sessions, we'll out these and work to calm you down. We will start simple today, though, and I'll show you some relaxing exercises."

Dean nodded, angry that he'd let go of the opportunity to ask the doctor about her sister. All through the rest of the hour, he tried to create another window to ask her as she showed him and Cas some simple breathing exercises. Their hour went by quicker than they expected, and towards the end, Dean finally found his excuse.

"Uh..." he began, once they were done with the exercises, "you wouldn't know where the cemeteries are, would you? I've got someone I'd like to visit. I'm not sure where they're buried, though."

She frowned. "You're not from here?"
"No, we live in Lebanon. We just heard about you, so we came here."

"Oh," she said, "you don't live very far away, then. Well, there's just one cemetery in this town. It's attached to the church."

"Okay, thanks," Dean said, and made to get up, when the doctor spoke again.

"Before you go, I have two more exercises for you."

He settled back down, ready to do anything, as he could now finish the job within the hour and head back to the bunker in the morning. Charlie had called earlier, saying that Sam was coughing, and he didn't like the sound of it. He looked up expectantly at the doctor, who smiled.

"Do you remember your wedding day?"

"Yes," Dean said, wondering what kind of a question that was.

"I want you to relive it," she said. "I want you to remember one of the best moments of your lives."

She gestured to the men. "Take your rings off and exchange them again."

"W-What?" Dean stammered.

"You heard me," she replied, "come on, now."

Dean bit the inside of his cheek as he took off his ring and handed it to Castiel, taking the former angel's ring from him. He turned to the doctor, who nodded, and he just said a silent prayer as he grasped Castiel's hand and slowly slid the ring on.

_Please don't make us kiss. Please don't make us kiss._

Castiel copied Dean, holding his hand, and Dean took a sharp intake of breath at the contact, but relaxed as the warm metal slid back onto his finger.

"Now," said the doctor, and Dean's heart went into overdrive. _Nokissnokissnokiss..._

"Tell each other how much you love the other person," Bollinger finished, and Dean almost sighed in relief. This wouldn't be hard.

He looked up at Castiel, not quite meeting eyes with the former angel, as Castiel spoke. "I love you, Dean."

"Yeah," Dean replied, "yeah, me too."

"Say it," the doctor said.

"Uh..." Dean looked into the earnest blue eyes and averted his gaze a little. "I love you too, Cas."

~o~

Castiel had only ever been drunk once, his whole life. He didn't remember the experience as the best of all the human experiences he'd had, but he didn't have a big problem doing it again either.

"I need a drink," Dean had said, once they'd salted and burned the remains of the doctor's sister. The spirit hadn't had opportunity to fling them about, and everything had gone quite smoothly. So Dean had pulled Castiel along to a bar to drink down the amusing, strange evening they'd just had.
Castiel drank a 'shot' of whiskey, and then another, and Dean ordered beers for them. And then they had some more 'shots', and Castiel wasn't sure he could think straight anymore. He started to get very amused at the most horrible of Dean's drunken jokes, and Castiel understood at that point, that he was quite intoxicated by alcohol.

So they exited the bar together, laughing loudly at Bollinger's session and about the fact that they had to confess love to each other. In a while, both stumbled into the motel room, still laughing loudly. Dean threw off his jacket the moment the door was shut behind them and he took out his nightclothes from the bag, pulling off the flannel shirt as well.

Castiel crossed over to his own bag so he could extract some comfortable clothes, but on the way he swayed, and bumped shoulders with Dean, who was starting to take off his t-shirt. The contact was brief but powerful, muscle and fabric brushing against the former angel's own shoulder. Something sizzled through him at that and he wasn't sure if it was a normal response to being drunk, but it was tantalising. Something seemed to move inside of him.

Confused, Castiel turned around to apologise, face-to-face with the elder Winchester. He opened his mouth, trying to say it, but no words would come out. The air between them had changed. Everything had changed, and Castiel couldn't figure out why a shoulder contact had done that.

And then there was silence, except for the slow, heavy, intoxicated breathing from both the men. In the dim light, Castiel could see that Dean's pupils were dilated, the elder Winchester's hands clutching at the hem of his t-shirt as he stood there, looking into Castiel's eyes. A pink tongue came out slowly, nervously, to moisten Dean's lower lip. And before Castiel had realised, he was leaning forward, so that his face was inches away from Dean's.

"Cas," the other man breathed, and Castiel could smell the alcohol in his breath. They breathed for a while, deep, slow and in sync and suddenly, without thinking, Castiel had leaned closer, palming Dean's cheek as he did so.

Two inches.

One inch.

One centimetre.

He could count Dean's freckles. His cheek was slightly rough with stubble and he was warm under Castiel's hand. Dean's lips parted, daring Castiel to take the next step, and he braced himself, his other hand going to Dean's shoulder, touching the place where his Grace had left a mark all those years ago — and where they'd touched — not so long ago.

They stood like that, breaths still in sync, pupils still dilated, blue into green, green into blue, and Dean's finger slowly came ahead to wind around one of Castiel's belt loops.

Their noses touched, and now Castiel could smell Dean – the Impala, cleaning oil, the gunpowder. Dean's other hand reached the hem of Castiel's shirt and he felt a cool palm on his waist. Fingers brushed against Castiel's skin, causing him to inhale sharply. He felt Dean's nails rub against his hip and he gripped the other man tighter. They moved closer, if possible, lips brushing, and as Castiel felt the softness on his mouth his brain woke up again.

He then realised what he was doing. What he — they had been about to do. Horrified, he pulled away.

"Cas?" Dean slurred, finger leaving the belt loop, but the other hand staying where it was. His
expression indicated confusion.

Castiel didn't reply to that. He just staggered back to his bed, feeling the brush of Dean's fingers again as they lost contact. He then slumped over and slept for the first time in days. The next morning, both of them remembered it, but neither spoke of it as they woke up with twin monster hangovers and drove back to the bunker, to Sam.

~o~

Sam was happy to have Dean and Castiel back, but that only meant that Dean was going to keep a closer watch on him than Charlie. His cough had increased slightly on the morning that his brother and the former angel arrived, pale-faced and on edge. Sam discovered quickly that they were both hungover.

"That bad?" he asked Dean as he handed him aspirin, referring to the marital therapy session. Dean was currently supine on his bed, moaning as he clutched his head.

"Don't ask," Dean groaned through his pain. "Fought like a fucking married couple. Of course we had to get drunk after that."

"Did she make you kiss?" Sam's lips slid into a mischievous smile.

"Shut up, Sam, NO!" Dean said, but he said it so fiercely, he and Castiel might as well have kissed. "I mean, I'm thanking my stars for that," he continued, ignoring Sam's smirk. "It was bad enough, what she made us do."

"What did she make you do?"

"Fuck off."

Sam chuckled, coughed, and went to check on Castiel, whom he offered aspirin as well. Both the hungover men were fine a while later, but the youngest Winchester couldn't help but notice that something had visibly changed between them. He couldn't put a finger to what it was, but something was... different. He promised himself he'd find out, though.

That night, Sam developed a slight fever again. It waned a few hours later with the cold compresses and he was okay the next day, just coughing more. It escalated from there and by night, the phlegm wasn't just regular phlegm anymore.

A few nights later, it all went to hell when Sam got up from his bed as he felt a coughing fit coming on. Slowly, he made his way to the bathroom and stayed there for the full attack, and what he spat out after that tasted very odd and was of a strange colour, that Sam knew, indicated infection. He got to his room and fell back into a disturbed sleep, uncomfortable because he was warm and cold and sweaty from the neuropathy.

When he woke up, though, he had a headache, and there was someone sitting on a stool beside his bed.

"Sammy?"

He squinted in the darkness, at the figure beside him.

"Hey," said the voice, "I think we should get you to the hospital, pal."

He licked his lips. Something was wrong, his gut told him. He didn't know... he couldn't... who
was this? What was happening?

"Sam, you with me?" the strange man asked, flicking on a light and leaning close. He looked familiar, but the other man wasn't sure why. He needed to find out.

He cleared his throat. "Who is Sam? Do I know you?"
"Who is Sam?"

Dean wrung out a washcloth in a bowl of water and placed it on his brother's forehead. The doctor had asked them to get to the hospital at daybreak so that she could have a look at Sam's cough, and she'd told Dean to keep an eye on him until then. The elder Winchester still hadn't told her about the fact that Sam hadn't recognised either of them when he'd woken up last because he really didn't need to hear any more bad news for the night.

"Do I know you?"

Sam had clutched his head, groaning, not recognising anyone around him, and Dean and Charlie had somehow managed to coax him back to sleep. The elder Winchester had taken his position by Sam's bed after that and began placing cool washcloths to his forehead to comfort him. Sam had opened his eyes once or twice, coughed for a bit, and moaned before going back to sleep.

Dean heard footsteps and sensed someone peering from the doorway. "Need any help?" asked a familiar, gravelly voice and Dean turned to a very dishevelled but alert Castiel.

"Uh, no, Cas, but thanks," he said quietly, clutching Sam's shoulder when the latter moaned.

Castiel looked at him for a long moment, causing Dean to avert his gaze, and then the former angel walked away.

Dean sighed. If everything else weren't enough, the awkwardness between him and Castiel was worse than ever. Neither of them knew what had gone wrong the night after the marital therapy or whatever — they'd just been drunk and ended up… not kissing… well, thank Jesus for that. Though Dean couldn't remember every part of that moment, he could distinctly recollect some sections, and it embarrassed him enough. What was he thinking?

His thoughts, however, were interrupted by another groan and a cough from his brother. He turned around to see Sam open groggy, glazed eyes. He coughed again. "D-Dean?"

"Hey," Dean replied, eyes widening. "Hey, right here, Sammy." He squeezed Sam's shoulder harder for emphasis.

Sam broke into a coughing fit and hauled himself up with the help of Dean, so he was sitting and bending forward. Dean patted and rubbed his back a few times, handing him a clump of tissues to spit into at the end of it. Sam then sat back against the headboard and shut his eyes.

"Feel crappy," he muttered, clearing his throat.

"No shit, Sherlock," Dean replied severely. "Why didn't you tell me that it was bad?"

"Didn't want you to worry," Sam rasped, coughing again. He opened his eyes a little and took a deep breath. "How come we haven't had a panic ride to the hospital yet?"

"The doc asked me to haul your ass in there first thing in the morning," Dean shrugged.

"Aw, man, it's just a cold," Sam groaned, and coughed again.
"It's not." Dean licked his lips, remembering Sam from a few hours before. He'd been so sure the memory loss was permanent… how was it that Sam remembered everything now?

Sam was looking at him questioningly. "Something else happen? Something I can't remember?"

"Nothin'," Dean replied. "Now go back to sleep."

The other man raised his eyebrow. "I can usually tell when you're lying to me, you know. I have always managed to find out the truth, haven't I?"

"You so can't tell, Sam, don't flatter yourself so much. And I'm not lying."

Sam was serious. "Tell me, Dean."

"Go to sleep, Sam."

He sighed and lay back down. "I'll find out later on, then."

Dean didn't reply to that, instead returning to his washcloth duties as he tried to cool Sam off. This was going to be a long night.

~o~

A few days later when Dean looked back at it, he had been sure that Sam had only had a simple throat infection, supplemented by a cold. The visit to the doctor earned more antibiotics and a discontinuation of the steroids again, which meant that the debilitating headaches were back. Dean had spoken to the doctor about Sam's memory loss and she had been sympathetic as she explained how Sam's brain tumours weren't getting any smaller, and that one of them was probably beginning to press on his memory fibres. Sam would have an amnesic attack every now and then, and there was nothing that could be done about it. So like every other permanent damage to his brother that Dean had to accept, he decided to accept this one too.

As such, he knew what he had to do, if nothing worked out. There was at least one way to completely heal Sam, and though no one thought it was appropriate, Dean would always keep it with himself, so that he could use it if required. It didn't matter how much Charlie or Castiel disapproved anyway — Sam wasn't their brother, and they hadn't raised him, or vowed to protect him. So yes, Dean had the right to go up to all extremes to help Sam, and no one was allowed to stop him.

Meanwhile, it was six days since Sam's huge memory lapse and now, as Dean sat next to his hospital bed, he could feel his throat tighten a little. Sam wasn't supposed to be here. He should have been at home, taking his antibiotics by mouth and bitching about Dean's cooking or trying to pry out the truth about what had happened between Dean and Cas while the elder brother dodged him (Sam had already questioned it several times, and Dean wasn't even ready to sort out that particular issue with himself — forget telling Sam about it — and he would never tell Sam. Never). Basically, Sam had been all right… he was supposed to be all right, but seeing him like this, in the hospital again… Dean couldn't understand what had gone so wrong.

His mind went back to that fateful day, three days ago. Sam was coughing harder than ever with a terrible ache in his chest to accompany it. It seemed that the antibiotics and cough medication weren't good enough, for later on, the coughing progressed to high fever with chills that didn't go away even with the thermostat bumped up. This was followed by a return of the all that terrible puking, and Sam had been so tired, so sick, he'd barely been conscious when Dean and the others had rushed him back to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with pneumonia.
"Lobar pneumonia," Dr Greene had said, "Caused by bacteria known as Pneumococci. I didn't think it would progress to this, but Sam's immune system is too weak."

Dean wanted to snap at her, but he held it back and watched as his brother was given a nasal cannula to deliver him some extra oxygen. He was then hooked to some stronger antibiotics, along with some cough and pain medication. From that, Sam had never improved.

The elder brother rubbed a hand down his face as he sat there, watching his brother sleep while he drew in wheezy, congested breaths. The X-rays barely showed progress — it was only getting worse, with consolidation or congestion or whatever the fuck the doctor was calling it, and Sam's health was really taking a plunge. Dean had read somewhere that most cancer patients died of exacerbated infections, and he hoped this wouldn't be the case for Sam. He hoped that Sam would be able to fight this.

As he thought of it, Sam opened his eyes, groaning, and Dean leaned forward, alert to act on anything that his brother would need. He watched as the slanted eyes opened to a slit — irises swivelling over and scanning the area. A hand fist Sam's bed sheets as he drew in a long, wheezing breath and coughed. He had been doing that for a while.

"Sammy?" Dean whispered, leaning closer.

Blue-green eyes moved sluggishly to look at Dean as Sam drew in another laboured breath. He let out a second cough and tried to breathe — a long, ratting inhalation shaking through him and eliciting another cough as he did so.

"Hey, take it easy," Dean muttered, rubbing his brother's chest as Sam's eyes filled up a tad, and he tried to breathe again.

That was when Dean realised that something was horribly wrong.

"Sammy," he called out, watching the eye slits shut as Sam's breathing picked up a little in pace, but still maintained the long and rattling quality. It seemed as if he was trying really hard to get some air in him but wasn't able to.

"Relax," Dean commanded him, clutching his forearm and pressing on the button to call the nurse. "Hey," he said again, when Sam's breathing rate increased and he started to cough and choke.

The nurse arrived just as Dean was trying to soothe his gasping, choking, breathless little brother. She paged the doctor the moment she entered and rushed to the cabinets, beginning to prepare a tray of some sort.

"What's happening?" Dean asked as she rolled over the tray, and he saw that it was equipped with endotracheal tubes and a laryngoscope, along with some other stuff that he couldn't make out. Dr Greene entered the room just then and she seemed to have heard Dean's question, for she answered it.

"Your brother is in respiratory distress," she said, "he's having trouble breathing."

"Is this—?"

"It's the pneumonia," the doctor confirmed, snapping on gloves from a box and opening Sam's mouth as she grasped the laryngoscope to intubate him. Dean realised, alarmed, that Sam was starting to turn blue.

Sam struggled and Dean patted his arm. "It's okay, Sam, be calm, she'll be done soon." He knew
what was going to happen. He'd seen it too many times, and had experienced it too, and he knew it wasn't the most comfortable thing.

The younger Winchester choked as the laryngoscope entered his mouth, fisting his sheets harder, tears making their way down his eyes. Dean held on to Sam's forearm as he watched the doctor manoeuvre the laryngoscope on the other side. Cecelia handed her the endotracheal tube and the doctor brought it to Sam's mouth, slowly inserting it, when Sam gagged.

She stopped for a moment, waiting for clear ground before continuing with the insertion process. Sam gagged again, eyes full of panic and Dean clutched his forearm harder, coaxing Sam to take it easy. "Don't fight it. Let her do it."

The younger brother nodded and shut his eyes as the endotracheal tube went down again, but then he gagged for a third time.

"Oh, oh no..." Dr Greene let go of the tube and took out the laryngoscope as bile bubbled out of Sam's mouth, flowing down his chin and throat. "Turn him over!" she commanded and Dean stood up, pushing Sam to his side as the sheets began to get soiled with the contents of Sam's stomach.

"Prepare for tracheostomy," Dr Greene said to some of the other medical staff who had arrived to assist her and Cecelia as the latter prepared to suction Sam's mouth. Dean patted his shuddering shoulders in an attempt to calm him, as he continued to choke and gasp. The bluish colour of his lips was increasing in intensity. They didn't have time, Dean realised.

"Come on, Sammy," he said, as Sam retched helplessly, "get it together. Breathe, man!"

Sam took a while to stop throwing up and when he was finally done, Cecelia hurriedly inserted the suction, trying to clear out his airway and turned Sam on his back again as Dr Greene moved ahead and started to swab his throat.

"What are you doing?" Dean asked her hoarsely, the smell of iodine hitting his nostrils. The doctor's head snapped up.

"You should leave," she said, as a nurse handed her a scalpel.

"No! Tell me what you're doing!"

"I'm going to tracheostomise Sam," she explained hurriedly, "cut through his throat and insert a tube. I can't stand and talk. Please—"

"I'll stay," he said, determined, seeing the fear in Sam's eyes. Dr Greene sighed.

"This is going to be painful," she told Sam, "but you're already hypoxaemic." Without further explanation, she reached Sam's throat and promptly slit it vertically. Sam's body arched as his eyes shut in pain and he flung out an arm, searching the air until he found Dean's shirt and clutched on to it.

Dean caught hold of his wrist with both hands. "Right here, buddy, she'll be done in a mo'."

"Retractor," the doctor said and a nurse handed her the equipment.

Dean tried to keep his nausea down as he separated muscle fibres and kept them retracted, and then took the scalpel again. Sam's fist was clenching and unclenching Dean's shirt, involuntary noises of pain coming out of his throat and breaking Dean's heart. The latter took deep breaths through his mouth to control his urge to throw up and looked at Sam's arm instead, at the IV
running up and delivering the medicines while his palms sweated against Sam's dry skin.

When he turned again he could see Sam's windpipe, and his stomach contents gurgled as the doctor injected something and started to cut. In a while she had inserted the tube and was taping it to Sam's throat after attaching him to a ventilator. Sam was still letting out short spurts of air from his mouth, his breathing improving from the ventilator, but his face crumpling in pain as tears of agony wet his temples and the bedding beneath him.

"Hey, man, it's okay," Dean said, one hand going up and down Sam's forearm while the other grasped his wrist. The nurse started to clean Sam's face with a wet cloth, but Dean held out his hand to her. "I'll do it."

"Don't touch the dressing," she replied while the doctor took note of Sam's readings. Cecelia also handed Dean a new hospital gown from the cabinet. "Get him into this. I'll change his sheets."

The elder brother helped Sam off the bed, onto a wheelchair and they waited while Cecelia switched the soiled bedclothes to clean ones. Dr Greene was standing in the background, waiting for Sam to get comfortable. The younger Winchester then gestured to Dean that he could change by himself and respecting that, the other man left the room. He came back to see Sam on his bed again, dabbing at his own face with the washcloth. Dean's gut clenched when he realised that Sam seemed to be in a lot of pain. Dr Greene was talking to him.

"It's just to assist your breathing," she was saying. "You are experiencing insufficiency, and your respiratory distress put you in the danger of hypoxaemia — which is basically a condition in which the oxygen levels in your blood are decreased. This in turn could cause reduced oxygen supply to your brain and other vital organs. We had to ventilate you to help your lungs along."

She inserted her hands into her pockets. "You'll be off the ventilator in a few days. Let Cecelia know if the tracheostomy wound is giving you trouble, okay? We'll keep you on IV feeding until you recover." She nodded at the nurse, who stepped forward and stuck a needle through Sam's IV port.

"Morphine," Cecelia explained as she and Dean watched Sam drift away.

Dean licked his lips. "Thanks." *For not keeping my brother in pain.* He pulled a stool and sat down again, watching the nurse go as he buried his face in his hands.

~o~

"Dean?"

Dean looked over at the door, at the source of the voice. It was Charlie. She gave him a wan smile as she came forward and pulled up a stool beside him.

"How's he doing?"

Dean washed a hand down his face. "He…" he looked up at the hissing of the ventilator. "Same. Hasn't woken up since she — they cut through his throat."

She glanced up at the ventilator. "He is triggering the vent, though. He's breathing on his own."

"Yeah. Yeah, he is."

"He'll be fine," she said. Dean nodded again, desperately wanting to believe that.
"Did you find anything else?" He asked Charlie, turning to her.

"Not yet," she sighed.

"He doesn't have much time, Charlie," Dean whispered, glancing at his brother. "Can't I at least —?"

"No," she said firmly. "No, Dean. That's not the answer. Just like it wasn't the last time."

"I'm not selling my soul or making a deal. This is different."

"Not really," she shrugged.

He swore under his breath and heard stirring from Sam's direction. He turned to his brother. "Sammy?"

Sam's eyes darted about before his eyelids fluttered open, revealing tiny strips of his eyes. He took in a sharp breath, hand going to the tracheostomy tube, but Dean was there first.

"Don't touch that."

Sam opened his mouth, when his eyes darted to Charlie. He smiled weakly.

"Hey," she said. "How're you feeling?"

He shut his eyes for a moment and tried to smile again, but his fists clenched the blankets. He was clearly uncomfortable, and in pain. Charlie got up from her place, sat down on his bed and stooped as she kissed his forehead.

"You're going to be okay, Sam," she said quietly, her voice breaking.

He nodded, looked over at Dean, and blinked. The elder brother pressed his lips together.

"Something you wanna say?"

Sam blinked again and nodded ever so slightly. Dean bit the inside of his cheek as he fished around for a paper and a pen.

"Here," said Charlie, producing the items from her handbag. Dean gave them to Sam and helped his brother hold the pen steady. And then he waited.

It seemed like an eternity to sit there and wait for what Sam wanted to say. Dean concentrated on the hissing of the ventilator and the beep of the cardiac monitor, and tried to match their rhythms as Sam's hand moved on the pad shakily. He thought he wanted to know what Sam had to say to him, but then he didn't. At long last, he was staring down, playing with a tear in his jeans when a clammy hand shook his.

He looked up. Sam was holding out the paper to him and Dean could make out his wobbly handwriting from where he was.

_You're going to be okay too._

His chest tightened and he frowned at his brother, jaw clenching. "Don't you dare."

Sam just shook his head before the morphine pulled him back to his own world and he sank in, welcoming blissful sleep.
Dean wasn't sure why and how, but Sam only got worse from there. The pneumonia did not go away — it increased, and soon, Sam stopped waking up from his slumbers, and he stopped triggering the ventilator, leaving it to do all the breathing for him.

He didn't improve after that, and when they got to his third chemo cycle, the single dosage of cisplatin went on to damage his kidneys somehow, and Sam went into kidney failure, leading to another flurry of medication, and when those didn't work, dialysis.

And then there was some disturbance in his electrolytes — his potassium was too high or something — Dean didn't pay much attention because he couldn't — not with all the coffee he was downing to stay awake, to look for desperate methods bring Sam back on feet — to buy him time, but fuck, how hard was it to supernaturally cure cancer? Wasn't there a single way, a single spell?

Castiel disappeared a day after Sam's health went further downhill, and he left without saying anything. But then he never said anything these days and Dean tried to call him to find out where he was, but he wouldn't pick up his phone. So in his desperation, Dean left the former angel a voicemail, telling him about Sam's worsening condition and pleading him to come back.

Sam didn't trigger his vent, he didn't wake up, and the dialysis was just barely tethering him to life, keeping the poison away from his system. He was fed through his IV, and he was breathing because of a tube that had literally been cut into his trachea. Basically, Sam wasn't alive at all. He was only hanging on with help from machines.

Dr Greene told Dean sadly that at this point, he really needed a miracle if he wanted to see Sam open his eyes again and Dean was surprised to see the sadness on her otherwise stoic face. He knew she was genuine, he knew she meant well, but no, it wasn't time for Sam to go. Not yet. So he sat next to Sam's bed, day and night, researching, and then begging, praying and coaxing his brother to fight — to open his eyes again.

He tried Castiel's phone again and again, but he was unlucky every single time. He didn't know what to think of Castiel's sudden disappearance, and he just hoped the former angel would come back soon from wherever he was because Dean had never felt so alone all his life and right now. It didn't really fucking matter that he and Cas had almost kissed or whatever because the bastard was family, and fuck, did Dean really need him.

He did get through to Kevin, though, and he told him about Sam. The kid rushed in from wherever he was to visit the younger Winchester. And on another day, Dean was looking through Sam's contacts when he found Amelia's phone number, and he called her too, because he knew that Sam would have wanted to see her one last time.

She arrived, worried and confused, and melted when she saw Sam. Dean waited outside while she visited his brother, and he secretly hoped that if nothing, at least Amelia's voice could help Sam — that he would wake up for the woman he had once loved.

It did not work. Amelia left with tears in her eyes and she thanked Dean for letting her know. She didn't come back after that and Dean, Charlie, and Kevin took turns at Sam's beside— Dean taking the majority— because, no, he wouldn't leave Sammy there. Just… no.

Dean didn't know what day it was after Sam's third round of chemo. Day seven, day ten… whatever — he didn't care as he sat next to his brother's bed, scratching at stubble he hadn't
bothered taking a razor to. He watched his brother's chest rise and fall rhythmically, and he heard
the heart monitor beep out a relatively slow heartbeat before turning to the window.

Sam's hospital room window faced the west, and as Dean stood there, looking outside, he could
see the sun go down while casting the last of its rays in a final attempt to win its battle with the
moon. The sky had a pinkish tinge to it, orange light highlighting the fish-scale shaped clouds that
floated about innocently… wispy, cottony… just like Dean's thoughts. There were no stars visible
yet.

Dean turned around and strode to Sam's bed. His hand went to his pocket where he had kept Sam's
note, crumpled many times in his own nervous hands. Presently, he drew it out and smoothed it on
his lap, fingers touching the single line in his brother's handwriting.

> You're going to be okay too.

"No," he whispered. "No. I'm not going to be fucking okay, all right? You can't—" he paused,
"Sam… please, man…" Dean's voice was a whisper — a broken whisper. "Please. I can't do this.
Wake up."

He could feel his eyes begin to burn, and he turned away. "Fuck."

At that moment, Dean felt a weak tug at his sleeve. He almost cricked his neck as he spun it around
rapidly, only to see his brother's eyes open again — as slits, nonetheless, like so many other times.
He swallowed. He couldn't believe it. Miracle, the doctor had said, and Dean had seriously thought
that there were no miracles left. But of course, Sam had to cancel that out. Sam was a fucking
miracle.

"Sam? Sammy?" He took Sam's large, trembling hand in his own and brought it down, the burning
in his eyes threatening to overwhelm as he smiled. "Hey! Welcome back. I'll just get the doc—"

But Sam shook his head before Dean could complete his sentence, or even get up from his place,
and the older man felt a feeble squeeze on his hand. He enclosed his little brother's hand with his
other one, squeezing hard. "Yeah, Sammy, you're okay. You're gonna be just fine."

Sam nodded and gave him a smile before shutting his eyes, a single tear sliding down the side of
his face. Dean felt another squeeze in his hand — weaker than before. He looked up, at his
brother's face, while Sam's hand grew limp in his.

And when the cardiac monitor screamed out an alert, Dean didn't have to look at it to know that his
baby brother had flatlined.

|| End of Part Two ||
Blue and Red

16. Blue and Red

Dean grasped at thin air as someone came to him and pushed him back, separating his brother’s cool hand from his. A group of medical personnel had now surrounded Sam, whose heart monitor screeched incessantly, showing only flat recordings.

The ventilator was off, paddles were charged and Sam's body arched once… twice…

It was like watching a medical drama, only with the sickening realisation that this was all real.

"Still no pulse."

Dean's head throbbed. His gut was churning.

"You need to leave," Cecelia was saying to him.

"No…” Dean muttered, and she didn't have time to make him go. She just turned back to the man on the bed.

It got worse. They couldn't shock Sam back to life.

"Let's start CPR." The ventilator was back on.

"One, two."

"Dean?"

"Three, four."

"Dean, hey."

"Five, six…”

"Dean, you okay?"

Dean snapped out of his reverie, blinking at the rasping voice beside him. Sam's face stared at him, sunken eyes and hollowed out cheeks made evident in the dim light from the glow of the TV. For a moment, he looked almost as pale as he had when he'd died on that hospital bed in front of Dean, and he had to swallow down a wave of nausea. He fumbled and switched on the lamp beside him. The extra light made his brother look better, and Dean felt his heartbeat return to normal.

Sam squinted into the light for a moment, but then leaned back into the cushions without protest. The sitcom they'd been watching had been paused. The expression on his face indicated that he was waiting for Dean's reply to his question from a few minutes ago. He looked concerned — as if Dean needed any of that from his sick little brother.

"Anything bothering you?" Sam asked him again when he didn't get his answer. His long finger pressed onto his tracheostomy wound to seal it up as he spoke. He wore a hoodie over his V-neck and Dean couldn't help but notice how it hung loose around Sam's shoulders and arms but couldn't hide a small belly that his little brother was beginning to form. Sam was back on the radiation and steroids now, and his middle was beginning to bloat up as his limbs grew thinner. Dean was aware that the puffy face would follow soon too.
He cleared his throat, turning away from Sam and the large, white square of bandage that sickened him every time he looked at it because each time he saw it, he could picture the scalpel slicing through Sam's throat, spilling blood. He blinked at the nasty reminder of the incident and pushed the thought away.

"No, I'm fine," he lied, and gestured to the TV. "Put that back on."

Sam sighed. "Come on, man," he said hoarsely, hand still not coming off the bandage. The doctor had said that Sam's voice would take time to regain its original quality. As of now, he had to apply pressure on the wound to get some of his voice out, and he sounded raspy, hoarse and strange even then. Dean didn't reckon he'd ever get used to it.

He shook his head at Sam. "I'm fine."

"Yeah, and me too," Sam assured him in a whisper.

Dean nodded jerkily.

"Dean," Sam sighed, "hey, I'm okay. You know I'm okay." He let out a hiss of a chuckle. "I'm not hooked to those machines anymore. I'm right here and since I'm back on the steroids and all, they must think I'm good enough, right?"

"Yeah," Dean said in a small voice. "I just…" He washed a hand down his face, running over the stubble he didn't bother to shave off these days. "I… the cancer…" He shook his head.

"You heard Cas when I began with the trials," Sam said to him. "It's a very difficult thing to heal."

"Yeah, but how difficult?" Dean asked him angrily. He averted his eyes from his brother and licked his lips. "Sorry, man, I should have found something. And even this, if it weren't for Cas…"

After all, Sam was alive today because of Castiel's efforts, and Dean — Dean should have known how to save his brother. Technically, he did know a way to do it but neither Charlie nor Castiel agreed with it. At the hospital, Charlie had literally kept him pinned down — that girl had amazing physical strength and she didn't shy away from planting a firm uppercut on Dean's jaw when he tried to use his sheer size to get away. It stung for hours.

"It's not your fault." Sam interrupted Dean's thoughts.

Dean nodded again, and Sam did not look convinced at this. However, without another word, he picked the remote back up and restarted the episode from the beginning.

"What did you do that for?" Dean protested. "We were almost through!"

Sam looked sheepish. "I kinda forgot the story up to the part that we'd watched."

Dean didn't have anything to say.

~o~

Sam wasn't sure how he'd landed back in the bunker, when a part of him had already been sure that the pneumonia was the last thing he'd have to suffer. He didn't remember much through all those morphine-induced slumbers, but he recollected telling his brother that he, Dean, would be okay. He remembered pleading Dean to let him go, and trying to convince him that his job wasn't to live with the burden of a sick younger brother.
The next thing he saw was bright, white light. He heard his brother's voice calling out to him. He thought he was dead — on his way to Heaven, but he opened his eyes even though he didn't know they had been shut. He came back to pristine, stark, white walls and recognised the hospital immediately. A part of him was disappointed, but then he saw his family: Dean and Charlie, happy and shaking; Cas, stoic as always, but his eyes sad and sympathetic, betraying everything hidden under; and Kevin too, pale and small, but happy at the sight of Sam waking up. All of them were at his bedside, Dean at the front, concerned green eyes locking with Sam's, and Sam gave the most reassuring nod that he could muster. After that, he had spotted another woman there and she wasn't a nurse or a doctor; he'd never seen her before. She left as soon as he had noticed her and Castiel followed, promising Sam that he would be back shortly to explain everything.

Slowly, Sam regained all of his physical sensations. The tracheostomy tube had been so terribly uncomfortable and painful; he was surprised he hadn't felt it after the day it had been inserted. The IV line in his vein stung, the urinary catheter made itself evident, and all the agony was back. That was how he knew for sure that he was still alive. The pain.

The moment Sam tried to claw at his tube, Dean had pushed his hand away and hauled him up from his supine position, crushing him in a hug for a whole minute. His brother looked shaken, eyes bloodshot and hands trembling, and he had grasped on to Sam's wrist for a long time even when they were not hugging anymore. He told Sam that he had been out for days, and how he had died briefly — twice, in two days — and if it weren't for Castiel, Sam wouldn't be alive.

It turned out that the strange woman was a fallen angel — Camael. Castiel had somehow managed to persuade her to accompany him to the hospital and heal Sam, but upon looking at Sam's condition Camael had said that she wouldn't be able to heal the cancer itself, though she could take away the pneumonia and the kidney disease that were killing him at that moment. And so she brought him back from the brink of death, only to give him some more time to die painfully.

Sam did not know how to react to this. He had hoped when Dean had mentioned Camael that the cancer was gone, but his brother had heartbrokenly denied this when Sam had asked. Sam was still deathly sick. He was dying — but just not yet. Well, how delightful.

Then they got news that Camael had died. It was reported in the papers as a mugging a few streets away from the bunker, but the Winchesters knew better than that. Someone hadn't liked what Camael had done for Sam and Castiel. Of course, the bet was on fallen angels and Sam had wanted Dean to go and find out details about the killing, but the Dean had refused, not wanting to leave Sam alone. Camael's death did affect Castiel a lot, though; he became more withdrawn than he already was.

When it came to his own health condition, truth be told, Sam was done being depressed or in denial but he was still pissed off about it. He could feel himself slipping away slowly — his memory was terrible and sometimes, he wouldn't even recognise Dean or Cas, or remember who the fuck he was supposed to be. Of course, he had no memory of these amnesic attacks; he just knew they'd happened from the look on Dean's face when Sam recovered from them.

He now felt he couldn't recognise himself at all. When he looked into the mirror, it wasn't him. Whatever he did — it wasn't him. He was the same guy who'd had a full ride to Stanford, and yet, he had to keep track of most of his activities through notes and post-its and Dean. He had been a person who could sew up his own wounds with a splash of whiskey and gritted teeth, and now he would stub his toe and feel enough pain to make him just barely hold on to the strings of his consciousness. He had probably thrown up more in the last couple of months than in the whole of his life put together, and had had more cramps than a girl on her period.
Sometimes, Sam would wake up cuffed to his bed and he'd know that he had probably got violent in his previous amnesic attack. He saw scratches on Dean's face, bruises sometimes, and once, Castiel was nursing a bleeding lip. He apologised to them, feeling horrible, but they refused to let him feel sorry. He hadn't been himself.

And that was the fucking problem. *Sam wasn't himself*. He wasn't Sam Winchester anymore. He was a bloated-up dude with a memory problem and a fatal illness. That was what he was. He slept a lot, and Dean let him these days. Dean didn't push him to exercise and didn't need to push him to eat. And at the times that Sam wasn't sleeping or trying to concentrate on a book, he was having one of his attacks or whatever. So he couldn't understand why Dean and Cas were even bothering to keep him alive any longer. It would be better if he died. And Dean looked like he knew something about how to save Sam again, but Castiel hadn't spoken of it.

Just then, Sam had a thought. A horrifying thought.

He paused the show for a second time and turned to Dean. He knew he'd probably forget a good chunk of the episode again, but he needed to talk.

Dean looked mildly frustrated. "Swear to God, Sam, if you rewind that again—"

"We need to talk," Sam said, and Dean raised an eyebrow.

He crossed his arms. "Okay… um, about what?"

Sam licked his dry lips. "It's just… uh… you're not planning to do something stupid, are you?"

Dean blinked. "Well, I'm probably getting myself into a girl-talk with you, so I think that's enough stupid for the day."

Sam didn't even try to retort at the poor joke. Dean was losing his touch. *I can't imagine why*, he thought sarcastically. He shook his head. "You know what I mean."

Dean blanched — or maybe it was a trick of the light, Sam tried to convince himself, because there was no way…

"Dean," he breathed, his finger touching the soft bandage. Pressing against the wound was painful. "Come on, man."

"Sammy." Dean seemed to deflate, but didn't continue. Sam's suspicions were confirmed.

"No," Sam protested. "You won't."

His brother smiled ruefully as he turned to Sam, eyes going down. "We're still looking, okay?" He snatched the remote from Sam's hand and the sitcom began to play again.

Sam knew that Castiel and Charlie had something to do with the fact that his brother was not allowed to do whatever it was that he wanted to. He decided to kiss their feet the next time he saw them. Charlie had had to leave again, so Sam promised himself that he'd text her later that night. Or, he thought, picking up his phone, he might as well do it now; who knew if he would remember later on?

He had started to type in the letters when he remembered something else. "Hey, Dean," he called out, putting his phone down for a moment. There was something else he had to know.

"What?" his brother asked, still irritate.
"Everything okay between you and Cas?" Sam asked.

"Uh… yeah." Dean arched an eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

He was lying. Sam knew it. "I just noticed that you two… never mind."

