

**SUPERNATURAL 6.15(a)**

**"Imitating Life"**

by

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## SUPERNATURAL

### 6.15(a) Imitating Life

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#### TEASER

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EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT

No one, not even the horseman himself, could call Dean Winchester squeamish when it came to death. He'd been the guy's freaking *stand in* for almost twenty-four hours for god's sake, and even before that a hunter's life hadn't exactly sheltered him from the black beyond.

But still. That sheet on the dirty ground, vivid white under the glare of the streetlamps save for the garish red blotching where the neck must be, makes him shudder and his gaze skims right over it and away. He can feel Sam still rubbernecking behind him but Dean just - can't.

Because while the corpse under there's as much a stranger as all the others Dean's seen burnt or buried in his time, he's also *Cas*. Right down to the fucking blue of his eyes Dean had spent altogether too long staring into through that never-ending 'scene' back at the set. So it's damn hard *not* to imagine their angel under there, cold and lifeless and -

Dean wrenches his thoughts away. According to Balthazar, Cas is safe and sound and deep undercover back in the *real* world. And while Dean has no great love for Cas' old flame, or whatever, he can't deny Balls' spell, freaking annoying as it's been, *has* kept them safe from Raphael's attack. Since that checks out he can't think of any reason why the guy should have been lying about Cas. Which means there's no reason to think Castiel is anything but fine and he can't let what's happened to this poor Misha schmuck distract him when one of Raphael's fanatics is on the loose in a world he doesn't belong in any more than Sam and Dean do.

Okay, it's a shame this guy had to bite it like he did, caught in the crossfire of a war that doesn't even exist on this plane of reality. But Dean can't dwell. It's not like the actor means anything to him or anything. It's not like seeing a Cas that isn't Cas has been quietly freaking him out since they first stumbled onto the guy, reminding him of that other not-Cas but still-Cas from that aborted future. A future Dean spends most of his time, and a large part of his alcohol consumption, trying to forget. It's not like this fake-Cas' death is reminding Dean of those last, harsh, almost spiteful words he'd traded with the angel back home. Words that were nothing but empty noise anyway. More shared fear than anger when you got down to it - fear at what a damaged soul was gonna do to Sammy. No, it's not making him think about that. Or about what crappy last words ever those would be.

"Yeah, yeah, Raphael like the ninja turtle. He was calling someone name of Raphael up on that bowl thing..."

The homeless guy's babble to the patient, but disbelieving, cop is a double relief. It gives Dean distraction from his thoughts and a much-needed lead on Raphael's secret agent. The one who's been missing since morning when he made off with the super special keys to Heaven's vault of weapons that Balls, and by extension Cas, had entrusted him and Sam with the care of.

There's no point even *trying* for an FBI cover here, where their faces are recognisable all over this damn fake country with its fake money and fake America. So after a silent nod of agreement with Sam, the two of them wait until the cop's done and busy helping forensics load the body into the newly arrived ambulance and take a more mercenary approach. Hell, it's not like they don't have enough money here and Canadian stuff doesn't count anyway, right?

"Yeah, yeah, that's right!" the guy recounts as soon as they ask, eager to milk his brush with death a bit longer. He points a grubby, gloved hand at the body being lifted up, nails slick with grease where they poke out of holes in the wool that may or may not be intentional. "The scary man killed the attractive crying man, and then he started to pray."

Sam's nose scrunches up and he looks back at the trolley and its covered occupant. Like the folds of the sheet might somehow confirm this description of

the man that a couple of lifetimes ago in a galaxy too fucking far away was once called Jimmy Novak. It's a moniker he clearly hasn't considered before.

Dean doesn't bother pretending he's not fully aware of the 'pretty boy' nature of their angelic companion and gives a cursory glance only to where the guy's pointing, just to show he's following the story. He turns back quickly to hurry the witness on so he won't have to picture Castiel crying.

The guy hardly needs the encouragement.

"The strangest part is," he tells them. "After a while, I swear I heard this voice answering."

"What'd it say?" Sam asks, the urgency in his tone suggesting he's growing as uncomfortable as Dean in this dark, mouldy alley and is eager to get back on the hunt.

The guy looks down and shakes his head, one hand coming up to scratch at the few oily locks of hair sticking out of his dark woollen hat.

"It didn't make any sense," he mutters, and Dean guesses this is the part the cop must have had the most trouble with and the guy doesn't wanna be stung twice in one night.

Another time he might have stayed quiet and left Sam to coax the guy round. God knows he's been getting a real kick out of watching his brother pull the puppy-dog thing again these last few weeks. But not here and not tonight. He's sick of this world. Sick of having to *pretend* to be himself when who he is doesn't even mean anything. Sure, half the world might recognise him here, but it's a fiction they're seeing, a fucking *nobody*. At least in *his* world he's a *somebody*, however crappy a one it might seem sometimes. A somebody who does something worthwhile from time to time. So, as surprising as the revelation is, and nobody is as surprised as him about it, he's impatient to get back to being plain old Dean Winchester again.

Which means if this guy has any information at all that might help with that he's not gonna let him pussy foot around.

"Try us," he snaps, tacking a smile on the end to at least make it *seem* like he's being friendly.

The guy looks up and licks his lips, uncertain. Dean stares him down. Hard enough to catch the wet gleams of what must have been the evening binge in the other's scraggly beard.

"Well, um," the tramp starts, apparently finding enough conviction in Dean to risk going on. He takes a breath then continues slowly and carefully. Reciting. "The voice said for Virgil to return to the place where he crossed over at the time of the crossing. And that Raphael would reach through the window and take him and the key home."

Dean nods, glances at Sam and sees the same relief mingled with despair in his brother's gaze. It's what they needed - proof it was Raphael's lackey who'd been here tonight and that the angel has a way back home. But it's also nowhere near enough. Where had Virgil crossed over? And when is Raphael expecting him back there?

It's a second before Dean realises the guy's still looking at them, hopeful and wide-eyed.

"Oh, right." Incomplete as the information is, Dean can't deny it's been helpful, so he pulls some coloured notes from his pocket. They're blue and red, which notches up his impatience that much more. Money should be *green* damn it, not an advertisement for gay pride!

After a moment of fumbling he hands over the red one with a short 'thanks.'

The guy takes it with a look of surprise before hurrying away. Which makes Dean think he probably screwed up there, but whatever, they've got more important things to worry about. As Sam steps forward to remind him.

"Dean," he starts anxiously. "If Virgil gets back with that key, Cas is dead and our world is toast!"

Dean can't help getting stuck on the 'Cas is dead' part of that, eyes flicking back to the already dead Cas-but-not-Cas behind them. Like he needs any more reminders of how he'd feel if the real Cas ended up like that.

"Well, we stop him," he tells Sam. Because there's really no other option.

Sam takes a breath and nods back but he still looks worried and Dean's surprised by a flash of satisfaction at having his kid brother looking up to him again. He's just about to reassure Sam that a wingless angel can't be all that much trouble, right? When a shout across the alley distracts them.

"Whoa! What's going on? What the hell are you doing?!"

The voice is loud, abrasive and familiar and as Dean looks for the source he's almost unsurprised to see *Gabriel* hurrying round the ambulance and forcibly stopping the medics from loading Misha's body inside. There's so much crazy going round already a little more is nothing to get excited about.

"What the -?" he starts but Sam cuts him off with a shake of his head.

"It's not," he says, anticipating Dean's confusion.

Dean lifts a hand to express his ongoing disgust at the situation.

"Fucking actor. Of course," he mutters.

"His name's Richard something, I think," Sam adds. Dean could care less, but he knows how his brother likes to show off about research - and while Dean was napping the other night he'd done a *lot* of research into this Supernatural TV thing. "Junior."

"*Junior?*" Dean repeats, grimacing. "Oh come on. Unless you're a jazz legend or royalty, you don't get to name your kid 'Junior.' Pretentious bastards."

Now he's looking closer he can see that, beyond the face, the guy bares little relation to Gabriel. For one thing he's sporting a beard, neatly trimmed, across his upper lip and jaw, styled so it's thicker round the edges in a way that's probably meant to look artistic and *not* douchey, like Dean's inclined to think. For another, his clothes are *classy* for god's sake. The black jacket is tailored and the shirt beneath looks like silk. Then there's the dress pants and expensive looking rings artfully positioned on both hands, along with the ball-bearing chain glinting around his neck. Another look-alike irrelevant to their interests.

They really should get going and work on figuring a way to track down Virgil. Only the new guy is freaking out, badly, and while it may be voyeuristic, that kind of display is undeniably compelling.

Not content with stopping the forensic team from getting Misha into the ambulance, he's now trying to get them away from the trolley.

"Sir, please," one of the team tries, laying what's obviously intended as a soothing hand on the maybe-Richard guy's arm.

The guy pushes her away, roughly, and moves closer to the trolley.

"Get off me!" he snaps. "They're saying you got Misha Collins under there, that some... religious freak... cut him up as part of a ritual or something, but there's no way. No damn way!"

"Sir!" another of the team tries, but it's too late, the guy's already pulling the sheet back and Dean has to swallow down bile. Has to keep telling himself it's not Cas who's laying there, white as the sheet they've pulled off him, head lolling towards them so he and Sam have a perfect view of the crusted red flap of skin where Virgil cut him.

At least someone had the decency to close the guy's eyes.

Richard seems floored by the sight, turning rigid with his hand still gripping the corner of the sheet, eyes wide and fixed on the body.

"Sir, you have to move," says the first medic, coming round behind the frozen actor and gently resting her hands on his shoulders.

She tugs at him and he shifts a little, more out of shock than anything.

"No..." he breathes, shaking his head, absolutely devastated. Dean wishes he had the strength to look away. It was so much easier not to give a damn about this fake Cas when there was nobody around who cared enough to grieve. "No. This can't... This kind of crap doesn't happen. Not here."

"Happens all too often, pal, I'm sorry," says one of the other guys, moving to replace the sheet.

As soon as his hand touches the fabric Richard kind of snaps, breaking away from the gentle woman and slapping the other man away.

"Get away, don't you touch him!" he yells, leaning forward grip Misha's shoulders and glaring at the group. "Just back the hell off would you! He's my..." He trails off, the wildness in his eyes softening. "He's my... co-star," he mutters, looking down. His gaze travels over Misha and everyone holds off in a silence that's part embarrassment, part respect. An acknowledgement of what is, for whatever reason, a clearly difficult and intensely emotional time for the guy.

After a bit, Richard lifts a hand and runs his fingers down Misha's cheek, drawing the dead man's face towards him. His fingers brush lower, stopping at the cruel rip long the guy's neck, and Richard closes his eyes.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Dean whispers, knocking Sam's shoulder with his own and turning them both round so they can head to the end of the alley and out the other side. The last thing he needs is to see a guy crying real tears over a Castiel that isn't.

That's when Misha sits up with a gasp, crying loudly into Richard's waiting arms and repeating 'oh god oh god oh god!' over and over.



## ACT I

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### INT. VANCOUVER GENERAL HOSPITAL - LATE NIGHT

"Here you go."

The look Misha gives Sam as the hunter holds out the crappy plastic cup of tepid brown water the hospital calls coffee is so pathetically grateful it hurts. Much like the weak 'thanks' he gives when he draws his hand out of the coarse blanket wrapped round his shoulders to take it and the wobbly smile that's gone as soon as it appears.

"It's, ah, it's really nice of you guys to wait with me," the shaken actor mutters between sips, Adam's apple bobbing with each swallow and making the cheap, fake skin-coloured Band-Aid over the cut there crease and stretch. The scratch is superficial enough to render the covering unnecessary, to be honest, but the paramedics seemed to feel a need to give the guy *something* after their 'mistake.'

After a pause Misha adds, "you don't have to..." Although the strained look in his eyes says otherwise.

It kinda shocks Sam, actually, the level of surprise at their presence and how sure Misha is that he and Dean are gonna leave him. The three of them have been working on the same show for a couple of years now, so says IMDB - you'd think they'd have formed *some* kind of friendship in that time. Enough that Jared and Jensen would *care* if the guy they worked with nigh on every day almost died.

Oh no wait, he's forgetting - he and 'Jensen' don't talk, as everyone can't help pointing out, so it's a fair bet, if they can't even share a few words offscreen with each other, that the two douchebags he and Dean are being forced to impersonate don't even try for a civil relationship with Misha. Man, showbiz sucks.

"Nah, man," Dean assures, patting Misha's back, although his gaze remains fixed on the window in the small waiting room door where Richard - or whoever - is just visible talking to a cop in the corridor outside. "It's the least we can do. I mean, you're our co-star, right?"

The way Misha's eyes light up at this throw away line makes Sam want to snatch the 'coffee' right back from him, get them all the hell out of this tiny, drab room and just spend time with the guy, go out drinking and grab a meal or whatever. Because, hell, he didn't *almost* die, he fucking *had* died, and whatever reality you hail from you shouldn't be alone after something like that.

But they can't stay. Sam knows that. The doctors might be baffled enough by the miracle to write it off as misdiagnosis but he and Dean know better. Something supernatural happened in that alley. And in a world otherwise devoid of magic that's significant, that needs investigating, especially if it might help them get home and stop Raphael getting that key.

"Co-star," Misha repeats, still smiling. "Cool. I guess I've been misjudging you guys. I figured, since Cas is just a Recurring and all, you didn't really think of me that way."

Something about this breaks Dean from his vigil and he frowns.

"Cas is a what?" he asks, looking down at Misha's hunched form on the plastic chair he'd been guided to after being pronounced perfectly healthy.

Misha tilts his head back, anxious lines cutting into his forehead as he meets Dean's stare.

"Um... a Recurring. Right?" He shrugs. "I mean, obviously he's not one of the Leads. The show's about the Winchesters, everyone knows that. You don't have to worry about the star billing this season. That's just a token thing. Something to keep the fans happy, you know? Castiel's barely even a supporting character when you get down to it. Totally expendable."

"That's not true!" Dean responds. So sharply Sam can't help raising his eyebrows because whoa, where did *that* come from? Catching the look, and a similar blink of surprise from Misha, Dean coughs to try and cover his outburst. Badly, Sam thinks. He continues slightly calmer. "I mean, he's not expendable. Him and Sam and..." Sam winces as Dean remembers at the last minute not to say 'me.' "Dean, they're a team, yeah?" He lifts a finger, lips curving with that infuriating smugness he gets when he thinks he's just hit on something oh-so-smart but that's inevitably not. "Team Free Will."

Misha nods, turning to hum a thoughtful, satisfied laugh around his next mouthful of coffee, while Sam catches his brother's eye from the other side of the chair. If the way Dean dodges the gaze is anything to go by, he got the 'do we need to talk about this?' message loud and clear, and the answer is a resounding 'yes.'

Sam's just opening his mouth to try and tackle the issue here and now - how handy that there's a TV show all about them to use as a disguise - when Dean's gaze moves past him to the door. Dean tenses and Sam turns his head.

The cop outside is leaving, while the mysterious Richard guy heads in the opposite direction. It's the perfect time to confront him.

Sam turns back and plasters on a wide smile.

"Anyway, um, Misha," he starts. "You seem pretty settled here, and, ah, Jensen and I, we *have* got things we need to get back to so..."

The dulling of Misha's eyes makes Sam feel like a real jackass, but it can't be helped.

"Right," Dean adds, playing along. "So, we'll catch you later, man."

He gives the guy another pat on the back and nods at Sam to open the door.

Sam does so, but as he steps outside, holding the door open for Dean to follow, he finds Dean pulled back, Misha's hand tugging at his sleeve.

"Hey, Jen?" Misha's voice is quiet, gaze drifting shyly away even as he looks up. Sam and Dean both startle at the nickname. They weren't aware anyone had one for Jensen, least of all Misha. They've been pretty much ignoring the guy since they arrived, with no indicator from him this was anything out of the ordinary, so the intimacy of the endearment seems pretty out of place. "Um, would you mind...? Do you think you could stay, until my cab shows up?" It's clear the guy hates himself for asking, but the way his fingers shake around Dean's jacket makes it equally clear he's too terrified not to try. Reaching out has shifted his blanket back enough to expose his patterned blue woollen jacket and Tee, and, seeing the blood stains still soaked into the fabric, Sam thinks that after what he's been through the guy has every right to be spooked. "I just... I don't want to be alone..."

A quick check down the corridor shows their quarry reaching a corner. He's still catchable, but they can't waste any more time.

Sam looks to Dean for guidance and finds his brother conflicted. Another surprise. Dean's hardly uncaring, but he doesn't usually have time for clinging victims. As much because he doesn't trust himself to be of any help to them as anything. Plus, he'd been pissed as hell about Misha's very existence just the other day.

But then, that was before the guy *died*, of course, and it's not like Sam hadn't noticed how antsy his brother had been at the crime scene. Then there's the extra element of crazy. Because if they're to keep up the pretence of being Jensen and Jared - and the risk of being arrested or committed if they don't pretty much dictates that they *should* - they can't do anything to arouse suspicion. If leaving Misha alone risks doing just that...

"Ah... yeah, sure," Dean decides after a second. "I'll catch you later, *Jared*." He tilts his head, eyebrows lifting. It just about fits as a goodbye gesture, but it's really a signal for Sam to *go now, before he gets away!*

Taking the hint, Sam gives a final smile and nod, closes the door and marches down the corridor after the retreating figure.

He follows the guy round the corner, longer legs soon closing the distance between them. He considers holding off approaching until they're outside, but decides that, since whoever - or whatever - he's chasing has shown no sign of being dangerous so far, a confrontation in a public setting like this might be more to his advantage than a one-on-one in the dark.

"Hey, wait! Um... Richard...?" he calls.

The guy stops and turns round, initially cautious expression soon fading as he recognises who's calling for him.

"Jared, hey," he greets with a tired smile, scratching through the bristles under his ear as he waits for Sam to catch him up. It's a shock to hear him because now the words aren't strained with anger and fear they really are all Gabriel, every lilt and infliction exactly as Sam remembers. Curious, because you can't say the same for Misha. He couldn't sound less like Castiel if he tried.

It might not mean anything. But then again...

"Hey," Sam nods back.

"Crazy about Misha, huh? Can you believe the doctors making a mistake about him being dead like that?"

Sam hesitates. This guy doesn't *seem* anything but as clueless as every other joe they've met here, and he's not getting any danger vibes - no drops in temperature, no prickle under his skin that he's learnt to associate with near-by demons that he assumes is a lingering effect of his blood addiction. But there's something about the way 'Richard' is pressing the point of Misha's survival being natural that feels tricky. You can't con a conman and all that.

With that in mind, Sam tries being blunt.

"No. I don't," he says, crowding the smaller man back against the wall. "Doctors make mistakes as much as the rest of us, I know. But I hardly think *five* trained professionals would fail to correctly identify a corpse."

The guy shrugs, unfazed.

"Hey, I'm as outraged as you are, man," he answers, a sharp, self-righteous tang to the words. "What's health care coming to in this country, huh?"

"That's not what I mean, and you know it," Sam presses. The other man's brow crinkles, dragging an errant lock of brown hair down a little way. Sam checks there's no one too close and leans in, going for broke "I saw how Misha was back there as much as you, and he was stone cold. His throat was wide open, for god's sake, you don't just wake up from that."

"Jared," Richard's voice is wavering now, a shadow of his freak-out at the crime scene. "I don't -"

"You *did* something to him in that alley," Sam interrupts. "And I need to know what."

Richard's lips part wordlessly and he gapes for a moment. Sam stares him down though because, at this stage, there's no time to sugarcoat things.

"Jared," Richard tries again, approaching Sam slowly, like you might a rapid dog, one hand inching up to Sam's shoulder and hovering there. "Are you okay? Maybe you should, I don't know, lie down or something. Because, seriously, listen to what you're saying. You think I, what? Brought Misha back from the dead? That's *crazy*."

Sam looks hard at the guy's face but the expression's soft, hazelnut eyes warm and honest. He eases back a little, confrontational stance deflating. Maybe he and Dean have this all wrong. Maybe this guy had nothing to do with what happened. Hell, maybe he's right, maybe nothing happened at all and they're just chasing windmills, so desperate to find some vestige of their own world in this madness they're twisting the facts.

Richard's hand falls on Sam's shoulder then and pats gently. The contrast to the rough and callous way Gabriel had always treated Sam and his brother makes the gesture somewhat ludicrous.

"Look," the actor starts with a sympathetic, very un-Gabriel-like smile. A smile that's softened further by his beard and moustache. From this angle Sam can even see unruly tufts of hair at the edges where the guy's failed to trim properly and a healing cut where he must have nicked himself. A completely *human* show of wear and tear that's worlds away from Castiel's permanent, unchanging, 5 o'clock shadow. Maybe the crazy, half-formed idea Sam's been forming really is just that - crazy. "Tonight's been really traumatic, for all of us," Richard continues. "Why don't you -?"

"Traumatic," Sam repeats, wearily, shaking his head with a dry laugh and shifting away.

He feels very tired suddenly.

He *could* blame it on the situation. He and Dean have barely had time to breathe since Balthazar turned up in a flurry of words and movement and flung them here after all. But deep down Sam knows his discomfort is more than that. More than this place sitting heavy around them like an ill-fitting costume. It's his *skin* that doesn't seem to fit anymore.

And that's so much worse than when he'd found out about the demon blood in him. Because at least that had been something he could own, something he could try and control. Now he's understudy to a body that's been up and alive without him, centre stage for some seriously scary crap, stuff he never even had a *chance* to control, leaving him tainted worse than ever. Only it's *not* his skin that's damaged, it's *him*, his *soul*, and he can't ever try and make things right, can't try and clean this taint he feels and make his flesh and spirit a perfect fit again because that might be exactly what rips him apart beyond repair.

"This isn't traumatic," he breathes. The need to unburden himself - a need he's been keeping in check so long - just for a moment too overwhelming to resist. "This is nothing. Try stopping an apocalypse. Try sharing headspace with the fucking Devil! Try spending a hundred years in Hell, burning and bleeding and crying for help with no answer ever, nothing but the same two voices over and over, gloating... And all that while part of you is upstairs doing god knows what in your name... And then not even being able to talk about the stuff you remember when you get back because you can't let your brother worry... *That's* traumatic..."

He glances up and finds Richard outright frowning at him, warm eyes now caramel hard.

Sam closes his own with a long, drawn-out sigh.

"Sorry. Sorry," he mutters. "Forget that. You're right. It's been a long day, I should -"

"You're not talking about the show, are you?" Richard interrupts, sharp and to the point.

Sam blinks his eyes open again fast and gives a weak smile. Dean's gonna be pissed enough as it is that he hasn't got any concrete information on what happened to Misha - best not let himself get shipped off to some institution as well.

"No - I mean - I *am*. Of course I'm talking about the show, what else would I be talking about?" Sam gives a short laugh that rings painfully fake in his ears. "I'm just... dealing with this whole Misha thing really badly I guess... I was thinking, um... maybe if I channel it, into my, ah, *character* -"

"No," Richard cuts him off, staring at Sam hard, body incredibly still all of a sudden. Just like beside Misha in the alley, Sam thinks, only there's no shock in Richard's expression this time. No, this time his eyes are narrow. Crafty. "You talk about Hell... like you've really been there."

Sam stills too, half hoping... but not sure enough.

"Yeah well... that's my job," he shrugs. "Hell's not real though."

"Isn't it?"

The question's clipped and tense. Almost scared. Like the guy's got a hope of his own riding on it that he's not sure enough to test outright either.

"Is it?" Sam tries back.

Richard doesn't answer, just purses his lips, and Sam wonders if he's pushed the back and forth too far.

Then the smaller man's nostrils flare as he takes in a breath. What he says next, leaning forward with eyebrows raised in what's more of a plea than a question, is both refreshingly familiar and completely unexpected.

"*Sam?* Sam Winchester?"

Sam opens his mouth, aware his reply might very well be condemning him to a white room and a straight jacket, and possibly Richard to the same. But what the hell, times are getting more desperate by the second. He checks up and down the corridor and, satisfied it's clear enough, leans in like a co-conspirator and whispers -

"Yeah."

There's a beat, then the other man's face crumbles in what Sam thinks at first must be pain, only then the guy breathes out and kinda swoons and the hunter realises he's riding high on *relief*.



"Holy -" he gasps, cutting himself off like even the exclamation of the emotion is too much, one hand reaching up to Sam's shoulder to keep himself upright.

A deep breath later and he's got a hold of himself enough to step forward and pull Sam down into a tight, bone crushing hug that's so left field Sam doesn't have time to react beyond a short flail of his hands.

"Who'da thought I'd *ever* be happy to see your sorry ass again, huh, Sasquatch?" Sam hears spoken brokenly in his ear. "I never apologise for tricks, *never*, but man I am *sorry* about the Tuesdays! I never knew waking up to the same nightmare day after day could be so *excruciating!*"

He sounds so heartfelt Sam's already jerking a hand towards the guy's shoulders to offer some kind of comfort when it clicks what those words actually *mean*.

"Wait -" He grips the man's shoulders in both hands instead and pulls the guy off him. "*Gabriel?*" he hisses, staring deep into the other's eyes as he asks to be sure he won't miss any subtleties in the response.

He needn't have bothered. The smirk he gets back is unmistakable, beard or no. It's one that's featured in his nightmares time enough. One that was meat and drink to his anger for months on end, giving him the strength to track down the monster that killed his brother and force him to bring Dean back.

It's funny how completely your response to something can change, Sam thinks, as the anger that smirk used to provoke is replaced with a relief of his own. Relief, and a smidge of happiness. Happiness that has nothing to do with his and his brother's plight and everything to do with finding the archangel who'd sacrificed himself in the battle against Lucifer alive and well.

"The one and only," Gabriel nods back, still a little shaky, but rapidly regaining his familiar, cocksure composure.

A smile darts along Sam's lips in response.

"Then this is officially the twilight zone," he grins. "Because it is *fantastic* to see you."

Gabriel waves a hand.

"Oh stop it, I'm blushing!" he mocks.

"Seriously, though," Sam hurries on, ever aware how time is ticking away from them. They can get to explanations later, right now they need to focus on immediate concerns. "You're, you know, *you* here? You healed Misha?"

The archangel gives a short, strangely modest shrug.

"Sure," he admits, turning his head. Which seems oddly dismissive given the delight Sam remembers Gabriel taking in boasting about his talents. "I thought something weird must have happened there, cos, well... this is *Canada*. You don't get crazy shit like that round here. And, ah..." He drops his head and seems to become fascinated with the outline of his shoes. Sam's eyebrows start to knot at the change, a sinking feeling building in his stomach. Gabriel doesn't do *embarrassed*. Maybe he's screwed up after all? "He's a good guy, Misha. I didn't like to... to leave him that way..."

Gabriel's eyes flick up and he must see the doubt in Sam's expression because he grimaces.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," he snipes, with a sharpness that puts Sam back at ease. "I've been here almost a *year*, okay? A long, painful, *lonely* year. You stay in this dump that long and Stockholm Syndrome'll kick in for you too. There's no *magic* here, so there's really zero else to *do!*"

*A year?* That sounds... ominous. But first things first.