"We what?" Dean pushed him, the sitcom forgotten.

"Well, ever since the marriage counselling thing…" Sam let Dean decipher the rest.

His brother's eyes narrowed for a second, but then he nodded. "Yeah. I know. Ever since the
session, it's been weird."

Sam almost couldn't believe his ears. His brother was actually talking about it. He straightened up
and turned around. "Anything happen out there?"

"Yeah," Dean said morosely. "You know… I don't know if the session with the doc messed me up
or what… the rings, man, and then going out drinking…" He heaved a sigh. "I think… I'm in love
with Cas. I really…" He looked embarrassed. "You think he'd want to marry me too?"

"What?" Sam had expected something like this … maybe… but not so soon. Or not to this extent.
Marriage? What had gotten into Dean?

"Yeah," Dean said. "Hey, you could be my best man. We could settle someplace nice and you
could be a surrogate mom for our babies with that generous uterus of yours and all…" He snorted
and Sam flared his nostrils at him before flipping him off.

"Ah," grinned Dean, his eyes sparkling for the first time in a while, "return of the bitch-face!" He
leaned forward and slapped Sam's shoulder, sending an outburst of pain through Sam's arm.

Sam grimaced as Dean's eyes widened at his mistake. He leaned forward again but Sam shook him
off. "You're an ass, Dean," he said, resting back and rubbing the sore spot. "Couldn't you have
given me a straight answer?"

"You could have believed me when I said it was all fine between me and Cas," Dean retorted, then
looked sheepish. "Sorry I hit your shoulder. Just forgot for a minute…" He shook his head, clearly
appalled with himself. "Sorry, man," he said again, "dick move."

"Nah, don't worry about it," Sam said, still rubbing the area. His neuropathy had so many shitty
symptoms, it was hard to remember them all. But he knew Dean would beat himself up about it if
he wasn't assured. "It'll pass soon," he lied. It would take hours to pass. "So… you guess Cas is
fine then?"

Dean fidgeted with his fingers, glanced at the TV, then back at Sam, before taking his time to
reply. "No. I don't think so. And he's been worse ever since that Camael chick died."

"Have you tried talking to him, then?"

"Dude won't let me," Dean sighed. "First time I saw him sleep in weeks was when we went on that
last hunt. He doesn't eat much, sleep much, or take breaks, Sam. He just keeps reading. I don't
know what to make of it."

Sam pressed his lips together. He thought he knew what was going on with Castiel. "Dean, I think
he's depressed — clinically," he added, when Dean started to open his mouth in some kind of wise-
as comment.
His brother looked surprised. "And you know that, how?" he asked, tilting his head.

Sam shrugged. "When you went to Hell…" He didn't have to continue and Dean turned away for a moment, looking guilty. "But it could be dangerous, you know," Sam pressed on, "it could get bad. We need to do something about it."

"Yeah, I know, Sam… hell, I've been through it too." Dean scratched at his eyebrow, squirming a little. "I tried to talk to him," Dean said. "I told you. You think he needs… meds?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted. "But if you're not able to help him alone, maybe we should try to talk some sense into him. Together. If that doesn't work…"

"I hate shrinks, man. They'll probably mess him up even more."

"He needs help, Dean."

Dean sighed. "Okay. We'll see what we can do then."

Sam looked around at the room. Their sitcom had finished playing and the TV sat there, blank, having nothing else on the DVR that it could play. Sam switched off the idiot box and looked back at Dean. "Do you want to do it right now?"

"Yeah," said Dean, "that's probably a good idea. Let's get it done. If he actually needs a shrink, we shouldn't wait. If it's depression, like you're saying it is…"

"Yup," Sam agreed. "Come on," he made to stand up, but his head started to spin and he stumbled, clutching on to the lampshade. He hissed as it burned hot in his hands.

"Oh hey, easy, tiger," said Dean, coming to his side and clutching at both his shoulders. "Sit down, okay?" He helped Sam plant his ass back on the couch. "I'll get him."

Sam swallowed and nodded, leaning back against the pillows and shutting his eyes. He hated his life.

~o~

Castiel shut the book he'd been reading and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. He had scoured countless books, and there was nothing for Sam. Nothing. The younger Winchester was running out of sand in his hourglass and the last time, it had almost been too late — but then he, Castiel, had been able to somehow persuade Camael to help him. If she hadn't agreed with him…

He shuddered. There were too many unfriendly angels out there, and they wanted revenge for Castiel's mistake. But there were a few who weren't all that bad. That was how he had found Camael. She had refused to accompany him back the first time, for she feared the loss of her life. The second time, though, when she had heard how desperate Sam's health was, she had come along to see if she could heal him.

However, once she had perceived the gravity of Sam's condition she had told Castiel that the trials had damaged him too much — the resulting cancer — a change in him at sub-atomic and cellular levels, was very difficult to heal and he needed something much more powerful to get rid of that. With Camael's power she could only take away the pneumonia and the kidney failure resulting from the drugs. Sam's cardiac arrests were all thanks to a fatal increase in the potassium in his body and she could balance out that too, but not the cancer.

It wasn't much, but it at least provided Dean and Castiel with more time to find something else for
Sam, so the two of them had agreed, and Sam had woken up, much to Dean's relief.

And now… Camael was dead.

Dean had warned Castiel not to blame himself for it, but he couldn't help but think that he was the one who had put her in danger by bringing her along like that. He was happy that Sam was better — very much so — but he had also caused someone else to die and he couldn't forget that.

Castiel rested his hands on the table and took a long, deep breath. He got up, returned his book to its shelf, and started to make his way to his room. Sam and Dean were watching something on the television and they'd asked him to join them, but Castiel had refused. Nothing really interested him anymore. He, Castiel, was only focussed on helping Sam. And as such, he knew that Dean would prefer it without his company.

He wasn't sure what had happened that night after the counselling. He didn't know what he'd been thinking, or what instincts he had acted on but at that time, his alcohol-addled brain had thought of it as a good idea, and apparently, so had Dean's. They both regretted the move and Castiel wanted the awkwardness to go away, but Dean wasn't the same anymore. He wondered if Dean was angry with him for it.

And he was really worried for Dean too. They had found one way — one fool proof way so far — to heal Sam, but it came with a terrible compromise, and Castiel knew that Dean wouldn't be afraid to make the sacrifice if it came to that. He knew, in the back of his mind, that if they didn't find a cure soon, Dean would go ahead and do it, and there would be nothing that he or anyone else would be able to do to stop him. Castiel didn't want Dean making that move; he couldn't even bear to think of it and he was sure if Sam knew, he'd agree.

This didn't mean that Castiel wanted Sam to die instead of Dean doing what he had to; he just wanted both brothers intact, and he didn't want them to suffer anymore. So he was doing his best, his very best, to help them, but he felt useless.

He felt worthless, tendrils of despair entering and exiting his mind at intervals. Sometimes, they were overwhelming, and he wouldn't be able to concentrate on what he was doing. He had more or less forgotten how to sleep and when he did get some shuteye, the dreams were taken over by nightmares and that didn't help one bit, which made him fear being asleep too. He didn't feel like eating these days either, most food just tasted bland and like mud in his mouth. Hunger didn't bother him all that much but he did eat a little bit every day, for he knew he could die if he didn't eat at all.

He was arranging some of the books in his room when that last thought caught up with him. He could die.

Castiel sighed, sitting down on the bed and running his hands through the white linen. It felt smooth and cool to the touch, pure, unlike him, for he was a useless burden, and he had brought on destruction and trouble one too many times. He had brought on death, and he had burdened the Winchesters with things they hadn't needed to face — more than once — many times before now.

No one really needed him, did they?

The realisation struck him like a lightning bolt. He had seen real lightning bolts while he was in Heaven. He had seen them form, he had seen them strike, and had felt morose when they had destroyed people. But that wasn't his fault; it had never been.

Now… this. Castiel licked his chapped lips, eyes turning to the cabinet where some of his supplies
were. He stood up and walked over, slowly, and he opened the drawer with his hands shaking. He had thought about this in the past, especially after the whole fiasco with his imbibition of all those souls from Purgatory, and then killing hundreds of angels in Heaven.

But this time, he had destroyed much more. So if this had been an option then... it had to be an option now too. It was probably the best option. He was pretty sure it was.

He pulled out what he was looking for. The angel blade shone as he raised it before his eyes, and the yellow light from the lamps flashed off it while he turned it over, scrutinising each sharp edge. He came back to the bed and sat there, surveying the knife. It had been wiped clean of all the blood that had been shed upon it; it could be new, except, he knew it wasn't. This was what he had used to murder so many angels, and now this was how he'd end it all.

He drew in a breath, slow and calm, as he pulled back the sleeve of his shirt and placed the sharp end to his wrist. His heart was beating faster — he could feel it — and as the blade grazed against his skin, it caused a small break. Bright red blood blossomed over and a small stream dribbled off the side, dripping to the floor.

He ran a finger through it and stared for a minute before bringing the blade back and placing it on the artery. He shut his eyes, gritting his teeth, as he slashed the edge across his wrist in one smooth motion.

Blood spilled out with a vengeance, streaming down his wrist, and he felt himself go lightheaded at the sight. And then he took the knife in his other hand and brought it down to the unharmed wrist, slashing that one too.

~o~

"Hey, Cas?"

Dean exited the library and came back to the war room. The former angel could usually be found in the library but he wasn't there this time. No books either. Could he be reading in his room? Maybe he was asleep, Dean hoped, as he started to make his way back to the living quarters. Castiel's door had been shut when Dean had come out to go to the library, but now that he thought about it, he figured Castiel was probably in there. He knocked at the door.

"Cas?" he repeated tentatively. There was no reply.

He chuckled to himself. Cas really needed to sleep, and this was good. He was just about to leave when he glanced down and saw red. A stream of it was seeping out from under the door.

Dean's heart leapt into his throat. "Cas, I'm coming in!" he warned, hoping, praying, that Cas could hear him.

He kicked open the door. "Oh, God," he whispered. The air stunk of blood. "Sam!" he hollered, panic flooding his system. "Sammy!"

He fell to his knees beside the angel, who was curled on the floor, unconscious and bleeding profusely from both his wrists.
Panic

17. Panic

The knees of Dean's jeans were soaked in thick, warm blood but he didn't care as he knelt there beside his angel, his mind going in circles, refusing to let him think straight.

What the hell, Cas?

The metallic stench of blood permeated the air, but Dean remained where he was. There was something in his head… something throbbing about. Blood rushed up his ears, so that there was roaring all around. His gut churned. When had it gotten so bad?

He knew he had to act, he had to do something fast, but he was almost catatonic.

Cas. Oh, God…

Work, dammit, move, Dean's mind urged him and he raised two trembling fingers to Castiel's carotid, a silent prayer at his lips.

Don't be dead, man, I can only handle so much…

He sighed when he felt a pulse, weak and fluttering, but definitely there. It was rapid under his touch, and Castiel felt cold and sweaty. He was slipping into shock. Dean's mind clicked back into place and he moved swiftly as he looked around for some fabric that he could press onto Castiel's wounds.

"Sam?" he called out, unsure if his brother had heard him the first time, and then began to unbutton his own shirt when he couldn't find cloth to help Castiel's clotting.

"Why did you do this, huh?" he muttered to Castiel, distressed, as he pulled off his plaid shirt and brought his friend's wrists forward, pressing the cloth on the wound. Dean was only wearing his t-shirt now and the single layer stuck to the sweat on his back.

"Sammy?" Dean hollered once more.

Where the hell was Sam? Dean tried to breathe through his mouth as he pressed the cloth harder against Castiel's wrists, trying to stave off the bleeding. "Come on, come on…” he sighed, "please, Cas…”

"Sam?!" Dean yelled a third time. Sam had been dizzy when he'd stood up, but that was a symptom of his neuropathy, or whatever that was, and Sam was all right otherwise, right? He had to be all right.

"Get me a crash cart in here!"

The memory hit Dean so suddenly, his fingers slipped off the shirt he was holding.

You're going to be okay too.

Not now… not right now.

Dean stumbled to his feet. "Sammy?"
Sam's body curved up uselessly, like a large puppet, as the paddles touched his chest.

He couldn't take this anymore.

"I won't lie to you, Dean, it will be a miracle if he ever wakes up again."

Dean staggered blindly out of the room in search of his brother. Sam wasn't okay. He wouldn't take so long if—

"Dean?"

His panic was interrupted by his little brother's voice, and he had never been so happy to hear it. He looked around the corridor to see Sam reaching for him, using the wall for support while he tried to walk. Nowadays, Sam actually needed support to walk sometimes.

He looked confused as his eyes swivelled over to Dean. "What happened? Where's your shirt?"

That was when Dean remembered again. Cas.

"Cas," he muttered and ran back into the room. Landing harshly on his knees, he took the bloody shirt off the floor and put it back to Castiel's cut wrists. The bleeding had reduced, but he frantically pressed the wounds.

"I'm so sorry, Cas, but you and Sammy should stop giving me so much grief, man."

"Oh my God." Sam's voice was a faint whisper as he arrived at the door, and Dean could feel his brother trying to move fast as he came down to crouch beside him. Sam tested Castiel's carotid again, eyes widening. "What happened? Why w-would he—?"

"I d-don't know." Dean couldn't get his words out right. "S-Sam…"

"Okay, okay." Sam took a deep breath and turned to Dean. "He's going to be all right."

Dean nodded numbly, eyes still on Castiel, and Sam shook his shoulders. "Dean. Hey. He'll be all right," his brother assured him. "You got to him in time. Here, let me hold that," he said, prying Dean's hands away from the shirt. "But he's going into shock so we have to act fast. You go get the sutures and saline. I'm here with him. If he doesn't get better with any of that, we'll get him to the hospital. Go on."

Dean's lips moved wordlessly for a moment, and Sam gave him a calming look. "Dean, I'll take care of him. Go."

"Yeah, yeah, okay." said Dean as he got back onto his feet, slipping on the blood before he took off in the direction of the small infirmary where they kept their medical supplies. He grabbed a suture pack and the materials to start an IV. He dragged along the stand as quickly as he could while balancing the other things in his free hand. He reached the room to see Sam still crouched in the same position, pain lines on his face from squatting.

"Take this." Dean gave Sam the first-aid materials as he crouched back down. He curled an arm around Castiel's shoulders and another behind his knees. "Move," he said with a grunt, heaving the angel off the floor and onto the bed. Red sluggishly started staining white, spreading along the crisscrossing fibres and Sam, who had managed to stand up without getting dizzy for once, went back to holding the shirt over the wound.

Dean quickly opened the iodine and wet a wad of cotton with it. Grabbing Castiel's wrist, he began
to paint it, hands trembling, as Sam worked to unwrap the sterile sutures.

"Here." Sam was ready with the sutures and Dean took them.

"Couldn't you just talk, you stupid son of a bitch?" he whispered sadly, as he went down with the curved needle, trying to insert it into skin, but his hands shook too much.

"Dean?"

"M-My hands are shaky," Dean sighed as he brought the needle back to the cut but couldn't, for the life of him, plunge it in. He'd done this so many times... for himself, for Sam... why was he trembling now?

"Give it here," Sam said calmly. "My hands are steady. I can do it."

Sam's hands were rarely steady these days, but this was the one time they were, so Dean gave the sutures to his brother and instead, started to hang up the bag of saline on the IV stand. He was trembling all over, and he could feel his heartbeat quicken. He thought his knees would knock together and collapse. Black spots appeared before his eyes — tiny, dark pinpricks that caused his head to spin.

"...Dean?"

Dean wasn't able to breathe. *Oh God... Ohgodohgodohgod...*

"You with me?"

Sam sounded as though he was speaking from a tunnel, far away from Dean.

Dean collapsed onto the bed as his chest began to sear in pain. He was having a heart attack... he was... oh, but he'd had one of those and it hadn't felt like this.

"Dean." A hand was on his shoulder. "Dean, breathe," a voice instructed him.

*I'm trying,* he thought, drawing in deep breaths. He wondered if this was what Sam had felt like that time they'd cut through his trachea, and a splash of blood decorated his mind's eye.

Bile rose up his throat.

"Dean."

Sam was patting his shoulder, but Dean pried away his brother's fingers and fled the room. He skidded before the bathroom and didn't even have time to slam the door shut as he fell hard on his knees again, this time in front of the toilet.

When he was done, he pushed himself back against the wall, shutting his eyes. His breathing was messed up, his chest still hurt and his head spun. He wasn't sure what was happening to him but he couldn't breathe at all. Sweat poured down his forehead — cold droplets gathering at his eyebrows and dripping down from there... some getting caught in his eyelashes.

He sat like that for a while — ten minutes, fifteen, maybe, listening to the sound of his own struggling breaths when he heard other sounds — footsteps, and a sigh. A hand was on his shoulder. He didn't shrug Sam away as he opened his eyes.

His little brother was crouching again as he put a paper bag before Dean's face. "Breathe."
Dean obeyed, dipping his nose and mouth into the bag and trying to breathe right. He took one breath in, held it, pushed it out, and repeated the cycle until his mind started to clear a bit.

"Better?" Sam asked him gently, holding his throat bandage with one hand while the other stayed on Dean's shoulder.

Dean nodded. He took two breaths and surfaced. "S-Sorry."

Sam said nothing to that but continued to offer silent comfort until Dean was able to breathe enough to put the paper bag away. He rested the back of his head against the cool tile.

"Cas?"

"He's going to be fine," Sam assured him. "I started him on the IV too. We should keep a check on his BP and pulse for a while, though. At least until he wakes up."

Dean nodded. "Stupid, stupid moron. I'm going to kill him…"

Sam snorted. "Last I checked, the fact that he almost killed himself gave you a panic attack."

"It wasn't a panic attack."

Sam arched an eyebrow. "I see. So you were just curious as to what it feels like to pull my gig?" he asked, gesturing to the toilet before extending a hand to flush it.

Dean shook his head. "It wasn't just… never mind."

He washed a hand down his face. "We should get back to Cas."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Peachy," Dean muttered, standing up, and helping Sam up with him. "You can go get some sleep, though. I'll sit with him."

Sam licked his lips. "No, actually, I think we should both be there. He'll feel better if we're both around."

"And I'm sure he'll understand if you're sleeping too."

Sam tilted his head and pressed his lips together, narrowing his eyes. "I'm fine."

Dean sighed, however he preferred Sam being stubborn, rather than having Sam listen to him because this way it meant that his brother was actually having one of his better days.

"Okay," said Dean, "whatever, bitch."

They proceeded back to Castiel's room together, Sam using the walls for support again as he walked. Dean reached out a hand to help him but was batted away and he smiled to himself at that. He knew that of late, Sam wasn't feeling himself but hell if this wasn't Sam. And hell if the trials or the stupid disease or anything, anything on the planet could put Sam down for long enough.

~o~

Castiel woke up to a sharp pain in both his wrists, and a prickle at the back of his palm. Whatever those sensations were due to, they stung, and on his wrists he could feel the pull of… something…
like thread sewing up his flesh together — stitches, he realised. He had seen Sam and Dean do them for each other many times during the year that his healing powers had gone away, but this was definitely his first experience with them.

But that brought him back to focus on something else — he wasn't dead.

He had failed in yet another thing.

"Cas, you with me?" asked a gruff voice he recognised, but couldn't quite place at that point. Where was he?

"Hey, Cas." A rough hand rested on his forehead.

Castiel shivered.

"Yeah, okay, I've gotcha," the voice said again, and the blankets were tucked tighter around him. "Come on, man, stop dicking with me. I know you're awake."

Castiel sighed. His hands and legs still felt cold and numb, and he was hurting. Part of being human, he remembered. But the hurt wasn't just physical. It was…

… he didn't know what to think of it. He just knew it was the persistent pain from always. It had never gone away.

He took a sharp breath and shivered again. A hand started to rub his shoulder. "Yeah, I know," the voice said again, and Castiel suddenly recognised it. Dean. He wondered why it took him so long to recognise the other man's voice.

"You lost a lot of blood," Dean was saying, "me and Sam almost took you to the hospital at one point." He paused. "Don't you pull that crap on us again, ya hear me?"

Castiel's eyelids were stuck together but somehow, he started to pry them open. His eyes burned at that, and a tear trickled down the side of his face. There was a sigh as a calloused thumb brushed it away for him.

"Hey," said Dean mildly, "what is it, Cas?"

Castiel finally managed to move his heavy lids and another tear fell off when he opened his eyes to a blurry world around him. The thumb was back, warm against his temple, and he wondered why Dean had forgiven him all of a sudden. He seemed to be quite shaken, and apparently Castiel's decision to die didn't bode well with either Winchester.

But he was okay, and he needed Dean to know that. He licked his dry lips before feeling a straw in his mouth. He blinked, vision clearing a little, to see Dean's concerned face hovering over his as he held up a glass of water.

"Drink up. You must be thirsty."

And he was. He took a few weak swallows, and then some big ones, draining the glass of its cool water in a jiffy. It felt good as it wet his dry mouth, and then his throat, sliding down his oesophagus comfortably. He sighed happily. Dean sat back as Castiel looked over at him. He smiled shakily.

"About time too, you son of a bitch. Even Sammy got too tired. You've been out for hours." There was a pause as Dean's tone took a serious note. "What were you thinking, man?" His voice sounded
heavy and he looked away, jaw clenching.

Castiel licked his chapped lips. "I'm sorry, Dean."

Dean scrubbed a hand down his face, but refused to meet eyes with Castiel. "You know how it is with Sam. You know—" he sighed, turning to look at Castiel again, "you know I'm not dealing. And… don't…" He bit his bottom lip as his hand clenched the white linen on the bed. "Please, Cas, I…"

Castiel looked at the changing expressions on Dean's face, opening and shutting his mouth several times. He didn't know how to explain himself — and would Dean understand? The unnecessary burden that Castiel was being for him was bad enough

"I'm sorry, Cas," Dean whispered. "I should have paid attention. I should have known. I didn't think it would hit you so hard."

"You shouldn't apologise," Castiel replied to that.

Dean shook his head again. "I didn't even realise until Sam told me today. How long have you been this way?"

Castiel blinked. He didn't understand Dean's question. "I don't get it."

"The depression. How long?"

"I'm not depressed. You misunderstand me."

Dean pursed his lips, and then nodded once. "Okay. Then tell me how you feel. Tell me how killing yourself seemed like a smart decision."

"I'm okay, Dean."

"Cut that crap, you moron," Dean said, voice breaking. "I should have noticed…"

"It's not your fault."

"The hell it's not!" Dean snarled, standing up from the bed. "I told you… I told you I'd help you. And, and—"

"You've been helping Sam."

"Yeah, but—"

Castiel tried to push himself up, and Dean rushed to his aid, picking up a pillow and putting it against his back so he could lean against the headboard. "Sam has been very ill, Dean. It's not your mistake."

"Okay," said Dean, sitting back down, "fine. Since you have a reason and justification for everything, tell me — tell me why you did this."

Castiel looked down at his newly sewn-up wrists, and then at Dean. He didn't want to reveal how he felt. He didn't want to bother Dean further.

"You have a lot on your plate already."

"It doesn't matter," said Dean, "but you don't get it, do you?" He stood up and began pacing about
the room, his fingers rubbing his temples. "You and Sam — neither of you gets it. You think I mind—"

"But—"

"You're family, you stupid bastard!" Dean snapped at Castiel. "How many times do you want me to tell you that? Should I go down on my knees and whack my face again, huh? Should I start writing reassuring poems to the both of you, telling you stupid fucks that I don't mind taking care of you — being there for you? What do the two of you want from me?"

"Poetry would be absurd." Castiel tilted his head. "But Dean, we just want you to not worry."

"Yeah, and you're doing a great job of that," said Dean, leaning against the chest of drawers and covering his face in his hands.

"I didn't want to be a burden."

Tired green eyes bore into blue ones and Castiel turned away for a second, sinking down into the bed and shutting his eyes momentarily. A few seconds later, the mattress shifted under him and he watched Dean sit down again. He still looked concerned.

"What made you think you were a burden, Cas?"

Castiel licked his lips. "I just…"

"Talk to me."

He sighed. "I haven't been able to help. I am practically useless as a human. I can't do anything—"

"Oh, Jesus, and who told you that?"

"I know."

Dean swallowed. "Cas." He took a sharp breath. "If it weren't for you, Sammy would've been dead already."

"I don't—"

"Listen to me. You went and convinced that angel chick to come and heal Sam. He was living off machines, man."

It was Castiel's turn to swallow at the reminder of Camael. "Camael…" he said, "she's dead because of—"

"— your dick brothers and sisters," Dean finished for him. "You weren't responsible for that, Cas, you get me? Your siblings call themselves angels, and then they go butcher their own sister who tries to save someone's life. We both know that's how it works for them. It wasn't your mistake."

There was silence. Dean raised his eyebrows, little creases appearing on his forehead. "Anything else you want to say? Any other brilliant reasons for wanting to die?"

Castiel pulled his blankets closer as he found himself lying to Dean. "No."

The other man nodded, and patted him on the shoulder twice. "That don't mean we don't have to talk. We're sorting this out and getting you better, yeah?"
Castiel nodded.

"Good." Dean smiled wanly. "Now get some sleep. You tired?"

Castiel was going to say that he wasn't tired, but a yawn interrupted everything, and Dean chuckled. He picked up a juice box from Castiel's bedside table and tossed it to him. "All right, drink this up, and then you can get some shuteye. I'm right beside you."

~0~

When Sam's eyes opened, he could make out that it was the middle of the night from the silence around the bunker. He turned to the digital clock at his bedside table and it informed that it was one o'clock in the morning, flashing neon read numbers at him. He yawned, feeling a slight grumble in his stomach. He was a little frustrated at how hungry the steroids were making him, and how the phenytoin was cutting through his sleep every night. It was a really shitty combination of drugs.

He sat up, ready to make a trip to the kitchen, when his eyes fell on something on his nightstand. He couldn't make out what it was in the darkness, but when he switched on the light, he realised that it was a covered plate. Food. Dean had been intuitive enough to put it there.

Mentally thanking his brother for being so considerate, Sam lifted the plate in his hands. It was difficult to grasp for a moment; his illness seemed to be decreasing his muscle power, and he wasn't even able to walk properly these days. He wondered, for what seemed like the umpteenth time, about what his life had come to.

As he uncovered the plate he discovered, to his happiness, that it had cut-up fruit on it. Midnight snacking was bad, he knew, and it was terrible for his nausea which was absent at that moment, but had a tendency to reappear whenever it pleased. So he appreciated Dean's thoughtfulness again as he forked a squared piece of pear.

He chewed it slowly, trying to remember what had happened earlier that day. He knew Castiel had cut his wrists, and he remembered sewing them up, and also Dean's panic attack. He could still remember the bigger incidents — thankfully, his memory wasn't that far gone. But was Castiel doing okay?

Sam knew that Dean would have woken him up if it got bad but he decided to go in a few minutes and check on Castiel himself. Had he told Dean that he thought Castiel was clinically depressed, though? It didn't matter now anyway, it was pretty obvious from Castiel's suicide attempt. Maybe he should have said it sooner. If only he could just stop forgetting.

Sam put another piece of pear into his mouth but before he could chew it, he had a strange sensation in his throat… like a spasm. Before he could catch the fruit on his tongue, it slid down and landed somewhere near his epiglottis, sending pain through his throat, thanks to the jagged ends.

He coughed, trying to get it back up so he could spit it out, but then it went down a little further and lodged itself on the opening of his windpipe.

~0~

"Dean."

Dean opened his eyes to Castiel's voice and sat up from his stooping position to see his friend
"Hey," said Dean hoarsely. His eyes travelled to Castiel's IV stand, where the bag of saline was empty. He stood up. "You need more saline."

"No, it's okay."

"I wasn't giving you a choice." Dean's joints cracked as he stretched, and then went to fetch another bag of saline. He made his trip quick and was soon at the IV pole, detaching the empty bag and replacing it with a full one. He tossed the deflated bag into the garbage bin and returned to Castiel's side.

"How're you feeling?" he asked Castiel. His friend was still pale — white, almost, and the last Dean had checked, his BP hadn't risen all that much. "Do you want any pain meds?"

"I'll be fine," Castiel replied, looking away.

Dean yawned and settled back in his chair. "So. What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing happened, and you just woke me up for no reason, then?"

Castiel hesitated. Dean sighed. "I'm going to get you out of this, okay, Cas? I'll help you with — whatever it is that's troubling you so much."

"Why?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Why? Why? Because suicide isn't the answer, you idiot! There's always, always a reason to go on—"

"And yet, if anything should happen to Sam, you plan to follow him."

Castiel's quiet truth stabbed Dean on the chest. He pressed his lips together and stared at a piece of paint peeling off the bare wall to Castiel's left. There was silence all around. His eyes swivelled over to the clock next to Castiel's bed; it was almost one in the morning.

"Tell me, Dean," Castiel pressed him. "Why would you say this to me if you don't believe in it yourself?"

"Because—" Dean dragged a rough palm down his face, feeling his eyes sting with sleep and emotion. "Because, Cas… he's my brother, okay? Without him, I have no one—"

"You said I was family."

It was coming back to the same loop. It always came back to the same loop, and Dean was tired of it.

"Yeah, but…"

Castiel sighed, and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Dean." He paused. "I think I know why this is happening."

Dean frowned at him, breaking away from his thoughts for a moment. "Why what is happening?"

Castiel offered no explanation to that. "I ruined it," he said, "I spoiled it. I shouldn't have broken it."
"Broken what?"

"Us," he whispered, and Dean's heart leapt onto his throat. "I understand you're angry because of what I did," Castiel continued, "and I wish I could have taken it back."

"Taken what back, Cas?"

Castiel's gaze held Dean's for a long moment, and Dean understood. He finally realised what his friend was talking about. His heart racing, he remembered that night. Castiel's hand on his cheek, the feel of his warm skin, Dean's nails brushing against Castiel's hip, and then those lips on his, brushing briefly, before they broke away.

Dean cleared his throat and yet, when he spoke, his voice was hoarse. "It wasn't your mistake. I'm not mad at you for it."

Castiel just looked into his eyes and Dean averted his gaze, trying to take his mind off that evening. Had that moment been one of the things that Castiel thought he was to blame for? Those few moments, where they didn't know what they were doing…

… or maybe they did. Maybe they both knew too well.

Dean gazed at Castiel's chest, hidden under the blanket and yet clearly rising and falling serenely. Cas could just be asleep, but he wasn't. He was wide awake and he was looking at Dean — he was looking for an answer, one which Dean couldn't give him.

What had changed between them? What was it that was different? What had led to the moment that night? Why was it even a big deal — because, it wasn't as if Dean hadn't kissed men on dares in his high school days. It was nothing to him. And yet, there was Castiel.

Castiel shifted, moving on the bed, closer to Dean. Dean blinked at him and leaned forward, not sure of what he was doing. He just knew, somehow that he needed to understand — he needed to find out. If it was nothing, it would be like school again.

On the other hand, if it didn't turn out to be nothing…

It seemed to take forever for Castiel to move closer, and Dean felt a gentle hand rest on his shoulder. He perched on the bed, twisting himself a little and putting his own hand on Castiel's waist and he tilted his face, leaning closer still, until their noses brushed against each other. Once again, he felt them — those lips, soft — a little dry, a whole lot hesitant against his.

Dean rested his other hand against Castiel's neck, pulling him closer so they were kissing properly now, his lips working uncertainly against Castiel's. He could feel the slight wetness, the slight stickiness of the juice from earlier, and the angel smelled of iodine and grape juice and detergent… and something that made Dean think of leaves and rain and wet mud all together.

His mind had stopped thinking and they were like that for a long time, Castiel's lips mostly just limp against Dean's, but working occasionally to kiss, and then sucking a little as he breathed heavily against Dean, his eyes shut and their noses mushed together awkwardly — but Dean hated himself for this; it felt right.

Castiel's hand was cupping Dean's cheek again, his smooth thumb tracing circles, and Dean held him tighter, for a moment — just for a moment, before finally pulling away gently.

His breathing was ragged, and his cheeks grew warm as he felt the blue eyes upon him again. They were both silent for a while, each mind running over what had just happened and trying not to think
of how good that had felt.

~0~

Sam gagged, his windpipe fighting desperately to dislodge the foreign object, but the gag was half-formed and his eyes watered. His hand clutched at his throat, massaging it upwards, hoping, by some miracle, to make it out of this alive.

He needed Dean. He needed his brother now.

He couldn't form Dean's name for the love of him, as his larynx was obstructed and already screwed up from the tracheostomy, so he stood on shaky legs and tried to walk, except, his legs weren't up to it.

As he slumped to the floor, pain blossoming on every part of him that hit it, he gasped again, gagged, and prayed to anyone, *anything* that was listening, for the pain to go away.

~0~

Dean bit his lip, still feeling, sensing Castiel slanted against him as he stood up. He refused to meet eyes with him, not sure how to respond… what to say to him.

What was that? What had just happened, and why did it feel right? What was it that the kiss had proven, or had the two of them acted on an instinct that had already existed…?

There were too many questions and no probable answer, and Dean couldn't stop his mind from whirring. He stood up, searching for the first excuse in his mind.

"I'll… check on Sammy," he finished hastily before retreating from the room. Once he was in the corridor, he felt relieved, like he could breathe again. He headed to Sam's room so he could see if his brother was still asleep.

He checked his watch. It was a few minutes past one and Sam's door was shut, but Dean pushed it open without knocking — because he didn't always need to do that.

What he saw, however, wasn't what he'd expected at all. He thought Sam would be asleep, or if he were awake, munching on the fruits. He didn't, however think that he would see Sam on the floor, his face scrunched up in pain, flushed under the light from the lamp, and one large hand on his throat as he choked and gagged helplessly.
There's a discussion between Sam and Dean here, where Dean's being a bit insensitive but those aren't my thoughts, they're Dean's. Being a med student and a girl myself, I don't think it's funny to be either menopausal, or hormonal. Definitely not being used as a joke or an insult here, but these guys aren't really feminists, so…

18. The 'L' Word

"Sam?"

Dean froze at the doorway for a moment, watching his brother choke, while simultaneously trying to believe that this was all happening on the same day. It seemed like the roof was coming down on all the people he'd ever cared about. Wasn't he allowed to have a moment to relax? Couldn't Sam and Cas be all right for a while — even for a day? Because he really couldn't take this anymore.

Sam gagged and tried to cough, eyes screwed shut and his hand gripping his throat as his head bobbed forward. He was trying to breathe — Dean could make out, but what the hell was he choking on?! It wasn't as if fruits could have tiny bones in them.

Dean was crouching beside his brother in a second. "Sammy," he commanded, putting a hand on Sam's shoulder. "Cough it up. Come on." He thumped his brother's back after that, hoping it would help.

Sam tried, coughing harder, but it was half formed, and his eyes began to roll upward as he gagged again.

"Okay," Dean said, trying to stay calm as his heart raced, moving so that he was behind Sam. "On your knees. Straight."

Sam tried to haul himself up from his slumped position but coughed again and his arms gave away as he tried to pull himself to his knees. He was either too weak, or in too much pain. Dean watched his once-strong brother struggle, familiar pain searing up his chest as pinpricks of black crowded his vision. Not another panic attack. Not now.

He took a deep breath.

Oh, God. Another deep breath. Calm down. Think. Sam was crouching… choking… Dean knew what to do, but he kept forgetting. Think, dammit. What do you have to do now? He searched his head frantically as the details started to slip, floating away with all the blackness.

He took yet another breath through his mouth, and then another. He was breathing too fast, and sweat formed again over his brow, which he wiped off with the back of his palm.

Sammy is going to die.

No.
Breathe.

Inhale. Exhale. Repeat. In. Out. Inhale. Exhale...

Some of the blackness cleared, but Sam was still choking. And then Dean remembered. His arms and legs shot back into action as he finally recalled what he had to do.

"Okay, okay," he said to Sam, "I'm going to get you to stand. Don't fight me, get it?"

Sam didn't reply, but Dean didn't have time to wait. Putting his arms under his brother's armpits, he half-lifted him into a standing position and Sam staggered back, his long limbs flailing, but Dean brought his own arms down so they were wrapped around Sam's torso, and held his brother tight to keep him straight. He found the area above Sam's navel, and plunged his fist against Sam's belly once, twice, hoping that it would work. Sam bent forward again and again, with each thrust, until thankfully, he let out a full-fledged cough, gagging at the end of it, informing Dean that his airway was finally free.

Dean moved over so he was facing Sam whose eyes were shut, breathing fast and ragged, but from his nose. He tore off a tissue from the bedside table and held it in front of Sam's mouth. "Spit it out."

It was a block of the fruit. By the time Dean had thrown it into the trash, Sam was sitting on the bed, the colour of his face returning to normal while he took deep, shaky breaths, his eyes still closed. Dean went and sat next to his brother, the pace of his own heartbeat slowly returning to normal. He couldn't believe he'd almost lost Sam and Castiel all in one day.

He was finally able to speak, though. "You feelin' any better, Sam?"

Sam nodded, but didn't open his eyes.

"Here." Dean reached for the bottle of water from the nightstand, opened it, and placed it before Sam's mouth. "Have some water. You're okay."

Sam opened his eyes and accepted it, hands trembling so horribly that Dean had to hold it for him. He took a few swallows but refused more, breaths still shaky. From his expression, Dean thought he saw something that was very rarely seen on Sam's face: fear.

"Sammy." He hesitated before placing a hand on his back. "It's okay. You're fine." He held the bottle against Sam's mouth again. "Have some more. Here."

Sam shook his head turned to look at him, eyes slightly bloodshot and watery. Dean could see hopelessness in his expression and wished, at once, that he hadn't looked so closely. Each time he saw his brother like this, something inside him seemed to break.

Somewhere, Dean hoped that even if he were to fail, Sam would hold on and fight his illness by sheer willpower, and seeing him like this was making all that hope to fall to pieces. Dean knew from the way he had kept failing to find a cure all these months that there was, perhaps, nothing out there to help Sam, but it didn't stop frank hope from burning inside of him. Maybe Sam could be amongst the one per cent that survived, like Dr Greene had said in the beginning. Even at the hospital, he had woken up when she had said that it probably wouldn't happen. Maybe just to say goodbye — and Dean's heart leapt at that — but Sam had woken up.