"No magic. That's exactly what we thought," Sam responds. "Trying a spell got Dean and I nowhere, and when Raphael sent -"

"Dean?" Gabriel interrupts.

"Yeah, we're both here."

The corner of Gabriel's mouth twitches.

"*No*," he drawls, another smirk blossoming. "You mean - you're saying that Jensen Ackles back there -" He waves a hand down the corridor, the silver on his

fingers glinting in the sterile hospital lights and reminding Sam that, unlike he and his brother, the archangel is fully entrenched in his doppelganger's persona. There's *something* that might be useful anyway. "- that's dashing Dean Winchester?"

"Yeah," Sam nods. "So -"

But Gabriel interrupts again.

"The Jensen Ackles back in the waiting room with Misha Collins?"

"Yeah," Sam repeats, anxious to move on. He barely manages a breath for his next word this time.

"So the two of them are in there, together, *alone*?"

"Yes," Sam answers, firmer this time. "But -"

"Just to clarify," Gabriel persists, and oh, Sam's starting to remember how he hated the guy now. "Dean Winchester, dead ringer for TV star Jensen Ackles, is back there, alone, with Misha Collins. The same Misha Collins Jensen's been fucking on and off for the last year and a half?"

"Y- what?"

There's a second where Sam's sure it's a prank. Him and Dean have been out of the wanna-be Trickster's reach for almost a year, so the guy says, he must be *dying* to pull something on one of them. Only then Gabriel chuckles and the pure *glee* in the sound is enough to assure Sam the archangel finds the truth far more entertaining. And Misha *had* been very eager for Jensen to wait with him in particular.

"Oh, wow," Gabriel exclaims, each syllable formed and spoken with relish. "This I gotta see."

With that he steps neatly away from the wall and Sam's looming stance, heading back the way they'd come.

Sam hurries after him, but excitement, or maybe something more, must be giving the smaller man an edge, because by the time the hunter catches up Gabriel is already at the waiting room door and watching through the window. He has his arms folded across his chest, drawing his black jacket close about him so he cuts something of a dark, foreboding figure amidst the hospital's pristine white surroundings. This isn't helped by the wide curve of his lips and joyous glint in his eyes, both of which combine to be positively wicked.

With a sense of trepidation, Sam moves up beside him.

"Oh, it is so much better than I thought," Gabriel informs, keeping his eyes on the window as Sam positions himself at the archangel's side.

When Sam's own gaze hits the glass he realises why the angel's so captivated immediately; Gabriel, the corridor and the steady traffic of doctors and nurses behind them blanked out by the image on the other side of the door.

He can see so easily how it must have happened.

Misha would have pulled Dean down into the seat next to his, and Dean would have let him because he'd promised to stay. Then, a combination of the guy's near-death experience and this whole, intimate history Misha and Jensen apparently have - one that Gabriel knows all about but it seems no one else sees fit to mention, which will be an interesting topic for later - would have had Misha reaching his other hand up to Dean's shoulder and pressing down. Natural enough. He'd have wanted to feel the closeness of someone he was familiar with, someone he'd felt safe with in the past, to counteract the violation he'd been subjected to by his attacker. Dean might have been weirded out by this at first, but Misha would have thanked him for staying at the same time perhaps, and since the guy had already proved a little clingy in the ambulance on the way down - hugging 'Richard' so tight the paramedics had to almost literally *pry* him away to check his vitals - Dean would have probably shrugged it off as an idiosyncrasy. He'd have added a mental note too, no doubt, that the guy was an *actor*. So, you know, being touchy-feely was to be expected.

Only then Misha would have leaned in, closing the gap between them and pressing their lips together before Dean even knew it was coming.

What Sam *can't* understand - can't, in point of fact, even *begin* to fathom - is why this *isn't over yet*. Why Dean hasn't pushed Misha away.

One of Dean's hands is crushed under Misha's on the actor's lap, but the hold is hardly inescapable. And besides, Dean's other arm is perfectly free to push the guy off. Only instead, Dean has left it to hover some way over Misha's back, like a divining rod seeking water. Dean's eyes are closed, mostly in surprise if the way his eyebrows are inching up his forehead is any indicator, and yet he seems to be perfectly content to let Misha hold him in position while he plunders Dean's mouth with his own.

Then - *what the hell?* - the hand on Dean's shoulder grips tighter and Sam's jaw drops as he watches his brother's waving hand settle, tentatively, on the back of Misha's neck. After a moment Dean's fingers start to twist through the loose strands of hair at the back of Misha's head in a cautious, almost tender, caress. Dean presses forward, lips parting, and there's no doubt whatsoever now that he's *kissing back*.

That's when Gabriel springs into action, a fraction of a second *after* Dean has made that conscious decision to commit himself.

The archangel opens the door with a flourish, a commanding hand still on the handle as he steps inside.

"Hey Jensen, I -" he starts, loudly, before cutting himself off. The look of surprise is perfect - just the right blend of parted lips and stiffened limbs. Even Sam, who's been partner to Gabriel's voyeurism, is almost taken in. Until he follows the angel's footsteps inside and notices the continuing gleam in Gabriel's eyes.

Dean and Misha are caught completely unawares and the reaction must give Gabriel what he'd wanted and then some, the two of them breaking apart so violently you'd think they'd been electrocuted.

Misha whips his head round with a gasp, but seems to calm at the sight of Gabriel. Dean, meanwhile, yanks his hands from Misha and startles, cursing, to his feet. So violently the plastic chair is left to totter for a few seconds, metal legs tapping out a discordant rhythm over the linoleum floor.

"Sorry," Gabriel continues, sounding anything but as his gaze settles on Dean. A smug curve breaks out at the corners of Gabriel's lips. "Am I interrupting?"

"No! God, no," Dean insists, shaking his head hard. His wide eyes flash, panic-stricken, to Sam and away. "We were just... I was..." He waves a hand in Misha's direction. "Guy almost died. I was -"

"Comforting," Misha interjects, eyes dropping to the floor. His shoulders slump with the word, leaving him despondent, but not surprised, at Dean's denial about what was really going on.

Interesting.

Grabbing the offered word like a lifeline, Dean nods vigorously.

"Comforting," he repeats. "Exactly. I was, you know... comforting."

"Right," Gabriel smirks. "If that's what they're calling it these days."

"Just leave it, Rich, okay?" Misha says, glancing up with - wow, so *that's* what Dean means when he tells Sam to break out the puppy eyes. "Not today."

Gabriel meets the gaze and Sam's surprised to see his smirk drop away, replaced by a look that's - no way - *kind*? The only time Sam remembers the archangel looking like that was right before he died.

Okay then, so Gabriel and this Misha guy have a *genuine* relationship here by the looks. That's... *weird*. Especially since 'Richard' isn't part of the show anymore, what with Gabriel being dead and all - they really *should* find out how the archangel dodged that. Gabriel must have plenty of non-Supernatural related friends in Richard's circle to bond with, ones it would be much easier to contact, so why is it *Misha* he's singled out?

"Sure," Gabriel nods, voice softening. Although there's a flash of something hard - and protective? - in his eyes when he glances back to Dean. "There wouldn't be much point anyway."

Misha sighs, heavy and resigned, and Sam senses this is not the first time he and 'Rich' have had this conversation.

"Um... what are, ah, what are you guys doing here anyway?" Dean cuts valiantly through the tension, eyes moving to Sam in a silent 'what the fuck?'

Sam opens his mouth to give a quick lie that will get Dean and Gabriel outside so Dean can be debriefed but - hell - what kind of stuff do actors do together that might be plausible in this situation? Running lines probably won't cut it this time.

"Kripke called," Gabriel supplies, before Sam's hesitation can stretch. "He needs to speak to you boys, stat."

"Who?" Dean asks, baffled.

"Good one," Gabriel quips back, slick as ever. It seems he's been keeping his Trickster talents nice and sharp during his time here then. "Eric Kripke. Otherwise known as *god*." Dean looks more confused, and even a little unnerved, at this, until Gabriel continues. "Producer, writer and creator of the show that's been your life for the past six years."

"Oh. Oh, right, yeah. *That* Kripke."

It takes all of Sam's concentration not to roll his eyes. God, his brother's such a moron sometimes.

"Fuck," Misha mutters, half standing. He doesn't get all the way because the blanket that's still partly over his shoulders has snagged on the back of the chair. He grapples with it a moment but the nervous tugging only seems to make the tangle worse. "Should I -?"

Gabriel releases the door handle and steps all the way inside, reaching out to Misha's shoulder and easing him back down.

"*You* should stay right here," he tells the stressed out actor gently as the door clicks shut behind him. "You almost *died*. Screw Eric - your health is more important. Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

A warm smile melts across Misha's face as he looks up. It's the most natural one Sam thinks he's seen on the guy and it's so downright *bizarre* to think it's *Gabriel* on the receiving end of that affection he can't stop himself gawping.

"Thanks," Misha nods, relaxing. He pulls the blanket tighter around him and looks down. "It's not like the show's gonna suffer without Cas for a few weeks anyway, I guess."

Gabriel tuts, eyes lifting skyward.

"Oh, would you cut that out already?" he snaps, but the tone isn't sharp. It's fond. Or no. More than that. It carries the same warmth Sam hears in every 'bitch' Dean throws his way. "The fans worship the ground you walk on, everyone knows it." Gabriel lifts a finger, firm but affectionate. Like a teacher with their favourite pupil or... or like a *brother*, Sam recognises with a jolt. "And even if they didn't, you're integral, man. Where would those boys be without Castiel, huh? Living post apocalypse, that's where. And what kind of show would that be? A dull and dreary one, that's what. Like Jericho. And we all know what happened there. So screw the writing this season, they can't sideline you forever. I'm telling you, Supernatural's *nothing* without Cas. These two chuckleheads can't even try and deny it."

This last part is directed at Sam and Dean and Sam smiles and shrugs to play along. Dean though - Dean's just staring at Gabriel. His eyes are distant with the skin between them pinched. It's a look Sam's seen a lot on his brother recently. Mostly during those times he'd spent eyeing up Lisa's number on his phone before Ben tried his Parent Trap. It's the look Dean gives when he realises he needs to man up about something, screw up his courage and bite the bullet, but doesn't know how. Why he's wearing it now Sam has no idea.

"Sure, Rich," Misha smiles up at Gabriel, humouring. "But hey, don't forget - Cas isn't the only angel the fans care about. The amount of tweets I get everyday asking about you is *insane*, seriously." He lifts and drops a shoulder. "And you know what, I think I'm with them on this. I mean, Sebastian's great, but Balthazar's no Gabriel. When you staging that dramatic comeback, huh?"

Misha's laugh is light-hearted. Joking. And of course it is. What he's talking about isn't real, not to him. In his mind, 'Richard' has a whole other world to occupy himself with, so it really doesn't matter one way or another whether Gabriel comes back to 'the show' or not.



But Sam can see Gabriel's eyes darken behind his answering chuckle and he sympathises. It's been hell the last couple of days having his and Dean's life analysed, objectified and ultimately dismissed. Like they're nothing but dolls on parade. The thought of having to suffer over a *year* of that leaves Sam sick to his stomach.

"Oh, I'm working on it, bro," Gabriel nods back, a little stiffly. "Trust me." His gaze shifts to Dean and Sam. "Come on guys, let's go."

After a final pat on Misha's shoulder, Gabriel turns and yanks the door open. He nods at Sam and Dean to step through and Sam does. Dean follows but, just as he's about to step into the corridor, he turns back, glancing down at Misha.

"You, err... you gonna be okay?" he asks.

Sam blinks. Just *what* is going on here? It's something of a relief to find his confusion mirrored in Gabriel. If he *has* fallen into a Twilight Zone within Bizarro World, or whatever, at least he's not alone.

Oddly, Misha seems just as surprised. He doesn't react at all at first, then startles up at Dean when he realises it really *is him* being spoken to. His eyes flick furtively from Dean to Sam then back again and he licks his lips, uncertain.

"Um... yeah," he offers back. Then a brighter, hopeful smile flickers at the corner of his lips. "Thanks."

Dean nods in return, then hurries out, Gabriel just behind.

They move down the corridor a way in silence until Sam can't take it anymore, stopping short to confront his brother. Only, as is becoming the norm since they crash landed into this freak show of a dimension, he finds himself lost for words and can only raise his palms in confusion.

"*What?*" Dean dares, staring Sam down in a familiar attempt to avoid the issue by intimidating his brother into not asking about it.

"Oh, zip it you two," Gabriel interrupts, glancing round at the single nurse behind them. He watches until she turns the corner and moves out of sight, then twists

back, slapping a hand on both their shoulders. "We got more important things to worry about."

There's a crackle of static and the hospital whites out around them.

#### INT. PADALECKI MANSION - LIBRARY

Dean's starting to think he's clocked up more air miles on angel travel than the whole human population put together. And yet, despite that, the disorientation, that queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach as the world shifts into something it wasn't only moments ago, *still* gets to him.

It's even worse unexpected and he sways backwards, dizzy.

He hits something with a clank, glances up at a man-sized hunk of metal and for a split second genuinely believes they've gone back to the Dark Ages and are being attacked by knights in armour. The worst part of that being - it wouldn't even be the craziest thing to have happened the last few days.

A couple of blinks later and the luxury leather couches, state of the art computer and giant black and white print of Sam as a cowboy tell him they are simply back at Jared Pada-whatever's place, in the study where Dean spent the night.