There was silence as Dean looked away from Sam. He could hear his brother breathing beside him, rattles and whispers of air, comforting Dean somewhat. He had just placed the bottle of water back on the nightstand when Sam brought his head down, resting his forehead on Dean's shoulder.
Dean reached forward and cupped his neck, patted it twice, and rested his hand on Sam's back. "You wanna sleep?"

"Cas," Sam whispered.

"He's fine."

Sam raised his hand to touch his bandage. "He's not. One of us should be with him." He looked up, and Dean let his hand slide away from Sam's back. "Did he say something?"

Dean scratched at his eyebrow. "Yeah — yeah, he did. He's just a stupid ass, really."

"What did he tell you?"

Dean sighed. "He thinks he's a burden to us. He thinks that being human makes him useless."

"Well, that's crap. And?"

"And, what? That's all. Well — it turned out to be a hell of a lot bigger than we thought it was, but yeah."

"What did you tell him?" Sam asked Dean.

"I told him not to be a moron."

He clenched his jaw. "Dean, we should really talk to him about this."

"Well, I just talked, Sam."

"No, I mean talk talk."

"Aw, come on…"

Sam narrowed his eyes. "What's going on with you? A few hours ago, you were all for helping him!"

"Yeah! Yeah I am…" Dean ran a hand through his hair. "I just…"

"What is it?" Sam pressed on.

"Nothing."

"Oh, come on, stop lying," he snapped, leaning back with the support of his palms. "Spit it out."

"It's nothing, okay?" said Dean. "It's all fine."

Sam's jaw was working again. "You're hiding something from me. You think he'll say it."

Dean wondered if Castiel would indeed talk about what had just happened in front of Sam. But no, his brother wouldn't know of what had transpired. That was between him and Cas. And it wasn't as if… it was a one-time thing. And yet, it had felt right. It had fit, as if it were meant to be. As if —

Dean pulled his mind off the topic before he could freak out again. He really didn't want to go there.

"Did the doc say something?" Sam asked quietly. "Am I worse than what I've been told? Is that what you're trying to keep from me? Is that what's worrying Cas — that he can't help with it?"
Dean's head snapped up. "You're okay."

He chuckled. "Right. I can barely walk without holding to the walls these days. And it's getting worse." He let out another whispery laugh. "You think I might need a wheelchair soon?"

Dean looked into his younger brother's eyes and found the sheen of tears there. His heart leapt. "Sam…"

Sam sniffed. "We'll deal with it, right?"

"Right."

"And…" he hesitated, "I know that Cas and I have been grabbing all your attention… and I know you're having trouble dealing too, and also that you prefer to talk to Cas about such things," he swallowed, "but you would tell me if anything was troubling you, right?" He smiled. "I know I'm screwed up, but I'm still your brother, you know. I can help sometimes."

Dean suppressed a lump in his throat as he cupped Sam's neck again and let him rest his head on his shoulder. "You're such a chick."

"I'm not the one who watches Dr Sexy, MD in secret, Dean," Sam replied in a muffled voice as he burrowed his face into his big brother's shoulder. "You're menopausal."

Dean snorted. "You're plain hormonal."

"That's still better than being menopausal."

"No, it ain't."

Sam laughed softly. "How would you know?"

"Well… I know," Dean replied hesitantly.

"Please don't tell me you've slept with a menopausal lady."

"Well…"

"Seriously?"

"Oh, shut up, hormonal bitch."

"By the way," Sam said, "that woman didn't know what she was talking about. Menopause is supposed to be awful — to the person experiencing it, I mean. It's got a lot of mean symptoms."

"Aw, c'mere, baby sis."

"Sure, Gran."

~o~

Dean smiled as he tucked the blankets around Sam before getting up from his chair. Stretching, he slowly shut Sam's door and made his way to Castiel's room, his heart beginning to hammer against his chest as he got closer to his destination. But he knew he had to go back there. He didn't want Castiel getting upset and doing something stupid again.

He waited a moment at the door and then rapped at it with his knuckles.
There was no reply. Dean raised his hand, ready to knock again, when there was a sound from inside. "Come in."

He twisted the doorknob, the cold metal feeling slippery against his sweaty palm as he walked into the room. The sharp reek of blood hit his nostrils again as he squinted at the dimness. "Gotta clean that up," he muttered, more to himself than anyone else. The attempt to rescue Castiel had been so frantic, he had forgotten to clean out all the blood.

"Sorry."

It was low, almost whispered. Dean pretended to ignore it as he went back to his chair beside Castiel's bed. His friend was lounging against a pile of pillows, the blanket pulled up to his middle as he stared at Dean with wide eyes.

"Sorry," he repeated.

Dean didn't ask what that was for. "Don't worry about it, Cas."

"I seem to upset you all the time."

Dean gritted his teeth, every instinct in him advising him to leave the room, but he couldn't. Something kept him glued to his chair. His heart was thumping harder now, but he somehow managed to reply.

"No, you didn't—" he sighed, "I just had to check on Sam. And thank God that I did."

"What happened?"

"He was choking on a piece of pear." Dean shut his eyes for a moment. "I rang up the doctor a while ago too. She said she'd look him over at the clinic session tomorrow."

"Because he choked?"

"Yeah. I just found it really odd that he choked like that… I mean, there's no way that could slip without being chewed."

"You think there's something wrong again."

Dean didn't reply to that. He scratched at his stubble instead. "Well, the doc said she'd give it a look, so I think she must have been anticipating this…" he hesitated, "I think she's given up on Sammy too, Cas."

Castiel straightened up. "What makes you say that?"

"Just…" Dean swallowed as his eyes fell on Castiel's heavily bandaged wrists and it jolted back to him that his friend already carried too much weight on his shoulders. "I don't… it's okay…"

"You can tell me."

"No, Cas, it's fine, I'll handle it. You rest yourself."

Castiel looked as though he wanted to rebel, but then he said something else. "I'm sorry for kissing you, Dean. I don't know…" he paused, and Dean never got to hear what exactly he didn't know.

He could feel his heartbeat start to rev up again. Why did Castiel have to bring that up? He could live with the awkwardness of it for the rest of his life… but now he had to discuss it with Cas?
"You don't have to be sorry," he told Castiel slowly. *I was equally involved,* he thought, but it wouldn't come out of his mouth. He remembered working his lips against Castiel's, and swallowed at the flashback. No. He didn't want to discuss this further.

"Go to sleep, Cas." That was it. Dean was ending the matter here. He didn't want to think about it ever again.

There was silence. Dean did everything but look at Castiel and the air between them was heavy with awkwardness. He wished Castiel would fall asleep soon, so he, Dean, could doze for a while and take occasional trips later on, to Sam's room. He tried not to think of the kiss, of the smell of leaves and rain… and wet mud… of Cas… because it just seemed too complicated for his mind to absorb it all at once. He thought he knew where the primary urge had come from, but he didn't want to ponder too much over it.

"Dean?"

Castiel's gravelly voice was like an axe through the icy silence. Dean looked up, eyebrows coming together, while Castiel spoke. "I am not sure what the socially acceptable way to say this is, but I find I would very much like to kiss you again."

It hit him like a bus. Or a high-velocity bullet train. Either ways, this was one thing Dean hadn't expected to hear from Castiel. He knew his jaw had dropped when he raised his face to Castiel again. He wanted to ask 'what?' or 'what are you saying?' but then, he was sure he had heard Castiel pretty clearly.

*I find I would very much like to kiss you again.*

*I would too.*

*That did not just pop into my head,* Dean thought, warmth creeping up his ears as he looked away from Castiel. And then, as though all of this weren't enough, Castiel spoke again.

"I wish you would say something, Dean."

He blinked. What was there to say?

"I'm – I'm not gay," he sputtered suddenly, his tongue refusing to produce speech. *Shit,* he thought the moment he'd said it. He swallowed. "I mean… this is a shitty time to say this, I know…"

Castiel shook his head. "I don't understand. What has homosexuality got to do with any of this?"

He was either really naïve, or Dean hadn't made himself clear, he realised. He just turned away, though, refusing to provide further information to the former angel. He didn't want to talk about it.

"Would you have felt differently for me, had I occupied a female vessel?" Castiel asked him.

Dean took a sharp breath at that. He had never thought of it in that way. Castiel had always been… a nerdy dude with wings, and now his wings were gone but he still remained in his vessel. If he had possessed a woman, would Dean have kissed him more willingly?

He remembered Anna.

*I would have kissed him ages ago.*

No, this is different. *Castiel is a dude… not some chick.*
"Sam told me once that when someone is important to you, external appearances don't matter."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Sammy tell you this?" he asked hoarsely. Did Sam know something? Why had he given this kind of advice to Castiel? Probably for Meg… hopefully for Meg…

"Yes," Castiel replied to Dean's question. "Long ago." He bit his lower lip. "I shouldn't be pushing you. I'm sorry, Dean."

Dean licked his suddenly dry lips. "When did—? Why did Sam…?"

"It is not of import as to why he said it," Castiel replied. "I just…" he hesitated, and turned away.

"Cas."

"Dean, I apologise. I didn't know how else to say it."

"No, no, look," Dean ran a hand through his hair, "I know, I understand, okay? And … I don't want to make this worse for you, Cas, and I'm sorry, but I don't feel that way."

"I know."

Dean frowned at him. "Then… why?"

Castiel smiled sadly. "I hadn't even known for sure until a few minutes ago. I think I've felt this way for a while now, but there was no way of knowing, and now I do. As a human… the emotions seem easier to understand — they're so much more definite. I don't think I would have ever comprehended this as an angel. So when I did realise, I just wanted you to know."

"That… you… have feelings for me?"

"Yes. I thought I should take a gamble. Humans do that all the time, don't they? You confess your thoughts, take a gamble and see if you get the result you wanted. I tried it for the first time, and I've lost, but…" He didn't continue.

Dean's heart sank. "Look, Cas…" The dude was depressed, and Dean was… rejecting him on top of everything. No. He couldn't be responsible for Castiel to get worse.

The angel had expectant eyes on Dean, waiting for him to say something, and Dean scratched his eye. "We'll — we'll sort this out in the morning."

"I know you don't feel the same, Dean. You don't have to make excuses."

"I'm not making excuses."

"Okay."

A sudden shot of anger flared inside Dean, as the magnitude of Castiel's words hit him once and for all. "Dammit, Cas," he hissed, standing up. "This is not okay!"

"I know—"

"No. No, you don't," said Dean, pacing about. "You don't just say this to someone, all right? You don't just dump this shit on them!" He had no idea why he was angry, or why he was reacting this way. He turned back to Castiel, whose startled, wide eyes traced him as he walked about.

"Stop staring," Dean snapped, and Castiel turned away.
"I was merely trying to convey that I believed you when you said you weren't making excuses," he said, still looking away. "I didn't mean to suggest that what I did was acceptable."

There was silence. Dean felt his temper wane as he walked over to the chest of drawers and leaned against it, palms unconsciously tracing the smooth mahogany. No. This was not the time to be angry at Castiel. This wasn't his mistake — no one had control over this stuff. And it wasn't as though Castiel's mental condition was tip-top, and Dean really didn't want to upset him further.

He suddenly remembered the blood on the floor. He needed a moment to clear his head, he realised, and cleaning that up would be a good excuse to escape so he could grab some supplies. He looked up at Castiel. "I've gotta clean up the floor. I'll be back in a mo', okay?"

"I'll help—" Castiel began, but Dean reached in his bedside cabinet and tossed another juice box to him.

"Keep your ass in bed and drink that. You lost blood, and you need rest. I'll be right back."

He left, checked on Sam once again, and returned with the cleaning supplies from the bathroom. Castiel was resting against the headboard, one leg over the other, as he sipped the juice. He looked once at Dean, and then concentrated on the fluid going down his gullet as Dean knelt down and began to sponge the blood off the floor

~o~

The IV fluids and juice were making Castiel feel much better, and once he had finished drinking, he crushed the box and threw it into the dustbin beside his bed. Then he lay back down, discreetly watching Dean wipe the floor, and looked away every time the other man turned to him.

He didn't know what had made him say it — to tell Dean the one thing he had been suspecting quite a bit, of late, but had been feeling for a long time. But then, like he'd told Dean, as a human, he could gauge his emotions better, and when Dean had kissed him a while ago, Castiel had known. He wasn't aware of how humans communicated such feelings with each other, but he had wanted to tell Dean the truth. Except, it hadn't worked like he'd thought it would. Apparently as a human, you could make mistakes in deciphering other people's thoughts and feelings for you. And Castiel had made that very mistake just now. He just hoped, that as he got adjusted to this life, he would be able to understand these emotions better.

Except, he didn't want to feel this way for anyone, except for Dean.

He didn't know why he thought so. It was, perhaps, the uniqueness of what he was feeling for Dean. It was pure, in a way... but he wasn't sure how. Just the sentiment was so different — good, painful, and liberating all at once — that Castiel was sure that this was not a regular mixture of emotions to have, and that it was special, and that Dean, in his own way, was different.

"Cas, is that you in there?"

Dean's voice interrupted his thoughts and he blinked up at his friend, realising that he hadn't noticed Dean finish with the cleaning, leave, and come back. But he spoke. "I'm not possessed, Dean."

He sighed. "That's not what I—" He shook his head. "Go to sleep."

"I don't feel like sleeping."

"Well, tough. I ain't letting you stare at me all night."
"I don't always have to look at you. I can read—"
"Cas, sleep."

Castiel licked his lips and turned to his side, so he was facing Dean, who leaned slowly back on his chair as he stretched his legs on the bed. "Can I ask you something, Dean?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Hasn't it been awkward enough?"
"It's not got anything to do with…" Castiel hesitated, "… us."

"So it's general knowledge that you're looking for?"
"Yes."
"Go on."

"Have you ever felt something for someone, felt something so unique, that you've never wanted to feel it for anyone else?"

Dean arched an eyebrow. "You're tired, Cas," he said. "Go to sleep, so I can get some shuteye too."

"Why would you think I'm tired?"

"Because I couldn't make heads or tails of the crap you just said."

Castiel shook his head. "I don't want to embarrass you further, Dean, but I feel something for you, that I've never felt for anyone else. But I don't want to feel that way for anyone else either."

The hunter's eyes widened, eyebrows threatening to vanish under his hair, as he opened and closed his mouth a few times. "Wha— what?"

"I…" Castiel felt embarrassment rise up him. He shouldn't have told this to Dean. He just seemed to be getting more and more successful at upsetting his friend, the only thing he seemed to have been able to do in the last few months. "I apologise."

Dean was still in shock, blinking repeatedly, mouth trying to work to form words. "D-Did you just…?" He swallowed, and stood up. "I… Cas… I need some fresh air, okay?"

"Okay."

And with that, Dean Winchester bolted out of the room quicker than Castiel had ever seen him run.

~o~

Dean could hear crickets chirping as he walked out the door, away from the bunker. A moonlit, starry night greeted him as he stepped out, and he had to hug himself to keep from shivering in the chilly air. He could feel goosebumps rise up everywhere and he coaxed himself to calm down.

He hadn't meant to run outside that way, but what Castiel had just said was…

*I feel something for you, that I've never felt for anyone else. But I don't want to feel that way for anyone else either.*

What did that mean? What the fuck was it supposed to mean? Was it just an innocent statement?
He wondered if he was overthinking this. Sam must be rubbing off on him after all these long years.

But Dean wasn't an idiot. He thought he knew what Cas had meant — about what he felt. But how? It was too sudden, and too soon. Or had his friend felt this way all this time, and simply hadn't realised it? But Cas had mentioned that he'd been like this for a while now.

A while… how long?

And what Castiel had just said directly translated to…

*I'm in love with you, Dean.*

It was Castiel's voice in his head, saying the dreaded words, and Dean didn't know how it had gotten to that.

Something dropped into the pit of Dean's stomach. This was so odd. This was impossible. There was no way in hell that Cas was in *love* with him. They were friends, sure, and Dean thought that Castiel was a good friend, one of the best, but … love?

No. No. He had to know for sure. He needed to ask Castiel about it.

He didn't want to face Castiel any time soon, but he also knew that the can of worms had been opened, and ignoring the situation now wouldn't do anyone any favours. They needed to talk about this.

Holy shit, he was turning into Sam.

Sighing, he made his way back into the bunker again, shutting the door behind him with an ominous creek and standing in darkness and silence for a minute before taking a deep breath and going back to Castiel's room.

~o~

Castiel knew he had said something wrong. He had probably angered Dean again — and somehow, he'd been doing that a lot lately. He kept making mistakes, he realised. He was erratic.

He couldn't really see the point of Dean saving his life. He was just proving to be a weakness during the hard time that this was. Dean needed strength for what he was facing Sam… not his, Castiel's, burden.

But apparently, he wasn't a burden.

He didn't believe that.

He pulled the blanket tight around him, the sheets under him rustling as he tried to make himself comfortable. That was when he heard the knocks on his door.

"Come in," he said, and Dean entered, one hand running over what looked like goosebumps on the opposite arm.

"Hey," he said. There was an expression of urgency on his face.

Castiel did not respond. He just looked at Dean, who came back to his perch by the bed. He looked like he wanted to say something as his mouth opened, and then shut, but he turned away.
Castiel frowned. "What is it, Dean?"

He shook his head. "Cas… I…” he looked at his hands, "I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have taken off like that."

"It's okay, Dean. I understand you needed to think. I hope the fresh air helped."

The hunter looked up at him and something passed over his eyes. "I thought about what you said."

"I know."

Dean looked puzzled. "Huh?"

"You made it clear that you needed time to process what I had said. But Dean," Castiel adjusted himself so he was on his side, "I didn't mean to bewilder you in any way."

"Uh… okay," he said. "But, you gotta tell me, man, how long have you felt this way?"

"What way?"

"What you said just now before I left. How long have you been thinking like that?"

"I seem to upset you when I try to tell you."

"No. Just tell me, okay? We need to talk about this."

Castiel licked his lips, unsure as to how he was supposed to explain it to Dean. "Dean," he said, "I just understood those… feelings… those emotions — now."

"Now."

"They've been clearer for a few days, but I completely understood them just now, yes."

"And before that? You didn't feel the same way?"

"I don't know," Castiel replied truthfully. "I was too new to being human. And when I was an angel, these were just things I didn't comprehend."

Dean blinked, jaw dropping slightly. "Since you were an angel…?"

"Yes."

"And… how much time?"

"I don't know," Castiel hesitated. "A few years."

"Years?"

"A year after I raised you from Perdition."

Dean was getting increasingly uncomfortable, and Castiel wasn't sure why. Weren't humans supposed to openly discuss emotions? He had never been part of intimate chats between Sam and Dean, so he wasn't fully aware. And the Winchesters were the only humans he had ever observed closely.

He turned to Dean, who was looking away, refusing to meet eyes again. Castiel felt a pang of guilt at this.
"I'm sorry I made it awkward," he said in a low voice, wondering how many times he was going to mess up on the same day.

Dean looked back at him, mouth slightly open, eyes disbelieving and sad. "Cas…"

And before Castiel knew it, Dean was leaning forward. He caught the brief scent of blood and gunpowder before calloused palms cupped his face, and Dean's lips connected with his.
19. Prognosis

When Castiel felt Dean's familiar lips on his for the second time that day, he was better aware of what to do. He did not stay limp against Dean's efforts this time. Instead, he worked his own lips along, gasping for a moment as Dean's thumbs moved lightly against his cheek. Their noses weren't pressed together awkwardly as their heads were tilted at the correct angle this time, and Castiel realised that he had never experienced anything like this. Not even with Meg.

After Dean pulled off, he brought his hands down to cup Castiel's neck, and their foreheads touched as Dean held him like that, calloused hands warm against Castiel's cool skin.

Castiel could hear him breathing heavily as he shut his eyes, taking in the moment. He wasn't sure what this signified, but he liked it, and he wanted to stay like that for a long time. He wondered if Dean felt the same way for him. He hoped he did, though. That would be very nice.

And just like that, Castiel raised his head and cupped Dean's cheeks again, and kissed him another time. Dean didn't pull away. He just complied and kissed Castiel back, making the angel wonder if it was a dream.

If it was, he didn't want to wake up.

They kissed again and a couple of times after that, and each time, Castiel didn't want to let go. He didn't understand any of it… or rather, he was just coming to understand, but if Dean didn't feel the same way as Castiel did for him, he didn't know why Dean was kissing back. Or had he been so moved by what Castiel had said?

It was absurd, he realised, his fingers interlacing with Dean's as they kissed for the umpteenth time. Humans were so absurd. But kissing did feel much better as a human experience than an angelic one. The confusing emotions involved were well worth it.

Dean returned to check on Sam in the early hours of the morning to find that his brother had slept quite well. He pulled up a chair next to Sam's bed and sat there a while, trying to think coherently about everything that had just transpired between him and Castiel.

He wondered what Sam would say if he found out, but decided he'd worry about that later. But Cas…? Dean wasn't clear on what he felt for Castiel, but at this point, he knew all his instincts were driven by what Castiel had just told him a few hours ago.

It was a word that he would have run away from, under normal circumstances. In all the relationships he'd had, barring Lisa, this was the single word he was most afraid of. But Castiel wasn't one of his girlfriends. Hell, he wasn't a girl at all. And yet, when he'd said something that had implied this, Dean had just gone on and… fuck, why hadn't he just run away from there and never responded to that?

Because he wasn't a dick. Or was he doing Castiel a favour because the dude was depressed, and had damn near killed himself just hours ago?
Dean Winchester didn't do any favours. Not favours of this kind anyway. And yet, here he was, pity-kissing a distressed friend.

_Pity-kissing_. He chuckled to himself. That was what it was, was it? In that case, he had to be the biggest ass on this planet.

He needed to think about this, he realised. He really needed to sit down and work this out. And while he did that, he'd take care of Sam and try to get him all better.

~o~

It was clinic day for Sam, which meant blood tests and a PET scan amongst other things. They did a head scan too, to find out how the tumours in his brain were doing. There were still days when Sam woke up speaking gibberish or suffering with a headache. He wasn't even himself sometimes, and Dean hated to see him like that. And another troubling thing was the progressive loss of his muscle power with each passing day, and then that episode from last night, because honestly, Dean really thought that choking on such a gigantic block of fruit was really odd, and he was more worried for Sam now.

They took Castiel along to the hospital this time because neither Dean nor Sam wanted him to be alone at the bunker. So he sat in the backseat while they drove to the hospital and Dean kept glancing at the rear-view mirror which reflected Castiel's eyes, but his friend didn't utter a single word about anything.

As he drove to the hospital, though, Dean yawned tiredly. Sam narrowed his eyes at him. "You get any sleep at all?"

Dean scrubbed the back of his palm across his own eyes. "Between you choking and Cas trying to kill himself? I was practically knocked out."

"I remember hearing you come back to my room early in the morning," Sam replied. "You were with Cas until then?"

"Yeah," Dean said, and realised that Sam thought he had probably just been keeping an eye on Castiel through the night, when what had happened was so vastly different. He realised that Sam would probably never know of this because Dean would kill himself before talking to Sam about it.

"You gotta take it easy, man," said Sam. "I mean… this is really getting to you."

Dean was annoyed now because yes, that was fucking _rich_ coming from Sam, who was just getting worse and then expecting Dean to rest. But it wasn't Sam's fault either, so he swallowed down his annoyance and didn't reply. They got to the hospital eventually, silence between them, and Sam's blood was tested and he was given the tracer before being wheeled off to the PET scan.

Later, they met up with Dr. Greene at her office. It was day sixty-two since Sam's first chemo and in two days, he'd be starting the final cycle. Dean sat down before the doctor nervously, with Sam seated between him and Cas, as the doctor went through Sam's reports, pin-drop silence between them.

She looked up at her patient. "How have you been, Sam?"

He shrugged. "Okay."

The doctor turned to Dean. "You said he choked on something last night?"
"Yeah," Dean replied, hands on the table as he leant forward. "Is that related to his cancer?"

"It's called LEMS," the doctor explained. "Lambert-Eaton Myasthenic Syndrome. It's something that's known as a paraneoplastic syndrome, and Sam has had it from the beginning — I think you must remember telling me about how he was weak on his legs."

"Yeah," Dean said.

The doctor nodded and turned to Sam, speaking to him directly this time. "It's intensifying, from what I can see, if it's affecting the muscles in your mouth and throat, but this is not uncommon and, well—"

"— I'll just have to deal with it," Sam finished for her in a low voice.

She looked sympathetic. "I wish there was something I could do about it."

His jaw clenched and nodded at her. Then he cleared his throat. "So… will I need a wheelchair soon…?"

"Has the weakness on your legs increased?"

"Yeah. More on my hips and thighs than anything, but yeah."

She sighed, and Dean didn't need an answer from her to know why that was. He bit his lip, wondering what was going through Sam's head. The kid was just about to lose another chunk of his independence and Dean didn't think he could take it anymore. But as long as Sam was alive, it was good. He just needed Sam to survive this — to be alive. They'd deal with the rest once that was sorted out. Hell, even Bobby had gotten off that wheelchair in the end.

Dean pressed his lips together. It still hurt to think of Bobby, especially since the last few months he'd been wishing, more than ever that Bobby was with them, because he was going to explode under the weight of this soon, and he didn't know how long he could go on like this.

Sam's rasping voice broke Dean out of his reverie. "So, Doc… my reports?"

Dr Greene looked like she was dreading that question when she shut the file and played with her wedding band, before turning to Sam again.

"Sam, your first two cycles showed real promise," she paused, "but… the third one hasn't been all that effective."

Sam frowned, as Dean felt himself go numb. He thought he knew where this was heading.

"So… can it get better?" Sam asked her, and Dean suddenly didn't want to know. He didn't want to listen to whatever Dr Greene had to say. He wanted to shut his ears and sing aloud like a child, because maybe that would negate it. But Dean never got his wishes.

The doctor sighed. "I'm afraid not, Sam. The treatment for your cancer is aggressive in itself, and each cycle of drugs we administer is very powerful, and we expect improvement — much more drastic than this."

"So you're saying it isn't getting better as fast you hoped it would?" Sam was holding on to the last strands of hope, and breaking Dean's heart in the process.

The doctor shook her head, and spoke in a low voice. "It hasn't improved much since the last time
at all. And the mets in your brain — they haven't shrunk as much as we'd hoped either."

The silence that followed was deafening. Dean was sure he could hear the thumping of his own heart as it made itself known, and beside him, Sam had visibly paled, his jaw clenching and unclenching rhythmically while Dean could hear his cogwheels whir. However, when Sam spoke, his voice was steady. Or at least, Dean knew that Sam was trying his damnedest to keep it that way.

"So, so the chemo…?" he asked her. "There's one cycle left, right?"

"Yes," she replied, "but… that won't cure you. It will just work to prolong your life."

"How much longer will I get?" There was a tremble at the end, and Sam blinked a few times, licking his lips.

The doctor looked sad. "Another couple of months, tops."

"And if I skip it?"

"We… we can keep you comfortable. You're relatively healthy now but if this tumbles downhill…"

Sam nodded, eyes still downcast. "I need — I need time to decide."

"You can tell me by tomorrow," she replied. "We start your final cycle on Monday if you want to continue."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry, Sam."

If one could describe the feeling of the entire world collapsing upon them, this would be it, Dean realised. As he listened to Sam's conversation with the doctor, he was sure that his heart had stopped beating and he just… why couldn't he just fucking be dead now? An unbearable pain tore at him, searing up his chest, until he couldn't breathe…

"Dean," said a distant voice in his ear. "Dean… please, man."

Dean heard the crackle of paper and someone cupped his neck, pressing his nose and mouth into another paper bag. Everything went black. A hand patted his back as Sam's voice coaxed him to breathe, and he heard Castiel's gravelly voice, muffled, as though his mouth was covered with a cloth.

"What's wrong with him?" asked the angel.

"Panic attack," said Dr Greene's voice, and she sounded very distant as well. "Is he predisposed?" she was asking Sam.

"He had one last night too," Sam replied, "but… no, never before this, really."

There was silence for a while, and all Dean could hear was the sound of his own ragged breaths as he inhaled and exhaled into the bag. Sam's clammy hand was still on his neck, holding his head in place while Dean tried to breathe. The blackness before his eyes started to clear up, but he wasn't feeling any better.

"Let him lie down," said Dr Greene, when nothing improved for a while, and Dean's heartbeat was
still at a crazy speed. He could feel himself shaking all over as Sam got up, pulled Dean off his chair with surprising strength and coaxed him down to the floor. Dean concentrated on his breathing then as the doctor came and knelt beside him, clasping his wrist and pressing three fingers to his pulse. Sam was crouching too, and Dean knew how inconvenient that was for him, and he wished he could ask Sam to go and sit on the chair, and then he saw Castiel's face looming over his.


He obeyed her, and took in deep inhalations, letting them out through his mouth, and counting. The doctor stood up just as her pager bleeped.

"He'll be okay," she told Sam. "If he gets worse, give the reception a call from my phone, and they'll have someone look at him. For now, I'll leave you to talk; I've been paged anyway. Let me know of your decision by tomorrow."

"Okay, Doctor," Sam said, squeezing Dean's shoulder.

The doctor paused for a moment. "I'm really sorry. We did all we could... and I wish there was something else."

"It's fine, Doc," said Sam, his voice heavy. "I know..." he paused, squeezing Dean's shoulder tighter. "Thank you." The doctor muttered something incoherent and shut the door behind her.

Sam looked back at Dean then, who refused to meet eyes with his brother because he didn't want to see the emotion there. He didn't think he could handle it.

"Dean..." Sam sat down, cross-legged, as Castiel knelt beside him. "Talk to us, man."

Dean turned away from them and the carpet tickled his cheek as he turned to the other side, eyes burning traitorously. He swallowed a few times and felt Castiel's fingers wrap around his wrist.

"It's going to be okay," said the angel, and Dean had to blink several times before facing them.

"Go and sit on the chair, Sam," Dean said, his voice wavering and weak.

"I'm good. You——"

"I'm fine," Dean said, taking another deep breath before pushing himself up, but Sam kept a hand on his chest.

"Lie back down."

"I said I'm okay," Dean replied in a flat voice. He was in no mood to fight. "Let me be."

"This is your second panic attack in two days!" said Sam angrily.

Dean ignored that, pushed Sam's hand away and stood up, wavered for a second, and gave his own hand to Sam, pulling him up.

"So, what are you going to do about it?" he asked Sam, as he removed his car keys from his pocket.

"About what?"

"About Hannah Montana splitting up with her boyfriend," said Dean incredulously. "What the fuck
do you think I'm talking about?"

Sam scratched at his scalp, and Dean turned away from him. "Look, Dean," he began, "we'll discuss this later, okay?"

Dean knew what that meant.

No, I don't want to continue, Dean. Please don't put me through that.

Let me die.

No, no, no, fuck no. He wouldn't let Sam just fucking die. No.

"Dean, it's going to be okay," said Sam in a soft voice and Dean suddenly felt a wetness on his cheeks.

He dipped his eyes to the crook of his arm and wiped it all away, and shook his head at Sam.

"No."

And he walked out of the room, leaving Sam and Castiel to stare after him.

~o~

Sam needed Castiel's help to walk back to the car. He was already tired by the time the angel helped him into the front seat beside Dean, whose red-rimmed eyes were staring right ahead. He pulled out of the parking lot as soon as Castiel had settled at the back and Sam desperately tried to stay awake after that, because he really, really wanted to talk to Dean, but he nodded off when they were halfway there.

He was shaken awake by Dean then, and his brother helped him to his room where Sam fell back to sleep, refusing to get up even for lunch, even though he was hungry.

He was pissed, that was for sure. He didn't fucking want to die and he was dying no matter what, and Dean wanted him to get that final chemo cycle so Sam could cramp and hurt and puke up his stomach. Sam really didn't want to be in pain anymore. He was done being brave, and he was done enduring pain for his brother and he wanted to be selfish this time, but fuck, watching Dean have those panic attacks… and twice in two days, too.

No, he had to make sure that at least Cas was okay before he died. He had to take that last chemo cycle if it fucking killed him, because it would mean that Dean could have the illusion of having Sam around for a while longer and that would mean that Sam could ask Castiel to watch out for Dean after he died.

Yes, he was going to take that last cycle of chemo.

~o~

Sam stumbled into the library late in the evening while Dean was frantically searching through another book on old-time healing. He looked up as Sam somehow managed not to fall face-first, before planting himself onto a chair. He covered his head with his hands, and Dean knew it was another headache.

"Wanna eat something?" Dean asked, shutting the book.
Sam shook his head. "Maybe later. I need to talk to you."

"Look, Sam—"

"I'll do that last cycle, okay?"

Dean blinked at him, a lump rising in his throat. "Sammy…"

"No, Dean, it's okay. Call Dr. Greene and let her now."

Dean felt his eyes burn again and scrubbed the back of his palm against them. "You — you don't need to…"

"I wanna."

He nodded. "Okay."

Sam took a deep breath and pressed his lips together. "So… this is it, huh?"

Dean didn't reply to that, but Sam stood up from his place.

"Can I ask you for something, Dean?"

Dean wanted to yell at him: *No dying wishes, Sam. You're not going to die. Not on my watch.* However, he just swallowed and nodded again, because he couldn't get himself to speak.

"Can we spar? One last time?"

Sam didn't have to explain why he was asking for that. He'd be needing a wheelchair soon, losing control over his body to muscle weakness and then… Dean couldn't think of it. Every instinct in him wanted to say no, because what if he hurt Sam?

He barely managed to get his voice out as he stood up and beckoned to Sam. "Come on."

~o~

They were in the gun range. There was a door on the other side which led to a room, empty except for those mattress-like things they used in movies to break falls while filming. Dean picked up a pink one and threw it behind where Sam was standing.

"Girly colour is for you, Sammy," he said, and Sam smiled at that because Dean was making an attempt at a joke, and that was a lot these days. After that, Dean proceeded to surround them with mattresses, and Sam just kept his temper down because he knew that Dean was worried.

He was reminded of their childhood, when they'd spar on motel lawns and open spaces. Their father would stand right there and bark instructions, encouragements and insults, and they would grapple with each other until they were spent.

Those were the days before the trials, Leviathans, Hell, Ruby, demon blood, Jess… and so many other things. It seemed like another time — another world that Sam had lived in and he realised that even though he'd been unhappy most of that time, he'd readily swap places now because all of that was better than the shit he was facing at this point.

"Sam," said Dean, and Sam noticed that his brother was holding out his hands, ready to start. They'd always done the Sticky Hands exercise first even as kids. He stepped forward and locked Dean's left wrist with his right hand, and let Dean do the same to his own left hand. And then Dean
rolled his left forearm inwards, and Sam could feel the muscles under his palm, strong as always, as he rolled his own left hand outwards simultaneously. He knew it was weak, from the minimal effort that it took Dean to counter him.

Their father had always insisted on this exercise first; it was a method to gauge your partner's strength before you could spar and Dean's wrist felt familiar under Sam's hand, the power from his teenage years still present and consistent.

Dean did not comment on the ease with which he was able to move Sam's wrist, and they finished the exercise a few minutes later. Sam went back a few steps after that, and stood on guard. Dean assumed his own position, but then put his hands down as he looked around for something.

"What is it?" Sam asked him.

"Seeing if they've got chest guards around here," Dean muttered.

"It's not necessary."

"I don't want to..." he hesitated, "I can't haul your ass up to your room if you faint from a mistake I make."

"You won't make a mistake."

Dean looked up at him with pained eyes, and Sam sighed. "Promise. I'm not as bad as I look."

He ran a hand through his hair, before getting back on guard. "If you faint, I swear I'm leaving you here."

"Sure." Sam grinned.

Dean nodded. "On three?"

"Okay."

They counted together, and on three, Dean raised his leg, aiming a roundhouse that Sam ducked. Sam shuffled sideways and aimed a side-kick in return, but was promptly blocked. He went ahead then and hit Dean with his elbow, but was blocked again, and he barely managed to guard himself against an upper-cut. Dean wasn't punching very hard, but slices of pain still shot through Sam from where his brother's fist had made contact during the forearm block. He didn't make a sound, though. Dean didn't need to know.

"Not bad, Sam," said Dean enthusiastically, shuffling forward, but he fell back when Sam's leg came up to stomp at his abdomen. "But I guess you're not fast enough!"

"Watch me," said Sam, blocking Dean's jab and holding down his other arm while twisting his arm to the back. At that moment, Dean acted on pure reflex and his free elbow shot back at Sam's middle.

It took a split second for Sam to register the pain but when he did, he was sure he'd never felt anything like it. He let Dean go as his vision started to darken, and stumbled backwards.

"Sam?" His brother turned around, expression changing from enthusiasm to shock in an instant. "Hey!" he said, rushing forward as Sam started to fall down. "Shit."

The mattress broke his fall and Dean fell to his knees beside Sam. "Hey, hey, Sammy?"
"M'okay," Sam muttered, biting his lips through the pain as Dean helped him lie down properly.

"Take it easy," Dean said. "Man, I told you this was a bad idea."

Sam chuckled feebly. "I still beat your ass."

"Absolutely not!"

"Did too."

There was silence, and Dean patted Sam's shoulder. "Take it easy, okay?"

Sam nodded, and then placed a hand on his sore abdomen. "Still strong, Dean. 'M not weak."

"Who said you were weak?"

"You think so," Sam whispered. "Cas thinks so." He was slightly annoyed.

This was the reason that he'd asked Dean to spar with him — to let his sibling know that he was perfectly capable of watching himself without being babied. And then… it had all blown up on his face.

"We don't think you're weak, Sam," said Dean in a low voice. "Heck, I don't know how I'd tolerate this shit you're going through." He paused. "You're not weak."

"I can still fight."

"Yeah, you can," Dean chortled. "I mean you just beat my ass, right?"

Pity. Sam realised that his brother pitied him. Dean was lying — he didn't think that Sam could fight. And of course, Sam couldn't blame him, seeing he was actually supine on a girly mattress right now, fighting to stay conscious.

He took a shuddering breath.