"Ow, ow, **ow!**" a voice yells from beside one of said couches and Dean straightens up to watch the guy his dumbass brother was supposed to be tailing drop down onto the cushions, the ball of his hand pressing hard against his left temple. "So that was fucking stupid," the guy continues, eyes screwing up, and no way is that grating tone *just* some actor, not after a mystery resurrection *and* teleportation.

"Wait," Dean calls, pointing. "*Gabriel?*"

The maybe-archangel pries one eye open to glare in Dean's direction.

"Yeah," he moans, groggy.

There's a vague part of Dean's mind telling him things *must* be bad when finding the guy who made a hobby of killing you multiple times is the best part of your day. But he's just too damn *relieved* to care.

"Holy shit!" he barks, breaking into a smile. "You have *no fucking idea* how *fantastic* it is to see you, man!"

Gabriel drops his hand and reaches for the inside pocket of his jacket.

"So I've heard," he answers, glare transferring briefly to Sam who's standing opposite, still shaking off the after effects of their shift across town. "You guys could at least *try* and make your elation sound less of a surprise."

"Whatever," Dean shrugs, hurrying closer and waving the snark away. "Let's just get this clear, okay? Because this place is so chock full of crazy I'm starting to lose track." He points again, staring hard. "You're Gabriel. The dick of an archangel who used to be a Trickster and left us a Dear John in a porno. You saved Misha and you just teleported us from the hospital. That's, you know, *true*. That happened. It wasn't all just..." His hands flail for a moment. A random gesture Dean feels conveys the lunacy of this world pretty damn well. "Smoke and mirrors?"

A slight smile - suspiciously friendly - crosses Gabriel's lips as he flicks open the small, cardboard packet he's taken from his coat and draws out a case of foil-covered pills.

"Oh, it's real, sweetheart. Don't worry," he says, glancing up to meet Dean's eye, locking on and yup, that's an angel alright. Gabe's might not be as intense as Castiel's, but Dean would recognise that mile long stare anywhere.

The moment's broken by Gabriel pressing two chalky pills from the foil-wrapped sheet to his palm and popping them in his mouth. He swallows them down with a look of distaste before continuing.

"It's the world that's crazy, not you."

Dean shakes his head, relief short-lived as a barrage of questions start easing it aside. There's an obvious one to lead with, but he decides to go with the most relevant.

"How come you've still got your mojo?"

Gabriel drops his head against the back of the sofa. The better to exaggerate the roll of his eyes - the diva.

"Hellooo," he drawls, circling his head up again. "Archangel." His eyes flick between the others, as arrogant as Dean remembers, but not quite as sharp. Actually, they seem sorta weary and, are those shadows under the angel's eyes? "We got a little more juice than your average cherubim," Gabriel continues before Dean can dwell. "And I managed to keep some when I crossed over." His lips quirk to the side, but Dean sees at once this is no Trickster smirk - this smile is wry and humourless. "Unfortunately, 'some' is *all* I kept. And unlike back home I can't refuel here. I'm *limited*. Which means every time I use some of the old black magic it's gone, for good." He leans forward with a sigh, hands dropping between his knees. His left one still holds the packet of pills and Gabriel's eyes trail over it, despondent. "I'm almost out now," he adds, quieter. "I can scrape out the odd trick from the bottom of the barrel, but it hurts like a son of a bitch to do it."

He rattles the packet between his hands and Dean recognises the brand as a heavy-duty painkiller. Shit.

"But, you... you still got *something*, right?"

"Dean, wait. Forget that for a moment," Sam cuts in, stepping between them to force Dean's line of sight away and onto him. Warning bells start trilling in the back of Dean's head immediately and only get louder when he recognises the scrunched up blend of disapproval and concern on his brother's face. "Because what the fuck, dude?"

"What the fuck what?" Dean tries, adding extra bite to his tone to try and make it more plausible.

Just a couple of weeks ago he knows Sam would have bought it, or at least not cared enough to push. But now he can see his brother's not buying the clueless card for a second, which, on the one hand - great. It means this *is* his brother anyway. On the other hand it sucks ass, because like *hell* they're having this conversation.

"Don't gimme that," Sam huffs back, as expected, shaking his head. "You know what. What the hell was that back at the hospital?"

"I don't know what you're talking ab--"

"Dean, I *saw* you, okay? The guy had his tongue down your throat!"

Actually, Misha's tongue had been brushing oh-so-lightly over Dean's own, eager and restrained and needy all at once in a way Lisa's confident, controlling kisses of the past year had never been. But Dean's not thinking about that. No, sir.

"Yes, okay, exactly!" Dean snaps back to stop his mind from wandering. "He came on to *me*. And he *obviously* expected something in return. What was I supposed to do? I don't know what him and fake me have going on, and the *last* thing we need right now is more people getting suspicious. That Singer guy already thinks we're certifiable."

Sam's eyes narrow, lips twisting as he thinks this over. It's a good argument, but from the look on Sam's face it's clear he thinks there's more to it, that there's stuff Dean's not saying.

Which is true, of course, but that's so beside the point.

"So... that's all it was?" Sam continues to pry, albeit more hesitant now. "You were just... playing along?"

"What the hell *else* would I have been doing?"

Certainly *not* being surprised, just for a moment, into thinking it was Cas pressing up against him that's for sure. Or stopping to consider how he might feel about that. How he might, just maybe, what with his split with Lisa KO'ing his love life to an all time low and everything, be curious to know what it would be like, you know, with a guy. And most definitely not realising, with a jolt that had been damn near physical, like a lightening strike up and down his spine, that if he *was* gonna experiment... Cas would totally be the guy he'd pick. The one he'd feel safest with. Cryptic, clueless, nerdy angel shit and all.

No, he sure as hell wouldn't have been thinking any of that.

"I don't know, Dean. That's why I'm asking," Sam responds, throwing up a hand. But it's more exasperation than anger. "Because it... it looked like more to me."

"Well, it wasn't," Dean insists, anxious to put a lid on the whole thing, because, okay, while he's willing to admit there's a genuine can of worms here, just because Sam's all set to open it doesn't mean they should. His brother's not the one who'll have to suffer the damn things crawling all over him when they do. "So can we get past this now, please?"

Dean curses to himself. Please? He might as well have written the truth in neon lights across his forehead - yes, it looked like more because it *was* more, but can we ignore it *please*?

Sure enough, Sam's caught the slip, expression softening so his eyes crinkle at the corners, lips flattening out. A patented, Sam Winchester, 'I know this is hard, but I just want to help' expression, like he breaks out with the hapless victims every hunt. It's wonderful and sickening how heartfelt those are again these days.

"Dean... you know, I wouldn't care if... I mean, you can talk to me, you know? I'm not gonna judge you, or -"

"That's great, Sam. Thanks," Dean cuts in quickly, because *oh hell no* he is not gonna stand here through an 'I love you no matter your lifestyle choices' speech. Especially not with Gabriel in the background grinning like the cat that got the cream, the cookie *and* the catnip. "Now -"

"Is this about Cas?"

Dean gapes, distracted mid-sentence by this latest, out of the blue, part of his brother's interrogation.

"Wha-?" he splutters, kind of disturbed to know that the way he's been acting with their guardian angel has been somehow gay enough for Sam consider Cas a factor in his decision to kiss another guy. Although, now Dean thinks about it, the fact that the 'other guy' is the spitting image of said angel probably helped his brother's train of thought along. "No, that's not -" Dean shakes his head and waves a hand, physically dismissing the whole thing. "Come on, Sam! You really

wanna do this now? World without magic." He points round his brother at Gabriel, who has pocketed his painkillers and is lounging back against the sofa, grinning smugly at Dean's discomfort. "Bonafide archangel. Let's figure out our priorities, okay?"

"Oh, don't stop on my account," Gabriel smiles as Sam turns to face him.

The reminder of the archangel's existence does seem to distract Sam from his questioning though and Dean presses the advantage.

"Don't start," he tells Gabriel, moving swiftly to the *other* elephant in the room in the hope it will divert Sam's attention. "How about you make yourself useful, instead of treating us like a personal soap opera? Like telling us how you're even breathing for one thing, and what the fuck you're doing here. What the hell happened to *if you're watching this, I'm dead?*"

Gabriel quirks an eyebrow, a vestige of his old self-assurance returning. But Dean can't help thinking, what with the beard and the headache and the painkillers and the, frankly embarrassing, display over Misha's corpse, that it's more for show than anything. That it's about playing the role the archangel *wants* his life to be, so he doesn't have to deal with a reality that's, let's face it, pretty damn craptastic for a being that used to a god.

Then Dean thinks about the guy's sudden, startling, uncertainty in that circle of fire back when they'd blown his cover and it doesn't seem so different to the vulnerability he'd shown at Misha's side. He thinks about how scared Gabriel had seemed just before he'd taken on Lucifer, and he wonders if role-playing isn't what the whole 'Loki' thing had been about all along.

He thinks about the safe, cocooned months he'd spent with Lisa and imagines Sam must have lived out much the same with Jess. Maybe that's just what life's about. Shifting from role to role so you don't have to face the crap behind it all.

"You think I'd take on *Lucifer* without a contingency plan?" Gabriel answers, voice dripping with disdain. Dean lets the insult slide. If belittling him and Sam is what Gabriel needs to reassert himself then okay, he can respect that. Besides, if they stand any chance of getting home, they need Gabriel on top form, which means getting behind whatever it takes to get him there. "I had a few tricks up my sleeve - spells, talismans, all kinds of crap," the archangel continues and, thank

*fuck*, Sam has become sufficiently engrossed in the explanation not to stop him. "As it turned out, a quantum leap over here was the only one that stuck. Upside - " He extends his arms, palms out. "Still alive. Downside?" His arms drop back to his lap and he hunches forward. "All trips to this neck of the woods are *one way only*. If you wanna get back, you need someone on the other side to pull you through."

Dean feels something plummet from his chest to the pit of his stomach and realises, belatedly, that it's all the hope he's been building since Misha's miracle return.

"Yeah, we figured -" Sam sighs beside him, and the resignation in his tone makes Dean twist his head, suspicious. Yup, there's no real surprise in that dull-eyed gaze. Something about the archangel's reveal to his brother must have tipped Sam off already that Gabe wasn't the lucky break he seemed to be.

Gabriel himself though, doesn't seem to have got the memo that they're riding a downer and his eyes gleam as he looks between the two of them.

"So, boys," he grins, lips trembling at the corners with what Dean, if he didn't know any better, thinks might smack of something a lot like desperation. "I'm psyched that you're happy to see me because, for the first time, and I sincerely hope the *last*, I am *thrilled* to see you. Whatever you need me for, I'm there. Just say the word. Seriously. Right now you two bozos are my holy grail." He lifts his hands and makes 'come hither' gestures with them. "Go ahead, lay it on me."

The sight of Gabriel - murdering, borderline psychopathic, would-be pagan - meek and hopeful as a kitten begging for scraps gives the brothers pause for a moment.

"Um, what?" Dean asks eventually. You know, *just in case* this isn't the misunderstanding it seems to be.

Gabriel's tut and the roll of his eyes puts an end to that in a second.

"Your escape plan, of course," the archangel replies, the inherent '*duh*' loud and clear in every word.



Dean stares at Gabriel in silence, glances round in time to meet the eyes of a similarly stricken and dumbstruck Sam, then looks away.

INT. PADALECKI MANSION - FEW MINUTES LATER

Gabriel doesn't take the truth well.

"You are *fucking **kidding** me!*" he yells once they've explained, jumping off the sofa and pacing in front of the computer and back again. "No really." He points at the two of them, the silver round his index finger glinting under Jared's ultra-modern light fittings. "*Tell me you're joking!*"

Sam looks down, mumbling.

"I thought practical jokes were your thing..."

Mistake, Dean thinks. But it's not like it wasn't on the tip of his own tongue as well. The edge to Sam's tone might have been unusual with anyone else, but he gets that his brother has reason to stay bitter when it comes to Gabriel. Dean doesn't like to *imagine* how he'd feel if the angel had reversed his trick at the Mystery Spot and made him watch Sam die over and over.

"Oh, don't get cute with me!" Gabriel snaps, scowling at him as he grows predictably more irate. "I've been here for a year, a fucking *year!* Living every damn second one after the other, on and on and on. No jumping back, no skipping ahead, no do-overs, no *tricks, nothing*. You have *no idea* what it's been like!"

Dean rolls his eyes. Oh no, that's only been their lives *forever*. Of course they have no idea. Drama queen. And besides, he'd watched Cas suffer much the same during the build to the apocalypse without even once complaining about it, and that was with Heaven's army out for his blood the whole time. Okay, living in this place can't have been a picnic, but it's hardly hell on earth.

"World's smallest violin, pal," he snaps back, because meeting anger with anger is just how he rolls. No one shouts down Dean Winchester. "Don't forget, we're stuck here too!"

"Yeah," Gabriel agrees, moving forward, eyes stormy. He has to tilt his head back to keep eye contact, of course, standing almost a head shorter than Dean. It should be ridiculous, but Dean remembers being thrown around enough times by this angel to tense his shoulders against the face-off anyway, reacting on instinct to what's always been a threat. "Because the two of you were *stupid* enough to let it happen! I had no choice about being here, it was *literally* life or death. You muttonheads just rushed in without thinking!"

"Oh, yeah," Sam sneers. "Because we had so much time to think before Balthazar sent us flying!"

Gabriel glances his way and breathes in sharply, closing his eyes. Like his fury is too vast to contain.