"I don't want to die, Dean." It came out weak and shaky, just like he was, but Dean had heard him. Sam felt the involuntary sting of tears in his eyes, and raised a trembling hand to wipe them away.

"I don't deserve to die," he said angrily.

Dean was quiet at that. He swallowed audibly and then knelt closer to Sam. "You wanna sit up?"

"Dead people don't sit up."

"You're not dead."

"Whatever."

"Sammy."

"Go," Sam told him suddenly, another tear falling out of his eye.

"Where?"

"Back to the library. To your room. Wherever."

"Hey—"
"Just go, Dean."

His brother looked like he wanted to protest again, but then he nodded and stood up. "You'll come back on your own?"

"I might be sick but I'm not disabled."

"Okay. Sorry." He left without another word and Sam shut his eyes to the pain, letting all the tears fall when he was finally alone.

~o~

Dean didn't sleep that night. He didn't sleep the night after that either. He just alternated between Sam and Cas's rooms, occasionally staying with Sam a little longer, happy that his brother seemed to sleep a little more peacefully than normal.

He and Castiel kissed again, and then another time, and a few more times after that. Dean found an odd sense of comfort in it. They didn't talk about it, though, mostly because Castiel seemed to know that Dean really didn't want to discuss it. But every time Dean felt Castiel's lips meet with his, it was like he could forget all the crap in his life for that moment. It was like Sam wasn't dying, and that there could finally be some happy times.

But it was an illusion, and Dean knew it. However, he was just happy with the illusion of having some peace for a minute.

On Monday, they went back to the hospital to start Sam's final chemo cycle. He was debilitated at the end of it and they needed a wheelchair this time to get him back to the car. Dean let him lie down in the backseat as usual, while Castiel sat in the front — they tried to have Castiel around them as much as possible these days.

Dean rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn as he steered the Impala down the empty road. He was so goddamned tired, he could just crash — and he was going to do just that the moment he got back to the bunker.

He blinked away his sleep as he turned, lids shutting sluggishly over his tired eyes as his foot found the clutch. He yawned again. Thank God that he wasn't the type that easily fell asleep behind the wheel…

"DEAN!"

Castiel's voice made him jump, but that wasn't before he saw a tree right ahead of him and he braked, but it was too late. The car skidded and its tyres screeched, sending it spinning to the other side of the road, where it hit another tree.

~o~

Sam felt awfully tired and ill. He covered his eyes with the crook of his arm, blocking the strips of sunlight streaming from between the roadside trees as he tried to sleep. Dean was driving faster than normal today and the sharp turns were making Sam jerk about on his seat. The contents of his stomach sloshed with the motion. Sam felt like telling Dean that if he wasn't careful, he'd need to pull over the car soon, but he didn't want to open his mouth, so he swallowed down the nausea and tried to sleep.

~o~

Sam felt awfully tired and ill. He covered his eyes with the crook of his arm, blocking the strips of sunlight streaming from between the roadside trees as he tried to sleep. Dean was driving faster than normal today and the sharp turns were making Sam jerk about on his seat. The contents of his stomach sloshed with the motion. Sam felt like telling Dean that if he wasn't careful, he'd need to pull over the car soon, but he didn't want to open his mouth, so he swallowed down the nausea and tried to sleep.

They were moving in that jerky, sharp fashion and Sam was just starting to get used to it, when all of a sudden, everything started to spin. He groaned, bile rising up his throat, and tried to sit up but
before he could do anything, he was thrown back against the seat, and there was a huge crash and bang, and then the sound of breaking glass.

The last thing he remembered after that was throwing up on the floor of the car and thinking that Dean was never going to forgive him if they got out of this alive.
If Dean hadn't been awake before, he was now. The tree branch penetrated the windshield, shattering the glass and landing several, little pieces on his lap. The lack of seatbelts caused him to soar forward but he managed to grip the steering wheel tight as his chest hit the horn, triggering the Impala to honk loudly. His head slammed mercilessly, against the branch, and he could feel the instant sting of broken skin and hot blood starting to drip down his forehead.

"Fuck."

Beside Dean, Castiel gasped — he had hit the dashboard face first, and his mouth was bleeding freely. Dean saw an unforgiving wood splinter from the branch peek out of Castiel's shoulder, blood darkening his clothes.

Castiel's hand reached up to dislodge the fragment, but Dean caught it midway. "Let me do it," he said. "Are you okay? Where else are you hurt?"

Fingers wriggled uneasily in his grip, and Castiel was staring at Dean's own injury. "I'm fine," he said. "You seem to be wounded more."

"I've had worse." Dean turned to the backseat before helping Castiel. "Sammy?"

He received a groan in reply. Dean sighed. "You hurt?"

"No," Sam whispered.

"Thank God," Dean muttered, because the last thing he needed was for Sam to get injured as well. "Hang on a minute, okay?" he said to his brother, diverting his attention to the other task at hand.

Sam, however, moaned once, in a low voice. "Yeah..." he rasped, swallowing audibly. "'M sorry."

Dean wasn't sure what he was apologising for, but he cursed again because he knew what Sam was heading towards. He turned to Castiel.

"Okay, Cas," he said to the angel, "I wish I could do this less brutally, but..." he pulled out the sharp piece of wood in one go, and Castiel hissed, but Dean discarded the splinter and patted his shoulder. "Take it easy."

Castiel nodded, eyes still screwed shut, and Dean started to undo the top buttons of Castiel's shirt to assess the injury. The cut wasn't deep — which meant no stitches, thank God for that. "We'll fix you up at the bunker," Dean told the angel. He reached inside his jacket pocket and extracted his black handkerchief. "Here," he said, giving it to Castiel, "hold it against the wound."

Castiel nodded and took the cloth, as Sam let out another moan.

"Ah, crap," he whispered, turned around again to see Sam lying there with his eyes hidden in the crook of his elbow. "Okay, Cas," Dean said, "you need to help him for now. Get him out and have him take some deep breaths — I think he's nauseous.

"I'll just try to start her up so we can get back as quickly as possible." He pointed at the Impala. The sooner they got Sam to the bunker, the better it would be for everyone.
Castiel nodded once and removed the handkerchief from his wound to assess the progress of his injury. The bleeding seemed to have slowed down considerably and Dean was relieved. Castiel gave him back the cloth and got out of the car, the door creaking as he shut it, and Dean heard the backdoor open as he brushed away the glass pieces from his lap. He clutched the steering wheel, ready to try and restart the Impala.

He grasped the key at the ignition, ready to twist it.

"Dean, I think… I think he —" Castiel's unsure voice reached his ears, just as Dean tried to start the ignition...

"What is it, Cas?" Dean asked him as the car refused to start..

"I think he's vomited."

Dean tried again, but the car just temporarily sputtered back to life, before it died with a groan. He turned around to look at his brother and Castiel, who were still in the backseat. "Fantastic."

~o~

"I'm sorry…"

"Nothing to apologise for, Sammy. Here," said Dean, handing Sam a bottle of water.

Dean's head was hurting like a bitch. There was congealed blood in his eyebrows and it itched. Castiel still looked like he was in considerable pain as well. But both of them had abandoned their concerns for Sam, who sat on the warm asphalt with his back against the Impala, swallowing convulsively as he took the bottle. He rinsed a couple of times, spitting into the side of the road, before handing the bottle back to Dean.

The sunlight fell starkly on them, and Dean wiped a stream of sweat mixed with dried blood off his temple, before taking the bottle from his brother. He wrinkled his nose as he peered inside the car, taking in the mess on the floor. He got to his feet, went around to the boot and pulled out a spare cloth. It was a good thing that he and Sam always kept some extra washcloths and blankets with the towel. He covered the sick and, body protesting, knelt back down next to his brother.

"Feeling any better?"

Sam shook his head. Dean let out a puff of air through his mouth. "Should I try to start the car again? We could get back to the bunker early. You can always tell me if you need me to stop."

"'Kay," Sam replied hoarsely, his throat bandage moving as he swallowed.

Dean and Castiel helped Sam get into the backseat again. He was upright this time, his head against the window as Dean got behind the wheel. He put the keys in the ignition and once again he tried to start the Impala. "Come on," he said, stroking the dash when it wouldn't start. He tried again, and then a third time, patting the dash when he was successful on the fourth try.

"Atta girl," he whispered lovingly to his car. "I'll fix you up nice once we get back, okay?"

The road was lonely, and he wasn't sure what they'd have done if the Impala hadn't started up, because there had been no cars going their way at all. This was another reason that he loved his baby — she'd never let him down in times of need.

Dean drove back to the bunker as quickly as he could without making Sam more uncomfortable.
Thankfully, there were no more stops and once they were back at the bunker, Sam got cleaned up and went straight to bed. Dean took out the first-aid kit and sat with Castiel in the library.

"Okay, Cas," he said, "shirt off."

"You are more injured than I am," Castiel insisted. He raised a finger and it lingered a few inches away from Dean's forehead before he sighed, and let his hand fall. Dean realised just in time what he'd been trying to do — what Castiel forgot he couldn't do anymore.

Dean swallowed, his heart sinking. "Hey. We'll get your Grace back too. Okay?"

Castiel nodded as a look of sadness clouded his eyes. Dean reached for his shirt and started to unbutton it again. Castiel didn't stop him, arms limp at his sides, and Dean peeled off the blood-soaked material until Castiel's chest and shoulders were exposed. There was a long cut that ran diagonally upwards from Castiel's clavicle.

"So how are you doing?" Dean asked, as he soaked some cotton in iodine.

"It stings a little," Castiel replied, hissing as the antiseptic touched his wound.

"It's gonna sting a lot more," Dean said, narrowing his eyes and concentrating on cleaning the wound, "but I wasn't talking about… well, not physically."

"Oh." Castiel licked his lower lip. "I'm okay."

"You know…” Dean hesitated, glancing at Castiel's face before going back to work, "you know you can always talk, right?" He smiled. "I mean, come on, man, Sammy's always whining for these opportunities and I'm handing it to you in a platter here." Dean pressed a finger on the areas around the wound. "Anything around the wound that hurts?"

"No, it's okay," Castiel replied. He paused. "And thank you, Dean. I understand it's difficult for you too."

Dean pulled out a tube of antibiotic ointment and squirted some onto a piece of cotton. "You know, Cas," he said, as he started to dab it. "You're way more…” he licked his lips, feeling warmth creep up his cheeks. "I mean, Cas, you mean a – I–I said 'mean' twice, huh…” he swallowed for the umpteenth time that day, and stopped there because he couldn't say it. Maybe he didn't have the balls, or maybe his balls were the ones stopping him, but he suppressed the words bubbling over, unable to find a legitimate way to express himself without sounding like the sparkly dude from Twilight.

"I understand, Dean," Castiel said in a low voice, and Dean put the antibiotic cream aside before looking up at him, into his eyes.

"I don't know what you've learned from seeing us," he said, picking up cotton, soaking it in more antiseptic, and placing it over the wound. He kept it pressed there and continued, "I don't know how much you've observed, but I gotta tell you, man, when it comes to family, it isn't about how 'useful' a person can be. Family is family and you don't… you don't belong because you're useful. You're a part of it just… just 'cause. You don't have any debts towards family. You don't have any conditions about belonging together."

There was utter silence. Dean shifted his glance and tore out dry cotton, placing it over the soaked piece. Then he began to cut out tape to stick it in place, the scissors making an audible snipping sound as he worked. When he looked up at Castiel, he saw a something like a shadow pass over his face, as Castiel nodded once.
"That…" Castiel began unsurely, blinking innocently, "thanks, Dean."

Dean smiled slightly as he began to clean his fingers on a washcloth. "Don't tell Sam, okay? I don't want him to come for girl talk next."

"Sam already knows, Dean," said Castiel mildly, pulling off his ruined shirt.

"Knows what?" Dean picked up a small mirror to examine his forehead wound. The cut wasn't too big, he realised as he probed it, and just some cleaning would help.

Castiel kept going. "Sam knows that you're doing the best you can, between the both of us, shouldering the burdens that we—"

"If you complete that sentence, Cas, I'm going to kick your ass," Dean snarled through gritted teeth, while cleaning his cut. "I told you that day, I'm not saying it again."

He lowered the mirror once he was done, and Castiel was looking at him, smiling lightly. "You are a very good person, Dean," he murmured, before coming forward and placing his lips on Dean's. Dean kissed him back, Castiel's lips feeling warm, familiar and comforting, as his mind stopped worrying for that single minute.

As Castiel broke apart, he looked unsure. "I hope that was not inappropriate. I just thought—"

Dean didn't let him finish his sentence for the second time that day as he leaned over and kissed Castiel again, his heart hammering against his chest like it wanted to get out. And Dean couldn't say — didn't know whether this was wrong — but if that was, he knew he'd take 'inappropriate' over 'appropriate' any day.

And just like that, he realised that he wasn't pity-kissing Cas like he thought. It had never been about that. It was just something he'd been saying to console himself and get used to something that he never knew would happen. And if over the weekend, he was forced to accept so many things — the possibility of Sam actually dying without any way to stop it this time, and the fact that Castiel wasn't okay, there might as well be another thing that he could come to accept. What he'd been doing was about what felt right. And right now, this was the only thing in Dean's shitty life which felt 'appropriate'.

~o~

At lunchtime, Dean made his way to Sam's room and opened the door, only to see his brother sleeping soundly, wrapped under the bedclothes. Sam had been feeling pretty crappy after the accident and as Dean watched him sleep, he felt awful about the fact that he'd have to wake Sam up for lunch, but really, if he'd had a choice, he wouldn't do it.

He went to the bed and gently shook his brother. "Sam?"

A thin stream of dim light fell in from the gap below the door, but otherwise, the room was quite dark. Sam shifted under Dean's grip, folding in on himself even more, but refusing to wake up.

"Sammy," Dean murmured, trying to shake him awake again. He could make out Sam's brows knit together as his hand came up weakly to bat Dean away.

"Hey, I know you're feeling crappy," said Dean in a low voice, "but I need you to wake up, okay? You've gotta get something into your stomach, man."

Sam swallowed and opened an eye, and Dean smiled at him. "Good. Now get your ass up," he said,
heading to the door. "What do you want for lunch?"

Sam didn't respond to that. Instead, he was blinking sluggishly, as though trying to figure out what Dean was saying. Slowly, he raised a hand to his eye to rub the sleep off. Dean waited patiently at the door, hands in his pockets, for his brother to get up and follow him. When Sam didn't say anything, though, and just swallowed again, Dean frowned.

"You feelin' sick or something?" He began to advance to the bed in case Sam needed help, but Sam sat up on the mattress, confused, blue-green eyes trained on Dean. Oh, fuck, thought Dean. He thought he recognised that expression.

"Sammy?" he asked carefully, testing the ground. "You okay, man?"

Sam blinked, frowning. "What are you doing here?"

Okay, that could be a perfectly normal question, thought Dean. He licked his lip. "I just came to tell you that lunch is ready, dude," he said nonchalantly. "You want me to get you a tray?"

Sam started to get up. "You're – I know why you're here."

Shit. Dean took a deep breath. "Okay. Relax. I'm not going to hurt you, okay? You know who I am?"

Sam narrowed his eyes and shook his head as he got to his feet, swaying a little.

"You know who you are?" Dean prodded him.

Sam shook his head again, confused. "You called me 'Sam'."

"Yeah, that's right," said Dean. "You're Sam. I'm Dean. We're brothers." He took a step back as Sam started to walk towards him on wobbly legs. "You've gotta take it easy, man," he said, raising his hands, "no one's hurting anyone here. Give yourself a while. You'll remember."

"You're lying," Sam said hoarsely, forgetting to press on his wound because — well, Dean really wasn't sure how this amnesia worked. He just hoped it wouldn't get too bad.

"Why would I lie to you?" Dean asked him mildly. "Sit down. You're not—"

Sam approached Dean and Dean stopped moving away as he put his hands down, resigned. Sam came closer and closer, until he was just a foot away from Dean, scrutinising him with narrowed eyes.

"Sammy," Dean said, putting his hands on Sam's shoulders. Sam flinched at that and glared, turning to Dean's hands, which were taken away immediately. "Okay," said Dean, raising them in defence. "Sorry."

"I need to get out of here," said Sam. Dean was poised, ready for any blows from Sam. His brother wasn't strong enough these days to hurt him, but he hated this anyway.

"Sam, just relax, okay?" Dean said to him. He gestured to the bed. "You wanna sleep? Go back to sleep. I'll wake you up later for lunch."

Sam walked forward and tried to push past, but Dean caught him by the arms and started manoeuvring Sam to the bed. "That's it. Go to sleep. You're sick."

"I'm… not." Sam fought weakly against Dean's grip, hands coming up and clutching at Dean's
wrists, nails digging into his flesh.

"You're acting like a chick with all that scratching," said Dean, gritting his teeth with the effort of trying to push Sam back. He might be sick and he might have lost weight, but he was still stubborn as fuck.

"Let me go," Sam rasped, fighting against Dean in vain. Dean pushed him to the bed. He opened the cabinet, drawing out handcuffs and before Sam could get up again, he grabbed one of Sam's wrists.

"N-No!" Sam's other hand came up, scratching frantically at Dean's face. Dean struggled with his brother, feeling his face sting as his skin broke. Sam was going to love this when he came to.

Finally, Dean managed to lock the handcuff to one of the four legs of the cabinet and snatching Sam's hand away from his face, he pushed his brother on the bed. Sam fell back, breathing deeply, trying to get up as he struggled against the handcuff. Dean saw deep red blood blossom over from his brother's wrists as Sam moved his hands, grunting.

"Stop that," said Dean, and Sam frowned at him.

"You've captured —"

"Bullshit. Go to sleep, Sam, you'll be better when you wake up."

Sam looked angry as his nostrils flared, and his jaw worked at top speed, clenching and unclenching alternatively. Dean licked his lips. "Lie down, Sammy. You'll be okay." He could feel a lump form in his throat as his brother's eyes scanned him as though he were a stranger, reflecting fear and hatred for him. Dean sighed. "The handcuffs are for your own good."

Sam looked away, eyes still narrowed. Dean stood up and got to the door. "I'll be back in a while, okay? Get your rest."

Sam didn't reply, still furious, and Dean was reminded of the times when Sam would get mad at him as a kid, and give him the silent treatment for days. It would be adorable. But right now, what was happening here, this wasn't adorable.

Dean took one last look at Sam's livid face before shutting the door behind him, only to see Castiel at the far end of the hallway. Dean wiped a hand down his face as he approached the angel. "Hey," he said.

"Is Sam okay?" Castiel asked him. "I thought you were going to call him for lunch."

"Yeah, I was," Dean replied ruefully. "Unfortunately, right now, he thinks I'm trying to kill him or something, so I'll have to try again later." He paused. "You came here to say something, didn't you?"

Castiel pressed his lips together, unsure, before answering sorrowfully, "Dean, I just finished reading the last book that the Men of Letters had about supernatural healing."

Dean stared at him for a moment, his brain hardly processing the information. "That's— that's all they've got?"

"We've been reading non-stop for three months, Dean. They did have a lot of information. It just wasn't enough for us."
Dean clenched his jaw and let out a slow breath. "So… internet it is. Faith healers, hoodoo priests, more angels… let's look." He said it in a low voice, hardly finding strength to believe it himself. He was so done.

Castiel looked at him for a long moment. "I'm sorry, Dean."

Dean swallowed. "Well, 'sorry' ain't going to save Sam. Come on. You hungry?"

"No."

"Not a choice. You're eating." He led Castiel to the kitchen, where he filled two plates with food. Castiel was reluctant to eat but Dean would have none of it. But he knew how Cas felt. The food settled heavily in his own stomach, and he had to fight a gag that came up when he tried to finish.

"Dean," Castiel said suddenly, then, breaking the silence in the kitchen.

"Yeah, Cas?"

"I'm scared."

Dean blinked up at him. This was new. Castiel never admitted to being afraid. But then, he'd never actually been scared before. He gave the angel a wan smile. "It's okay, Cas. Don't be scared. We'll pull through. We'll find something for Sam, and —"

"Dean, that's what I'm afraid of," said Castiel urgently. "I'm afraid that there might be no way to prevent Sam from dying this time."

There was utter silence for a moment, as Dean looked up at Castiel, realising that his own deepest fears had just been mouthed out loud. He bit the inside of his cheek, unsure as to what to say to that. Because it was so true, and it seemed like a horrible reality, ready to hit them and destroy them. But Dean wouldn't accept it. He wouldn't accept it till there was absolutely no way to prevent Sam from dying. And that wouldn't be true unless they'd looked everywhere, and not found a solution.

"Well," said Dean, collecting his and Castiel's dishes and walking to the sink, "we haven't looked enough yet. So no. Sam isn't dying till we've tried everything, and looked everywhere, Cas. I need you to remember that."

Castiel nodded meekly as he joined Dean at the sink, but Dean knew that Castiel, like Dean, was aware that the days for false hopes were long gone. It was time for acceptance. It was just that he wasn't ready for it yet.

~o~

"I hit you, didn't I?"

Dean stood next to Sam's bed with a tray in his hands, as he watched Sam hoist himself. Dean had unlocked the cuffs when Sam had woken up relatively normal, and slightly hungry, but Sam had realised that he had attacked Dean in some way. Since then, there'd been guilt dripping off Sam.

Dean shook his head at his brother. "You didn't hit me. Yeah, you scratched like a chick in a cat fight, but you didn't hit."

"Then why are you hurt?"
Dean touched the cut on his forehead and smirked. "Don't flatter yourself. That's from the accident."

"What accident?"

"You don't remember?" Dean asked him. "We were in an accident on our way back from the hospital. You puked all over my poor baby."

"No, I didn't," said Sam, frowning. "I'd have remembered something as big as an accident on our way back."

"I can show you the car if you want," said Dean. "I cleaned up your mess, but she's still bashed up. Windshield is shattered and there's a dent in the front. It won't take long to fix her, but you can see her if you want proof." He paused, as Sam's eyes swivelled to the floor. "Really, Sam, why would I lie to you?"

Sam looked angry when he glanced back up, and for a moment, Dean was scared that he'd reverted to that other version, but Sam just let out a breath. "I think you're not telling me how bad I got."

"Not so bad," Dean said. "You were less… violent than the other times, okay? Promise. You can ask Cas. You know how much he sucks at lying."

"He supports your lies."

Dean sighed. "Sam, I'll show you the damn car, okay? A branch hit my forehead. Cas has a shoulder wound from another piece of glass, and he hit his face on the dash. You, on the other hand, were unhurt because you were sleeping in the backseat."

"Then how did we get back?" Sam questioned him.

"Baby was still okay to run. It wasn't a huge accident. Like I said, I'll fix her. You happy now?"

Sam shook his head. "I still attacked you, Dean."

"Yeah, and a kitten could have done more damage," said Dean shoving the tray into Sam's hands. "Shut up and eat, will you?"

Sam opened his mouth to say something, but Dean frowned. "No."

"But —"

"Don't even think about it. I'm not putting you in hospice or something, when you might not even die. Hell, I wouldn't put you in hospice even if you were dying for sure."

"The doctor said —"

"Screw her, Sam. When have the rules applied to us?" Dean crossed his arms. "Come on, now, finish eating before the toast gets cold and hard."

Sam looked at him, resigned, before smiling wanly. "Thanks, Dean."

"Shut up," Dean said, turning away and trying to hide the smile on his own face.

~o~

Sam had a rough evening. Soon after his lunch and the nap, he was puking his guts up again and
Dean sat with him, wondering how he had anything to throw up anymore. The episodes abated for a while, though, and Sam was able to rest until dinner. And then it started again.

Dean didn't sleep a wink as he sat up in Sam's room, Cas with them. Dean was tired and aching from all the events that day, but he needed to be alert for Sam, so he watched over his brother while insisting Castiel get his own rest. Sam was miserable throughout the night, retching and then dry-heaving painfully, and then Dean would get him to drink some ginger ale which wouldn't stay down either. The vicious cycle continued and Dean called the hospital, but again, Dr Greene asked him to get Sam to the ER if the vomiting didn't stop by morning. He just continued to watch his brother struggle.

That was until Sam suddenly leapt out of his bed somewhere around dawn and Dean awoke from his light slumber to hear his brother's giant feet pound to the bathroom. He frowned at the garbage bin, which he had recently emptied, and got himself up before staggering to the bathroom, only to find the door shut.

He could hear Sam retching inside. Again. He frowned, and tried the doorknob, but it was locked from the inside.

"Sammy?" he called out, concerned.

"F-Fine," said between heaves. "G-go."

Dean sighed, and made his way back to the room, understanding Sam's need for privacy. He pushed himself against the wall again, and watched, as Sam came back and dropped onto the bed. He pawed at his sweaty face and turned to Dean, gasping for breath. "Get... some sleep."

"I think we should take you to the hospital, man," said Dean worriedly. "You've been puking for hours."

"Not morning... yet." Sam was still short of breath. Dean watched his brother's face scrunch up uncomfortably as he let out a small groan and started to sit up again.

"Hey, take it easy," said Dean, standing up and walking to Sam. He sat on the bed next to his brother and picked up the trash can. "Use this. It's okay."

Sam batted his hand away weakly and swallowed, trying to stand up. "Y-You just have to c-clean it up."

Dean narrowed his eyes at him, as Sam failed to stand and hid his face in his hands, still swallowing down his nausea. "Come on, Sam," Dean said. "I've been doing it all night. It's okay."

"N-No, I —" Dean shoved the container onto Sam's lap and Sam looked up at him with tired, bloodshot eyes. "I'm sorry."

"You're really a bitch, you know," said Dean. Pressing his lips together, he patted Sam's shoulder twice. "It's fine. You'd have done it for me." He pursed his lips, and added as an afterthought, "I guess."

"Must be gross," Sam replied, spitting, and then looking up at Dean. "I don't know if I'd do it."

"Yeah, well, don't put it under a microscope," Dean replied. He squeezed Sam's shoulder as Sam started to breathe deeply, bending towards the bin. "And relax."

Sam nodded, swallowing, and then coughing, and Dean cringed. Sam bent over even more as he
started to heave and after a short spell, he surfaced, looking towards Dean with tears of effort streaming out of his eyes, which were laced with worry. Dean was about to ask him what was wrong, when he noticed that Sam's lips were stained red.

~o~

"Mallory-Weiss Syndrome. It's a tear in his oesophageal lining," said Dr Greene as she came out of Sam's cubicle in the ER, drawing the curtains shut behind her. "It's because of the excessive vomiting. I've given him some more anti-nausea medication and a mild sedative, since you said he didn't sleep all night. We'll get to his chemo in a while."

"What are you going to do about the tear?" Dean asked her.

"The bleeding should have resolved itself by now," she replied. "I'll perform an endoscopy just to confirm, though. The tear will heal soon."

"Yeah, but if he keeps throwing up from the chemo —"

"He won't," said Dr Greene. "We'll keep him in the hospital, on the feeding tube for this round of chemo."

Dean nodded and watched as some of the hospital staff came and wheeled Sam to endoscopy. Half-an-hour later, he found himself sitting on a stool beside his brother's bed, with Castiel for company. He watched Sam sleep peacefully for the first time in hours.

They fed Sam through his tube, and later, after he woke up, they started chemo. He was relatively good, though, and he didn't throw up, thanks to the tube. Dean considered that a win.

Sam dozed off again after a couple of hours of chemo, and Dean gave himself up to sleep too. He woke up from his slumber somewhere late in the evening to see Sam staring at him from the bed.

Dean rubbed at his eyes. "That's creepy, dude."

Sam averted his gaze. "Sorry." He paused. "You should go."

Dean raised an eyebrow at him. "What?"

"I didn't — that came out wrong," Sam whispered. "I just meant, get back to the bunker and get a good night's sleep. You must be tired."

"I'm good."

Sam glanced at Castiel, who was snoozing on his own chair, his body leaning against a wall. "Take him," Sam said, gesturing to their friend. "He should get some proper sleep too. Especially after everything..."

Dean looked at Castiel. "Yeah, I know."

"Go ahead," said Sam. "The doctors are here for me. I'm okay." He raised his hand to scratch at his eyebrow, and Dean watched the feeding tube jutting out of his brother's nose, knowing how uncomfortable that would be. Unfortunately, he had first-hand experience in that field.

"I'll drop him at the bunker and come back, then," said Dean, as he bent over to pick up his jacket from the floor.

"He needs you more than I do," Sam argued. "Stay back with him."
"Sam —"

"Dean, please," said Sam, his eyes soft. "I just… just please get some sleep, okay? Give Cas some attention for a day. Nothing's going to happen to me."

"Yeah, but…" Dean didn't continue because he didn't expect Sam to understand. What if he left, and something happened? What if, overnight…

Dean stopped himself from thinking further. No. He wouldn't go there.

"Trust me," said Sam quietly, and Dean looked at him, gulping down a lump in his throat. "Please," Sam said again, sadly. "For me."

Dean took a deep breath, and nodded. "Yeah. Okay, Sammy. I'll do it."

~o~

"Let's start CPR."

Sam was pale and motionless on the hospital bed as the doctor put his palms to his chest, pushing down as hard as he could.

"One, two, three, four…"

"… thirty."

"Come on…"

Two puffs from the ambu bag, two breaths, before the hands pushed down again.

"Still no pulse."

They tried. They tried their best, with every ounce of strength they had, but Sam had given up. Dean stood at the side, urging Sam to fight, hoping his brother was listening somewhere, and coaxing Sam to stay on.

"He isn't responding," said the doctor. "I'm calling it."

The hands were withdrawn and Dean watched, mouth agape, as the ambu bag was taken away.

"Time of death…"

Dean woke up with a start.

Heart thumping against his chest, he sat up in his bed to find the sheets sticking to his bare torso, everything around him covered in sweat. He peeled off the bedclothes and took deep breaths as he tried to calm himself.

It was a dream. Just a fucking dream. Sam wasn't dead.

He picked up his phone from the nightstand and checked it, but no one had called. If anything happened, the hospital would call and it hadn't, so obviously Sam was all right. Dean needed to relax.

Except he couldn't. Just the previous day, Castiel had said that they had finished looking in all the books that the bunker had, and those included the ones in Bobby's library, that they'd added to the
collection when they had moved in. Garth and the other hunters hadn't turned up with any positive news in the last three months, and all they had was the internet.

Dean stopped himself from hyperventilating just in time. Panicking wouldn't help, he knew, and he also knew that Sam wanted him to relax, but how could he...?

He got up from his bed, threw on a robe and headed to the hallway to get himself some whiskey from the kitchen. On the way, though, he passed Castiel's room, whose door was slightly open. Wondering if the angel was asleep, Dean opened the door wider, making it creak.

"Dean?" called out a sleepy voice, almost immediately. Dean cursed to himself.

"Hey, Cas, not sleeping?"

Castiel did not reply for a few seconds, and then he said, "I can't."

Dean frowned, making his way inside. In the darkness, he could see Castiel sitting up against the headboard. "Want me to sit with you for a while?" Dean asked him.

Castiel seemed to hesitate. "Okay."

Not bothering to switch on the light, Dean went and sat on the bed, near Castiel. There was silence as Dean's eyes got trained to the darkness. He cleared his throat. "You can lie down. I'll stay 'til you fall asleep."

Castiel lay down, his head still turned to Dean, and Dean watched him shut his eyes. He waited until Castiel's breaths evened out and then he made to get up, when a hand came and gripped his own tightly. Dean frowned, trying to free his hand. "Go to sleep, Cas," he said mildly, shuddering slightly at Castiel's grip.

Castiel didn't reply to this. Instead, he pulled Dean down, towards him, until Dean was bent over and their faces were close to each other. And then, Castiel's hands came up to the sides of Dean's face, pulling him closer, until they were kissing.

Dean kissed him back softly, finding his familiarity and comfort again, the fear and heartbreak from the nightmare backing off slightly at Castiel's touch. He shifted himself more comfortably, his hands gripping Castiel's shoulders as they continued to kiss, softly, and then harshly, and softly again. He moaned slightly as Castiel did the same. Castiel was starting to card his fingers through Dean's hair when Dean pulled away.

Castiel drew in a sharp breath, but Dean ran a thumb over Castiel's cheek, and didn't give him an explanation for what he did next. And he didn't have an explanation either, except that it suddenly seemed obvious — so natural, and he just smiled once at Castiel, as his fingers started to unbutton the angel's nightshirt.
21. Fights and Promises

Castiel felt feather-light fingers brush against his skin as the buttons of his shirt came undone. He lay on the bed, spread-eagle, his heart thumping, and he felt an unfamiliar sensation in his stomach — as though he had ingested a thousand butterflies that were now fluttering about, causing his gut to do little backflips. He could hear Dean's breaths cutting through the silence, and even in the darkness, he could make out Dean's face as he started to peel Castiel's shirt away.

Castiel shivered. "Dean…" His voice was barely a whisper, because for some reason, he couldn't bear to speak louder.

Dean froze, eyes widening as though he was slowly coming to realise what was going on between them. Abruptly he withdrew his hands and sat up straight. "I – I…" He looked away, evidently embarrassed. "Sorry, Cas, I…"

He was moving away, trying to get off the bed, when Castiel caught his hand. "Continue," he said softly. Dean turned around, looking confused, and Castiel nodded at him reassuringly. The angel knew all about humans and sex, but experiencing it seemed so different. He wanted to know what it was, and what it would be like. With Dean.

Dean hesitated. "Are you sure?" he said, his voice hoarse.

Castiel nodded. Pressing his lips together, Dean readjusted himself so that he was on his knees. He came forward on all fours and climbed over Castiel, with one knee on either side, straddling him, but he hesitated again before bending forward.

"Cas, if you—"

"I want this, Dean," Castiel replied. For the first time in months, the fog of despair in his mind was starting to break. The thought of Dean being so close to him, being entirely his, even for a night, or just a few moments — it ignited something in him. Castiel felt secure and relieved, like he'd never felt in the billion years of his existence. He knew that often, lovemaking was not only to quench basic lust, it was also considered an act which needed riddance of all inhibitions, physical and emotional, and that the soul was considered as naked as the body in true lovemaking that wasn't just sex.

For the first time, Castiel was about to bare himself for someone — figuratively, because he knew that Dean had seen him naked before and vice-versa, and honestly, Castiel only saw clothing as one of the mundane things that humans used to physically mask themselves from each other. Clothes were just like all the other masks they wore, the lies they said to hide their real selves. However, for Castiel, instead of being daunted by the thought of Dean getting a peek at him, it was soothing. He wanted Dean to know every aspect of him, and he wanted to know everything about Dean. He wanted to belong to Dean… completely and eternally.

Dean gave him an unsure smile as he bent forward to continue removing his shirt. His hands were so light, so gentle, Castiel hardly felt them, but he could sense them enough to send his heart fluttering against the touch. His stomach felt strange — like he was in free-fall, and tiny currents of
electricity seemed to pass through his spine.

Dean sat up briefly and pulled off his robe, beneath which he was wearing only sweatpants and nothing on top. Castiel could see the raised, faded outline of the mark that his hand had left on Dean's shoulder all those years ago. He tentatively put his hands on Dean's bare skin, which was cool and smooth to the touch. Sighing, he ran his fingers over the mark, around to Dean's back, caressing along the crease of his spine, and he felt Dean arch slightly, gasping. Castiel knew that he was doing it right.

Dean eased down again, matching lips with Castiel and this time, the kiss was different. It was frantic, hurried, even, and Dean's lips parted, his tongue coming out to trace the side of Castiel's mouth. He had never done anything like this before, and Castiel felt a thrill run through him.

He latched on to Dean, nails scraping against moist skin as the butterflies flew about again. He could feel wave upon wave of tantalising currents pass through his body, raising goosebumps everywhere as he gasped. Dean worked his lips faster and faster against Castiel's, his hands coming to grip the strands of Castiel's hair, and his body and shoulders moving as they kissed. Castiel's hands cruised up Dean's spine, to his neck, which he cupped gently, holding on against the storm raging inside him.

That inexplicable feeling was back — the unique emotion he had for Dean that he just couldn't afford to dedicate to someone else, and Dean paused, straightened, and started to work off Castiel's pyjama bottoms, his eyes never leaving Castiel's. There was something about the eye contact that Castiel couldn't break and even in the darkness, he could see the gleam in the green of Dean's eyes.

The pyjama came off roughly, followed by Castiel's boxers. Calloused fingers traced along his hip, where the waistband had left a red, itchy imprint that Dean touched and caressed for a moment, before starting to ease off the rest of his clothing. Castiel sat up too, to help Dean. Their fingers trembled as they peeled off Dean's sweatpants and his boxers together, throwing it down with the others, in a bunch beside the bed.

A shaky smile decorated Dean's lips as he cupped Castiel's cheeks, kissing him briefly on the lips. They fell back on the bed together, but Dean didn't hold on to the kiss. He moved, to the corner of Castiel's mouth, tracing kisses from there, to his chin, and then along his jaw, to his earlobe. His lips sucked and kissed alternatively, his tongue leaving wet trails, and Castiel grasped the bedclothes, bunching them as Dean nipped his ear. It felt so good… so good… he couldn't even begin to explain it. No wonder humans enjoyed sex so much.

Dean placed his lips on the stretch of skin behind Castiel's ear. He leaned over, kissing his neck now, his lips soft and gentle. He took Castiel's hands in his and kissed each wrist, pressing his lips over and over to the thick bandages, and moving up to the forearms, settling for Castiel's right shoulder after that. Castiel shivered, again and again, wrapping his arms around Dean and holding him close. He could feel a vaguely familiar stirring near his navel, and he gripped Dean tighter to himself, clinging on to him, relishing every hint of touch, and every ripple of sensation. He held on to the moments like he'd held on to his loyalty for the garrison, his love for God, and his want to do the right thing, but unlike the other times, this time, he knew he wouldn't let go. He knew that Dean was so precious to him — so different from the other things he'd had in his life, that he wouldn't let go of this even if it killed him.

~o~

Castiel's breaths were heavy as Dean pressed his lips lower and lower, now kissing the angel's chest, Dean's hands holding his shoulders as his thumb moved in circles against Castiel's shoulder. Castiel himself had his arms around Dean as though he was holding on to dear life but he didn't
protest as Dean continued to kiss him, and eventually, his arms let go of Dean as his palms cupped his neck instead.