"Balthazar..." he hisses through clenched teeth, eyes snapping open again and boring into Sam. "Of all the... you two really don't have a brain cell to rub between you, do you? Of all the angels to get the drop on you, you get outwitted by *Balthazar*? It took the kid over a century just to learn to fly straight for god's sake!" His gaze flicks back to Dean. "It's a miracle there was even a universe left for you guys to be thrown *from*. Stop the apocalypse? You two could barely fight your way out of a paper bag, forget saving the world!"

"Okay, that's enough," Dean growls.

"Oh, I haven't even *started* yet, kiddo!" Gabriel insists, raising a finger that's just shy of sticking up Dean's nose.

"Well I'm cutting you off," Dean counters.

"I'd like to see you try!"

"Yeah?"

Gabriel's hand balls into a fist, but Dean gets there faster, clocking the angel squarely in the jaw. He whips his hand back immediately - experience telling him it should be smarting like a bitch. Except it's not, of course.

Instead, Gabriel's reeling back, hitting the table behind him hard enough to make the deluxe computer screen shake and the pots of pens and paperclips rattle across the wood.

Breathing hard, Gabriel holds a hand to where Dean hit and winces as his fingers find the spot. When he draws his hand back a second later and blinks down at it Dean sees a splash of red there, taken from a matching drip of colour staining the hair on the angel's upper lip.

Silence descends and Dean, realising he's breathing pretty strong himself, swallows a couple of times to calm down.

On one hand, going with his instincts has totally paid off. Gabriel's not angry anymore. On the other hand, Dean kinda regrets it, because the worn and weary expression of defeat on a face he's used to seeing fresh and defiant is weirding him out.

"Hysterics over?" he pants, hoping to break the quiet before it gets oppressive.

Gabriel takes a moment to catch his breath.

"Yeah," he sighs, wiping the last of the blood away with his sleeve.

He glances up, bitter and contrite all at once, and for a second Dean is back outside the Elysium Fields Hotel, asking the guy if he can't or won't kill his brother. A low blow, like his punch just now, but similarly hitting straight to the heart of things. Because that's what the apocalypse had come down to for Dean - whether or not he was prepared to live without Sam. And he'd realised then, with perfect clarity, that behind all the pranks and the carefree living and the laughter, that, if you subbed 'Sam' for Michael and Lucifer, the same was true of Gabriel. Because, hell, if Dean could reshape the world with a click of his fingers wouldn't he make it all babes and junk food too? Takes one to know one.

It seems the archangel remembers as well because he swallows as their gaze meets and gives a very slight, very personal kind of nod.

"I can't stay here another year," he says, much softer. Almost apologetic. "I just can't..." He draws his arms back and grips the edge of the table behind him, as though for support, eyes darting away. "And it's not because of my powers. Though that *is* a drag, not gonna lie. But no, it... It's because... because there's nothing for me here. No one I..." When he looks back to them his eyes are bright and *open* somehow and it feels *wrong*. Honesty's not a good look on a Trickster, Dean supposes. "It's stupid, right? The only reason I'm here at all is cos I got screwed over by both my families." His nose crinkles and his voice starts to rise again. "I mean, I should be *glad* they're not here. I'm better off on my own! Screw them! They're just a bunch of blood hungry savages and tight-assed flying moneys, what do I need them for anyway?"

He holds the bravado for almost half a second. Then it drains out of him and his shoulders slump down. A quietly human gesture his theatrical embracing of the culture doesn't usually allow.

"But they're still family," Dean offers, filling the void he knows Gabriel will never admit to. "And no matter how much crap they put you through, you love 'em anyway. That's just how it is."

Gabriel's gaze slides from Dean to Sam and back again and his mouth twitches with what might be affection. Or resignation. Or both.

Part of Dean can't help feeling for the guy - he'd tried so hard once to prove Dean and Sam were the same as his brothers, only to find out it was Heaven that mirrored humanity more than anything.

Mostly, though, Dean's trying to avoid the sappy look Sam's giving him. Yeah, okay, so he loves the bitch. Doesn't mean he has to put up with Sam's watery smile and freakishly emotive eyes every time he says it out loud.

He coughs before Sam can get a word in.

"Anyway, uh... I don't know about you, but I can't take another *day* here, forget a year." He nods at Gabriel, business-like. They need to move on from this touchy-feely crap, stat. "So trust me, we're not gonna slack on this. We're gonna find Virgil and get the hell outta dodge. *All of us.*"

The emphasis on the last part is remarkably easy. Something of a surprise, considering that if you'd told Dean a couple of years ago he'd be, willingly, agreeing to help the *Trickster* out of trouble he'd have laughed in your face. But while his conscience pricks a little at the thought of letting a homicidal angel loose on the world again, the fact that Gabriel *had* saved their asses that time wins out. Dean's the first to admit he has plenty of faults, but at least he's *fair*. They owe the guy, so they're damn well not gonna leave him behind.

"Stirring, Rambo," Gabriel quips back, but Dean can almost taste the gratitude behind the sarcasm, relief at the return to their usual banter. "Just one thing. Supposing we actually *do* manage to track down Virgil before he catches the last train home - what, exactly, are you planning on then? Asking him politely if he'll let us tag along?"

"I was thinking something a little more persuasive," Dean counters. "Guy's powerless, right? Three of us to one of him - we should take him down easy. Hell, Sam and I almost had him on our own earlier."

Gabriel waves a hand.

"That was before. He's clued in now. The stunt with Misha proves it. You think an angel would lower themselves to a demon trick like that if there were any other option? No, he's figured out the rules here, just like I had to, and don't sell your destructive powers short, boys. They sell guns in Canada, same as in the US."

Dean snorts, thinking of Castiel's almost comical lack of expertise when it comes to firearms.

"Right. Well I don't think we need to start running for the hills just yet," he grins. "If this guy's anything like Cas he'll be a worse shot than a stormtrooper."

"Well unfortunately for us Virgil's *nothing* like Castiel," Gabriel shoots back, and the intensity of his glare wipes Dean's smile away. "We used to call him The Weapon's Keeper of Heaven. Knowing how to use something to kill is kind of his speciality. Name a weapon, from *anywhere*, and he's an expert. All he has to do is *look* at one and he knows how to kill you with it in a hundred and one different ways and boy, you don't even want to *imagine* the things he could do with a Swiss Army Knife. Angel powers optional."

There's a pause.

"Fuck," Dean says, which covers it pretty eloquently in his opinion.

"Yeah," Gabriel agrees.

They sigh together, briefly united in their dejection. Until Sam hums beside them.

"Wait," he murmurs. Dean and Gabriel look over in tandem, eager to learn what tactic they might be overlooking. "A year you've been here you said. Are you sure?"

It's a moment before Gabriel answers as, like Dean, he's too busy frowning at the irrelevance of the question.

"Okay, not quite. More like ten months. Ten months, three days and -" He checks his watch, eyebrows still drawn. "Eh. Four hours." His shoulders lift as he looks up again in a half-hearted shrug. "But hey, who's counting?"

Sam shakes his head, face creasing in a way Dean has long come to associate with a dead end trail. Though, granted, he's more used to seeing it across a computer screen.

"That doesn't make sense," Sam continues. "You did come here right after the fight with Lucifer?"

Gabriel glances at Dean, like he expects him to have some kind of explanation for his brother's crazy. Dean just shrugs. To be honest, he's just happy it's no longer *him* squirming under Sam's scrutiny.

"Yeah," Gabriel answers, sounding none too happy about the reminder of his brother's attempt to gut him.

"No," Sam counters, with a strange, out of place authority that makes Gabriel's face darken. "You can't have. Gabriel, you've been dead for over *two* years now."

"What?" the archangel replies, but Dean cuts him off because he's starting to grasp his brother's logic.

"Wait, *yeah*, you're right," he nods, turning his eyes to the distance as he tries to work through the implications. "What does that mean? This place is, what, Narnia? Time is different?" His stomach lurches as the potential of this sinks in. "Oh god. If we ever do make it back are we gonna end up in the year three thousand?"

Sam gives him a *look* - half pity, half exasperation - that says 'you're my brother and I love you, *but*.' Lucky for him, Dean is too relieved about whatever mistake he's made to feel insulted.

"Dean, we're a *year* behind, not centuries."

"Right. Yeah. I knew that. I was just -"

"*What* are you guys talking about?"

But Sam isn't listening, he's busy searching his jeans and jacket pockets.

"I can't believe I didn't think about this before." He tuts under his breath as he pulls his - no, *Jared's* - cell from the back of his pants. "I saw the date onscreen when we were ordering the Saint's bone -"

"The what now?" Gabriel interjects.

"- but I figured it was just a glitch," Sam presses on, as though Gabriel hasn't spoken, swiping a thumb over the screen to get to the phone's - overly flashy - main menu. "I mean, we had more important things to worry about, you know? But check it out, it really *is* 2011 here."

He holds the phone up for Dean to inspect and sure enough, the date reads February 25<sup>th</sup> 2011. Dean even grabs Jensen's ridiculously small and artsy thing from his own jeans to double check, but the display reads the same.

"Guys," Gabriel tries again, waving his hands to get their attention. "We don't have time for you to lose it! Of *course* it's 2011, now can we -?"

He stops, whatever he was going to say swept aside as some kind of revelation hits, popping his eyes out wide as saucers.

"Oh! Oh, no way!"

He turns to Sam, wagging a finger in quick jerks up and down, like his mind is moving too fast for him so his body's trying to pick up the slack.

"You! You were blubbing at me in the hospital about how hard it is not remembering life without a soul, and about not wanting to worry Dean-o here with your memories of Hell..."

Dean glances at his brother, other stuff taking a backseat for a moment because goddamn him the little liar! He *knew* Sam remembered something from that time he collapsed, but he'd been all 'don't worry, I'm fine, blah blah blah' and Dean hadn't pushed it. He knew better than anyone how hard it could be facing up to time in the Pit and figured Sam would talk when he was ready. Knowing the kid's love of chickflick heart-to-hearts, Dean assumed he wouldn't be waiting long.

From the way Sam's avoiding him though, head angled down, those absurd bangs of his dropping across his face so he won't have to meet Dean's eye, it seems Dean's been mistaken. Perhaps he *should* push it, however painful, because no way is he gonna let his little brother bottle up like he did.

Unless... would even talking, about stuff Sam already remembers, be enough to damage the wall? Can they take that risk?

"So that means it's true, right?" Gabriel's asking and Dean lets himself be distracted. They'll deal with Sam's memories, and lack of them, later. "The soulless thing, your year with the Campbells, your grandfather being alive again?"

Dean swears he can hear the swish of his brother's hair as Sam looks up.

"Yeah," Sam starts. "How -?"

But Gabriel's on a roll, snapping round to Dean.

"And you!" he says, waving. "You really wasted a year playing house with Lisa and Ben?"

"I wouldn't say *wasted*," Dean answers with a frown, by-passing confusion and jumping straight to defensive.



"Holy shit!" Gabriel exclaims, a flash of excitement in his eyes that Dean can't begin to guess the meaning of. "You guys really *are* from 2012. That whole year they skipped, you actually lived that."

"That who skipped?" Dean asks, and is promptly ignored.

"What else is true? Um, um um..." Gabriel clicks his fingers at the side of his head with each 'um,' as though trying to snap his chaotic thoughts into order. "Oh! Were you really a vampire?"

He points at Dean who, compelled by the sudden urgency in the angel's tone, nods back.

"Yeah. But -?"

"And the faeries? With the fake alien abductions? That happened?"

Dean doesn't get further than 'yeah' this time before Gabriel throws his head back with a loud 'ha!'

"*Genius!*" the angel grins. "Oh, man. If I ever make it back, me and those guys have *got* to get together! Oh! Oh! What about that time with Sam and Balthazar and the vibrating -? No wait, that was a fi - Nevermind. How about -?"

"Gabriel," Sam interrupts, firm enough for the guy to actually pay attention. "How do you know all this?"

A familiar, taunting glint shines in Gabriel's eyes, a grin snaking wide and slow across his face. It's the most himself he's been since they found him.

"Because I'm your number one fan, boys. Never miss a show."

"Show?" Dean repeats, groaning as the implication dawns on him. "You mean that Supernatural crap that's somehow based on our lives?"

"Not so much based, it turns out," Gabriel replies, gleeful in his newfound superior knowledge. "More like wholly accurate. Right down to the last detail. Which might just make it our ticket outta here..."

With that, Gabriel spins round and strains his neck looking over Jared's monster of a computer screen. He looks up and down the desk, frowns, then hurries to the other side and starts rifling through drawers.

"What do you mean?" Sam asks, moving to lean across the desk at the edge of the computer. Dean does the same on the other side, equally invested in Gabriel's answer.

"You're saying the show is, what, like Chuck's books?" Sam adds. "Is that why it has the same name? This Kripke guy, he's a prophet too?"

Gabriel drops to one knee to open a bottom drawer and chuckles.

"Eric?" he mutters, absently, as he flicks through papers. "Hardly." Apparently the drawer doesn't have what he's looking for, because he slides it shut with a snap and moves to the other side, opposite Sam. "There are no prophets here, because there are no gods to preach the word of. Not that that stops people trying. The connection to you guys is probably just some... I dunno... latent psychic ability, manifesting in creativity since there's no magical outlet for it."

Dean senses rather than sees Sam's mutual scoff at this.

"You just made that up, didn't you?" Sam accuses.

Gabriel pauses and bites his lip sheepishly.

"Yeah," he admits with a shrug. "The crap you pick up from daytime TV, huh? I don't have a clue how Krip's doing it, but the point is he *is*."