When Dean reached Castiel's navel, Castiel gasped, body arching slightly against the bed. He shuddered and Dean moved lower still, quickening the kisses, so that Castiel's fingers were barely brushing his hair now. Dean's hands gripped Castiel's waist while he worked himself lower still, and then he let his hands slide down, lower, and below, using his palms and fingers to rub more circles, teasing Castiel and eliciting gasp after gasp. Castiel shuddered with pleasure and heaved his body upwards, palms, nails and fingers chaffing desperately against the bedclothes before coming to rest on Dean's head and curling around his hair.

Dean looked up, into Castiel's eyes, smiled at him reassuringly. Slowly, teasingly, he began to lower his face, between Castiel's legs. Castiel grunted, body quivering, hips jerking and Dean held Castiel as he continued, hearing Castiel's breaths come in shudders, low-pitched groans escaping him. Dean let his tongue work harder, letting go of Castiel to hold on to his waist instead. He continued, frantically, ignoring the sounds that Castiel was making, until finally, he heard a tiny "oh!" of surprise and pleasure. Dean knew what was coming then, and that he was close. He kept his pace until Castiel let out a long, shuddering breath, gasping again and again, groaning even more. At long last, Castiel let out a keening moan and his fingers pulled urgently at Dean's short hair, as Dean saw evidence of his mission being accomplished.

When Dean surfaced a few moments later, Castiel was still looking at him, panting, sweat pouring down his forehead. He shut his eyes briefly, still sucking long breaths through his mouth as he felt Dean crawl up and lie beside him.

Dean waited for Castiel to catch his breath. When the angel had calmed down, Dean placed a palm on his cheek and smiled as he brushed a thumb over Castiel's cheekbone. Castiel didn't reciprocate the smile but he rolled over and placed a kiss on the tip of Dean's nose, and Dean chuckled as Castiel began to dust kisses of his own, plunging down to echo what Dean had just done to him.

~o~

Dean wasn't sure what made him so insanely happy when the alarm woke him up the next morning. The usual darkness in the pit of his mind seemed to have faded slightly, and he was feeling better than he had in years. He rolled over, turning off the alarm, and then he realised whose room he was in.

As his sleep broke and consciousness swirled in, he began to recollect everything. He remembered the darkness, and he remembered holding Castiel close… kissing every part of him. And Castiel's arms around Dean, his kisses, and then as he went lower, how his tongue had worked wonders. It had been a night of bliss.

He turned to Castiel, who was pressed against him, sleeping serenely with his mouth slightly open. It felt so good to be close to him… something like how he'd felt with Cassie, and Lisa. It had been comfortable and inviting, and it felt oddly right — like one of the pieces of his life's puzzle that fit in perfectly. He knew he should be freaking out, as words like not gay ghosted about in his head, but he was oddly clear-headed — clearer than he'd been in a while.

He didn't know what he felt for Castiel yet. He just knew that he was on the right track, and this time, he didn't want to fuck it up because it was Cas and though it was not like Dean had been waiting for this all his life, it really felt like he had, somewhere, been looking for this. Just not from Castiel.

Maybe he hadn't thought so much about his sexuality or maybe he had, but hadn't counted on
actually feeling this way for a man, but like Castiel had said, things would probably have been no different had he occupied a female vessel. It didn't matter if Cas was a man or a woman. It mattered that Cas was... Cas. Dean knew now that nothing about what he felt had anything to do with Cas being a dude, just like he wouldn't stop protecting and caring for Sam, had Sam actually been his sister. And the clarity of this — the obviousness of it — made Dean realise that he had nothing to get freaked about because maybe, after taking all the unpleasantness that life had thrown at him, this was one of the good things to happen to him.

He had always had Sam, and he would always hold on to Sam like nothing else. Sam came first — above everything, above Dean himself — but with Castiel, perhaps he, Dean, finally had something else to hold onto. Maybe he had someone else to live his life for, perhaps not as significant as Sam, but someone else, nonetheless. An addition, not a replacement.

Though everybody in Dean's life faced the danger of being used as his Achilles's heel, Castiel had actually been there for a long time, feeling the same way for Dean as he did now, and it wouldn't make a difference now that Dean mostly reciprocated his feelings (except Dean wasn't sure he exactly loved Cas well... like that). Everybody up against Dean, Sam and Cas knew about Dean's friendship with Castiel, and a step further from just friendship between them could hardly change things. Plus, Dean was confident about the badass that resided in Castiel, and knew that the angel was more than capable of fending for himself if any such calamity actually struck them.

On instinct, Dean raised a hand and pushed some of Castiel's dark hair off his eyes. It was funny, how much he wanted to touch Cas, to run his fingers on the angel's skin so as to claim him for himself, now that the dam had broken last night. It was like Cas was now his — only his, and the thought itself made Dean feel all sunshine and lollipops and he decided not to let his mind go down that lane again as warmth rose up his cheeks.

He smiled, overcoming the embarrassment of his thoughts, and traced a finger on the shadows beneath Castiel's eyes, before raising his head and kissing the dark bags lightly. Castiel's lashes fluttered against Dean's nose, reminding him of butterflies, as he pulled away. The angel blinked at Dean, his forlorn, glassy gaze fixed upon him as he seemed to recollect the incident from last night. Bravely, Dean leaned forward and kissed Castiel's forehead. "Hey."

Castiel blinked again and Dean looked at him, unsure and scared of how he'd respond, but Castiel smiled. "Good morning, Dean."

They were naked under the covers and Castiel's bare waist was pressing against Dean's. Rolling onto his side, Dean curled a leg around Castiel and gripped the back of his neck, kissing his lips. Castiel reciprocated and their tongues met again, briefly, before Dean pulled away.

"You need to brush your teeth," he said, scrunching his face.

Castiel looked mortified. "I'm sorry—"

Dean chuckled, cutting through his apology, kissing him again, just for a couple of seconds. "I was kidding," he said softly. He peeled off the bedcovers and untwisted himself from Castiel, sitting up and sniffing the air. "We do need to shower, though. We smell of sex."

Castiel frowned, and took a whiff of the air himself. "I wasn't aware that sex smelled like semen."

"Well, you know now," Dean replied, throwing his bare feet over the side of the bed. He stretched, popping his vertebrae into place, and yawned. "I'm going for a shower," he said. "You comin'?"

Castiel was sitting up too, his legs flexed and his palms splayed over the mattress, supporting him.
"I thought that humans liked privacy while—" he stopped there, realising suddenly, what Dean meant. "Oh." He thought for a moment, and nodded. "Okay."

A bit later, Dean stood under the warm spray of the shower, feeling the water tickle and comfort him, taking away the sweat and exhaustion, and he looked down at Castiel, who was on his knees, eyes fixed on Dean's.

Dean could feel Castiel's lips and tongue, teasing him softly and he shuddered, leaning against the wall, while Castiel's hands held on to his ass. Soon, he was arching against the wall, biting his lips as he gasped, "God, Cas…" Castiel continued, and Dean screwed his eyes shut, his mouth open, huge, panting breaths coming out of him while his chest heaved.

The shower kept spraying them with warm water, and Dean took the first hint of pleasure he'd had in years. He gasped, arching his head backwards and felt Castiel stand up against him a few moments later and their bodies pressed against each other in the small shower stall. Castiel had curved an arm around Dean's wet, bare waist when the reality of Sam's impending death hit him hard, and he asked Castiel to stop, while turning off the shower and rushing away to get ready to meet Sam at the hospital.

~o~

"Fuck."

Dean examined the damp bandages on Castiel's wrists as they sat down for breakfast at the library. He sighed, watching the bland reminders of what Castiel was going through at that minute. He had forgotten about so many things in those moments with Castiel, but now, all his worries and everything in his life that was screwed up was coming back to him, and the elation from the morning was long gone.

"Why didn't you remind me before you got into the shower, man?" Dean asked Castiel softly, not wanting to sound angry. He walked to the shelf and took out the first-aid kit.

Castiel looked guilty. "I didn't realise, Dean."

Dean undid the wet bandages and started to redress the wound. Once he was done, he let go of Castiel's wrists, washed his hands, and settled down for his sausages, forking one into his mouth. "Fine," he said, as he chewed on the meat. "We'll keep an eye on that, since you got it wet. Eat fast, so we can get to the hospital sooner. Sammy's alone there."

Castiel obeyed and after a quick breakfast he and Dean took a cab to the hospital. Tonight, Dean promised himself, he wouldn't leave Sam's hospital room, no matter. He needed to check on the leads he had for some hoodoo priests and faith healers, and see how many were legit, so he'd do that while keeping an eye on Sam. Screw the doctors. They weren't any better than Dean.

Sam was still sleeping when Dean entered his room with Castiel at his side. The nurse checked on Sam and flashed Dean a smile as he and Castiel resumed their places near Sam's bed. She attached Sam to his saline bag, turning to Dean. "He slept well through the night."

"That's good," Dean replied. "He feeling okay?"

"Yes. He's a little weak because he doesn't have any solid food going in, but he's okay."

She left and Dean settled himself beside Castiel, pulling out the laptop and browsing through the contacts he'd stored in a Word file. Castiel was quiet as he peeked over Dean's shoulder and for a moment, Dean felt as though something was off. He turned to the angel. "You okay?"
Castiel nodded, but his eyes looked sad. Dean bit at the inside of his cheek. "Hey. What's up?"

Castiel just shook his head. "We should try talking to some of the more plausible contacts that you've found," he said, pointing at the screen.

Dean frowned. "Cas."

He sighed, his shoulders slumping. "I'm sorry, Dean."

Dean blinked. He swore, between Castiel and his brother, he never understood half the things they apologised for. "For what?"

"I delayed you," said Castiel quietly. "I should have controlled my… well, as a human, there are some things I should know to hold back, too."

Dean arched an eyebrow. "You apologisin' for what happened yesterday?"

"I… well, mostly for the shower," said Castiel sheepishly. "I cannot apologise for yesterday, Dean. It was the most wonderful experience of my existence. I have never felt that way before. Thank you for that."

Dean felt his ears go warm. "Dude, stop. You're going to embarrass me. And I wasn't pissed at you in the morning. I just…" he glanced at Sam, who was still sleeping, face turned towards them. "I just didn't want to leave Sammy alone for too long. He was puking up blood, Cas, and we were…” he paused, sighing. "But it's not your fault." To prove his point, he leaned ahead and kissed Castiel again, the gesture feeling so familiar now.

He felt Castiel smile against his lips and the angel lightly brushed Dean's cheek with his hand before pulling away. However, Dean's heart stopped when he heard a sleepy voice behind him.

"Dean?"

He looked around, hoping that Sam had only woken up after he'd pulled away. His brother lay on the bed, tugging his blankets around him, looking at him with dazed eyes.

"Hey," Dean put the laptop on the floor and stood up, trying to smile as though nothing had happened. He very much hoped that Sam hadn't seen them. It wasn't that he didn't want to tell Sam, but he thought that Sam at least deserved an explanation before he broke the news. "How are you feeling?" If Sam replied to this, it meant he hadn't seen…

Sam swallowed uncomfortably, and gestured for Dean to bend over. When Dean obliged, his brother pressed a shaking finger to his tracheostomy wound and rasped, "When were you going to tell me, jerk?"

~-o~

"Dean and Cas, sitting on a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!" Sam sang in his weak voice, as Castiel looked troubled by it.

"We weren't on a tree—"

"First comes love," Sam interrupted him, "then comes marriage…"

"Oh, jeez, shut up!" Dean said, rubbing at his temples.

"Then comes b—"
Sammy!

Sam coughed a couple of times, grinning as he stopped with the rhyme. Dean swore he hadn't seen his brother's eyes sparkle like that in a while. His face was gaunt, all sharp edges and in the hospital gown, Sam looked incredibly frail. His arms were bony and his clavicles stuck out starkly from the collar. He always wore full sleeves and hoodies at home because he felt cold very easily and now, watching him this way… Dean could hardly bear to look at him.

Sam caught him staring. "Dean," he said, "not that I'm not flattered that you can't take your eyes off me, but you're going to make your boyfriend jealous."

"He ain't my boyfriend, bitch. Are you, Cas?" Dean asked, turning to Castiel.

Castiel's eyes were still narrowed in confusion. "Why did he say that we were sitting on a tree? And we weren't just kissing—"

"Oh, what else did you do, Cas?" Sam perked up.

"Shut your pie-hole," Dean said to him incredulously. "And it's a stinkin' kids' rhyme, Cas, don't think about it so much."

"We were in my room," Castiel said, answering Sam's question. "Though what we did was mainly… hedonism, which I cannot describe accurately without embarrassing myself." He turned slightly pink.

"Cas..." Dean warned, and Castiel kept quiet immediately. Dean turned to Sam, who was smirking. "What're you smiling at?"

"Hedonism," Sam chuckled. "You stole Cas's virginity, huh?"

"No, I didn't," Dean said, going red. "And end of discussion. You might have been embarrassingly open about your sexual escapades with Ruby, but I ain't you."

Sam grimaced at the mention of Ruby. "But honestly," he said, glancing at the IV bag, which was now sending the etoposide into him. "I'm happy for you guys. When did this happen?"

Dean got comfortable on his chair. "Not too long ago. I was going to tell you once it was..."

"... Official?" Sam asked him.

Dean looked back at Castiel, who was listening. "Cas?" he said, "Can I talk to him alone for a while?"

Castiel stood up and nodded. "I'll be at the cafeteria," he said almost gratefully, leaving the room.

Sam adjusted his blankets around himself, sensing that something was amiss here. He frowned. "What's up?"

Dean pressed his lips together. "Honestly? I don't even know what this is, Sam. It just... it happened on a whim, okay? We'd pretended to be gay and we got drunk, and well..."

"Something happened," Sam deduced.

They rarely spoke like this. Not about their love lives, at least. Dean still didn't know much about Amelia or Jess, and Sam knew just about as much about Cassie and Lisa. But this wasn't some random third person in Dean's life — it was Castiel, and he knew that if he screwed up, he would
be screwing up big.

Dean swallowed. "Well, nothing, really, but something almost happened. And then Cas tried to kill himself, and I don't know, Sammy… things just escalated."

Sam was silent for a moment. "Well," he whispered, "I won't say that I didn't expect it…"

"What?"

Sam shook his head. "Never mind."

"No," Dean urged him. "Tell me. I need to know, okay? I seem to have been the last person to understand whatever Cas feels for me. So how did you find out?"

"I don't know, Dean, it was pretty obvious," Sam replied. "I mean, you taught me how to recognise if someone liked me; I don't know how you missed this."

"Probably because he's a dude." Dean sighed, rubbing at his eyes.

Sam shrugged. "I know you like your ladies, Dean, but I never thought this would matter to you all that much. And about Cas — it's been clear for a year, and even more so ever since he became human."

Dean nodded. "And you don't mind, right? It doesn't matter to you… that it's a… dude?"

Sam wrinkled his nose, and it looked kinda funny with his NG tube snaking out. "I might be an idiot sometimes, but I'm not a douchebag," he said, offended. "Why would I care if you have a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend?"

"Not my boyfriend, bitch."

"You keep saying that, jerk," Sam teased him.

Dean sniggered and smacked his brother lightly on the side with the back of his palm, keeping in mind how easily pain could be triggered for Sam.

"OW!" Sam said, far too dramatically to be genuine. When Dean refused to react, he stopped the act and narrowed his eyes. "You're such an abuser."

"Oh, you're just a delicate princess," Dean told him.

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Nuh – uh!"

"Uh – huh!"

Sam feigned a pout and folded his arms. After a moment, he reached for the cabinet beside his bed and pulled open the drawer. "You should get to Cas," he said. "He must be missing you. But before you leave…" He turned back and tossed a brochure-like thing at Dean, who caught it and turned it over.

**DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS ARE NOT A SIGN OF WEAKNESS. THEY ARE SIGNS OF HAVING TRIED TO REMAIN STRONG FOR SO LONG.**
Dean read it, as it mentioned how it wasn't weak to seek help, and he licked his lip when he stared back at Sam. "You think I need a shrink?" he asked Sam.

Sam looked guilty. "Look, not that I don't think you can't handle it, okay? Just… if you need help…"

"Well, I don't," Dean insisted, anger infiltrating his thoughts. He stood up. "I should go."

"Don't get mad at me, Dean," said Sam. "I don't think you're weak, all right? Even the brochure—"

"Well, you know what?" Dean said, rounding on him. "That is just their way to get patients and help… such people…” he gestured at the brochure, "with their conditions. I'll live, thanks." He paused, and cleared his throat. "Like you said, I should go to Cas. Maybe he doesn't think I'm broken, or damaged — or something else. He's fine with the way I am."

"Dean…"

Dean was out before his brother could complete his sentence.

~o~

Sam fell asleep sometime midway through the etoposide. He felt relatively comfortable since he hadn't been nauseous for a day, thanks to the alternative nutrition he was getting from the hospital. He wished Dean hadn't gotten angry at him, though, because he hated fighting right now.

When he woke up, chemo was over, and his head was killing him. He wasn't a stranger to these headaches anymore, but he still hated them. He groaned and turned his head, only to see Castiel perched on the stool beside his bed. Sam smiled at him, feeling a tinge of sadness at Dean's absence. Was Dean seriously still pissed at him?

"Hello, Sam," Castiel said in reply to his smile.

"Ye Jane—" Sam began, but stopped, realising what was happening. He raised a hand to his forehead. "Ye Jane…” he forced out, frustration coming in immediately. Where's Dean, fuck, fuck, where's Dean?

Castiel frowned in confusion. "What is it?"

"Ga ya…” Sam took a sharp breath, his heartbeats increasing in frequency as a lump formed in his throat. Where was Dean?

Castiel stood up, realising what was wrong. "Are you having trouble speaking?"

Sam nodded, pressing his hand to his eyes as tears threatened to spill. He heard Castiel talking to someone on the phone. "Yes, Dean," said Castiel as Sam struggled through the agony. The phone conversation was brief because after a moment, Sam could hear Castiel approaching him.

"I'm going to call for the nurse, Sam," Castiel said, and Sam assumed he was pressing the call button.

Cecelia came rushing a minute later. "What happened?" she asked.

Sam removed his hand from his eyes as Castiel explained for him. Cecelia took out her penlight and shone it in his eyes as he moaned. "Headache?" she asked him.

He nodded, bringing his palm back to his forehead. Cecelia squeezed his shoulder. "We can't do
anything about the speech thing, Sam, but I'll see if the doctor can give you something for the pain, okay?"

She left and Sam pressed his forehead with one hand, covering his eyes with the other. His throat was clogged and he wished Dean had been around. He didn't feel good.

A hand suddenly grasped his, gentle and soothing, as he felt something cool pass through his vein. "Here you go," Cecelia said softly, and Sam felt the darkness beckoning to him again, which he embraced with relief.

When he woke up again, he could see through the windows that it was dark outside, indicating night time. His whole body ached, as though he'd been wrestling a Wendigo. He opened his eyes and they felt heavy and sticky. The room was dark — except for the glow of the heart monitor. Somebody snored.

Sam blinked to clear his vision and turned to see Castiel sleeping rather uncomfortably on the chair, his head bobbing forward and his arms crossed. There was still no sign of Dean, and Sam's heart felt heavy again. His head, however, was fuzzy and light, and if he were honest, he wasn't feeling very well, even after ruling out the general everyday crappiness from his cancer and everything. However, this was probably just because of the chemo.

He cleared his throat. "Cas?" he whispered, grateful that he could speak again.

Castiel's lids fluttered and he opened his eyes, yawning as he did so. He stood up and came to sit on the stool, which was closer to the bed. "How do you feel, Sam?"

"Not great," Sam replied. "Where's Dean?"

"He's back at the bunker," Castiel sighed.

Sam's heart sank. "He still pissed at me?"

"He came to see you, but he went back when he realised you were all right. I tried to get him to stay, but he didn't listen to me," Castiel said sadly. "You know how stubborn your brother can be. Much like you."

Sam nodded, swallowing down the tightness in his throat. He wished Dean would just let it go. Sam had been genuinely concerned about how Dean seemed to be falling apart at the seams these days, and he had only wanted to help. He hadn't expected his brother to have such a caustic reaction to that.

Sighing, Sam rubbed a finger between his bald brow bones. "Hey, Cas?" he said, pressing on his tracheostomy wound.

"Yes, Sam," Castiel bent forward, listening.

Sam shifted positions. He was unable to get comfortable, and Castiel noticed that. "Should I call for the nurse again?"

"No, I'm good," Sam told him. "I just..." he began unsurely, unable to determine if Castiel would understand him entirely, but he continued. "Just take care of Dean, okay?"

Castiel tilted his head. Sam cleared his throat. "I mean, if anything happens to me, don't let Dean do something stupid. Please," he added.
"He won't listen to me," said Castiel.

"He might now," Sam insisted. "He's gone through enough shit trying to save my life each time, Cas."

"He just can't seem to imagine life without you," Castiel said simply.

"Well," said Sam sheepishly, "but you're there — so you can... you can be there for him... he just needs someone to hold on to, and..."

Castiel nodded. "I understand, Sam. And if anything unfortunate happens, I will help Dean."

"Thanks," Sam whispered. He liked that Castiel wasn't like Dean — holding on to false hopes and empty promises. He could at least talk to the angel straight, without Castiel yelling at him for being realistic about this.

Sam shifted. He was starting to feel strange. Something was going wrong...

"No problem," Castiel said, in reply to Sam's thanks. His voice was muffled, and Sam wanted to ask him to call the nurse, but the blackness got to him first.

~o~

Sam was seizing. Castiel looked on, stunned, as Sam's body arched up for a couple of seconds, eyes rolling upwards. And then his arms and legs began to jerk, his back hitting against the bed again and again as he made a terrible, choking noise. Sam's limbs were flailing horribly and Castiel had to compose himself to face the medical staff that came in at the screech of Sam's monitor.

They had just entered — hadn't even gotten to Sam yet — when his arm gave a particularly violent flail and the IV bag attached to it dislodged, the tube tangling with the pole and bringing it down. It collided with Sam's head. The pump hit his temple harshly before the pole slipped further, and Castiel saw a spurt of blood as the medical staff began to try to correct the situation.

Castiel put his hand into his pocket and clutched his phone. He knew he should call Dean, but he wanted to wait for Sam to stabilise first. Finally, mercifully, Sam stopped seizing and he lay there, deathly still. His lips were blue. Castiel swallowed down fear. What was happening?

"He isn't breathing..." said Dr Greene, who seemed to have magically appeared in the midst of the chaos. Castiel watched the nurse press a bag to Sam's mouth, pushing in air and waiting for him to respond, and when he didn't, Dr Greene took a clear, plastic tube that one of the nurses handed her. With another device, she opened Sam's mouth and shone a light in before passing the clear tube in her gloved hand and twisting it securely. Sam didn't react much — he just coughed once through the procedure, and Castiel wondered if that was something to worry about. The bag came back, over the tube, to give Sam breaths and a nurse wiped at his temple wound, trying to stem the bleeding as they started to wheel him away.

"Where are you taking him?" Castiel asked them, surprised to find that his voice was trembling.

"The ICU," Dr Greene replied. "You might want to call Dean. Sam isn't doing so well right now."

Chapter End Notes
The words on the pamphlet that caused the fight aren't my own. I'd seen them somewhere before, and I realised after I'd written and posted them that they'd been stowed away in my brain from somewhere else.
"Dean."

"Yeah, Sammy."

"D-Dean…"

"Yeah, buddy, I'm here."

Dean sat in Sam's room at the ICU, wringing his hands together as he watched his brother regain consciousness. He could make out that Sam had no clue where he was, because ever since Sam and Dean had started hunting, one of their father's rules was that if they got separated, somehow, the first thing that they were supposed to do was to look for the other person. And right now, Sam was doing just that. He was confused, and he was making sure that he wasn't under threat.

Sam had been asleep for the last few hours, after a bad headache that had almost made him lose his mind. Visiting hours were coming to an end and Dean had been hoping that his brother would wake up again before he would have to leave for the night. He'd almost lost hope, when Sam's breathing and heart rate had changed abruptly and he had moaned, indicating that he was finally awake.

However, Sam had another problem right now.

"C-C-Can't see," he whispered.

"You had a headache a while ago," Dean said, eyeing the cotton and gauze covering Sam's eyes. "You couldn't take any of the light — even when they switched everything off. The monitors were bothering you. So they've covered your eyes." His heart sank even as he said it, remembering the pure agony that Sam had been in a few hours ago.

"Where 'm I?" Sam asked him. Dean tongued the side of his mouth as he watched his Stanford alumnus brother struggle with remembering the very pieces of his own life.

"The hospital, Sam," Dean replied. It was five days since Sam had been admitted into the hospital, and three since he had seized, causing the IV pump to strike his temple. He had received ten stitches for it, but since the seizure, Sam's condition had just deteriorated.

They had taken him off the ventilator a day later, which was the only good thing to happen. Ever since, he had woken up to horrendous headaches and had been in a lot of pain, for which they'd put him on morphine-induced slumbers to make him feel better, but it didn't do his failing memory any good.

"Head's k-killing me," Sam rasped. "M-My temple…”

"I know. You got hurt, Sammy, but you'll be fine."

"Hmm…” The heart monitor began to slow and Dean thought that Sam was starting to drift away but he spoke again, proving Dean wrong. "Cas?"

"He's here too," Dean said, gesturing to Castiel, who stood behind him with saddened eyes. "Cas,
say 'hey' to Sam."

Castiel did more than that. He stepped forward and put his hand on Sam's, squeezing it tightly. Dean smiled at the humanness of the gesture, happy to see how Castiel was changing. "Hello, Sam," said the angel.

"Hey, Cas," Sam whispered, as Castiel stepped back. "Dean," he called out again, forlornly. Dean winced at the helplessness in Sam's voice but he knew that it was just because Sam was confused. He'd be fine soon enough.

"Yeah, man," said Dean reassuringly. "I'm right here."

"Your boyfriend's h-holding my hand."

There was silence, except for the bleeping of the heart monitor. Sam shifted, legs moving underneath the sheets, as Dean chuckled softly.

"Oh, and that you remember." Dean paused. "Never mind, dude, you get a pass."

Sam smacked his lips, and Dean reached for the glass with the straw on the bedside cabinet. Placing a hand below his brother's neck, Dean raised Sam's head and put the straw to his mouth. Sam drank gratefully, and yawned as he lay back down, twisting uncomfortably in his bed again. "Tired," he said.

"Go back to sleep."

Sam nodded. "Hey, D-Dean," he said, "not m-mad anymore, r-r-right?"

Dean's heart sank. Of all the things Sam remembered, Dean had wished he wouldn't have recollected their fight. He swallowed a lump in his throat. "No, man, I'm not mad at you. I was being an asshole, and I'm sorry."

Sam smiled, dimples deep against his thin, sallow cheeks. "I'm that b-bad, huh?"

"No, you're just fine," Dean replied. "And I was wrong." He didn't care that Sam seemed to have seen right through him. However, he wasn't lying when he said he apologised for the fight. That was a shitty thing to do.

"Jerk," Sam croaked ruefully.

Dean couldn't get himself to say 'bitch'.

~0~

"You gotta eat, man," said Dean, pushing the jello cup towards Sam.

Sam shook his head. He'd had his feeding tube out a couple of days ago, and his Mallory-Weiss tear seemed to be healing. He was out of the ICU, but he was still in the hospital, and was slated to remain there for a few days more, just to be sure. The doctors were pretty finicky about his condition, and Dean didn't blame them.

"Stomach's weird," Sam said to Dean.

"That's just because you haven't eaten anything solid in a while," said Dean. "The doctor said it would get better, right? Besides, it's just jello." He prodded the cup again, holding up the plastic spoon.
Sam reached out to take the spoon. It shook in his unsteady hands, and he waited for a moment before sticking the spoon into the jello and scooping up a blob. The spoon took a long time to find his mouth and it seemed like a lot of effort, but Dean didn't reach out because he knew Sam would hate it, and bite his head off. He watched Sam grimace as he swallowed the jello down.

"See, that's not so bad, is it?" said Dean.

Sam didn't reply. He just took two spoonfuls more, and when he reached again, his fingers twitched and the spoon fell off, hitting the floor with a weak, small sound. Dean sighed.

"Never mind," he said, "I'll get you another—" he hadn't even finished his sentence when Sam batted at the jello cup, sending it flying across the room. It hit the wall with a splatting sound and landed on the floor, chunks of semi-solid gel falling out.

Dean licked his lip. "Another jello cup, then."

"I don't want another."

"Sam…" Dean began sadly, "please, man. You haven't eaten anything solid in ages."

"I don't care. They can always put me on a feeding tube if they're so insistent."

"They just got you off it."

"They didn't."

"They did."

"I would have remembered a fucking feeding tube, Dean," Sam snapped.

Dean sighed again. "Fine," he said, putting his hands up in defence. "Just eat some more jello, okay?"

"Where's Cas?" asked Sam, ignoring Dean's pleas.

"He's eating too."

"At the bunker?"

"No, he's here," said Dean. "Cafeteria."

"Good, because I thought you'd left him alone again."

"Why would I do that?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Well, you know his problem and you still seem to leave him alone even though there are doctors to look after me, Dean, so I really don't know what to think."

Dean gritted his teeth to keep from getting angry. He didn't know if Sam was plain irritated or if it was the tumours acting up, but Sam was doing a good job of pissing him off right now. "What do you want from me, man?" Dean asked his brother, defeated.

Sam looked at him for a moment, and raised a hand to scratch at his forehead. "I just… I don't know why I'm pissed. Sorry."

Dean nodded grudgingly. "It's fine. Cas is fine. I won't let anything happen to him, okay? You take
care of yourself. Is your head hurting?"

"A little. Did you fix the Impala?"

"Working on it," Dean replied. "I'll do it fully once you're out of the hospital."

"Dean—"

"Shut up, Sam. I'm not going back. Look what happened the last time I did."

Sam sighed, fingers ghosting over his still-tender temple. "That wasn't your fault. And I don't even remember half of what happened, so could we just forget that, so you can go back to the bunker and sleep on a flat surface for once?"

"Yeah? You think it's just that easy?" Dean asked him. Well, forgive me, but when you were just barely hanging in there in the ICU, on that fucking vent after the seizure from hell, all I could remember was giving you grief for shit that doesn't even matter and getting pissed at you for no reason.

He swallowed, and narrated the short version of his thoughts. "Well, I don't care how much you bitch about it. I'm not going back to the bunker this time."

Sam rolled his eyes. "So, what's the news on that hoodoo priestess?" he asked, picking at his sheets.

"She was a bust," Dean replied, "a fake. I'm following up on that faith healer from Minnesota right now." He looked at the IV fluids dripping steadily into their cannulas; the faith healer seemed to be a bust from what he'd found out, too. But it was better not to draw conclusions before he could find out for himself.

Sam licked his lips. "You know, Dean…" he began hesitantly, "I think it's time to let go."

Dean looked up at him, arching an eyebrow. "You out of your mind?"

"You've looked everywhere, man," said Sam, shrugging. "The longer you hold on to false hopes, the harder it is going to be to let go. I did it your way, didn't I? I took that last dose of chemo and it's clearly not working—it just landed me back in the hospital earlier than necessary. Keeping me alive is not the only thing in your life, Dean. You have so much more to live for. You have Cas, and with the bunker and the Men of Letters, there's so much more you can do. Crowley's still locked up in that dungeon—"

"No," Dean interrupted him.

"Listen to me," said Sam. "I can still complete that third trial, finish this the easier way, and with the demons locked up—"

Dean shook his head. "I'm not giving up. Not yet."

"I'm not asking you to give up," said Sam mildly. "I'm asking you to set yourself free." He winced, raising a hand to his forehead, and Dean knew that his headache was getting worse. Wordlessly he stood up and wheeled the tray table away, before lowering the bed and helping Sam lay down. Sam pinched the bridge of his nose, shutting his eyes as he did so. Dean pulled the blankets tighter around Sam.

"There's nothing that I need to free myself of, Sam," he said quietly.
Sam didn't reply for a while, jaws clenching and unclenching against his headache while he struggled. Dean stared at the morphine drip and wondered if he should up it and make Sam comfortable, but Sam hated it, and Dean knew that he wanted to talk. Finally, whatever the pain was that Sam was experiencing (Dean really couldn't imagine it) seemed to pass, and he opened his eyes, just a little.

"Dean," he said softly, "If it comes to that, you have to let me go. You get it, right?"

"Well, I don't wanna."

"Dean," Sam breathed. "I don't want to fight with you anymore, okay? Will you listen if I say that I'm done from my side? I—I tried to hold on, man. I'm tired. I—" he clenched his jaw again as his body arched a little. "Oh, G-God…"

"Hey," Dean said, reaching for the morphine drip. "We'll talk about this later. How about—" Sam's clammy hand caught his wrist before he could touch the drip.

"I n-need to t-talk this out," Sam said, panting.

"Not while you're in pain, Sam. We can do this later."

Sam shook his head, grip tightening on Dean's wrist. Dean brought his hand to pat Sam's once.

"Okay," he said. "Relax. I'm here and I'm listening. You don't have to kill yourself trying to talk. Wait for it to pass."

Sam nodded, tears of agony slipping from beneath his lids, as he clutched Dean's wrist tighter, nails digging into Dean's skin and drawing blood. Dean could feel Sam's hand trembling and he waited, until Sam relaxed a bit with a sigh. He opened his bloodshot eyes and looked at Dean pleadingly.

"I'm just…" he swallowed. "I'm j-just tired," he whispered, at last.

Dean freed his wrist from Sam's clasp and he looked away, as Sam continued to speak.

"I'm—I'm tired of getting a h-hundred different infections, Dean. The headaches d-don't stop a-and I'm not m-me anymore." His breath hitched and Dean looked just in time to watch Sam grit his teeth against more pain.

"I… f-forget stuff all… the time," Sam said, breath coming in short pants, "I c-can't… keep m-most of… m-m-my f-food down. And then… th-there's a… c-catheter u-up my… d-do you… want me to g-go… on?" Dean could feel his brother stare at him, even though he wasn't facing Sam.

Dean shook his head. His eyes stung. "No." He stood up, still not looking at Sam. "I need…" Dean took a shaky breath. "I need some air. I'll be back." He exited the room without another word, barely keeping his emotions in check.

~0~

Sam wondered if this was his last day on earth after all. The headache was worse than it had ever been. He shut his eyes, hoping the headache would just go the fuck away because he wanted to sleep without the help of morphine. Just once. He was angry and frustrated and he wanted to go back to the bunker and live his last days there in peace.

Why wouldn't Dean just listen to him?

Ten minutes passed and Sam palmed his pulsating forehead. *Fuck it*, he thought, he would need the morphine. And he really, really needed it *right now*, but Dean needed to be dealt with first. He was
rubbing his eyes when he heard a knock at the door. It was Dean again.

His brother came in and reclaimed his position on the stool. His eyes were red-rimmed and Sam tried not to look away. Sam swallowed. "Look, i-if it's all the s-same to you, I just… want t-to sleep, okay?"

Dean shook his head. "I thought about what you said. Are you… you really want out, don't you?"

Sam pressed his lips together, keeping his eyes open with great difficulty and nodded.

Dean cleared his throat. "Okay. Okay, then, once they clear you to go home we'll take you back to the bunker, and—" he bit his lower lip, "we'll just do whatever you wanna do. We'll go wherever you want, watch your chick-flick movies… and we'll just…"

"… be b-brothers." Sam finished for him in a whisper. "And C-Cas too."

Dean nodded. "Cas too. Of course." He paused. "Go to sleep now, Sammy."

"And… y-you won't hesitate t-to spend… alone time w-with C-Cas if y-you want," Sam added.

"There's plenty of time for—"

"Just promise m-me, Dean," said Sam.

Dean nodded, shutting his eyes and taking a deep breath.

"You p-promise? No m-more… s-staying up, no more hoodoo o-or… healers or a-a-angels?"

"Yeah, I promise," said Dean, his voice breaking a little. He looked away, but that wasn't before Sam noticed a single tear dropping out of his eye. "You should sleep," Dean added thickly, reaching for the morphine drip.

Sam caught his wrist again. "Dean…"

Dean stopped on his tracks, his back to Sam, but Sam noticed as Dean's free hand went to his face, his fingers came away wet before he pushed the button on the drip. "Good night, Sam." His voice was shaky and weak, and Sam's heart sank right down to the stomach.

"G-Go back to the… b-b-bunker, Dean, b-be fine…" he said, before his tongue started to give away, feeling loose and useless in his mouth.

Dean nodded and sniffed.

In his mind's eye Sam saw a tennis ball shattering a window, sending cracks everywhere, and then a single shard of glass falling loose. That was what had just happened to Dean, he thought, as he surrendered his cognition to sleep.

~o~

Dean found Castiel sitting outside Sam's room. He occupied one of the plastic chairs, blank-faced, standing as he saw Dean. The sight of Castiel somehow lightened the burden in Dean's heart and he smiled. "Hey, Cas."

Castiel smiled back at him. "I stayed here because I thought you and Sam were having a private conversation."
Dean nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, we were."

"How is he?"

"He's... he just had a headache. He wants us to go back to the bunker for tonight. Did you eat your food?"

Castiel nodded. "Yes. Did you eat?"

"Not particularly hungry," Dean replied. "Come on." He reached ahead, and on instinct, he took Castiel's hand, pulling him down the corridor. Castiel walked along, Dean's hand feeling comfortable in his, and they exited the hospital. Dean was heading towards the taxi stand, when Castiel's hand tugged at his, in the opposite direction.

Dean turned to his friend (no, Castiel wasn't Dean's boyfriend). "What's it, Cas?"

"You should eat," Castiel replied, gesturing towards a diner around the corner of the street. "You haven't eaten anything all day."

Dean looked down, at their interlocked hands, and then at Castiel, who slowly started to walk towards the diner, taking Dean with him. Dean didn't protest, but he definitely wasn't hungry. However, he did not have the strength to argue with Castiel.

They entered the diner, Dean pliable and compliant by then, and Castiel let him sit in a booth, asking him to shift over before joining him. Their thighs touched as Castiel frowned at the menu card, one hand still entangled with Dean's because the last time he had withdrawn, Dean had clawed around until Castiel had finally seemed to understand, and had taken Dean's hand again.