"I don't get it," Dean cuts across, shaking his head. "How does that help us?"

The archangel's eyes flick round to him, not mocking anymore but round and excited, the situation forcing them onto equal footing.

"Think about it," he says. "It's Winchester brother reality TV. And right now the Winchester brothers' reality is *here*." He points down, indicating what Dean presumes is the universe in general and not the polished finish of Jared's wooden floor. "Which means if we find next episode's script, the script of *now* -"

"Then we can find out what happens next!" Dean finishes, catching on. "How Virgil's getting out of here and what we need to do to stop him. Awesome! Where do we find a script?"

"Jared's gotta keep his around somewhere," Gabriel answers, waving a hand across the desk.

"Right," Dean nods, excitement of his own building as he hurries round the desk to Gabriel's side, flicking through the scattered papers on top while the angel goes back to opening drawers.

"I dunno guys..." Sam starts and Dean winces at the killjoy tone. Gabriel must feel the same because he stops mid-drawer and looks up with a scowl.

"Don't go raining on our parade, Sammy," he chides. "You got a better plan?"

Sam shakes his head.

"No, but -"

Gabriel returns to his search with a non-committal grunt and Dean follows suit, glad to be finally doing *something* after the age they'd spent waiting at the hospital.

"- but," Sam continues. "The latest script'll be the one they're filming now, right? Dean, you remember. The stuff they had us acting earlier? We, the fake us... I mean, the *fictional* us... who are the *real* us being acted by the fake - Well, whatever. We weren't in this reality in that scene. We were at Bobby's, talking to Cas. You know, all that crap about keys and locks."

"So?" Dean shrugs, looking under Jared's keyboard.

"So that script *isn't* what's happening to us now. Which means finding it *can't* help us."

There's a disheartening amount of sense in what Sam's saying and Dean doesn't like it one bit.

"So... maybe whatever they were filming today is just something that hasn't happened to us *yet*," he tries. "Maybe... it's a good sign. It means we do get back."

Sam remains unconvinced.

"Wait." Gabriel pauses, his latest drawer halfway to shut at his waist. "They made you guys *act*?"

Further ridicule is cut short by a high, trembling voice calling from the corridor outside, followed by a tap of heels growing louder with each step.

"Jay? Is that you?"

In the next second the door to the study clicks open and fake Ruby peers cautiously inside. The smudged mascara from earlier has been cleaned up, but her eyes are still red and puffy and, just, *soft* and *human* in a way Ruby's had never had been. Dean wonders how he and Sam ever managed to mistake her for her counterpart.

She blinks at Dean and Gabriel, slow and uncomprehending, like she's too weary to even be surprised by their presence in her home, and shifts her attention to Sam.

"I didn't hear you come in," she says, voice plaintive.

"Err," Sam manages, which, admittedly, is better than Dean imagines he might have in the same situation. He'd all but forgotten the girl's existence.

"Hey, Mrs. P," Gabriel chimes in, all warmth and smiles as he moves round the desk and towards her. It's a switch in personality so drastic Dean does a double-take back to the empty space the archangel's left behind to make sure it really is Gabriel speaking.

While the brothers watch, Gabriel glides past Sam and rests his hands lightly on the girl's arms. She's taken off the woollen throw she had on before, leaving just the strappy white thing and her jeans, but if she objects to Gabriel touching her skin she doesn't show it.

"Great to see you again."

With a practiced motion Gabriel leans in and the two of them kiss the air around each other. It's such an overblown, theatrical gesture Dean has to bite back a guffaw. It seems to calm fake Ruby though and she shoots Gabriel a tiny smile as they pull back.

"Oh, you too Richard. What are you doing here?"

"Me and the boys met up at the hospital. Thought we'd get together."

Her smile falters at the words, body stiffening.

"The hospital?" she repeats. "Oh god. Did they... did they need you to identify the body?"

"Body?" Gabriel's eyebrows point down for a moment in confusion. Then his face clears and he rubs his palms up and down the stricken girl's shoulders. "Oh, sweetheart. No one told you? It was all a mistake. Misha's *fine*. A little shaken up, but otherwise okay."

Tension starts bleeding out of the girl almost at once.

"Really?" she asks, sagging under Gabriel's hold, bright eyes moving to seek confirmation from Sam.

Sam nods and smiles.

"Yeah, uh, they gave him a Band-Aid and sent him home," he assures her.

"Oh," she breathes, stepping out of Gabriel's hold and putting a hand to her chest. "That's such a relief!"

"Yeah, completely," Dean agrees, flashing her one of his most practiced, most charming smiles. Because times still a-wasting here and he figures they might as well try and use this distraction to their advantage. "So, anyway. I don't suppose you know where, err -" He stumbles a bit over the name because, damn it, it's still every bit as stupid as when he first heard it. "- Jared's Supernatural script is, do you?"

Dean stoically ignores the three stares he gets in response - fake Ruby's blank, Sam and Gabriel's complete with stormy eyerolls. Seriously, they're working on the clock here, there's no time for tact.

"The... script?" the girl - goddamn, he really should try and remember her name - repeats, hesitant.

"Yeah," Dean nods, encouraging. "You know, the, err, the latest one."

She turns back to Sam for reassurance, as you *would* do with your *husband* Dean reminds himself, refusing to except his mad skills with the opposite sex might be lacking.

"Yeah, we, um, we thought we'd maybe... run some lines," Sam tries. "Calm ourselves down."

He breaks out the puppy eyes when fake Ruby looks unsure but it seems that's a trick less effective coming from the guy who makes his living fabricating it, because the girl's expression doesn't soften.

"Uh... oookay," she answers. "Well, your script's right where you always keep it, Jay."

There's an awkward pause where Dean can practically hear the cogs turning in his brother as he tries to figure out how to move on without seeming too out of character.

"Right. *Right*," Sam nods eventually. "Where I always keep it. Cool..."

He looks round at the desk and beyond, like he expects the place Jared keeps his stuff to somehow magically reveal itself to him.

"In the folder, under the cowboy print," the actress prompts, stepping round the desk with a bemused shake of her head and reaching out towards a leather-bound folder on the counter under the black and white image of Sam on horseback.

She flips it open and draws out a stack of pages from inside, raising a questioning eyebrow as she turns round with them in her hand.

"Of *course*," Sam responds with a sheepish smile and a wave of his hand. "Thanks... babe."

Aware that the awkwardness is threatening to rise to impossible levels any second, Dean moves to take the offered pages from Mrs P's hand.

"Yeah, thanks," he grins, trying not to seem too eager as he turns to thumb through the thing.

He's not even read beyond the first line - TEASER. INT. BOBBY'S HOUSE - when the paper is snatched away from him by Gabriel, who stands at his side and skims through the pages with surprising expertise, pausing every now and then to read the odd sentence or two over again.

Dean leads closer to try and see over the angel's shoulder, only vaguely aware of their benefactor moving past him and speaking with Sam in hushed tones.

"Sam's right, this is no good," Gabriel mutters as he reaches the end.

"What?" Dean snaps, irritated as much by his own disappointment as the failure itself.

"It starts like you said. Balthie shows up and gives you a key," Gabriel explains. "But the rest is just some crappy story about Virgil chasing after you. It's so lame it's practically loony toons. *I* could write better."

"But that doesn't make sense," Dean insists, not willing to give up on their one escape plan just yet. "If the rest of the show's been real, why not this?"

Gabriel flips the pages shut and looks over the front. Something at the bottom catches his eye and he taps a line of text with a ringed finger. It reads '*story by*: Ben Edlund *teleplay by*: Sera Gamble.'

"Got it," he says, looking up. "Hey Gen?" he calls - ha, yes, *Gen*. Short for Geneva, or something. *Gen* breaks from her quiet but strained looking conversation with Sam and turns. "This script revised much?"

"Oh, god yes," Gen answers, shadows of disapproval on her face fading as she warms to the topic. A recent and well-argued one, Dean imagines, from the way her tone hardens. "The original was some god awful meta thing. They wanted us back, but as *ourselves*, you know? I mean, ridiculous, right?" Gabriel gives a jerky nod, but if his accompanying smile comes too late Gen doesn't notice. "Well, I told them to forget it. I'm not humiliating myself like that. So Sera rewrote it."

"You don't know where the original is, do you?" Dean asks. He shrugs as well to make the question seem casual, but can't deny there's a sense of desperation to it.

Gen frowns at him.

"No," she answers, cold now. "And to be honest, I don't really understand why you're interested. It's been a long night, and I get that you guys wanted to, relax, or whatever, after what happened to Misha. But you can run lines tomorrow, and I'd *really* like some time alone with my husband, if that's okay?"

Sam grimaces in apology over her shoulder and Dean realises this must have been what the two of them were discussing while he and Gabriel looked over the script. He opens his mouth to try and convince Gen otherwise, fully prepared to knock her out and stash her somewhere if needs be, but Gabriel gets there first.

"Of course," the angel tells her, voice smooth, smile soft and muted. "We'll call Cliff now and get right out of your hair."

Dean turns to him in shock, noting a matching move from Sam out of the corner of his eye, but the angel wraps a hand round his arm in a vice-like - warning - grip and pulls him towards the door.

"Come on, Jensen," he mutters through his smile and with no better plan on the horizon Dean chooses to go with it, following Gabriel out into the corridor. A few seconds later Sam joins them, calling something over his shoulder about seeing them to the door.

"What the hell, man?" Sam asks in a furious whisper once they're out of Gen's earshot. "You were just planning to leave me with her?"



"I can think of worse places to be," Gabriel answers as he leads them through the maze of panelled walls and wooden etchings that is Jared's hallway, flashing a wolfish grin at Sam over his shoulder.

"Oh, cut it out," Dean snaps. "Sam's right, we can't split up. We need to be together when we find out where and when Virgil's ritual is going down."

"We got the when," Gabriel says, holding up the script. "I've picked up a thing or two about the profession since I landed here, alright? This is revised, but the original timeline will be more or less in tact. It's easier that way - less changes means less work, and more time for drinking and banging hookers, you know what I'm saying?" He shakes his head. "Showbiz lifestyle. If I had even half my usual power, the things I'd do to some of the guys on this show... But anyway. According to this, after Virgil steals your key, which goes down more or less like it already has, by the way, which pretty much proves the first draft *was real*, you guys meet up with him, and Balthazar, *tomorrow*, to take the key back. Some time in the afternoon. That'll be when it's all happening."

"Some time in the afternoon? Oh yeah, that's real specific," Dean mutters.

"Hey," Gabriel bites back, defensive. "It's better than you mooks could come up with!"

"Okay." Sam holds up a hand, pacifying. "You're right. We at least know *roughly* when this ritual thing of Raphael's is gonna take place. But we still *don't* know where. Which means we still need to find Virgil. Either to make him tell us where we need to go or so we can follow him there somehow. Won't that be easier if we're together?"

"No," Gabriel argues as they reach the front door, its gold leaf handles glinting as the hall lights flicker automatically into being at their approach. "I've been working this gig way longer than you guys and trust me, the one thing *guaranteed* to screw you over without fail?" His eyes turn stony. Shielded. "Is fucking with the status quo." He pauses to let this sink in before pressing on. "I mean it. Maybe it's because there's no magic, I dunno, but people here are *really* narrow-minded. If something's even the *slightest* bit out of the ordinary they'll start freaking out. So unless you wanna spend a couple of weeks in a white padded cell with nothing but an hourly injection for company -" Dean turns to

Sam and finds matching surprise, and no little compassion, mirrored in his brother's gaze at this latest reveal. "- you stay *in character*. It's bad enough the two of you are talking, but at least that's plausible. Making Gen worry is a disaster waiting to happen. Which means *you* -" He points at Sam. "- are gonna stay here and spend the night getting laid, like a good husband should. While we -" He points between himself and Dean. "- head back to our respective bachelor pads."

"By which you mean, we work on tracking down the original script, right?" Dean corrects, deciding it's probably best not to bring up their recent, decidedly status quo fucking, conversation with Bob Singer on set. The guy had seemed more concerned with keeping the show on air than dealing with potential mental breakdowns in his stars anyway, so if all goes well they'll be high tailing it outta here long before he becomes a problem.

Dean's also ignoring the noticeably *not* unhappy reaction from Sam at the thought of having to spend his time getting it on with the spitting image of his demon ex. Although, damn, he can't deny it must be a bit of a dream come true for the kid - all the hotness of his evil lover, without any of the evil? Hell, the acting part aside, all in all life's not too shabby for Mr Padawan. If things do go south with Virgil, there are worse fates for Sammy than being stuck here.

"No," Gabriel answers again, shaking his head. "Best I do that alone." He holds up a hand, anticipating Dean's protest. "I got contacts, okay? I might not have known it was real, but as soon as I figured things out here it seemed pretty clear sticking as close to your damn show as possible was the best shot I had of getting home. So I made some friends in the business. Guys who'll gimme early drafts and stuff if I make it worth their while. But if they see I got one of the Leads with me they'll run a mile. No, you go home. I'll call you when I've got something."

"And we're supposed to just trust you?" Dean presses. "What's to stop you running off to wherever this ritual's taking place on your own?"

Gabriel's eyes darken, lips pursing like Dean's just fed him an unripe lemon.

"*Virgil's* stopping me, that's what," he answers, biting out the words. "If I can't even defend myself against a half-hearted hit from you, what chance do you think I have against Heaven's top assassin?" He breathes out sharply, shoulders

sagging. "I need you as much as you need me. So I'll suck it up and play nice if you will, at least until we're outta here. Agreed?"

Dean glances at Sam and they shrug in unison.

"Agreed."

## ACT II

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### EXT. JENSEN ACKLES' APARTMENT - LATE NIGHT

Dean lifts a hand in goodbye as Cliff pulls the company car out of Jensen's - *his* - driveway, gravel crunching under the tyres. He shakes his head as the car disappears into the night, heading to Richard's place across town, and wonders if the TV business is always as nuts or if it's just this universe. Because if Cliff had been surprised to find the stars he'd been waiting for outside the hospital inexplicably transported to Jared's, with an extra person in tow, he hadn't shown it. He'd just turned up and driven as Gabriel requested, no questions asked.

But then again, from what Dean remembers of his time there - which admittedly isn't much, considering how very distracting Tara Benchley had been, hell *yeah* - everyone in Hollywood had been equally eccentric. So perhaps the weirdness is a universal thing with actors and their entourage.

Well, whatever. Gabriel had said it might take a couple of hours to hunt down his 'sources,' so Dean figures he might as well make the most of them. Okay, it's not a mansion, but the two-storey apartment he's been dropped off at that this crazy world has given him license to call *his* for the night is nothing to sniff at!

Dean can't make out much of the garden in the dark, but he can see enough to know it's *big* - like, garden party big, in a way that puts Lisa's barbeques to shame - and there's the sound of running water coming from somewhere that he guesses means a fountain, and maybe a pond. Hell, for all he knows there's a freaking *lake* out there. But screw that, it's not the garden he's spending the night in.

With Virgil no longer an imminent threat and no other responsibilities to take care of, Dean finds he's actually kinda excited to see what Jensen's life has to offer him. If it's anything like Jared's, minus the inconvenience of a wife, he might be in for a treat. So it's with a sense of anticipation, then, that he makes his way to the front door.

He pauses at the lock, running through different ways to pick it with the limited tools available to him before he hits on the obvious solution. It's *his* apartment right? Dean pats down his jacket and, sure enough, eventually hears a jangle of keys in one of the pockets. Bingo.

It doesn't take long to find the one he needs from the bunch and a flick of the wrist later he's stepping into a roomy hallway and switching on the light.

It's not as ornate as Jared's place. Instead the fittings are modern. Sleeker. In futuristic whites and greys. There's no weird art deco crap lining the walls either, but there *are* a row of fancy framed mirrors, all freshly polished and gleaming.

There's a coat stand at the end of the stairs in front of him with a tall, circular table beside it. The table has a shallow bowl that Dean naturally drops his keys into as he kicks the door shut behind him and a pile of envelopes with Jensen's name and address scrawled or printed across the front. Curious, Dean leans down and starts leafing through the mail, wondering how much of it is exorbitant bills and if he even wants to know what people like Jensen are throwing away their absurd wealth on when he and Sammy have to scrape by with scams and hustling just to stay alive.

Somewhere in the middle of the pile his thumb catches on the crumpled edge of an envelope that's already been opened and he pulls it out, dipping a hand inside and finding -

A photograph.

Of himself in a loose fitting green hospital gown, grinning wildly at the camera and being hugged tightly by none other than *Doctor fucking Sexy MD*, with his trademark sexy cowboy boots and everything. He has an arm round the doctor's waist, *under* his white coat, and the guy is reaching across to ruffle his hair, stethoscope swaying between them.

Holy shit.

It's like someone's taken one of his most secret, most hidden fantasies and brought it to life. Dean doesn't know if he wants to burn the picture then and there, or steal it to take home with him.

He settles for dropping it, face down, onto the table and searching further inside the envelope. There's a letter inside, handwritten. '*Jensen! Thought you might like this one. It was blast filming with you - you **must** come back sometime. I'm*

*already talking to Paul about writing you in as a Recurring. Maybe even a love interest? Don't you dare say no. Love ya, babe, Steve.'*

Dean swallows and places the letter back with the others, extremely grateful neither Sam or, god forbid, Gabriel are there to witness how red he must be turning if the sudden burn in his cheeks is anything to go by. God, the mocking would have been unbearable.

Thankfully, as it is his embarrassment is a purely solitary affair and he's left to muse on his own over what's worse - the fact he knows, without even thinking about it, that 'Paul' is Paul Shore, Dr Sexy MD's producer and creator, and that 'Steve' is Steve Bacic, the show's charismatic lead. Or the fact that since seeing that picture his boxers have become notably... constricted.

A guilty pleasure for sure, in more ways than one. Even during his time in suburbia, where watching the show was considered a respectable pastime. Because Dean sure as hell doesn't think Lisa or Sid thought about the good doctor in quite the same way.

In fact, he might go as far as to say the whole crazy thing with Misha was, in many ways, a result of his secret addiction to the stupid show, with it's stupidly attractive star and his stupid boots, making him ask stupid questions of himself that he's neither thought nor wanted to before. Not to mention giving him stupid, inappropriate thoughts every time he walks in or past a hospital now. Which is only, oh, every damn hunt.

Coughing to get himself back under control Dean decides to leave the mail where it is and heads down the hall. There's gotta be alcohol in this place somewhere.

He glimpses the white wash of what's probably a kitchen ahead, but since the thought of cooking doesn't appeal he veers to the right, where an open door reveals a gloomy interior spotted with outlines of leather - chairs and sofas. He's just stepping inside when there's a distinct shuffle behind the door, making him tense.

Could Virgil have found him? He'd taken a hefty beating back at the set, so there's every chance he wants some payback for that. And who knows, maybe cutting Misha has wetted the angel's appetite for human violence.

Dean moves forward slowly, glancing as best he can through the hinge of the door. Only the barest slither of hall light is bleeding through, but it's enough to make out the shadow of someone lying in wait on the other side.

Adrenaline courses through him, almost unbearably strong after the relaxed state he'd let himself fall into believing himself safe for the night. Dean does his best to ignore it, working on keeping his breathing even as he inches further inside, hand reaching for the door handle.

It's not until he's almost at the edge of the open door that he acts, yanking on the handle and letting the resulting momentum slam the door shut. Meanwhile, he's darting round and slamming the body on the other side into the wall, one hand frisking down the partly raised arm and prying a heavy, bulky weapon from soft fingers. His other arm presses hard against his attacker's neck, not quite cutting off circulation, but with enough pressure to hold the mystery man - it's definitely a man - in place.

Oddly, though, the fight Dean's expecting doesn't happen. Instead the body he's pinned slackens in defeat, choking against his hold. Dean eases up a little and a frightened voice starts up.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! It's just me, Jensen! I'm sorry!"

"What the -?" Dean mutters. The voice sounds familiar, but he's not taking chances and keeps his arm on the other man while he gropes round for a light switch.

There's a brief glare of white when he finds one, then his eyes grow accustomed to the change and a pale, stubbled face comes into focus, eyes wide and afraid. The expression's so unheard of on that face Dean thinks he might not have recognised it if it wasn't for that damn gemstone blue round the pupils he's come to know so well.

"Ca -" he starts, biting down on the syllable and correcting himself. "*Misha?* What the *hell?*"

"I... I thought you might be a burglar!" the actor stammers.

Dean's adrenaline high siphons out of him, like sand through water, leaving him bone tired. He takes a step back, arm dropping, and Misha slips a little down the wall without the hold, threads of the grey woollen sweatshirt he's changed into catching on the plaster.

"Dude," Dean snipes, pissed at having got pumped up for nothing. "What kind of burglar uses the front door? With a key?" A question that of course leads to the more relevant - "And *I'm* the burglar? I'm the one who *lives* here! *You're* the one breaking and entering!"

"No, no!" Misha insists, holding up his hands in a placating gesture. "I didn't! I used the spare key." He pats his pockets, anxiety making him fumble, and eventually pulls out a set of keys on a chain and displays them. "In the fountain by the fish pond. Like I used to."

The cut metal tinkles between them and Dean lets the remaining tension in his shoulders bleed out. If Misha and Jensen really do have some kind of *thing*, then knowledge of a spare key seems more than likely. And besides, from what Dean's come to know of this Misha guy, the idea that he might be a threat is laughable.

Of more interest to Dean is the news that Jensen seems to have some kid of fish fetish. Because seriously - an aquarium in his trailer *and* a pond in his garden? Seems kinda excessive. Like, bald supervillain excessive. Was he gonna find a shark tank in the basement too?

Mistaking Dean's musings for further disapproval Misha presses on, one part explanation, three parts apology.

"I know you said not to. That... that it was over, for real this time. And I get that, I do. You're a great actor, Jen... Jensen. You shouldn't be tied down..."

Misha's tone lowers and he drops his gaze, shuffling his feet. There's embarrassment there, but an underlining disapproval as well that he's not sure of himself enough to voice.

Awkward as it is being on the receiving end of such an intimate outpouring, one that's ten times as cringe worthy for not being intended for him, Dean can't help but feel for the guy. The whole 'not wanting to be tied down' crap is *clearly* a line Jensen's thrown out at some point, no doubt to get Misha out of the picture so he



could go play doctor with Steve, and while the genders involved might be different it's something Dean's run with himself enough times to know *exactly* what a douchebag Jensen's being.

"I just... I keep seeing him, in the shadows and stuff, everywhere I go," Misha glances up, then sharply away, voice breaking as he mentions his attacker. It's at that point all comparisons to Cas, hell, even to Jimmy, fly out the window, because the vulnerability is so *different* and so *out of place*. "I... I'm scared he's laying in wait for me somewhere, that he's gonna try again and... and I wanted to be with someone. And you..." He swallows and dares to look back, catching Dean's eye. "Back at the hospital, you were really... so I thought..."

He takes a step forward, one hand reaching up - to Dean's shoulder, maybe, or his cheek. It doesn't matter in any case, because as Misha moves Dean flinches back a step, unnerved.

It's just so different to how things were at the hospital. Lines were blurred then, but this isn't Cas. Not anymore, not even close. This is just some stranger, some *guy*, coming on to him, and that's *weird*.

Misha stops still at the move - hurt and disappointment passing over his face. He doesn't even try and hide it. And this guy's supposed to be an actor?

"Uh... um..." He coughs. "Right. No. Stupid. I'm sorry, I... Forget it. It doesn't matter. But... but can I at least crash on the couch?"

He waves a hand at something behind Dean, who turns instinctively and gets a good look at the room for the first time.

He has to bite back a whistle of admiration, because it's incredible.

Real rock star glam.

The walls are a rich, slightly dappled, brown, making Dean think of chocolate - the dark, bitter, *expensive* kind that melts on your tongue and slides like silk down your throat - and are dotted here and there with an array of smoky, finely brushed paintings. The sort Dean hasn't seen since that auction house all those years ago with the haunted canvas. They have an ancient, long-lived feel about

them, contrasting with the modern fireplace opposite the doorway, which is all smooth silver and straight lines. An eclectic mix, but not unpleasant.

There's yet *another* ornate mirror above the fireplace, reflected in which - aside from Misha's kicked-puppy expression and Dean's faintly awed one - is a row of sparkling silver and gold awards of varying shapes and sizes lined up along the mantelpiece.

An empty spot jumps out to the right of the line-up and a glance back to the floor by the doorway reveals the missing piece, moulded into some strange, pop-art rectangle and fallen from Misha's fingers. As far as Dean can tell it's just a lump of glass with squiggles on the front, but it's large and weighty enough to be a decent weapon at a pinch, if you swung it right.

In front of the fireplace and over the room's varnished wooden floorboards is an honest to god tiger skin rug. It's minus the head, true, which means it might be synthetic, but Dean's not putting anything past his doppelganger at this point. On top of the rug is an elegant glass table and to either side are the most expansive, most sinfully luxurious sofas Dean's ever seen. Their black leather looks just worn enough that you know the fabric's gonna embrace you like a lost lover the second you drop into it. Something like the seats of the Impala, in fact.

If that wasn't enough, there's also a pool table to the left, a plasma screen TV hooked up to the wall on the right with a star-shaped clock above it, and in the near right corner a nicely sized cabinet topped with crystal decanter and a collection of tumblers.

Jackpot.

"I'll be gone before you even wake up," Misha's continuing. "You won't even know I'm here."

Feeling considerably less irritated by the guy's unexpected presence now the prospect of alcohol is within his grasp, Dean waves him off.

"Don't sweat it, man," he assures, magnanimously, over his shoulder as he heads to the cabinet. Being jittery after an attack - hell, after *dying* - is understandable after all. "Of course you can stay." Dean squats down to open the cabinet doors and can't hold back his grin at the sea of liquor inside. "And you don't have to

slum it on the sofa either," he adds, reaching in to look through the collection and tutting at the amount of pansy-ass fruit flavoured spirits he finds. What a waste of space. "I mean, Jesus, it's not like there isn't room!"

There's a pause. Then Misha's voice starts up again, uncertain.

"Really?"

Dean curses under his breath. He knows that tone. It's not suspicion, not yet, but it *is* a reaction to something out of character. He'd learnt the subtleties of that real early when Dad had - finally - started taking him with on his hunts. When he turns round Misha will no doubt have that soft crease in his temples when someone realises their expectations aren't quite being met - like when a trainee priest starts raving about Metallica, for example.

He glances round and yup, there it is, a soft smudge of confusion either side of Misha's brow, threatening to spread to an ugly black smear if Dean doesn't figure a way to airbrush it out quick.

For one crazy second, Dean imagines walking over and soothing the marks away with his fingers.

In the next, crazier, one he realises the thought's not even new. The guy's only a head tilt away from being Cas again with the look and Dean's always felt conflicted seeing uncertainty on the face of an angel, torn between endearment at the humanity in the gesture and pangs of guilt telling him it's wrong to take pleasure in seeing a being as pure as Castiel so tainted.