A waitress came by to take their orders. She was cute, but Dean wasn't looking at her. His eyes were only on Castiel, who placed an order for Dean and asked for some coffee for himself. After the waitress left, Castiel turned to Dean, squeezing Dean's hand. "Dean," he said, "what did Sam say?"

Dean shook his head. He cleared his throat. "We're— we're... uh... not going to look for that faith healer anymore."

"Why?"

"Sammy wants us to let it go." Dean's voice broke, and he looked down at his lap. "He just..." he couldn't continue.

Castiel remained silent, his hand still a comfort in Dean's as their orders arrived. Dean freed his hands to eat his burger, which tasted bland and awful, but he knew that if he were to help Castiel combat depression, it wouldn't do much good to set a bad example. Sam wanted to die. Dean had to learn to live without his brother, just like Castiel was learning to live without his grace.

A newfound respect rose inside his chest for Castiel and when they had finished and were outside the diner, Dean pulled the angel to him and cupped his neck, locking lips with his. He rested his forehead on Castiel's and said softly, "Don't change. Ever."

"You already said that to me once," Castiel replied when they broke apart, smiling at Dean. "Years ago, remember?"

Dean took his hand again, a genuine smile forming on his face as they began to walk to the taxi stand. Yes, he realised, Castiel was most definitely his boyfriend. And his heart fluttered when
Castiel stopped and took Dean's other hand, stepping ahead to face him.

"Sam says that I should tell you this," he said. "You understand, Sam is a very good friend of mine as well, and now that you seem comfortable with our relationship, I didn't lie when he asked me about certain things."

Dean blinked at Castiel. "You mean you told him about…?"

"No, I think he already guessed that," Castiel replied.

"Cas," Dean sighed. "Sam or not, these things are private, okay?"

"I didn't tell him, Dean," Castiel said, looking hurt. "He had already assumed. We spoke about… other things and he thinks I should tell you something. But if you don't want to hear it…" he let go of one of one of Dean's hands and looked down, starting to walk again, but Dean stopped him and lifted Castiel's chin.

"Sorry," he apologised, when Castiel was facing him. "Tell me. What does Sammy think you should say to me?"

Castiel gazed at him and once again, reached forward to take Dean's other hand. The street was deserted and they stood under the stars, hearing muted music from a pub nearby and cars rumbling in the next street, but not really listening to any of it. Castiel smiled.

"Dean Winchester," he said, "I'm in love with you."

~o~

They had to keep their hands off each other the whole taxi ride and it was hard, considering how much Dean wanted to grab Castiel by the lapels, pull him into a kiss and take him right there. But they controlled themselves, holding on until they reached the bunker and Dean let the cabbie keep the change before rushing to unlock the entrance.

They stumbled into Dean's bedroom, and had just barely gotten inside when Dean pushed Castiel against the wall and cupped his face, meeting lips with him. He could taste coffee, his tongue flicking against Castiel's in little strokes. Dean's hands caressed Castiel's neck before clutching at the ex-angel's overcoat. He tugged the lapels and began to pull it off.

The jacket tangled with Castiel's arms but Dean managed to strip it off before Castiel pulled Dean's t-shirt overhead. Within moments, they were undressed to their boxers. Dean pressed Castiel back against the wall, dusting kisses on his neck and down to his clavicles, his chest. Dean tugged off Castiel's boxers and held on to his waist with one hand as he knelt down and leaned forward. Using his other hand, he leaned farther still, and Castiel moaned, gasping, panting as his body jerked forward wildly, sharp bursts of breath coming off him.

Dean finished the blow job and smiled up at Castiel's half-mast eyes before losing his own boxers. The area below his navel was already tingling and he could feel his own arousal. He took Castiel's hands and pulled him down so his boyfriend was kneeling next to him and they kissed again. Dean grabbed Castiel's shoulders and lowered him to the ground, flat on his back, before reaching for the nightstand, where he found the tube of lube. His wallet had a couple of condoms in them and he took one out. In a few moments, Castiel had wrapped his arms around Dean's neck and was pulling him lower, as his legs came to circle Dean's waist, ankles crossing each other.

Dean raised one hand to Castiel's hair and looked into his eyes as he jerked his hips forward. Castiel groaned, legs around Dean tightening, eyelids fluttering shut as his mouth opened a tad,
nails digging into Dean's flesh, and Dean held on tighter as he pushed again, and again, grunting, sweat prickling down his face and back.

At long last, Castiel collapsed under Dean, arms and legs unravelling from around him and falling to the floor, sweat blossoming on his forehead. Dean pressed over him, very gently, and kissed his neck as Castiel's arms came up to enshroud him again. Then Dean rested the side of his face on Castiel's chest, listening to the thump of his heartbeat.

Castiel moved, so that they were both on their sides, none of them noticing the coldness or the hardness of the floor beneath them. A leg curved around Dean's legs and he buried his face in the crook of Castiel's neck, listening to Castiel muttering I love you repeatedly in a breathy voice. His heart fluttered and he pressed his lips to Castiel's neck again, both of them staying like that, in each other's arms, until sleep consumed them for the night.

~o~

Sam had a slight fever when he woke up in the hospital the next day. His head wasn't aching and he was relatively cheerful when Dean arrived, and the fever wasn't very bad so he was glad that he wouldn't be too debilitated to spend time with his brother. The doctor told Dean, like she had explained to Sam, that Sam had developed a slight bladder infection thanks to his catheter, and that they had started him on antibiotics.

"It hurts when I pee," Sam said to Dean, scrunching up his nose when Dean and Castiel took their seats beside his bed. The infection was mild, yes, but he really didn't need this on top of everything else.

"Serves you right," Dean joked. "You were being a bitch yesterday."

Sam flipped him off. "So, Cas," he rasped, deciding to get back at his brother, "was there any hedonism last night?"

Castiel was opening his mouth, when Dean went pink around the ears. "You talk, Cas, and we're breaking up," he threatened.

"Oh, so it's reached that, has it?" Sam grinned, waggling non-existent eyebrows. "Really, if you guys just needed me to be outside all that time, you should have told me. Anyway, I'll be out of your hair soon so there's nothing to worry about now."

"No one wanted you outside, Sammy," Dean replied, taking Sam's statement seriously. "And if you talk like that again, so help me God, cancer or not, I'll clock you one, so shut up, okay?" He looked angry and upset as he said it, and Sam stopped smiling.

He sighed. "I was joking, man."

"Well, it's not funny," Dean snapped, getting up from the chair.

"Dean, don't—" Dean was out again before Sam could stop him and Sam blinked up at the ceiling, frustrated about the fights they'd been having of late. He heard Castiel dragging his chair closer to his bed and looked at his friend for a moment, before looking away again. "I don't know why we're fighting so much, Cas," he admitted quietly, staring at the corridor outside the door.

"Dean is very upset about your condition," Castiel replied, "and I think you realise that."

"Yeah, I know," said Sam, "but there's nothing I can do, right? You guys tried, and I think it's just time for you to pay attention to yourselves instead of—"
"We are in no hurry for that. We won't fall short of time for ourselves even with you alive — and in fact, that is much, much preferable to you dying. What means the most here is your life, Sam. Nothing in the world is more important to me than you and Dean, and nothing in the world is more important to Dean than you," said Castiel. "You should understand that giving in like this is very hard for him, too."

"But you're there."

"It is delusional to think that I can replace you, Sam. And I don't want to take your place in Dean's heart. I respect how Dean puts you above all else, and that's the whole reason I cherish him. I do not object to being of lesser importance to him than you."

Sam felt embarrassment rush up his chest. "Well," he said, "he did practically raise me... so..."

"You saw for yourself how he took the news at the doctor's office the other day," said Castiel. "He was devastated beyond words."

Sam nodded and cleared his throat. "Yeah."

"And if you want him to accept your wishes, you should learn to give him time too, Sam," Castiel continued. "He will accept it some day, at some point, but it will take him a lot to get there and patience is necessary."

Sam nodded again, marvelling at Castiel's insight on his brother. "I guess you're right. I should apologise to him." He paused. "Can you... can you convince him to come back in? Please?"

"I will try," said Castiel. He stood up, patted Sam's shoulder and exited the room to get Dean. Sam knew Dean was in the corridor, because he heard muffled conversation from there and finally, footsteps, as Dean materialised at the door. Sam tried to smile at him but Dean didn't respond as he sat himself on Castiel's recently vacated chair. He looked down, refusing to meet eyes with Sam, and Sam knew that he was still pissed.

"Look, man," Sam began, licking his lips unsurely, "I know that this isn't easy—"

"Oh, you realised that now, did you?" Dean asked him, still looking down.

"Dean," Sam breathed, "Please. I'm sorry, okay?"

"Sure you are."

"What do you want me to say?" Sam asked him. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm dying, and I don't fucking want to die! You think it's easy for me? I'm just trying to accept things here, man."

"Yeah, and that's so hard," Dean looking up at him, eyes glistening with grief and anger. "You'll be with Mom and Ellen and Jo and Bobby..." he swallowed and clenched his jaw as his chin quivered.

"You have Cas."

"But I won't have you, Sam! You're my brother. My fucking family!"

There was silence. Sam blinked and placed a trembling hand on Dean's knee, causing him to look away again.

"Okay, you'll probably say I have boobs now," he said, "but Dean, I'll always be there, all right?"
You know how Ellen can watch us from up there—remember when she told us she'd kick our asses if we didn't stop fighting? So yeah, like her, I'll be watching. Except, well, you gotta let me know when you and Cas need some private moments, because, dude, I don't want to have to embarrass myself." He snorted. When Dean didn't respond, he drew his hand away and continued.

"You and Cas will know that I'm there. You won't even have to try and look for me. You'll always find me around, until the very end, until it's your turn. Not as a spirit… or anything that we hunt…but you know what I mean, right? Thirty-two years have got to count for something—for the memories, if nothing else. You'll remember our prank wars, won't you? And… and that time when I broke my leg and you drew dicks on the cast, so I couldn't stop embarrassing myself? And those other times… I—I can't remember, but you don't forget, okay? Don't become like I am now — because this sucks, man. Fucking amnesia."

Sam knew he was rambling, but he wished Dean would talk. Dean, however, kept staring at the same spot and remained unresponsive. Sam chuckled lightly. "And, you know, once I'm topside, I can maybe kick Metatron's—hey—"

He stopped, because Dean had abruptly bent over, literally falling in a way that made Sam think that he'd passed out, but actually, he had rested his forehead on Sam's bed. And as suddenly as that, his shoulders started to shake as great, heaving gasps escaped him. Sam's heart clenched. After taking a moment to compose himself, he raised his hand, letting it hover above Dean's neck before slowly, reluctantly, putting it there. He took it as a good sign that Dean didn't shake it away or storm out of the room at the gesture. But he rolled his eyes in exasperation as he brushed his thumb once, against the bristles of Dean's short hair. "Look who's the chick now."

His brother shook his head, refused to look up, and Sam took his hand away, palm ghosting over Dean's hair so that some of the strands tickled him. "Hey, if Cas finds us like this, he's going to punch me for upsetting his boyfriend. And don't say 'not my boyfriend, bitch',' Sam said, imitating Dean's gravelly voice. "I notice things, you know."

Dean nodded, coughing, as his shoulders heaved more, and Sam stopped talking, tears beginning to crowd his own eyes. His throat constricted painfully. He blinked the tears back and tapped Dean's shoulder as he cleared his clogged throat. "Hey," he said, grabbing the remote from his bedside cabinet. "Wanna watch some TV? I bet there's a good movie going on somewhere."

When Dean didn't reply, Sam decided to stop talking and he lay there, putting his hand on Dean's back, watching him, offering silent comfort, his heart shredding itself to pieces by seeing his brother react like this to what he had said. He hadn't meant to upset Dean further—he just wanted to reassure him, but he should have known that this was coming. He was aware this was months, years, of grief welling up all at once and he let Dean have his release, reaching up to squeeze Dean's forearm when he finally emerged, eyes bloodshot and face blotchy.

Dean scrubbed the sleeves of his jacket roughly against his face, but he didn't talk. He just looked away, at the clear blue sky outside the window. Sam switched on the TV, to a crappy movie that he watched half-heartedly, and Dean eventually stopped looking out of the window as his swollen eyes swivelled over to the screen. Castiel joined them later and when he'd taken a look at Dean, he pulled his chair beside Dean's and just briefly took his hand while Sam pretended not to notice. Neither of the three of them talked that day, and all that remained in the room was thick, unbreakable silence. Sam realised then that all the shards of shattered glass had fallen out and all that remained in place of the tennis ball now was a huge, jagged hole.
Hang in There

23. Hang in There

Dean was a mess.

At least, that was what Castiel thought was the human term for it. After watching a movie on the TV in Sam's room in utter silence except for the sound on the TV, Sam had asked Dean to go back to the bunker. Up until then, things had been — Castiel thought it was safe to say this — awkward. Dean had seemed visibly upset and wasn't talking to Sam, while Sam kept shooting him glances from his hospital bed.

After coming back home for the night, Dean had slammed Castiel against a wall and kissed him fiercely, his hands feverishly tearing Castiel's clothes off. But halfway through he had stopped, apologised and pecked Castiel just once on his lips before retiring to his bedroom and shutting the door behind him.

Castiel had been unable to sleep after that. The slivers of despair kept slipping in, preventing sleep from coming. He shifted about in his bed until he gave up and just stayed like that, under his covers, thinking about Sam and everything that was happening. Dean's presence beside him always eased the permanent heaviness in his chest, but then again, whenever he saw Dean in such agony, he felt pain of his own.

For his satisfaction, Castiel had gotten up, gone to Dean's room, and gently opened the door, without even a creak, only to see Dean twisting about under his covers and sweating, whispering something in his sleep — something that Castiel couldn't make out from where he was standing.

Right now, he was still standing at the door, unsure if he should go in. What if it angered Dean to see him? What if Dean wanted to be alone for now? Before him, Dean moaned and kept writhing, and Castiel couldn't take it anymore. He wasn't sleeping anyway but if Dean was in distress, at least he could help.

He entered the room as quietly as possible and knelt beside Dean's bed. Dean's face was coated with a thin layer of sweat and he squirmed, face coming to rest in front of Castiel's. "Can't," he muttered wearily.

Can't what? Castiel wondered. Dean scrubbed at his face with his hand, shook his head, and shuddered. "N-Nooo S'mmy… c-can't."

Castiel wasn't sure of the human idiom of 'heartbreak' but he knew that whatever he was feeling, this had to be it. Instinctively, he reached for Dean's forehead, and hesitated for a moment, but went ahead anyway, and laid his palm there. Dean's skin was damp and clammy, and Castiel cupped his forehead before pushing his hand up to Dean's hairline and feeling the bristles of hair. Just then, Dean opened his eyes.

"Cas?"

The whisper was hoarse and hopeful and Castiel quickly withdrew his hand as he tried to smile at Dean. "Hello, Dean."

"What are you doing here?" Dean asked softly. "Why aren't you asleep?"

Castiel shrugged. "It seems I cannot sleep tonight. And you seem to be having trouble too."
Dean squinted at the clock on the bedside cabinet. "It's morning. You didn't sleep all night?"

Castiel didn't reply to that. Dean sighed. "Cas..." he hesitated, and then drew his bedcovers open. "Come here."

"I cannot—"

Dean circled Castiel's wrist with his hand, and yawned. "Shut up, Cas, and c'mere."

"You need your privacy," Castiel replied. "I want you to have it."

"Okay, then let me make myself clear," said Dean. "I want you here."

Castiel stared at him, bewildered, and obliged, sliding into bed beside him. Dean wrapped them both up in the comforter and felt about underneath, until he found Castiel's hand. Gripping his wrist again, Dean brought it up to his lips, kissing Castiel's wound lightly. He let it go and smiled. "Come on, now, go to sleep. We can meet Sammy in the morning."

Castiel nodded and felt Dean move closer, until his arm was wrapped around Castiel's waist. Castiel reached for Dean's free hand and squeezed it with his. "How are you feeling, Dean?"

Dean didn't reply to that. Castiel looked at his face to see him shut his eyes and swallow once. "I'm fine," Dean said, at long last.

"Okay," Castiel whispered and let Dean pull him closer, until his head came to rest on Castiel's shoulder.

Castiel placed his palm on the back of Dean's head and stroked it lightly, before folding him into a hug. He heard Dean chuckle. "Look at us. A pair of screwed-up guys, cuddling."

"Well, you are my manfriend, Dean," replied Castiel. "And I think, under the circumstances, I am allowed to hold you close. I don't like it when you're distressed."

"Cas," Dean whispered, and he pushed his face against Castiel's cheek, so that Castiel could feel the warmth of his skin. "Stop with that," Dean said. "And manfriend?"

"I meant that as a joke," Castiel said earnestly. "You seem sad and I noticed that a joke often helps remove sadness."

He could hear the smile in Dean's voice when he replied, "Thanks, Cas."

"You're welcome," said Castiel. "Although, it's hardly logical to call you my boyfriend," he reasoned. "You're a man, not a boy. However, we're more than friends, Dean, so I'm not sure if the term is correct altogether."

Dean snorted. "So what do you propose we be called?"

"Interspecies lovers," suggested Castiel. He heard another chuckle from Dean.

"Just go to sleep, you idiot. Stop making this sound like Twilight."

"I don't see what this has got to do with the twilight."

"Shut up, Cas." Dean laughed softly.

"Okay." Castiel paused. He was glad, though, to hear Dean laugh. He held Dean tighter. "I hope
you find 'interspecies lover' as acceptable as I do," he said, running a hand through Dean's hair.

"Caaas," Dean moaned. "Seriously, man. I'm going to ask you to leave if you don't close your cakehole now. You're worse than Sam when he was five."

"Sorry." Castiel shut his mouth as soon as he'd said it. Dean had said that he didn't want another word.

But Dean didn't let go of Castiel. He didn't push Castiel away, or ask him to move. Castiel heard Dean's breaths even out, slowly, and whispered into his ear, when he was sure that Dean was on the verge of sleep, "I love you." He felt the need to say it — again and again, because he was aware that Dean didn't hear it much, not even from Sam, although between Sam and Dean, they just didn't believe in saying it. It was understood.

But Dean needed to know how much he was loved. How much he was valued. And Castiel knew that at this terrible time, these words would definitely help.

Dean took in a sharp breath and didn't reply, and Castiel wasn't expecting one until he heard Dean's hoarse voice. "Me too. Freak."

~o~

Sam woke up to a bone-deep ache throughout his body. The bleeping of his heart monitor was too loud and the blankets chaffed against his skin, but this also brought to his instant attention that he was in the hospital. His throat was clogged and sore. His head felt like it weighed a ton and his stomach churned uncomfortably. His back hurt really badly.

Great, he thought, today is going to be a fantastic day.

Slowly, Sam opened his tired eyes, feeling as though he had woken up after a century, and yet unable to feel well-rested. He looked around for Dean, but found no sign of him.

Where was Dean?

Sam's gut roiled with the telltale nausea that felt so familiar, he instantly knew what was going on. Chemo. It had to be chemo. That explained why he was feeling so awful. He glanced at his IV pole, which for some reason was a good distance away from him, and a few bags hung there, dripping clear liquid into the cannulas. Maybe one of them was the cisplatin. He could usually feel the etoposide burning through his veins, so he knew this wasn't that. Evidently, he was on day one of his final chemo. He had said he was prepared for another one. He remembered telling Dean.

Some more weeks to live. Or something.

Sweat poured down Sam's neck and back, and he huddled into his blankets as goosebumps rose on his skin from the cold. Conversely, his eyelids felt warm — scalding, almost — and he didn't want to shut his eyes because they burned. However, his eyes were tearing up just from the effort of staying open, and he couldn't bear to do that either. His head throbbed dully and his mouth was dry. Intense fatigue, tiredness that he had rarely known, spread throughout his body, making him feel queasy and like over-boiled spaghetti.

Fever. He just knew it. He could feel it, and it felt worse than that one time he had passed out in the hotel where they'd found Metatron. But that had been because of the Trials; they had been slowly working up his lung cancer, developing something in him, which would kill him. Why had the fever come back now? Sam couldn't remember feeling this crappy before Dean brought him for the chemo. He always felt awful, but never like this.
Swift, small footsteps sounded from outside the room just as Sam shut his eyes, because the light felt too bright and everything was blurring together and spinning, even as he lay down, making him very nauseous. The ache in his body was dull and continuous, particularly concentrated at his flanks. His fingers trembled even though his hands were still on the mattress, and his arms and legs felt like they were made of lead.

The footsteps grew louder and Sam knew from their quality that it wasn't Dean. He wondered where Dean was. Oh, right, he was home. But Dean was never home for Sam's chemo. Right, he wasn't home… he was at the bunker…

Sam wasn't sure. His thoughts kept going in circles and he had no idea what was going on anymore. He heard someone enter the room, and a gentle hand felt his forehead.

Not Dean.

He opened his eyes, to see an elderly nurse standing over him with a thermometer in her hand. She smiled, when she saw that he was awake. "Open up," she said, bringing the thermometer close to his mouth.

He couldn't bear to move his hand, or he'd have taken it from her and put it into his mouth by himself. The cold, metal tip touched the frenulum of his tongue and he couldn't help but shiver. The nurse put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, waiting there, until the thermometer beeped, and she took it out, only to frown at the reading.

"How are you feeling?" the nurse asked him. Sam wondered where Cecelia was.

"C-Ccollll'," he whispered, words stumbling against his tongue, which seemed to have thickened a hundred times its original size. The nurse immediately adjusted his blanket and wrapped him up more comfortably, making him feel better.

"Your fever spiked at night," she explained. Her nametag said 'Ruth' on it. "It's been quite high. The doctor just ordered another dose of your antipyretic a while ago, and it seems to have gone down a bit."

Sam swallowed. How did he get a fever in the middle of his chemo? Or chemo in middle of… he was cold. But Dean wasn't here. Was Dean at the bunker?

"D-DDD…?" Sam enquired, voice barely coming out. The rest of his brother's name wouldn't come out either. He hissed, frustrated, as the nurse looked sympathetic.

"He'll be here soon, honey," she said. "Dean told Cecelia that he'd be back in the morning. It's still only dawn. You take a nap, and he'll be here when you're awake again." Ruth spoke to Sam like he was two and trying to learn colours, but he didn't care. He felt too crappy to give a shit.

Sam glanced at the window and noted that the sky was beginning to lighten. A clear, blue shroud was starting to bleach away the inky black, spreading through the horizon like thick, spattered paint. But he still didn't get it — why was he having overnight chemo?

He glanced at his IV bags as Ruth waited there. "Ch'mo?" he asked her.

"You finished that a week ago, Sam," she said. "You don't remember?"

He shook his head, heart sinking. No, he didn't remember. And… he didn't… where was Dean again? When was he coming?
Ruth's eyes softened when she realised that Sam was struggling with remembering. "Are you feeling any chemo side-effects? Why do you think you're on chemo?"

"M – 'Mmm okay," he lied. No, he was not okay. He felt awful. Where were Dean and Cas?

Ruth nodded. "All right. Do you need to go to the bathroom?"


"Okay," the nurse replied. She held out her hand. "Come on."

Sam tried to lift himself off the pillow, but the rest of his body seemed to want to stay down. He gritted his teeth and got himself up, everything spinning uncontrollably around him. Ruth had her other hand around the IV pole and Sam tried his best not to lean on her too much while she guided him to the bathroom. He fumbled with his gown as she stood behind him, supporting his shoulders, but a terrible, burning pain hit him when he tried to go about his business.

"You'll feel better soon, it's just a urinary infection from the catheter you had while you were unconscious," Ruth assured Sam when he hissed at the pain. She waited patiently for him to finish, checked the toilet for blood, and led him to the sink to wash his hands.

When Sam was back on his bed, he felt like heaven (the metaphorical one) had come to greet him. Ruth adjusted his pillows and his blankets, and when he shivered, she promised to return with another blanket for him. "The doctor has increased your antibiotics dose," she told Sam. "It should clear your infection and soon as that's done, you'll be out of here."

"'Kay." Why did he have a urinary infection? Why had he had a catheter? Where were Dean and Castiel?

"Go back to sleep, okay?" Ruth told Sam, as she made to leave the room. "Your brother will be here soon."

Sam nodded and let his scalding eyelids cover his eyes, welcoming the sleep as it came to relieve him of a thousand years' worth of exhaustion.

~0~

"He's inching towards an acute case of pyelonephritis," said Dr Greene, while she and Dean stood outside Sam's room.

"Do I want to know what that is?" Dean asked her tiredly.

"We've started him on stronger antibiotics," replied the doctor. "He spiked a fever at night and it's not getting much better."

Dean glanced at his brother, who was talking to Castiel, while the former angel leaned close to try and make out what Sam was saying. Sam wasn't making much sense today, not because he couldn't speak, but because of the fever and the fact that he was just semi-conscious.

"When can he come back home, doc?" Dean asked, raising a finger to scratch at his nose.

Dr Greene looked uncomfortable. "Dean, to be honest, I'm not sure if he can."

"What?"
"His immune system is compromised, and the urinary infection is now in his kidneys, which are inflamed. He's in pain and his fever is high. If we don't take care, he could go into shock. Sepsis."

Dean felt his insides twist. He looked away from Dr Greene's eyes, to Sam again. "So you're saying he has —?"

"A couple of weeks, at the most. Even after the infection clears. I'm sorry, but he got worse really quickly. I was actually impressed that with so many problems, he was still even ambulatory, but ever since that seizure…"

The seizure that had happened while Sam thought Dean was angry at him. And what was worse, Sam barely remembered anything that had happened in the week after that. His memory was still stuck at Dean being angry at him.

Dean wanted to punch something. He was so fucking pissed at himself. Goddammit, why was everything in his life like this? "I – I can't let him die in a hospital," he said to the doctor. "He…"

His voice got caught in his throat. "Can I at least talk to him about this?"

"About continuing treatment?" Dr Greene asked Dean. "You should know that if his treatment isn't continued, he will go into sepsis, and his organs will fail."

"He can take the meds at home, right?" Dean pleaded.

"He doesn't have anyone to monitor him there, Dean. What will you do if he gets worse? He also can't take the medicines through his mouth."

"I'll manage the IV, but you're telling me he's going to get worse anyway," Dean whispered, and he couldn't believe he was saying this, that he was giving up. "I just… I just want him to be as happy and comfortable as he can get when he…" Dean couldn't say the word.

The doctor nodded, her eyes soft. "We will do that for him."

"Can I at least ask him?"

"He isn't really coherent, but you can try."

Dean nodded and made his way into Sam's room as the doctor left for her rounds. Castiel was still bent over, trying to talk to Sam, but he looked up at Dean and smiled.

"Hey," Dean told Castiel. He pulled up a chair, sat down and leaned over, as Sam looked at him with half-mast eyes. "Hey, Sammy."

Sam smiled. Dean tucked his blankets tighter — quite unnecessarily — but he wanted to do something; he had to do something. He couldn't just sit there and stare at Sam while saying what he was about to say. Behind him, Castiel seemed to have realised that Dean's talk with the doctor hadn't gone all that well. He put a gentle hand on Dean's shoulder.

Dean smiled briefly at Castiel, before leaning back towards Sam. "You wanna go back to the bunker?"

Sam looked at him for a moment before nodding.

"Now?"

Sam nodded again.
"You'll take your meds the way I give them to you?" Dean asked him. "Listen to what I say?"

Sam nodded again, and Dean felt like he was talking to a toddler. He stretched out a palm and felt Sam's warm forehead briefly, before biting the inside of his cheek. "I'll tell the doctor then."

In reply, Sam lifted his hand and reached it to Dean's wrist. The hand was warm and it shook, as Sam's fingers squeezed lightly. He gave Dean a serene smile. Thanks.

~o~

Dean drove back to the bunker with Castiel riding shotgun, and Sam curled up in the backseat. They'd signed the AMA discharge form and everything in the insurance had been fine, thanks to Charlie. She had made sure their fake insurance stayed, until they didn't need the hospital. Dr Greene had been a little hard to say goodbye to. Dean liked the woman and her genuine wish to help. But he also knew that Sam would hate to spend his last days in the hospital.

When Dean stopped at the bunker's garage he got out of the car and took a deep breath, putting his hands on his hips. Castiel stepped out from the passenger seat and Dean could feel his manfriend's eyes on him, before Castiel strode to Dean's side and enclosed him in a hug.

Dean hugged him back, gripping on to Castiel's jacket, and burying his face in Castiel's neck. He felt Castiel's hand on his hair and he hugged the ex-angel tighter, feeling comfort that he didn't want to let go of. But he knew he had to leave. He couldn't stay here forever. No good thing was ever meant to last forever.

He untangled himself from Castiel and strode over to open the backdoor. Sam was sleeping with a blanket tucked tight around him and Dean could see a fine sheen of sweat on his brother's face. He hesitated then bent over, gently laying a hand on Sam's knee and shaking it. "Hey," he said in a low voice.

Sam stirred and turned around a bit, before blearily blinking at Dean. "We're back at the bunker," Dean said to him softly.

Sam nodded, and Dean helped him sit up and get out of the car. Together, he and Castiel manoeuvred Sam into a wheelchair. The bunker was not designed for a wheelchair, hence getting Sam to Dean's previous room was difficult, but they managed it and settled him onto the bed.

"Comfortable, huh?" Dean said, as Sam lay down with a sigh. Dean made a trip to the infirmary to get the IV line started for Sam's meds.

After he returned, Dean sat beside Sam and examined his brother's hands. The backs were swollen and the veins along his wrist had already been tapped. Dean went further up, near the crook of Sam's elbow, and tied a tourniquet around his biceps. Sam hardly hissed or moved when Dean inserted the needle and slowly drew out the stilet, watching blood blossom out and lidding the catheter before taping it. "Here you go," he told Sam as he connected the IV. "You good?"

Sam nodded and pulled the blankets tighter.

"Good. Cas and I are in your room, okay? Holler if you need us."

"Mmm," Sam replied. "Thanks." He opened an eye and his lips formed the ghost of a smirk. "D-DDDDon't be t-too loud, 'kay? Th-think of y'r sss-ick brother."

Dean almost didn't get the implication. "What are you talking about, why would I be — OH." He narrowed his eyes at Sam. "You aren't even funny anymore."
"'M h-hhilarious," Sam whispered, and Dean snorted, remembering having said the same thing long ago.

"You won't leave me and Cas alone, huh?" he said to Sam. "Go to sleep. Oh, and," Dean smirked, "ignore any noises that sound something like — ohhhhhh, Cas, ohhhhhh." 

"Y'r a j'rk," Sam muttered, before promptly falling asleep.

"Bitch," Dean retorted quietly, but Sam didn't hear him.

~o~

"Is Sam afraid that we will have sex?"

Dean looked up from the book he was reading. They were in Sam's old room, this time trying to research a way to get Castiel his grace back and reopen Heaven. At the hospital a while ago, Cas had had an idea. He figured that if they somehow found a way to get his grace back, maybe he'd be able to heal Sam little-by-little once he was at full power.

They wondered why they hadn't thought of this before. Either ways, they were running out of time and they needed to do this quickly.

"He's not scared," Dean said in reply to Castiel's question. "He's just trying to pull our legs."

"So is it all right for us to have sex while he's in the next room?"

"Well, he won't actually hear us," said Dean, looking up at his boyfriend. He cocked an eyebrow. "You horny all of a sudden?"

"If I may be honest," said Castiel, "Yes. I feel the urge to have sex with you."

Dean laughed, shaking his head. "All right, Barney Stinson, back to the reading. We can't waste time." He paused. "Later, okay?"

"Okay," said Castiel, and Dean wondered how he could look so nonchalant while being horny. Only he could have ended up with this nerdy dude. He chuckled, got up from his place and sat next to Castiel before reaching for his boyfriend's trousers.

Castiel looked at him, a frown lining his brows. "Dean, you just said —"

"Shut up," Dean muttered, plunging his hand into Castiel's waistband.

~o~

"Y'know, I r-r'mmbr…"

"Remember what, Sammy?"

"We n-nnever… nvrr wen' t'the Grr-Grnd Cnn. Was drm?"

"I don't know, you tell me."

Dean adjusted the washcloth on Sam's forehead and waited, palming his own mouth and running it down his stubbly jaw. Sam sighed and turned his head towards Dean. When Dean had come to check on Sam a couple of hours after he'd gone to sleep, Sam was spiking a fever.
"Can you keep Tylenol down?" Dean asked Sam.

"N-no… ch’mo."

"That got over last week, buddy. No more chemo. And Tylenol won't mess with you."

Sam snorted. "'M dying."

Dean drew in a sharp breath, and then cleared his throat. "Tylenol then?" he said, changing the subject. "You can have a bowl of soup before you take it."

"'Kay," Sam whispered, shifting his head about again.

"Good," said Dean and raised a hand towards Sam, wondering what he could do to comfort his brother, but ended up patting his shoulder. "Hang in there."

"Fr … f-ff-r ass long as I-I can."

Dean smiled and got up. When he opened the door to exit the room, though, he found Castiel standing outside with an urgent expression on his face.

"Hey, Cas," said Dean. "'Sup?"

Clear blue eyes glanced over to Sam's bed and then came back to look at Dean. Castiel took a deep breath. "I believe I have found something."

"For your —?"

"My grace, yes. There is a ritual. It will help me get my grace back from wherever it is, even if it's been used in a spell."

"And your grace isn't destroyed?" asked Dean, finding that his heart was racing. If they could do this…

"The book says that grace isn't completely destructible. It fragments, but it doesn't combust like I thought. Dean, even if I get a part of it back, I can help. I can heal Sam of the infection like Camael did and —"

"And he'll have a while after that, I know," said Dean. "But the cancer is still gonna be there."

"Then I redo the ritual for the other fragment and get back into full power," said Castiel. "It will take me months after that but since I know what exact trouble Sam's body suffers, I can concentrate my energy and heal him slowly." He paused. "But there is a problem."

Dean sighed. He knew it. He fucking knew it. It was impossible for his life to ever be easy. "What is it?"

"The ritual has to be performed on a full moon night," said Castiel, "and that isn't for another fifteen days. And —"

"— and you're not sure if Sammy will survive until then," said Dean softly. He turned back to Sam, who was watching him and Cas. Dean wasn't even sure Sam was picking up on what they were saying. He scratched at the back of his neck, trying to keep calm. "Guess we'll just have to try, Cas. We can only hope."

"I'm sorry," Castiel said softly.
Dean leaned over and kissed him on the lips. "Thank you."

Castiel ran a hand over Dean's cheek before leaving the room. Dean turned around and went back to seat himself beside Sam. "You hang in there, okay?" he repeated to his brother. "We're gonna get you out of this."

Sam nodded and whispered, "I'll t-try."

And that was enough for Dean.

∥End of Part Three∥
24. Saving Sammy

The moonlight seemed sinister as it filtered in through the windshield of the stolen Volkswagen that Castiel drove roughly through the quiet streets. He didn't quite know how to drive yet, only the basics, and the car careened dangerously as he sped with it. However, he had no choice. He had to drive tonight. Time was of essence, and waiting for Dean wasn't an option.

He thought of what was waiting for him at the bunker and wondered if a part of his grace would do it. If not... they'd have to revert to other measures... but Castiel didn't want to think about that. It was a full moon night at last, and there was just one thing on his mind. And there was finally hope. Well, a bit of it anyway.

He didn't let the wisps of grief get to him this time. He had work to do. The last couple of weeks had been nothing but Sam and Dean offering him support, helping him try and fight the despair away, and that was saying something, seeing what they were going through themselves. Most of Castiel's grief was for Sam, though, and fighting that was harder. However, Dean was always there, constantly reminding him that they were in this together, and trying to remain determined through the hopelessness.

Castiel thought of Dean, probably slumped somewhere in a bar right now, downing drink after drink. He thought of Sam, at the bunker, under his blankets, waiting to be saved. Dean hadn't wanted to leave Sam alone, of course, and when Castiel suggested that he should get a bit of fresh air, Dean had yelled at him. Then, a few minutes later, he had gathered his jacket and disappeared through the door. After that, he hadn't come back and Castiel had left him voicemail, saying he was going ahead to finish the ritual, and begging Dean to be careful.

It was very, very important to finish the ritual in time, or Castiel would have waited to check how Dean was doing.

His mind reverted to the night before, when Dean had been so restless, he hadn't slept. Castiel had gathered him in his arms, but Dean had pushed him away, saying he was too warm, and then had gone to the kitchen and gotten a beer. Castiel had followed and wanted to sit with him, but Dean insisted he had to go back to his room with the beer, saying he needed to be close enough to keep an eye on Sam.

Then Dean drank a lot of beer and then some whiskey, after which he developed a headache, but never slept. Finally, near dawn, he had crawled into bed, where Castiel was lounging against the headboard, quietly watching, and Dean had lay down and buried his face in Castiel's lap, throwing his arms around Castiel's waist. Castiel had not been startled. He had just held Dean — like he'd been doing everyday of late. This was a side that Dean didn't allow Sam to see. In front of his younger brother, Dean was always positive and he tried to look as happy as possible. Sam could guess that Dean wasn't doing all that well, though. Castiel could see it in the way he behaved with Dean.

Castiel had always known that Sam and Dean shared a unique bond as brothers, but he had witnessed it all in the last few months. They didn't always agree with each other but they cared, and they showed it in absurd ways. Castiel couldn't help but sympathise with them about how their
lives were always messed up. Both of them deserved a lot better, and yet, had almost no opportunity to experience happiness.

But that was about to change. Castiel would help them the best he could, and make sure it changed. For the time being, though, he just hoped that this plan wouldn't fail. He just prayed that it wouldn't fail.

~o~

Dean barely registered the burning sensation in his throat as the last of the whiskey went down. His head spun a little, and his thoughts were swirling in uneasy circles. He had to get back to Sam… Sam was by himself in the bunker, and Dean knew he shouldn't leave him alone like that.

He fought the lump in his throat. He had promised Castiel that he'd be back to burn the bones, but he couldn't leave from where he was. And he was so scared, so nervous, because they were so close now, and if anything went wrong, Sammy wouldn't…

He couldn't even think of it. He needed Sam to get back to what he was — Sam needed to walk again, and to laugh, talk, and joke, and say idiotic shit about Dean being in love with Cas and Dean wanted his little brother to look like he used to look.

They were in the last stages of saving Sam. It was the day, and that was why Dean was so scared. Because just when everything seemed to be getting better, things had a way to go horrifically wrong. That was how the Winchester luck ran. And it was not like everything was going okay, or according to their plan. It wasn't as if everything hadn't already been screwed up, and now Dean didn't even know whether it would be right ever again, but he was still dangling by that last string of hope, and he hated himself for it. Also maybe it was better for Castiel to be on his own, without Dean there to fuck it all up by his mere presence because of all the bad luck he carried around at final moments like this.

Dean momentarily buried his face in his hands before reaching into the pocket of his jacket and withdrawing a folded sheet of paper. His eyes lingered over the barely-legible words, evidence of how badly his hands had shaken when he'd written it down. He sighed. He didn't know if Castiel would succeed, but Dean had another way… there had always been another, foolproof way. But even for that way to work, it was necessary that Cas didn't fail his task.

Everybody — Castiel, Charlie and even Sam had said no to Dean's way, but Dean thought it was fitting. It was the best path, and screw them all. Dean knew what was best for Sammy; he knew it better than Sammy himself. So none of them had a say in this.

He got up, holding on to the counter as he swayed, and the barstool made a scraping noise as he steadied himself. He dug into his pocket and produced a few dollar bills that he placed on the counter, under his shot glass, before leaving.

Dean was going to save Sam. And how poetic, he thought, that what he was about to do shared an ingredient with Castiel's ritual. Except, Castiel needed to be at the cemetery, while Dean needed to be next to the ghost. And Dean's method was way, way better.

~o~

The graveyard finally came into view and Castiel sighed in relief when he saw it. It was well past midnight and there was just an hour to dawn — the perfect time according to the spell book at the bunker. Castiel could hear a dog howling somewhere when he put the car into park. He looked over at the passenger seat and grabbed the shotgun there before exiting the car. It was loaded with
rock salt shells. *Just in case,* Dean had said, but Castiel was almost certain he'd need it, because they'd found an actual haunting in the town, and had decided to kill two birds with one stone. Castiel's ritual, after all, needed the ashes of freshly burned human bones.

He was going to help save Sam tonight.

~0~

There were teenagers in the abandoned house, and they were planning to spend the night on a dare. Dean aimed his shotgun at them and told them to leave, and they did, their eyes wide. One brat even squeaked out that he'd call the police.

Dean couldn't bring himself to care. Gosh, kids could be so stupid. The fact that they were doing shitty things like this on dares proved it all. Dean had listened to Castiel's voicemail on the way to the house and he knew that Castiel should have reached the graveyard by now, and hopefully, he wouldn't take much longer to dig up the grave. Dean glanced at the paper in his hands, unfolded it, and squinted at the incantation for a moment, before chanting it into the cold, musty air.

Nothing happened. There was no flash of light, no shift in the air, and no ghost that appeared before him. Hoping that this was going to work, Dean pulled out a small, glass vial that he'd kept in another pocket, opened it, and licked his lips. "Come out, come out," he said to the silence around him. "If you think you can spook me, show yourself, you son of a bitch!"

Almost immediately, the temperature around him dropped from cold to frigid. A plume of white mist came out of his mouth when he breathed and Dean gripped the shotgun harder, the hairs on his neck standing as he turned around. He waited. He couldn't make his move. Not yet.

The ghost — a young man with a missing eye, flickered before Dean. His senses heightened as he narrowed his eyes at the spirit before him, who didn't look very pleased at being disturbed. "Why are you here?" the spirit asked in a deep, echoing voice as he came forward.

*Any moment now, Cas,* thought Dean, as he swallowed. He'd brought the shotgun for safety, but he didn't actually want to use it because he didn't want his only chance to slip away. However, before he knew it, the ghost came closer still and Dean felt his guts, his belly, seize up as something stabbed him. He let out a loud gasp and his breath caught in his throat. He looked down to see the ghost's hand in his abdomen, cutting through flesh as blood bubbled over, thick and fast.

There was agony, white-hot pain, and then, everything felt cold. Dean blinked, his vision blurring as the ghost kept his hand inside, twisting it and sending shots of pain through him. But Dean stayed the way he was, not fighting the ghost or attacking it because if he did anything, he'd fail. So he had to hold on; he had to finish this.

His fingers curled tighter around the vial in his hand. *Fight,* said a voice in his head. Sam's voice. And Dean *was* fighting. He was fighting for Sam.

And then, miraculously, his belly began to feel lighter as the ghost flickered, and Dean knew what was happening. Mentally thanking *Cas,* Dean managed to dredge up what he had to say, and it was a quite a feat, considering how he was barely able to think straight anymore. Dean gathered up the last of his adrenaline and began to stutter out the words of the spell he had memorised.

The ghost started to flame away, bright orange-yellow taking over the pale grey, and in Dean's tunnelling vision, it looked beautifully terrifying. He held up his vial as the ghost, instead of vanishing, reduced itself into golden light which made its way towards the vial.
When it was gone, Dean staggered and lidded the vial. He put it back in his pocket securely and looked down at the wound perforating his belly. Blood was oozing out of it, soaking his shirt, and soaking his jeans but Dean had to hold on… he had to hold on…

For Sam.

He tried to walk, but couldn't, and his knees buckled, black spots appearing in his vision as the floor came up to greet him. He couldn't pass out. He had to help Sammy. He had to get back to the bunker and finish the rest of the spell. The crucial ingredient was already with him now and the rest of the spell was easy. He just needed to get out of here.

Please don't let me pass out. Not right now…

But the blackness, the bastard that it was, won over and Dean fell onto the floor, particles of dust dislodging from the inertia, his last prayer just half-formed as he gave up consciousness.

~o~

Blue light engulfed the cemetery as Castiel felt the grace enter him, his arms and legs tingling with warmth. He drank in the power of his grace flowing through him again, the feeling almost alien after having been human for so long. The nerve synapses that had been shooting endlessly in the last few months calmed down and his body numbed a little — as though he was on one of those pain pills that Dean had given him after he'd cut his wrist. The clouds of hopelessness in his mind shifted a little to give way to rational thinking, although that didn't stop the sadness from lingering. It was odd — to not feel after so many months of emotional onslaughts that had been difficult to handle. But finally, Castiel felt good.

He took a deep breath. He was an angel again.

Castiel could feel his grace humming inside him, vibrating enthusiastically, and he flexed his fingers, smiling at the familiarity that was returning. But even with all this, something felt off — like he was an angel, but not completely, and Castiel knew that this was because he only had a part of his grace back. He would have to wait a month for the rest of it.

Fear struck him. What if this wasn't enough? Camael, when she had healed Sam, had had her grace intact, but she'd been weak from the fall. Castiel had never met any angel with only part of their grace intact, but he was sure that having all your grace was preferable, especially when the case with Sam now was so much worse than before. But he would try. He would definitely try his best.

He tucked the shotgun under his arm and returned to the car in quick strides. He wondered if anyone had noticed the brilliant light when he'd gotten his grace back; he didn't want to attract the police. He started the car and drove it back to the bunker, hoping against hope that his grace would work on Sam the way he wanted it to.

~o~

Dean woke up to a weird sensation. He was lying face-down on a cold, hard surface. He couldn't move and his body felt stiff all over, as though his joints were glued to immobility and his arms and legs were…

… bound.

He opened his eyes to a blurry, dusty floor. He could feel ropes cutting into his wrists and his ankles, the rough bounds going through his skin and causing slippery blood to leak out in tiny
streams. His abdomen hurt horribly, pain coursing through him in stabs, but he gritted his teeth to try to ignore it, although it was difficult to do that, seeing as he was lying on his belly. He felt thirsty, unstable and cold. His heart was hammering in his chest. He was too weak to move, but he knew he had to. However, he was confused. He didn't understand how he had gotten here. Hadn't he come to gank a ghost?

Dean suddenly remembered Sam at the bunker. Sammy... so pale, so sick. No... Dean had to get out of here. He had to go and help his brother. And he didn't understand why this was happening and he didn't have time to save Sam and this needed to stop so he could get back to Sam.

Dean could barely think. It was like his thoughts were slipping away, rationality dripping away like water draining from the gaps between the fingers.

"Well, well, guess who's decided to join us!"

The voice was unfamiliar and Dean twisted his head to see a pair of boots approach him. He couldn't crane his neck beyond that, and he was too weak to flip over. His captor, however, crouched before him, to reveal a face that Dean had never seen in his life.

He tried to place the man, and wondered if they'd ever met, but Dean was pretty sure they hadn't. At least, he couldn't remember if they had. What did this bastard want right now? Was it absolutely necessary to do this right when Dean needed to be there for Sam? When time was running out? And how had this dude even found Dean?

"I'll make this easier for you," the man said, sitting beside Dean and crossing his legs. "You don't know me, but I know you very well."

"Y-Yeah, I gathered t-that," Dean mumbled, barely able to keep his teeth from chattering.

"Not doing so well, are we?" the man asked, smirking, and Dean watched as two of the stranger's friends joined them. The two other men knelt down beside the first man as he spoke. "That shouldn't be a problem, though," he said. "Castiel's back on angel radio. So I'm sure he can heal you. That is if we don't damage you more than the salvageable limit."

Dean understood then. "Angels," he whispered.

"Very good," the angel replied. "And I'm surprised you don't remember me, seeing as I was declared brain dead by the doctors in the same hospital that your brother's been pathetically depending on to save his life. I was one of the famous patients who 'miraculously' recovered. But those stupid humans didn't know we were angels, of course, and we had to run to escape their research and tests."

Dean remembered now. Charlie had been gushing on about some coma patients waking up or something and he hadn't really listened, because he'd only been concerned about Sam at that point. But that was a long time ago — the time when Dean had gotten the flu and if this douchebag had woken up then…

"Yes, we've been keeping a close watch on you, Dean," said the angel. "Cancer. Not something you'd expect God to inflict on someone who was just trying to lock the demons away, right? But don't worry. It's not you we want. You can get back to that messy, sickly brother of yours. We only need your boyfriend. We're fully expecting him to come here to try and be your knight in shining armour."

Dean laughed. "C-Cas ain't going t-to get trapped."
"Oh, I'm sure he will. His love for you being so tremendous and all." The smile on Douchebag Angel's face widened. "And you know who will lure him? You. He might not know where you are, but he can listen to your prayers again."

Dean swallowed. He hadn't thought of that. But then again, these bastards couldn't make him pray to Cas. No matter what they did, there was no way that Dean would break.

He gathered his energy, coaxing his mind to work. He somehow needed to undo the bounds and get out of here. Sam was his priority, but he'd make sure these assholes were taken care of. They'd probably taken the blade he'd kept in his jacket, so he'd have to think of another way.

"We're going to untie you now."

Dean wrinkled his eyebrows, confused, but the angel gave him an explanation. "You will fight us, and while you're losing, you'll pray to Castiel for help."

"No," said Dean.

"See, that's why I'm going to let you fight," said the angel. "If we just beat you while you're tied up, you won't pray. But when you're actually fighting — trying to escape, run, and overpower us — you won't realise whom you're praying to."

"Your l-logic sucks," Dean rasped.

"It will work," said the angel plainly, as he began to cut the ropes at Dean's ankles. One of the other angels worked on Dean's wrists and once the bounds were gone, they backed away, waiting for Dean to get up.

"Come on," said the leader. "Stand up. You know how to fight, don't you?"

Dean's head was spinning as he got himself on all fours, his hands shaking while he tried to stand. And just as he gained his balance, he heard the door of the house open, and a voice call out to him. A voice he'd been waiting to hear for long enough.

"Dean!"

It was Sam.

~o~

"Sammy."

The word escaped Dean's lips before he could help it, but he shouldn't have done that, because the angels turned in the direction of the door. The leader waved his hand, and Dean heard the door shut again. He smiled at Dean. "Baby brother, huh? Very good, Dean. Let's see if you can still resist us."

Dean swayed as Sam appeared amidst them, and he drank in the scene before him, eyes wide. And looking at Sam, Dean wanted to cry in relief. He looked so much better. His eyes were still a little sunken, but he could walk. His face was fuller. He looked steadier. Compared to what he had been, he looked healthy.

Castiel had succeeded. And yet, Dean wasn't done. He'd still finish his own spell, because it was time for Sam to get a reprieve from all the months of torture that he'd gone through.
"Sammy," Dean whispered again.

Sam smiled at him before drawing his angel blade and coming forward.

~o~

"Almost there."

"S-Sammy…"

Dean's wounds hurt double now. His abdomen felt ready to explode and his wrist was bent at an odd angle. His head hurt, a cut bled profusely into his ear, and his lip was torn. He was pretty sure his chest was bruised too. His legs felt heavy and he could barely walk.

He couldn't remember why he was injured so badly, or who the three dead men were, although the fact that he and Sam had killed them with angel blades suggested that they were the angels. However, Dean couldn't remember fighting them and apparently, neither could Sam, and this was worrying. Sam was also hurt some from the fighting, and Dean wanted them to get back to the bunker soon so they could take care of Sam's injuries. And anyway, Sam wouldn't be suffering his cancer much longer now.

What Dean could remember from tonight was that he had come here to fight a ghost, so he could do the spell for Sam, and that was it. He didn't even remember when Sam had turned up. Everything from the night eluded his memory. Everything, except for the fact that he had gotten his brother back today.

"Hey, come on," said Sam, supporting him as they walked slowly. Dean's feet felt leaden. He rested his head against Sam's shoulder and Sam didn't shrug him off. Instead, he led him ahead gently.

"H-How did y-you…?" Dean asked his brother, the words feeling alien in his mouth as the sentence refused to come out fully. How did you find me?

"After Cas healed me, he was worried about you," Sam explained, his voice low and his breaths a little ragged from the effort. Dean remembered that Sam was still sick, that he wasn't completely all right, and he tried to let go of his brother so he could walk by himself.

"Hey, no, it's okay," said Sam, evidently feeling Dean's weight lift a little. "How many times have you helped me now? Come on." He pulled Dean closer as they limped to the entrance. "Anyway," he said, "Cas and I decided to split and look for you. He went to the bar. And he said he'd come here if he didn't find you."

Dean's knees buckled and Sam tightened his hold on him.

"Come on, man," Sam said again, "don't pass out on me. We need to get out of here."

"C-Cas…"

"He's on his way."

"D-Did he…?"

"He did," said Sam, and Dean could feel worried eyes on him again. "We just saw the ghost flame away, remember?" He sounded uncertain as he said it. Even Dean couldn't remember now if Sam had been there when the ghost had flamed away. The angels still didn't make sense either.
Almost there."

Dean just smiled at Sam's words. He had his brother back.

~o~

Castiel drove the Volkswagen in a frenzy, his stomach doing back-flips at each turn and his lips praying, at every moment, that Dean was okay. Dean wasn't at the bar. And Castiel should have known — he should have known even as he left for the graveyard that this would happen. He should have known months ago, when they'd found the spell that he, Charlie, and even Sam, had forbidden Dean to use, that this was ultimately the path that Dean would take.

He pulled over roughly on one side of the road and didn't bother to shut the door when he got out of the car. The Impala waited on the other side of the road, calm and majestic, and Castiel's heart missed a beat. The house was dark, abandoned and run-down, and the door was shut. Castiel tried it, but it wouldn't open. It was locked from the inside, but that didn't seem like something that Dean would do. Castiel tried again to open the door, with much force.

"Cas?" a tired, muffled voice called out suddenly, and Castiel stood there, alert. And then he heard something else — but the voice was so low, he couldn't make out anything. Finally, the Impala keys were slid under the door.

Castiel knew what to do now. He rushed to Dean's car and opened the trunk, finding the axe inside. After shouting out a warning, Castiel started to break down the door. He made enough room for a single person. Dean was just inside, leaning against the wall and bleeding profusely from what seemed like every part of his body.

Castiel gasped as he moved forward to help him. "Dean!"

Dean came willingly, with Cas muttering reassurances and helping him out of the house. Dean's skin was too pale under all the blood and his eyes kept drifting in and out of focus. His breathing was laboured and he seemed extremely confused. Castiel rested Dean against the Impala and placed two fingers to Dean's forehead, but it wouldn't work. His grace was too weak to heal.

When Dean's wounds didn't disappear, Castiel's heart sank but there was no time to wish that he had his complete grace now. He held Dean's chin and made sure Dean was facing him before shining a torch into his eyes, only to see a fixed, blown-out pupil. It was a trick that Dean had taught Castiel when Heaven had cut him off six years ago, and from what Castiel could see now, Dean had a concussion, or maybe even a more severe head injury. That explained Dean's confusion, but it was just the beginning of his wounds. Castiel swallowed as he began to pat Dean down for other injuries. "You have to hold on, Dean. Please," he begged.

He felt Dean's arm tighten around him. "Cas. L-Love… you, man…"

Dean began to slump and Castiel held him up, letting him sit inside the car. He had to rush Dean to the hospital, and the closest one was the one where Sam had been getting his treatment. It was half-an-hour away, and Castiel prayed that Dean would survive the ride. As he tried to get Dean to lie down, he was stopped with a cold, weak hand on his wrist.

"S-Sammy…"

"Dean, the spell won't work," said Castiel desperately. Castiel had failed, and he felt miserable about it.

"N-No," Dean whispered, "you d-don't… understand. 'M s'posed t'do… trials…" He looked at the
space beside Castiel, making pleading eyes. "S'mmy, please."

Castiel squinted, at the place where Dean was looking, and then turned back. "You need the hospital, Dean."

"N-No…" Dean pointed at empty space again. "S'mmy… spell…" he cast a pleading glance on Castiel. "Please," he whispered at last.

The spell. Castiel knew what spell that was. It was a ritual which involved taking someone's disability or illness as your own. Just the way Castiel had taken Sam's madness earlier. But he had survived because he was an angel. Dean, on the other hand, wouldn't be able to take it, even if it worked. But as far as Castiel knew, the spell wouldn't work now. Because Castiel had failed miserably.

"I'm sorry, Dean," he said. His voice dropped to a whisper as tears threatened to fill his eyes. He braced himself to say it. He had to say it. Dean was being stubborn and he needed the hospital and there was only one way to get Dean to comply.

Castiel took a deep, trembling breath. "The spell doesn't work on dead people," he said quietly.

"S-Saaammm…" Dean repeated, pointing behind Castiel. "S'mmy… n-not… you s-saved 'im…"

Castiel shook his head, looking at the empty space around them. "Sam's not here. There's no one here. Sam is d-dead. I – I couldn't resurrect him. My grace wasn't sufficient. I'm s-sorry… I'm sorry."

Tears were escaping his eyes freely now as he saw a pained expression on Dean's face. He wiped his face and tried to swallow his grief; he couldn't wait here anymore, for Dean was grievously injured. So he gently put Dean's legs inside and shut the door before sliding behind the steering wheel. He had already seen Sam die that morning. There was no way he was letting Dean die too.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't kill me D:

Okay. I had many, many inhibitions about writing this thing. I'm aware that I haven't warned, but I did mention that I wasn't warning, right in the beginning. It was the closest I could come to without saying the actual thing., which would have acted as a gigantic spoiler. I usually warn for death, and would have, but it would have ruined the whole plot. So I apologise.
25. Almost There

Hey, Dean.

Sammy, come back, man.

Look who's being all emotional now.

Less girly than you, dude.

... You're a jerk.

You're a bitch, too.

The pain was excruciating. Dean was cold and uncomfortable. He could feel something vibrating underneath him, and he dazedly recognised it as his car when he heard the purr of the engine. If Cas was right and there was no Sam, Dean didn't know who he was talking to. And who was driving? Was it... was it Sam?

"Sam is d-dead."

It felt like Dean had just heard the words from Cas's mouth, but he wouldn't believe him. Because Sam wasn't dead. Sam had helped him fight the angels. Sam was alive... He was right here.

"Not dying that easy, Dean," Sam said suddenly, his voice making him sound equal parts exasperated and concerned. "Stop the Niagara Falls that you've got going on that ugly face of yours."

The voice was almost divine to listen to. Dean's eyes seemed to be glued shut and he vaguely felt shivers run down his body until a large, warm hand rubbed his shoulder. He opened his eyes weakly to see Sam sitting on the far end of the seat, his thighs touching Dean's booted feet. Dean was curled up and on his side, cold sweat running down his face in torrents as sudden nausea took over his senses. Sam looked concerned. He gently lifted Dean's legs and laid them on his lap, pulling off the boots and socks and throwing them to the floor. "Almost there," he said, rubbing the bottoms of Dean's feet slowly. "We'll keep your legs elevated, yeah? Don't go shocky on me."

Dean shut his eyes again.

0

He is at home, seated at a small table that's covered with a ton of food. It's Thanksgiving and his mommy has told him just a few days ago that in a few months, he is going to get a really nice new friend. Whether it's a boy or a girl, she doesn't know, but she has promised Dean that whoever it is, they will grow up to be the best friend he's ever had.

Dean's best friend right now, is a boy named Alex. He lives down the street and they play with their Hot Wheels together. Dean wonders how he can get a better friend, but Mommy never lies, so he believes her.
They have a great dinner, though Dean's new best friend isn't letting his mommy eat in peace without her feeling sick. Dean doesn't know how exactly his friend is doing that, but it's pretty mean. Alex never does that to Dean's mommy.

Later on, once they're done with dinner, Dean's daddy takes the big bone — they call it the 'wishbone' — and Dean knows that they have to break it every year. When his parents are holding each side of the bone with their pinkie fingers twirled around it, Dean's mommy bends towards him and whispers, "Make a wish, baby."

And he wishes for his best friend to turn out to be a boy, because that will be really nice. Then maybe he can join Dean and Alex with his own Hot Wheels and they can race their cars together.

Dean is happy when his mommy gets the bigger piece of the wishbone.

0

"Hey, you with me?"

Sam's voice was difficult to make out, but Dean nodded. "W-Wissssssh- wishb-bone," he confessed.

"Huh?"

Dean didn't elaborate. It was his secret. He wouldn't tell Sam about how his wish had come true — wouldn't give his brother that kind of satisfaction.

The car hit a pothole, driving spikes of pain through Dean, and he vaguely registered a moan that escaped his lips. A hand squeezed his ankle. "Hey, it's okay, it's okay." A pause. "Cas, be careful, he's hurting."

"S'mmy..."

"Yeah. Yeah, Dean."

"S'mmy."

0

A baby is curled up in Dean's arms, giving him a toothless grin and cooing as it nuzzles its face against his chest. Mommy smiles at him from her place, lending him a hand so that he can hold Sammy properly.

Sammy's been around for four months now. He was bald, pink and chubby when he came around. Now he has a bit of hair and is still pretty chubby, but he hasn't done much other than keeping everyone awake with his nightly crying. And he has stolen Mommy and Daddy from Dean. Dean isn't sure best friends are supposed to behave like this. Alex says that best friends don't do it, but baby brothers do. Alex's baby brother is like this too. But then, after making Mommy sick for so long, Sammy absolutely doesn't have the right to be this way. He is so stupid.

For the longest time, Dean had hated Sammy. Cried and begged his mommy to put Sammy back wherever he came from because he doesn't want to share her with anyone, and he thought Sammy was a terrible baby brother.

But Mommy had stroked Dean's face and promised it would get better. That Dean would love being a big brother, and he just needed to give it a chance. So Dean believed Mommy again and gave it a chance. He had to give it a lot of time to actually start liking Sammy but now, as Dean
looks at the baby in his arms, he thinks Sammy is okay. Besides, he can be cute.

"Aw, look at him," Dean's mother says happily as Sam coos at Dean and smiles again. "He adores you, baby."

"He's okaaaay," Dean replies, letting his mother take Sam in her arms. "When can we play with my Hot Wheels?"

His mother leans forward and kisses his forehead. "Soon, honey. Soon."

"Almost there."

Sam was blurring in and out of Dean's vision. The pain was ebbing to numbness and Dean wondered if he should be worried about it. He glanced at Sam, trying to decipher his expression (because if Sam was worried, it meant that Dean was definitely dying). Sam seemed serene, though, as he rested his head against the back and kept Dean's legs elevated, so Dean figured he was doing okay.

"Dean," Castiel called out in a panicked voice, from behind the wheel. Dean turned his face to Cas, where he could see his boyfriend or manfriend or whatever Cas was calling himself, flicking glances at Dean.

They were going to crash the Impala if Cas didn't take care. But when had Cas learned how to drive? Wasn't it supposed to be Sam behind the wheel? But Sam was here, at the backseat with Dean. Why was he even letting Cas drive?

"Dean, please talk to me," Castiel begged, his voice thick. He turned again, and Dean wanted to ask him to switch places with Sam. Dean didn't know why Castiel was so scared. Looking at Sam, Dean didn't think he was all that badly injured.

Sam patted Dean's foot. "Just answer him, man. He's really worried."

Dean blinked slowly, and took a deep breath. "M – M'kay, Cas," he said. His blurry vision was making him nauseous, and he shut his eyes again, watching the cool black flood his mind and revelling in it.

"Dean?"

Sam's eyes are large and inquisitive from beneath his fringe as he looks up at Dean. He's just arrived from kindergarten and Dean sits him down on a chair so he can undo Sam's shoelaces for him. Dean kneels down to his brother's tiny feet hanging off the chair, as Sam pushes himself back to lean on the backrest. He swings his legs once, and Dean catches them, steadying them, before starting to undo Sam's laces.

"Dean," Sam repeats in a small voice, "where's our mom?"

Dean freezes while pulling off one of Sam's shoes and looks at his brother, who is blinking at him with wide eyes. Dean blinks back at him, as his memory goes back a few years and he remembers the white, bright light, tinged with orange and yellow. And it had been everywhere.
"Take your brother outside as fast as you can and don't look back!"

There was a bundle in Dean's arms and his father was frantic, eyes shining. "Go, Dean, go!"

*It was hot... so hot...*

"Dean?" Sam asks again, pulling him out of the memory. The whole thing is so vague in Dean's head, and yet, Dean feels like he remembers everything. Sam pouts at him, lips trembling. "Where's our mom, Dean?"

"With us," Dean replies to Sam, taking the other shoe off and sitting back on his haunches to lock gazes with his brother.

"But—"

"She's always with us," Dean repeats, before getting himself up from the floor and moving to the kitchen. "Lucky Charms, Sammy?"

0

"S-Sammy..."

"Almost there."

Sam had being saying that a while now, but Dean still believed him. He knew that he had been in the car long enough that they should be nearing the bunker now. Home.

… Or was it the hospital that they were going to?

Did Cas say something about it? Dean wasn't so sure. His brain wasn't cooperating, and…

"Hospital, Dean," said Sam, stopping the loops that were Dean's thoughts. "I can't patch you up like this. But you're with me, right? You'll stay with me?"

If Sam couldn't patch him up… was it bad? Was Dean really dying? He couldn't remember… what had just happened?

He'd know if he were dying, if he could look at Sam…

"Dean?"

"W-Wi' you, S'm..." Dean managed to mumble. His lips weren't working and everything was slipping away like water trickling down the gaps between fingers. And he was completely numb now — the pain had dissipated — just like those spirits, when they were shot with rock salt. The numbness felt uncomfortable, but Dean would take it any day to the terrible pain he'd been feeling.

There had been a lot of pain in Dean's life. Too much pain.

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"Where's Sam?"

Dean swallows as he locks gazes with his father. John doesn't look happy at all, and the smell of whiskey on his breath proves just how great his mood's been tonight. It's the last week of October and like every year, he's pretty much crawled into a bottle. Sam hates this, and as usual, he's been whining about it for days and spending increasing amounts of time at the library.
"Dean," John says menacingly. "I asked you a question."

Dean lets out a sharp exhale. "I don't know, sir."

John's jaw clenches, and Dean takes a step back. His father puts a hand to his own forehead, possibly to stop the pounding there, and speaks again. "Didn't I ask you to keep an eye on him?"

"He's fifteen, Dad," says Dean, "how much more of an eye can I keep on him? I can hardly ask the guy to stay home all the time — he has a life!"

"Yes, and that 'life' of his has probably led him into trouble," John replies. "You know that, don't you?"

Dean blinks, clutching at the phone in his hand. He's tried calling Sam, but Sam's phone is switched off. He's tried looking in the library and called all of Sam's friends too, but nobody knows where Sam is.

"I know, sir," Dean replies to his father. He looks at the grimy floor. "I'm sorry."

His father sighs. "We gotta start looking for him now."

"Yeah."

"Do you have any idea—?"

Dean licks his lip. "I checked the library and his friends and—"

"Check his friends again," says John. "I'll drive back to the library and ask them and try to retrace his steps from there. Got it?"

Dean nods, then hesitates. "What?" his father snaps, catching the hesitation.

Dean looks at him. "You… uh — probably shouldn't drive… like this…"

"Yeah well," John says, "you should have thought of what this would take before you let Sam go missing on your watch."

It's a gruelling two weeks before they somehow dig up Sam's whereabouts. He's in Flagstaff, and John rattles off some information and curse-words about the situation, but all Dean hears and knows is that Sam is alive, and that's enough for him.

But oh, how stupid he was to think that this was the worst that could happen.

0

"Almost there," Sam repeated soothingly.

"Y'gotta s'op s-ssayin' tha'…” Dean breathed out to his brother. "I kn- knnnow, Sam. Je…sus."

Sam chuckled. "Dude, stop talking, will you?"

"Y-You shouldn'a… g-gone t'F-Flag…ssstaff."

The statement just slipped out of his mouth, and Dean had no clue why he'd said it. He felt Sam's grip on him stiffen. "That was years ago, man, why are you bringing it up now?"
Dean didn't reply, remembering the horrendous mood that their father was in when neither of them had found Sam. He didn't want to talk to Sam about it, because Sam was right. It was long gone. They had faced so much worse and Dean had lost Sam in other ways since then. The two weeks' anxiety was nothing in comparison to the edge that Dean had lived on for the last few months and he'd do anything to just have to deal with things like the Flagstaff situation, rather than Sam having freaking cancer.

"Dean," Sam said softly, "I never told you this, but I'm sorry, okay?"

Dean snuffled out a small laugh. For what?

"Flagstaff," Sam said, as if he knew what Dean was thinking. "I shouldn't have… I didn't realise…"

Dean stretched out a shaky hand until he found Sam's forearm, and he squeezed. It's okay. You're forgiven. You were forgiven long ago.

"Thanks, Dean," Sam said quietly. "We're almost there, yeah?"

Dean let out a weak chuckle again. Sam needed some new words in his vocab. Seriously.

"You coming?"

Dean glances up at his little brother. Sam looks heartbroken and pissed off, bags slung over his shoulder and containing the few possessions that he can boast about. Sam and Dad have had a terrible fight, and right now, Dean can't quite believe the words that came, and are still coming, out of his brother's mouth.

"What?" he asks, surprised.

"To California," Sam replies. "We could work a few small jobs before the start of term and use the money to rent an apartment."

Okay. Dean heard it right then. Not that his heart doesn't warm a little at the fact that his brother still doesn't mind having him around, but he knows there's a problem here. They can't exactly do this — dump their current lives in favour of higher education. So Dean takes a deep breath, knowing exactly where this is going to go. "What about Dad?"

"I told you," Sam says, "if he's ready to take back his words—"

"Come on, Sam, don't do this. Let Dad come back. We can talk this out. All three of us." Dean is not beyond begging now. He knows that Dad won't relent, and Dean can't change his father's mind but Sam could maybe listen to him. They can't break apart like this. They're family. Of course, Sam has every right to go to college, but maybe they can work something else out. And Dean will sort it out. He'll talk to both Sam and Dad.

Sam interrupts him. "There's nothing more to talk about, Dean. As for Dad, if he cares, he'll make an effort."

"He's our dad."

Sam lets out a small sigh. "Are you coming or not? I think you should apply for a course too. You're brilliant, Dean. You deserve better than this."
"Better than this?" Dean is incredulous as he says it. "I save lives, for fuck's sake. We save lives, Sam. I'm better off like this, rather than being in some prissy lecture hall with a few douche-y kids."

And that does it. A look of determination and sadness crosses Sam's face and Dean realises that Sam is going, and he also realises that Sam knows that Dean won't come along. No. No, this can't be it. This can't be it.

Sam looks down and sniffs, and when he looks up, his cheek is damp. Dean's heart lurches at that, but he ignores it. "You're not coming with me," Sam says, heartbreak showing clearly on his face.

Dean blinks. "I just want to help Dad out." He shakes his head and turns away, blinking more when his eyes prickle. "Sammy, don't leave, man. Not like this." He wishes he could look his brother in the eye, make Sam believe it, but this is not enough. And fuck, Sam is leaving… leaving for real.

He hears Sam sniffle. "I guess you've made your choice, then."

"Sammy, please." Dean is actually begging now, and he faces Sam, his vision blurring traitorously. He blinks the tears back. "Just… just wait, okay?"

"Forget it, Dean." Sam sounds defeated. "Dad's more important. I get it."

"No, no, Sammy, I—"

Sam turns around and starts to make his way out. Dean stands up from his place. "Sam, hey…"

Sam doesn't listen to him as he continues to walk away. Dean follows him with an arm outstretched to grab him — something — but by the time Dean's gotten out of the house, Sam's walking swiftly down the street, his back stubbornly to Dean. And Dean waits there, watches Sam's figure grow smaller and fade. All Dean does then is will Sam to look back. To turn around.

It never happens.

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"Dean?"

"Y-Yeah."

"You're with us? Good, good."

"Mmm…"

"Hey, man, we're—"

"I kn-knnnnoow we're… alm-most there, S-Sammy."

Dean felt peace settle over him. It was odd, the placidity that took over his whole body, because he hadn't been this way in a long, long time. The sensation was alien, but it was good. It was like the weight on Dean's shoulders was gone. God… it had been so long since he'd felt like this. With Dad dying, Hell, the Apocalypse, and then everything that had gone wrong in their lives, with Bobby, and Sam's psychosis and Dick Roman, Purgatory… the fucking Trials…

Dean saw it all in technicolour. The last ten years of his life flashed past him vividly, and it felt like his mind was racing through the core moments, until it stopped, until it came to an abrupt halt at
the last two weeks alone. His whole life had been so difficult all these years, but the last few
months... all that was nothing compared to the last few months, and definitely nothing, when it
came to the last few days.

"C-Cas? Hhhooow... 's'e hool...d-din' up?"

Dean balances a tray of soup, crackers and water in his hands as he leans against the wall outside
Sam's room, and listens to his brother's raspy voice and slurring, barely coherent speech. Sam
coughs once, twice, draws in a deep breath, and waits for an answer.

Sam's anti-tussives have been good for his coughing fits these days. Of all the symptoms and side-
effects that Sam's been facing from the cancer and his chemo, this is the one that's been easiest to
control. But it's getting worse. It's been worse ever since the last series of events that led Sam back
to the hospital and kept him there.

Sam is also breathless a lot, even when he's lying down and doing nothing. When Dean had
brought Sam out AMA, he'd told Dr Greene he'd continue Sam's treatment at home, and it basically
amounted to end-of-life care, which, Dean found out, Sam had actually signed earlier on during
one of his visits to the hospital. He didn't give Sam a hard time about it, though.

Sam's terms are that he wants to be taken care of at the bunker, with no hospice or nurses. And
Dean understood it because if he were dying, he'd not want doctors and nurses around him either.
But this also meant that Dean had to learn the basics, so he could be alert when it came to Sam. He
already knows most of what he is meant to do, though, and the rest wasn't so hard to learn either.
Sam also doesn't want the continuous morphine drip because he hates being dazed and loopy all
day. So Sam has got some of the good stuff for pain management — except, it's to be given to him
only when he wants it.

When the equipment had arrived, Dean hadn't thought too much about the oxygen cylinder and the
nasal cannula, until Sam got breathless towards the evening on the second day. Dean had called the
doctor for a final time, and got instructions on the pressure and settings and all that crap as he went
on to hurriedly place the cannula under his brother's nose, making the prongs hold on to the
septum. He had watched Sam take in the oxygen hungrily, bloodshot eyes screwed shut and leaking
strained tears, while Dr Greene explained the BiPAP machine as well.

That night, Dean decided that he couldn't take it anymore. He dug up the old spell that Charlie had
found, which would let him take on Sam's disease. He didn't care. He'd take all that shit laughing,
if it meant relief for Sam. Because Sam deserved a break.

Dean was collecting the components and packing his bags for it, when Cas caught him at it.

They fought. They yelled and fought and Dean punched Castiel and kicked him and hit him, Cas
reciprocating all of it, until Sam heard the commotion and somehow wheeled over to their room.
Castiel took the opportunity to tell Sam everything about the spell, and Dean's intentions, all before
Dean could knock the bastard unconscious.

Sam's eyes had widened at the information. "Dean."

"It's the only way, Sammy," Dean told him. "Last few days, man, I'll—"

"No," Sam replied, crossing his arms.

"Listen to me," Dean told him frantically.
"No," Sam had repeated, his voice gentler. And then he had smiled faintly. "You won't dishonour the wishes of a dying man, will you?"

And fuck it, Sam is really a pain in the ass with his eyes and his little-brotherly shit.

The cannula becomes a permanent fixture for Sam within the next two days as he gets more and more air hungry. And Dean wonders why this problem is striking Sam now, because even though Sam's lungs have a freaking cancer in them, before this, he had only gotten breathless when he walked too much or exerted himself. He was never this starved for air before. And Dean is mulling that over, when he remembers Dr Greene's words. He remembers that Sam's been going into sepsis. It's not just the kidney infection anymore.

Dr Greene had explained how Sam's lungs would be the first to give out, and then his kidneys. The process isn't all that long either.

Dean religiously switches Sam to the BiPAP at night, gets the cylinders filled, and tries to joke about it all. "You look like that chick from The Fault in Our Stars movie," he says, as he adjusts the nasal cannula for his brother.

Sam smiles and greedily draws in some oxygen. Dean ticks off Sam's lungs from the list of functional organs (and his lungs had been screwed up anyway and Sam survived four months with it, so fuck if he can't go on a bit longer until Cas gets his grace). Sam tells Dean, though, that no matter what happens, he doesn't want to go back to the hospital. Even if Castiel is getting some of his grace back in just a fortnight.

Every night, Dean prays to an unknown entity for Sam to last another few days.

It's the third day since Sam's home, when Dean's heading towards Sam's room with soup, that he hears Sam's conversation with Castiel.

"He will be okay," Castiel says in reply to Sam's question. "You must rest. Your fever is high. Dean will be here with the soup, and—"

"Caass…" Sam says, and takes a breath. "T-Tell… me. P-P—"

Castiel doesn't let Sam talk further. "He's not had panic attacks," he says, almost as if he knows that it's the first thing that Sam's worried about. "He drinks more than he used to, but you know, Sam, that's how he is, and I can't stop him. I do try to help him. I really do." Cas sounds upset, as if he believes that he's not doing enough. And Dean disagrees.

"I knnooww… I… kn-knoww, Casss," Sam slurs. "N-'n you ta…ke c-care, y-yeah? Youuuur… wr-wrissts…"

"I'll be fine," Castiel mumbles, and Dean knows that he's lying too.

"Dean…" Sam's voice was gentle, grounding. Dean took a deep, shaky breath, fingers brushing against the leather on the seat. Sam squeezed Dean's ankle. "Hey, man, relax, yeah? You're going to be all right."

Dean nodded, and covered his eyes with a hand.
Eleven days before full moon, Sam voluntarily wants to go out of the bunker and wheel about for a while. Dean agrees, because he's afraid that Sam's getting depressed (and he probably is) and Dean wants to help and he can at least take Sam out for some fresh air.

Sam gets into fresh clothes and Dean helps settle him on the wheelchair before handing him his shoes. Sam pulls them on one-by-one, and he looks pale and tired, but also pleased at getting a chance to go out for a bit. His hands shake as he tries to hold on to the laces but his fingers keep slipping and letting go of them.

Sam has so many problems, it's difficult for Dean to remember which one is acting up, so he quietly goes forward and kneels next to Sam's wheelchair.

"No," Sam says weakly, hands trying to push at the wheels so he can move away.

"Sammy," Dean says gently, picking up the laces and looking at his brother. "It's okay. I've done it before, remember?"

It takes a couple of minutes, but Sam finally nods. He watches Dean start to knot the laces, before lowering his face to bury it in Dean's shoulder, not looking up even once as Dean finishes tying his shoelaces. And once Dean is done, he doesn't push Sam away, or get up. He places a hand on the back of Sam's neck, and continues to kneel silently. His chest feels heavy and he looks at Castiel helplessly as he brings up his other hand to put it on the back of Sam's head.

"Sammy?"

Sam nods into Dean's shoulder, looks up, and smiles. And it's not tired or faint. It's a big, honest-to-god, all-dimples, complete Sammy smile. Dean chuckles back at him. "You wanna leave sometime today, or—"

"Let's go, jerk," Sam says mildly as he bats Dean's hand away and starts to wheel himself out into the hallway.

0

"Dean?"

The rumbling of the car died suddenly, as tires squealed, and the car came to an abrupt halt. Dean lurched forward, sliding on the leather and barely holding on, as his nails scraped against the seat. He was covered in dried blood, his lower body caked in it. He took another breath, trying to pull in air, but his chest was hurting.

"Oh no… oh no…"

The door behind Dean's head opened with a creek and gentle hands were on his face.

"Dean… Dean…"

Dean wasn't sure who was holding his face and sobbing out his name like that. He thought it was Cas, but he wasn't able to be sure. His brain was numbing with the rest of his body.

Pins and needles… and no more pain.

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Dean decides to drive Sam to a diner two hours away from the bunker. He and Sam had been there
when Sam was thirteen, and Sam had loved their salads and shakes. He'd frequented the place for as long as they'd stayed in the area, and Dean had accompanied him because the cherry pies were to die for, too. And for months after, Sam had craved the salads but they'd never been able to go back. Even after settling at the bunker, the two-hour drive one-way had seemed like too much.

But it's different now. They're nine days away from full moon and Dean is still praying. And Sam is having one of his better days. His fever is down and he hasn't hacked his lungs up or been delirious, so Dean decides to take his brother out for a treat.

Sam's appetite has reduced considerably, but Dean hopes one of those salads will make him feel better. He knows that he technically shouldn't be exposing Sam to the public — probably shouldn't let Sam have raw vegetables either — but Sam is down most of the time now, and Dean wants to cheer him up.

Sam's lungs are getting shittier and he has horrible flank pain and several other problems from the kidney infection that's refusing to leave, and is slowly poisoning his body instead. The strong antibiotics make Sam's stomach weak. However, Dean hopes to pull this trip off without accident. So he adjusts Sam's cannula, assures him he has another cylinder filled and ready and loaded in the Impala, and he waits for Sam to change so they can leave.

Castiel is coming along too, of course, and he stands outside Sam's room with Dean, who glances at him, leans over, and kisses his lips. Castiel kisses him back, one hand cupping Dean's cheek, and running to his chin as they break apart. Dean can see the bruises on Cas's face, from hitting him the other day, and he feels guilty.

He takes Castiel's hands and then holds his wrists, moving his thumbs over the healing wounds. He doesn't know how to tell Castiel that he's there for him, or how much Cas means to him, or the fact that he can understand what Castiel feels. But he reassures Cas silently, in his own way. Because in ten days, it's not just Sam who's getting back hope. And Dean knows that the closer the destination is, the harder it is to wait and the easier it is to lose or fail. He knows Castiel is afraid of failing and he doesn't want Cas thinking that.

Once Sam is ready, they go to the diner, and all three of them enjoy their food, despite the disturbing thoughts in their head. Sam even keeps his food down and laughs some, and Castiel holds Dean's hand beneath the table while they wait for their orders. The day is good. Sam's health forgives him for a few hours and lets him be happy. Dean thinks of how much better it's all going to get in just ten days, and he tries to believe that it won't go wrong this time.

"Dean, Dean please hold on."

Dean could hear... someone... pleading. He didn't know. Was it Sam?

His breaths hurt. He wasn't sure how to... how to... Cas? Sam? Who was that...?

There was a crackle, and something tickled his nose and mouth. Dean could barely feel it through the numbness, but he tried to breathe. He wasn't sure what this was, but Dean wanted to breathe and he couldn't.

"Here. Here."

What the fuck was happening? Dean couldn't breathe... couldn't breathe...

"Dean..." the familiar voice whispered, and two fingers touched Dean's forehead. Cas. Cas was
healing him. Of course… Cas was an angel.

The fingers touched Dean's forehead again. And again. Where was Sam? What was Cas doing?

Dean was slipping into the beautiful sea of black again…

"No. No! Dean!"

Cas's voice.

_Cas, I love you, man._

Sam stops eating, stops tolerating food, and Dean has to shove a tube down his nose to get the hospital-prescribed nutrition in his brother. And he has to 'shove' and not 'insert gently' because at the time when it becomes absolutely necessary to start Sam on tube feedings, Sam is having one of his episodes where he can't remember who the fuck he or Dean are, and he is getting restless.

Dean doesn't want to do this monstrous task, but he also knows that if Sam doesn't eat, all their hope and all their waiting will be for nothing. So he snatches on some gloves, squirts lignocaine jelly on the NG tube and pushes it down Sam's nose, all the while asking his brother to swallow.

Sam's sporting a fever since the morning and is delirious and confused from the combined effect of the temperature and his brain mets. And boy, doesn't it just make it all that much better for Dean.

Dean removes Sam's nasal prongs, knowing he has limited time to get this task done, but the moment a small length of the thin tube has entered Sam's nose and gone down, he gags and struggles against the intrusion, feebly trying to beat his arms and legs.

Dean just continues to push the tube. "Swallow, Sammy, swallow it."

"Nggghhhh," Sam grunts in response, retching hard enough that his eyes tear up. Castiel continues to hold him down from the other side, grasping his arms tightly. Then as Sam moves his legs up, Dean holds his knee over Sam's thighs and bends sideways at an awkward angle to continue to push the tube down.

Sam yells, tries to bat Cas away, and kicks his legs up, but Dean shoves more of the tube.

"Swallow," he says, trying to sound calm.

Sam starts gagging. He retches and retches, enough for Dean to turn him on his side, even though he knows that Sam's stomach has nothing to give.

"Sammy," Dean soothes, placing a hand on Sam's back. "Calm down, man. You'll be fine." But Sam lets out a distressed, angry grunt, and retches some more without throwing up. Dean sighs and holds his brother like that, feeling more heaviness settle in his chest.

The moment Sam stops trying to puke up air, Dean turns him over, pushes the last of the tube in and goes for the empty syringe, listening with the stethoscope as he thrusts a puff of air into the tube opening. Then he secures the tube to Sam's nose and puts back the nasal prongs. Sam, who's already been breathless, gags once more and takes in a heaving breath.

When Dean and Cas let go of their hold on Sam, he reaches right up to pull out the tube but Dean is quicker, and he's holding Sam's hands away again. And then come the handcuffs, and by the time Dean is done, Sam's face is crumpling and he's gagging, mouth twisting in pain. Tears leak out of
his eyes and slide down his temples.

"Hey," says Dean, placing a hand on his brother's chest, but Sam's face wilts some more as he turns away. So Dean seats himself on the bed and holds on to his brother's trembling shoulder, fighting the tears that threaten to fill up his eyes.

"I need an ambulance!"

Black faded away, but Dean tried to recognise the frantic voice close to him.

It was so vague… Dean couldn't open his eyes. And when the panicky voice began to say something else, Dean recognised the owner. Castiel.

Someone patted Dean's shin from the other side. "We're almost there, yeah?"

This was Sam. Right. Sam and Cas… Sam and Cas…

Where were they?

"I wanna talk to you."

It's two days before the full moon. Sam's having another good day, and Dean has never been so hopeful. He knows now, that they really can win, and he is glad that this time, it's not like the hinky stuff they always end up doing — that no one's going to pay for any of this in any way. And damn, it's never been this straight for them.

Dean sits himself on Sam's bed. His brother is reclining and drowsy. He's able to breathe okay with the BiPAP at night and cannula through the day, and Dean's been giving him regular tube feedings. Sam's kidneys are holding their own despite the infection. His BP is quite low, though, and he sleeps a lot. But apart from that, this is definitely a good day.

Sam smiles fondly up at Dean's face, and says two words. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For…" Sam sighs. "I never… Dean, I know I let you down—"

"Shut up," Dean snaps. "We've been through this, okay?"

"Dean, let me talk."

"No," says Dean, shifting closer to Sam. He pauses, watching Sam's sunken eyes, which are fixed on him. "Sam," he says again, "I've seen you fight fucking cancer in the last few months. I've seen unimaginable shit happen to you and you always stood up and you always came for the next chemo and you fought. And you know what, we kill all the supernatural crap on this planet because we can and we know about it — and most of it we can control, but with the cancer; what you're doing, what you've been doing…” he swallows around the lump in his throat.

"You handled it better than me and Cas put together, man, and we weren't even ones who were sick. And I knew — I always knew that you were a tough son of a bitch, but…” You're so much stronger than I thought, and I'm sorry I expected less of you. I'm so fucking proud of you. Thank
you for sticking around just because I asked. I should have believed in you more than I did. I'm sorry. So sorry.

"...You're awesome," Dean manages to complete his sentence, at long last, and can barely get the words out anymore. Thank you, Sammy.

Sam snorts. "Of course I'm awesome, Dean," he mumbles, but his hand finds Dean's wrist and squeezes it as he shuts his eyes. "But I couldn't do it without someone watching my back." He squeezes Dean's wrist once more before drifting back to sleep.

"You're nearly there, now, Dean."

"Dean, hold on!"

Sam's kidneys get worse a day before the full moon. Dean doesn't notice this at first, but Sam doesn't pee through most of the day and he's not pissing much even when he does go to the bathroom that one time. That's when Dean realises that if they keep this going, Sam's kidneys are going to fail.

They don't have the equipment to handle this at the bunker, and Dean wants to rush Sam to the hospital, but Sam says it's not necessary. "It will be okay, Dean," he says tiredly as Dean sits next to Sam on his bed, worried out of his mind. "Kidneys don't just fail so easily."

And fuck, maybe they do fail easily sometimes, and what the hell does Sam know about this anyway?

"I'll be okay," Sam assures him, but Dean doesn't feel good about it. Sam shuts his eyes briefly. His BP is always dipping these days and Dean is doubly worried about that.

"Sam," he says, "I don't want to take chances with this. We're not doctors."

"I know," Sam says. "But I won't die on you like that, all right? Have some faith in me, man." And he gives a big, woobie smile to Dean, the dumbass that he is.

Dean moves a little on Sam's bed and lifts Sam's legs to put them on his lap, so they're elevated. Sam has pillows for that, but Dean needs this right now. He doesn't know why. He just needs it.

Sam opens his eyes. "Thanks," he whispers in relief.

Dean rubs the bottoms of Sam's feet. "Are you sure about this?" Because Dean isn't sure. He isn't sure at all. This could go wrong in so many ways, they shouldn't risk it. And Dean's big brother radar is going crazy right now.

Sam nods. "We're going to win."

Later that night, Dean's instincts are still prickling at him when he enters his room. He tries to ignore them, but he can't sleep. Castiel is there with him, in the room, and he watches silently as Dean downs beer and whiskey and develops a bad enough headache to throw any hope of catching some sleep out of the window. Cas is awake with him the whole time.

Dean checks on Sam, and Sam's alive and breathing, but Dean hates the feeling in his gut. But Sam
was mostly awake and functioning and he said no hospital, and there's less than twenty-four hours for Cas to get his grace back, although Dean really doesn't know what to do.

Finally, helpless, Dean crawls into bed near dawn, where Cas is rested against the headboard. And he buries his face into Cas's lap, letting two tears trickle out of his eyes.

"Dean, Dean, please…"

Someone was sobbing. Well, it sounded like that. Dean didn't know what was going on.

"It's going to be okay. The ambulance is coming. I'll help you, Dean, please…”

Dean realised, belatedly, that the sobs were issuing from him. His face was resting on a familiar shoulder and arms were holding him close. And Dean tried to breathe, he really did, but all that came out was another sob, like something ripping out of his chest.

And through all the commotion, through all the pain, Dean heard Sam too.

"You're almost there, Dean."

Sam's fever rises with the sun on the day that he is going to be saved. He is very visibly uncomfortable, letting out short, shallow pants of breaths, sweat pouring down his face even though that doesn't mean that his fever is breaking. Dean attaches Sam back on the BiPAP to help him breathe, and wipes him down with a washcloth before injecting anti-pyretics with Sam's drip. Sam is barely conscious at that point, and he doesn't really respond to Dean before drifting asleep. When Dean checks his BP, it's sixty over forty.

Dean elevates Sam's legs, wipes him down some more, and hopes for Sam to wake the fuck back up. Castiel is by Dean's side and when Sam's fever lessens an hour later, Dean relaxes for a moment, just for a moment, and shuts his eyes, the moment stretching to minutes as Dean falls asleep.

It's a vivid flurry of colours behind his eyelids. Dean is floating, watching different worlds. He doesn't know where he is, or what he is doing. That is, until there's a voice in his ear.

"Dean."

Dean smells lavender and baby powder. And he knows the voice. It's his mother.

A hand cups his cheek. You've been great, Mary says quietly, and Dean can't see her, but he knows she's there. A moment later, gentle lips press against Dean's temple. It's time, to let Sammy sleep, sweetheart. Say goodnight to your brother. And just like that, Dean can't smell the lavender anymore.

He opens his eyes abruptly, blinking away the last of the bizarre dream, his heart thumping fast as he looks at Sam lying on the bed before him. Sam is still sweating, his chest rising and falling rhythmically with the humming of the BiPAP, and Castiel is nowhere to be seen.

Dean sighs. It was a dream. A stupid, fucking dream. He leans forward and puts a hand on Sam's forehead when Sam coughs.
"Hey," Dean soothes him, laying a hand on Sam's chest. Sam coughs again.

"Sammy," Dean murmurs, as Sam coughs a few more times. Dean sighs. The coughing is starting to get bad again. Sam is going to need something for it.

Dean gets up and heads to the drawer where he keeps the meds. Sam lets out a heaving breath and breaks into a coughing fit. Dean opens the drawer, grabs a morphine ampoule and a syringe but when he gets back, he notices the fine red spray on Sam's BiPAP mask.

"CAS!" Dean takes two more ampoules from the drawer, along with the morphine, before rushing back to the bed.

He sits Sam up, just as his brother's eyes open slightly. Dean holds his shoulders, and Sam raises a trembling hand to signal that he wants his mask off. He coughs more, dots of red flying out of his mouth and coating his lips and chin.

"The BiPAP will help you," Dean tells Sam. "Keep it — k-keep it on." Sam coughs again and Dean reaches for the medicines. "I'll give you a little something for the cough and the bleeding. Try to relax, huh?" Dean breaks the tops off the ampoules with three little pops and begins loading syringes, one-by-one.

"Dean."

Castiel's quick footsteps make themselves known and Dean injects the ethamsylate and tranexamic acid. "He needs the hospital," Dean says urgently. He pushes in low-dose morphine next.

"Okay," Cas replies, without questioning. "Okay—"

"You start the car," Dean tells him, as Sam sags a little with the morphine. "I'll get Sam."

"Dean—"

"Just do it, Cas!"

Castiel leaves. Dean starts to collect Sam's blankets, but a hand on his wrist makes him stop. He turns to Sam, who's leaning against the headboard, eyes half-mast as the coughs taper off.

"Sam, we need to get you to the hospital," Dean tells him gently, trying to swallow around the tightness in his throat. He knows that Sam doesn't want to go back to there, but tonight Cas will get some of his grace back, and Sam can't die before that. He just can't.

Sam tugs at Dean and stops coughing at long last, his face pale and dribbling trails of sweat. He reaches his other hand to pull off the BiPAP mask, but Dean stops him.

"Sammy what is it? Keep the mask on, man."

Sam struggles with Dean's hold, trying to get the mask off, and Dean wonders for a moment if Sam's having one of his spells where he can't remember. However, Sam meets tired eyes with Dean, and Dean realises that he really just wants the mask off.

"Okay." Dean says, lifting a hand. The thing covers most of Sam's face, with an outlet for the NG tube. "Okay," Dean repeats, "but we're putting that back on in the next few seconds and scooting to the hospital, yeah? It's just a few more hours." He takes off the red-stained mask. "They'll help you for a while and Cas will heal you and—"
Sam interrupts Dean mid-sentence by folding forward and dropping his forehead on Dean's shoulder, turning his face to the crook of Dean's neck and taking shallow, panting gasps. The hand on Dean's wrist is still there, and Dean feels a feeble squeeze before Sam suddenly stops panting, and takes a heaving breath.

"Sammy?" The hairs on the back of Dean's neck prickle.

Sam doesn't respond, but he takes another laboured breath before suddenly going limp. Dean wraps an arm around him, waiting for another breath to come. "Feeling better? We'll get you back on the BiPAP in a moment, yeah?" he says, realising that Sam has stopped trembling. He rubs Sam's back.

There is no response.

"Sammy?"

Sam doesn't reply. He doesn't take another breath either.

"Sam?!" Dean calls, panicked, pulling his brother off him, and something churns in his stomach when Sam sags forward like a rag doll. That's when Dean notices that Sam's arms are glowing — like they did after each Trial. And Dean knows then, somehow… but no… no… this can't be…

"SAM!"

Dean presses a hand to Sam's carotid — please, please, please… but there's nothing… there's no… fuck.

Dean pushes Sam down on his back and straddles him, placing his palms on Sam's chest and starts compressions. The BiPAP is still humming loudly in the background as Dean finishes thirty compressions and grabs the mask to place it roughly to Sam's nose and mouth.

Sam's chest rises from the air pushed into his lungs but when Dean tests his carotid again, there's still nothing.

"Sam, Sammy, no, man," he begs as he starts another round of compressions, pausing to give Sam two breaths. He does more compressions, gives more breaths, and Dean doesn't get the pulse but he goes on, until there are racing footsteps down the hall.

"Dean, I was waiting in the car — Dean?!

Dean turns to Cas as he continues the compressions, "Cas, his h-heart…" he says, voice catching in his throat. "His heart st-stopped, I have t-to—"

Castiel comes forward and places the mask in time for two breaths before Dean starts compressing. He repeats the cycle again. And he does it again, and again and again, until there is a hand on Dean's shoulders.

"Dean…"

"No!"

"Dean, he's—"

"He's not dead!" Dean roars, and tears are streaming down his cheeks when Castiel cups his face with one hand and removes Dean's hands off Sam's chest with the other.

"H-He's not d-dead, Cas," Dean says, his voice barely audible. He collapses down to his haunches
and gives in to Castiel, who moves forward to wrap Dean in a hug.

Cas doesn't say anything. He takes a sniffing breath and Dean feels himself being held tighter. He whispers the same mantra under his breath, breathing in the scent of Cas, but unable to process any of it.

"No... no... he's not dead... please..."

Dean wants to push Cas away and run. He wants to punch something, wants to scream until his chest seizes up, but he curls himself against Castiel, trying to bury himself in and disappear, trying to wake himself up from this nightmare, sobbing.

At that moment, Dean just wants to die.

Dean's vision was shot to hell, and he had no idea what was going on. Someone was holding him — just like Cas had when Sam had... Sam had...

"S'm?"

Sam didn't reply to Dean. And of course... Dean should have realised that Sam wouldn't come back... no... what was happening?

Someone was sniffing heavily. Dean's cheeks were wet. A thick voice was begging Dean for... something. Dean didn't get what was going on. What was really going on?

Dean doesn't eat. The thought of food makes him feel sick; and he refuses to eat when Cas pleads him to. Of course, Cas doesn't eat either. He just watches Dean silently, follows him around, and when Dean snaps at him to leave him the fuck alone, obeys.

Later, when Dean has downed one of his many glasses of whiskey, Castiel comes around and sits next to him. "Dean... I might be able to resurrect Sam... with my grace."

"Good." Dean stands up.

"Dean—"

Dean ignores him, and goes and locks himself in his room. He looks around, takes a deep breath, and makes a decision. When Cas brings Sam back to life tonight, Dean is going to take the rest of Sam's illness for himself. He doesn't care whose wishes he goes against and who he upsets. He is going to do this, and no one will stop him this time.

~o~

"Dean."

Dean blinked. He wasn't in his car anymore. He was not with Cas. He wasn't being held or coddled, and the terrible sobbing sounds from before were gone. And all around him was black. Unending, soothing black.

When Dean blinked again, Sam stepped forward from the sea of black, hands in his pockets and one side of his mouth curved in a smile. "Hey."
Sam wasn't glowing or illuminated, and yet, Dean could see him clearly, despite all the blackness around. And Dean felt light. Weightless. He continued to look at Sam, drinking in Sam's regained musculature and long hair, and Dean wondered how long it had been since he'd seen Sam like this — like Sam — truly Sam: happy and carefree.

Dean finally found his voice. "Hey yourself, bitch."

Sam's smile vanished, and he looked down. "You're pissed at me."

And Dean wanted to say that yes, he was goddamned pissed — but not at Sam — just the way their lives were. However, he stopped himself. This was not the moment.

Dean took a deep breath. "So," he said, "what is this place? And if you say I'm 'almost there'…"

"Almost where?" Sam asked Dean, an eyebrow raised.

Dean sighed. "Oh, you kidding me? That wasn't you?"

Sam was still confused for a moment, but then his expression changed, and he shrugged. "I don't think we'll ever know."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Sam looked back up at Dean and locked gazes with him as he spread his arms wide, gesturing to the unending weightlessness around him. "You're here now, Dean. So if here is what 'there' was…"

Typical of Sam to be so confusing. Dean decided to stop thinking about this matter. There was no use asking Sam about it, and yeah… maybe he'd find out sometime, or maybe he'd never know. But the pressing matter wasn't that.

Dean took a deep breath. "So I'm dead. Jeez, I died because of that stupid ghost?"

Sam smiled and stretched an arm towards Dean. "You died because of a ghost and I died from cancer. It wasn't what either of us expected. You coming or not?"

"What about Cas?" Dean asked, remembering Castiel holding him just a while ago. That was definitely Cas, and God… he'd sounded so devastated. Dean felt sadness rise in him. "Cas is gonna be alone?"

"Not for long," Sam replied. "You know that. Soon as he gets his grace, he can pop in to see us."

"A month, Sam," Dean said quietly. "At least. Shit…"

"Hey…" Sam's hand was on Dean's shoulder. "You can't look out for everyone, Dean."

Dean licked his lips, refusing to meet eyes with his brother. "I know that," he said, "but if I couldn't help you, I should have at least helped Cas…"

He remembered Castiel again, lying in his room with his wrists slashed, and Dean had tried so hard after that, to remind Cas that he was not alone, but fuck, here Dean was, in some weird-ass world, having a chat with Sam, and Cas…

Dean remembered the pained sobs from before. "Cas is not okay, Sam," he said, blinking back the stinging in his eyes as he looked up at his little brother.

"But we'll look over him, yeah?" Sam replied.
"Is that even a thing?"

"You bet it is!"

Dean nodded. "Okay." He swallowed. "And Sammy…” he looked into his brother's eyes, "sorry."

"For what?” Sam asked him, eyes growing wide. "You did all you could, Dean, it's not—"

"I should have taken you to the hospital sooner," Dean whispered. "Shouldn't have taken you off the BiPAP. When your kidneys started being weird…"

"It's not your fault, Dean," Sam replied calmly.

"Easy for you to say," Dean replied.

Sam shook his head. "What you did for me… all those days…” he bit at his lip. "Thanks."

Dean nodded, still not convinced, but Sam's mouth curved wide in a smile again, and he couldn't help but smile back at his brother.

"Okay," Sam said, "now that we're done with that part of our talk…” He beckoned to Dean. "Come on. I've been waiting for you."

"Missed me already, huh?” Dean said, moving forward to join his brother. They started walking ahead, and though Dean couldn't see anything but Sam, he trusted his feet (and his brother) to take him to the right place.

"I wasn't missing you," Sam retorted with a huff.

"Oh, you're a big, fat liar, Sammy."

"You're a sentimental idiot."

"You're… sentimental. And a dork."

"…Jerky jerk."

"Bitchy bitch."

|| End of Part Four||

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so the ending is pretty much open to interpretation, but here are some of my thoughts. If you have any more questions after reading these, let me know via reviews or PM!

Moving on-

Firstly — what is Sam? Honestly? I don't know either. This was based off a dream, and I was Cas, so I really didn't know what exactly was going on. But I thought the vagueness would make it better, instead of mulling it over in my head and figuring it out. I trust you guys with your imagination and intelligence, and please do tell me what
you thought of what Sam was. Was he a ghost? A hallucination? A reaper? ;) I would also think that since Sam's been psychic and everything — and those powers don't just go away, maybe he was unconsciously harnessing something. Or maybe Dean was just missing him that much. Brotherly connection?

What killed Sam? It was a pulmonary embolism. There's actually nothing Dean could have done to prevent his death. Even the hospital could have done nothing, because it was really very sudden.

Sam dying. Now, I know some of you might not have wanted that, while others might have been okay with it. The reason I decided to bring this to his death is that cancer is a horrible, horrible disease. It seemed unfair to me to bring him back with a spell, or something else in just a moment, when in truth, people die of this every day after suffering for months and months, and there's no magical cure for it. Also, going in deeper, I troubled him enough and at this moment, bringing him back, only to fight some more, lose some more, really didn't make sense. You can counter this by saying that in this world of despair, Sam did have hope from their supernatural knowledge, and that in their bleak lives, this would have been a silver lining, but again, this is just the way I wanted to end the story.

Dean dying. Do you need a reason? ;) I was just… they've all been through too much. Plus, Dean would have either brought Sam back, or followed. It didn't seem like he'd have wanted to stay.

That brings me to Cas. Don't worry, I haven't forgotten him! That's what the epilogue is for. ;) Again, in the epilogue, you'll find that several things are left open to interpretation. I will also explain Castiel's situation, and what actually happened (briefly) on that night, from his PoV.

Where are Sam and Dean? I'm not quite sure if in the show canon they share a heaven or not because it was pretty ambiguous to me. They were together but they had different memories, and Dean had to look for Sam too. So that too is open for imagination. They could be going to find Heaven together, or maybe they're just enjoying a brief meet-up before going to their respective heavens. :) Let me know what you think again? :D
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue

One Month Later

"Hey. Winchester. Quit your dreamin' and clear that table there."

Castiel snapped out of his reverie and picked up the empty tray before heading to the table that the diner's owner, Simon, had pointed at. The waiter, Henry, passed Castiel a glare as he stood with a tray of desserts and watched while Cas cleared the plates away.

"Service here is ridiculous," complained the customer loudly — a suave man in a trim suit. "How hard can it be? Christ."

Henry glared at Castiel again when he straightened up. This probably meant no tips or whatever, Castiel couldn't get himself to care. Because it was a big day today, and his mind wasn't on anything else. He didn't know why he'd even come to work. Because today was the day — and his grace was going to be wholesome at midnight. The prospect of it filled him with happy anticipation.

He had mainly taken this job because despite getting his grace back, a few human traits remained; he got hungry and sleepy, and he still felt, although it was all dimmed and muted. He didn't think, though, that he'd ever go back to being unemotional again. The whole experience of being human had changed him — for the better or worse, he didn't know.

So Castiel had started working for money, and the fact that he didn't have an educational background didn't do him any favors. Being a busboy at the nearest diner was the best he could do for now. Funny how he knew more than most humans, but they still relied on printed paper with grades and scores to hire their best people.

He leaned against a table and glanced at his dirty apron, and then at the wall clock. It was seven in the evening, a long time until midnight. Castiel took a deep breath and began to undo his apron.

"Hey, Winchester!" came Simon's grating reprimand again, but Castiel continued to untie his apron. He walked over to a very confused Simon and handed it over.

"I quit."

"What?!"

"I don't need this job anymore," Castiel provided. "Good luck with the future."

Simon frowned. "You win the lottery or somethin'?"

"You can say that." Castiel sighed. "I need to leave. Thank you. For the job."

"Yeah, no problem, man. Here, wait, let me give you your wages for the week." He retreated into the kitchen then came back with a few dollar bills and handed them to Castiel. "See ya, man."
"Thanks," Castiel said, pulling out his wallet and placing the bills carefully inside. Simon squinted at one of the two pictures inside.

"That your boyfriend?"

Castiel looked down, to see that he was pointing at Dean's picture. "Yes." He smiled, remembering a day that had been good and fun — the one at the marriage counsellor's. "He was my manfriend. We were married once."

If Simon thought there was something strange about the word, 'manfriend', he didn't voice his opinion, although his eyebrow did go up for a couple of moments. Instead, he pointed at Sam. "And him?"

"He was a good friend and one of the bravest men I knew. He saved the world," Castiel replied, and barely registered the confusion on Simon's face as he left.

~o~

The Impala shone in the moonlight as Castiel headed towards it. He had been very careful to maintain it — he cleaned it regularly and drove it to work once in a while, keeping checks on the gas and the sounds from the engine. The car had been a huge part of Dean himself, and Castiel couldn't ignore it. He also knew that Dean would like it taken care of.

He ran a hand over the hood before opening the driver's door and settling in. He took a whiff of the leather and shut his eyes. He had survived like this, with the Impala and just the ghosts of Sam and Dean's memories for a whole month, and he had no idea how he had done it. All he knew was that every time he'd felt like giving up, he looked at the scars on his wrists and remembered Dean pressing kisses against them in the dead of the night, reminding him that he was loved, coaxing him to keep going.

Dean never actually said any of that, but Castiel knew. And he couldn't let Dean down. He knew Dean wouldn't want him to die, so Cas dragged on, every day feeling like it should have been his last, but he went on for thirty such days. And it had been extremely difficult. Castiel now respected humans even more than he already had.

He placed his hands on the steering wheel. One of the reasons he hadn't enjoyed driving the Impala after… after that day… was that he couldn't bear to relive it. That night, Castiel had gone to the graveyard to get his grace back, and it had been rather unwise of him to do so without taking Dean with him, he realised. After Sam had died just that morning, Dean had not been all right and Castiel should have taken care of him. Instead, he'd left Sam in the cold, icy morgue, let Dean wander off to the bar, and Castiel, had gone to get back his grace. It had been extremely selfish of him.

He should have known that Dean would try that spell to switch illnesses. They'd just fought about it a few days ago, after all.

Later on, Castiel had rushed to the haunted house, only to find Dean in miserable condition, talking to a non-existent Sam and muttering about angels. Castiel, after loading Dean into the Impala, had rushed him to the hospital, all along hearing Dean talk to what he seemed to think was Sam. When Dean had started hyperventilating shortly afterwards, Castiel had stopped the car and went to his side, noting that Dean's pulse was too feeble and that he was too cold. Knowing that Dean needed help as soon as possible, Castiel had called the hospital.

"Dean, Dean, please..."
Castiel swallowed around the tightness in his throat as he held Dean in his arms, trying to get him to hold on. Dean leaned his too-cold forehead against Cas's cheek. "S-Saamm..." his hoarse voice choked on the last word, and Castiel felt something wet slip into his fingers that were cupping Dean's cheek.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered, rocking Dean, shocked at the tears wetting his palms. "Dean, please, it's all right, it's all right." He didn't know what to say — how to be any more comforting — just that he couldn't take this anymore. Dean shuddered against his grip and Castiel held him tighter.

"The ambulance is coming," he said. "I'll help you, Dean, please..." He needed something... anything to keep Dean here, and he had no idea what to do while waiting for the ambulance. Sam would have known some first-aid. He'd have gone to the trunk of the Impala and promptly pulled out medical supplies, or done something, but even after so many years, Cas didn't know... he didn't know...

The distant sound of ambulance sirens rang in his sensitive ears, and he knew they were coming, but they were too far, and God ...

He pushed Dean's face to his shoulder and held him. Dean was still shaking, whether from cold or from the sobs, Castiel didn't know, but his heart was in pieces already, and he didn't want to find out. His vision blurred, turning watery, and Castiel was amazed at this as he blinked it back. His chest seemed to constrict. He sniffed.

Dean's fingers weakly held Castiel's shirt. The sirens grew louder, and Castiel laid Dean on the ground, placing his head on his lap as he cradled Dean's face. He looked grey, torrents of cold sweat running down, and Castiel lowered his forehead to rest against Dean's. "Stay with me," he whispered. "Please."

He sniffled again, droplets of tears falling on Dean's face as he put a hand on Dean's chest, over his heartbeat. He caught Dean's other hand and pressed it against his cheek, feeling the clamminess of his palm as he whispered again and again, "Please, Dean. Please. Please. Please."

The sirens were louder and Dean was fading. And Castiel knew — he just knew now, but he continued to plead, to beg, until...

"Dean."

The last beat gave away against Castiel's fingers. And Dean took a shuddering breath, but Castiel kept his palm where it was. Dean's heart, however, didn't beat again, even though the ambulance came a minute later.

And they tried. They tried to shock Dean back to life and they did CPR, just as Dean had tried it on Sam earlier that day, but all Castiel remembered was how, at the end of it all, he had seen Dr Greene at the ER looking at Dean's dead form, shock breaking her intelligent features, and how the doctors had declared Dean's death as though it was nothing to them — he was just another perishable item past its expiry date.

"Time of death..."

Castiel's forehead was rested against the steering wheel as he tore himself away from the memory. He remembered how much he had hoped — in fact there had been nothing but that for four, very long months, but nothing came of it — but he still hoped, as though the last time had not been a mistake at all. And this — this very thing had to be the best and worst part of being human.
He had checked back at the haunted house and found three of his brothers there, dead. He couldn't figure out how Dean had fought them in his condition, but Dean could be incredible sometimes. And he had seemed to think that he had fought the angels with Sam, when there had been no trace of Sam. Castiel had just decided to accept it, though. Sam and Dean did have an extraordinary bond, which he couldn't even begin to comprehend.

Castiel glanced at the keys in his hand, realising it was time to get back to the bunker. He needed to prepare for tonight's spell. Warmth spread in his chest as he thought of it. There was finally some resolution to going on for all these days alone — truly alone. Kevin and Charlie had come over, of course, but they weren't the same as Sam and Dean. Nothing had felt right. But now, something was going to change.

Everything was going to change.

~o~

The graveyard was quiet when Castiel left it, every cell in his body vibrating with his restored grace. He felt powerful and new, the sadness, despair dragged down and rubbed away by his essence, which fluttered inside him like a thousand butterflies. He felt his majestic wings at his back, whole and unbroken due to the fact that his grace had been stolen before Metatron cast the rest of the angels away, making it so that he hadn't fallen, and that Heaven wasn't locked for him.

Castiel was so relieved. He was as good as new.

He took a deep breath in the night air, raising his nose to let the cool, comforting peace inside. He looked at the Impala. He didn't need it, as he could get around without transport now, but it had to go back where it belonged: his — their home.

He sat in the car again and stroked the steering wheel, and then the leather on the passenger seat. He shut his eyes, letting his fingers feel the familiarity of it and he took in all of it, everything about Dean that was this car. Dean, the one constant in his life ever since Castiel had fought his way to Hell.

When he opened his eyes, it was still quiet, but Castiel smiled. "I'll see you shortly," he whispered into thin air before turning the ignition back on and starting to drive back to his destination.

His home, and his family.

The End
Many thanks to my wonderful betas, BohemianMoose, and quickreaver, for their help and support, SPNxBookworm for her constant cheerleading, and you guys, for constantly sending input and building my confidence!

This is the longest, most intensely emotional fic I've ever written and it drained me and tested my patience and everything, everything; not to mention, somewhere in between, I turned into a complete Sam!girl, from a Winchesters!girl. Not that I don't still love Dean very, very much, I just relate to Sam more. Like. A lot.

Thank you, guys, thank you so, so much for waiting, reading, reviewing, and putting up with my changing writing and the weird medical stuff and gahhh, thank you so much! I love all of you!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!