"What about Steve?" Misha asks with more shuffling, bringing Dean's mind back on track. "Don't you... I mean, if he found out, you wouldn't want to give him the wrong idea... and there's your whole 'ladies man' reputation and everything..."

What a dick, Dean thinks of Jensen as Misha continues to stumble through all of the guy's douchey reasons for hitting the breaks on their relationship. Sounds to him like, behind the fame, Jensen's just a plain old, run of the mill commitment-phobe and Misha's too scared to come out and say it. Sort of ironic, really - Dean Winchester arousing suspicion for not being *enough* of a dick.

In any case, it sounds like Jensen's bullshit is gonna be way too complicated to unravel enough to replicate, so Dean opts for a simpler way of defusing the situation.

"You want a drink?" he asks, cutting Misha off mid-mumble. The actor blinks down at him, distracted enough for his confusion to be momentarily dispelled. "Long night, right? Let's just... call it a write off, drink away our troubles and start over in the morning." He reaches to the back of the cabinet and pulls out the one bottle he recognised during his search - Blue Label whiskey. Rufus' favourite. "What'dya say?" he adds, holding it up for Misha to see.

There's a tense moment where Misha starts to frown and Dean thinks maybe he's used the wrong tact. Then the curve of the actor's lips switches - a flicker of a smile round a puff of laughter.

"A Dean Winchester special? Really?" he chuckles, nodding at the bottle. "I can't believe you even own that. Fan present, right? I thought you hated the stuff."

What the hell kind of man hates whiskey? Dean's opinion of Jensen is dropping by the second. Guy should listen to his fans. But while the slip up should have made things worse, the growing laughter in Misha's eyes has given him something to work with. If he can make a joke out of this then he's got an easy excuse for unusual behaviour.

"Ordinarily," he nods, standing up and twisting off the cap. Straight away setting the scene as *out* of the ordinary. "But after today, well..." He pulls two sparkling glasses across the cabinet surface and pours a generous portion of liquor in each - washing away the guy's logic with alcohol certainly can't hurt things either. "I think -" He grabs a glass in each hand and turns, holding one out. "- it might do us both some good to, err, act a little more like Dean Winchester tonight. What do you say?"

Misha hesitates and Dean quirks an eyebrow, encouraging. The insanity's not lost on him - he's working a con of *himself* here for god's sake. Dean Winchester, acting as an actor, acting as Dean Winchester. It's enough to make his head spin. But when in Rome...

And Misha seems to buy it, expression softening.

"Sure," he shrugs, head bobbing as he moves forward to take the offered glass. He stares at the swirling liquid, a final nod confirming his decision. "Yeah. Sure, why not?"

#### INT. JENSEN ACKLES' APARTMENT - LATER

Dean's not sure how it started, just that they're near the end of their second bottle - fans, it turn's out, are *awesome* - and with Misha constantly complimenting his 'acting' and how well he's getting inside Dean's 'headspace' this evening, and, you know, being who he is and looking like he does, it seems inevitable they'd end up talking about Castiel sooner or later.

"It's the way you can just, dip in and out of character like you do," Misha's saying. "I envy that."

He's not so far gone that he's slurring, but he's certainly more animated than Dean's seen him before. And far less reserved as well, with his body as much as his words - arms and legs sprawled out across the sofa next to the hunter with as little regard for personal space as his angel twin one universe over.

It's not a relaxed position though, akin more to a kitten rolling in the sun, all restless energy thrumming away under a cutesy exterior. Keeping him calm one minute and a frenzy of movement the next.

"I mean, it must be so great, you know?" the actor continues, one arm darting out in a burst of excitement. "Having someone like Dean Winchester basically on tap. All that... charm, and charisma... bravery..."

Shameless it might be, but Dean enjoys having his ego stroked as much as the next man and can't help smiling and nodding along with this particular assessment.

"God. If only it could be like that with Castiel, is all I'm saying," Misha ends with a sigh.

"Hey, you can - I mean - Cas can be badass when he wants to be," Dean blurts out, thinking about the smackdown the angel had given him when he'd been on his road to ruin and ready to give it up for Michael.

"Oh, absolutely," Misha agrees, nodding vigorously. "But he's so much *more* than that. He's not just an angel anymore, he was human, or as good as, for almost a year. That's gotta have taken some kind of toll. Left him all conflicted, emotional \_"

"*Emotional?*" Dean splutters round his next sip, liquid dribbling down the side of his glass. "Cas? You're kidding me."

"Well, it's all under the surface of course," Misha responds, gulping down another mouthful. "And that's the problem, cos I have to act that. There's so much going on with the guy, and I have to reign it all in. It's exhausting. Almost makes me miss how it used to be, right? When he was all 'I'm the one who gripped you tight' and 'show me some respect.' Back then a gruff voice and a straight back pretty much covered it."

Dean almost chokes on his next swallow, because the switch Misha makes from actor babble to talking *as Cas* is *uncanny*. The pitch and tone of voice, the inflections and, god, even his facial expressions, brief as the change is for the two snippets he offers, are *spot on*. As clear a difference as there is between Cas and Jimmy.

And it's stupid, right? Because he and Sam spent over an hour watching the switch before, so it really shouldn't surprise like it does. Except that was what feels like an age ago, and in the meantime there's been fights with a Heavenly assassin, fucking *Gabriel*, and then all of this. Getting to know Misha as *Misha*, as opposed to the empty fake Dean had taken him as when they first met. So for a time Dean had forgotten. Forgotten that stubbled jaw was usually straight and sombre, laughter lines round the eyes smoothed to the point of non-existence, making the wild blue inside seem ocean deep. Forgotten about the angel a galaxy away being hunted by a Don with wings. The angel who'd been AWOL for a year and even now stuck around only with reluctance, as tight-lipped and tight-assed as the good little soldier he'd been when he'd first raised Dean from the Pit.

The next swig of whiskey burns hotter down Dean's throat, firing up his vocal chords with all those bitter complaints bubbling under the surface whenever the feathered ass sees fit to visit these days.

Misha's face might not be a perfect match to Castiel's anymore, but it's close, and in some ways it's better this way. It keeps things that one step from reality. This isn't Dean Winchester chasing down a moment. It's just an act. A flesh and blood simulation, giving him all the satisfaction of the real thing, without the burden of it actually happening.

"I dunno, man," Dean starts, shaking his head, gaze dropping despondently from Misha to his glass to the wiry strands of rug beneath them. "Seems to me like seeing how the other half lives didn't do jack shit. You - I mean, Cas is two steps away from being the dick angel he started out as. Never around, never willing to give 'insignificant' us the time of day..."

"Well, he is fighting a war," Misha starts but Dean lifts his hand in a chopping motion, cutting him off, wanting this tirade to himself.

"Bullshit!" he spits. "You can only use that excuse for so long. We... *they*, him and Dean... and Sam... fought an apocalypse together. What? Does he think we've gone soft? That I'm not up to the fight? Or is it just all about the Bigger Picture again now and we don't even matter? A year in the trenches written off just because he's got his wings back and a full promotion as some hot shot General?"

It's probably for the best it's at that moment Misha reaches over to top up his glass and finds the bottle empty. Otherwise he might have noticed that the pinch between his co-star's eyes and the twist of his lips was a little too personal than even the most method of actors take their roles.

"Damn," Misha mutters under his breath, replacing the bottle on the table and swaying to his feet. "I'll see what else we got..." He veers round to the liquor cabinet, glass in hand. "And no, I don't think it's that at all. If the guys didn't matter, then why'd he bother trying to fix Sam, huh? No, *I* think, that some of it at least is about protecting them. The less you're involved, the less danger you're in. What you don't know can't hurt you. That kind of thing."

"So he *does* think we can't handle it," Dean surmises, dimly aware, through the warm haze of growing intoxication, that he's mixing his pronouns pretty badly at

this stage. Fortunately, Misha's alcohol stupor seems just as inhibiting and he doesn't notice.

"No, no," Misha insists, turning round with a bottle of something white and sickly looking in his hand. He points a finger at Dean, chastising, which is a sure indicator the alcohol's starting to take over since he's been nothing less than subservient in Jensen's presence up till now. "He just doesn't *want* you to handle it."

Dean scoffs.

"It's the same thing."

He gets a stern shake of the head in response.

"No. It's not," Misha intones, staring down and into Dean hard enough and long enough for lines to start blurring again. Then, just as Dean's catching the breath he seems to have misplaced, the actor turns away and twists open the bottle, releasing an aroma so teeth-numbingly sweet Gabriel would be jealous just thinking about it. "And anyway -" Dean's so morbidly fascinated by the slow glug glug glug of white into the glass he's only half listening to the next part. "That's all just expanding on the obvious, of course."

"The obvious?" Dean repeats, finding the undulation of Misha's throat as he sips the viscous stuff down slightly obscene. It had been hard enough getting Cas to accept a beer.

"Um-hmm," is the thoughtful hum he gets back, glass returned to the cabinet surface as Misha reaches inside to draw out a dark coloured bottle of something else and an ice bucket Dean hadn't noticed before. He mixes the ingredients together as fast and sure as Dean's ever seen Cas work a spell, throwing his next words out in a precise but offhand manner that might as well be in Enochian for all Dean understands him. "You know, Castiel being madly in love you and all that."

A stillness settles over Dean, broken only by the tinkle of ice against glass as Misha stirs his drink.



The laugh, when Dean finds his voice again, sounds far away and he barely registers the way he twists himself round to see over the back of the sofa.

"Say again?"

Oblivious to the effect of his words, Misha turns with a shrug, leaning on the cabinet as he continues. One hand rests on the wooden edge behind him, while the other keeps his drink to his lips like a microphone.

"It's what it all comes back to, isn't it?" he answers, casual, like they're discussing the chill Vancouver air this time of year or a topic similarly fundamental enough to have become mundane. "And I know, I know what you're gonna say -" He points with his glass, droplets of swirling white and black splashing in Dean's direction, even though Dean hadn't been about to say anything. "- a whole year without a word? He can't love him that much. But that's just *it* isn't it? Castiel's been this... this... practically emotionless automaton for what? Hundreds? *Thousands* of years. After that long with barely a hint of feeling, if you found yourself suddenly experiencing something that strong? You're not gonna enjoy it. You're not gonna embrace it. You're gonna get as far away from what's causing it as possible."

"Yeah, but -" Dean starts, voice scratchy and sticking in his throat, like he's forgotten how to use it. "- but Cas doesn't... that's not..."

Misha's drinking again, so he misses the tremor.

"No, not in the show, of course," he agrees. "Couldn't be. We've got all those viewers in the Bible Belt to consider, and god forbid an *angel* might be homosexual." He rolls his eyes. "Sucks ass is what it does. It's not like angels are a fixed gender anyway, and besides, fantasy shows, they're the way *in*, man. They're the ones to break the taboo. Look at *Buffy*, that's how *they* did it. The second people started complaining about Willow, or Spike and Angelus, all they had to say was 'Oh, she's a witch' or 'Hey, they're vampires' and no problem, scandal averted. But an angel of the lord? Oh no. That's different. That's *religious*." He shakes his head, a bitterness darkening his eyes that's entirely new to Dean. But it doesn't matter. The illusion's been dispelled for a while and Dean doesn't want it anymore in any case. He's got other things on his mind now. "Of course, those cowards hiding behind the Actor's Guild don't help, quoting privacy

laws and refusing to admit who they are! How are we ever going to ditch the stigma if people are too afraid to stand up for themselves?"

The words haven't even settled before Misha's slapping a hand to his mouth in horror, discarding his drink behind him to lift his other arm in supplication.

"Oh my god! That was a horrible thing to say, I didn't mean that!" he squeaks through his fingers. "I -" After a couple of twitches his hands drop to his sides, body deflating as they fall, like a punctured balloon. "I just... I get frustrated sometimes about... but people's personal lives are their own, of course, and I... I know that you're worried, about your family and... shit Jen, I'm sorry!"

A rush of affinity spirals inside Dean through the meltdown, burning through his veins like fire off a Catherine Wheel and making him dizzy. Because it seems Jensen might not be such a dick after all. Just a guy, very much like Dean himself, *very much*, working as best he can through a personal crisis.

"That's, err, that's okay, dude," Dean manages in response, since Misha seems under the impression he's about to cancel all his birthdays and Christmas forever. "Don't worry about -"

"No," Misha insists, hurrying to Dean's side and kneeling at the arm of the sofa. "No. I was out of line. Your private life is your own business. If you want to call it off with me because you're not ready to come out... and then hook up with a sexier, openly gay star from another show, that's... that's your call. I respect that. You're entitled..."

There's something both admirable and pathetic in the way Misha makes this spiel, that would be an accusation from anyone else, into apology and sycophancy together. Entitled is the word.

But as much as Dean feels he's bonded with his double the last few minutes, it's not *Jensen* he cares about.

"Hey, hey," he cuts through the babble, touching a hand to the ones Misha has clasped, prayer-like, over the leather arm between them. The guy takes an audible breath, chokes on it, and shuts up. "Don't worry about it. It's fine, it..." His mind's working so hard on how to play this Dean swears his palms are sweating with the effort and he moves his hand away before Misha can notice,

rubbing both of his roughly down his jeans. "You're *right*, okay? People should, um, stand up... for who they are. *I* should, I just, err... I'm not sure if it's the right... direction... for the show. I mean, you really... you really think Castiel... that there've been signs that..." He coughs. God this is getting so uncomfortable. But there's a part of him that *wants to know* too badly for him to back down now. "That he feels that way. About m- about Dean?"

Misha pulls back to look him over, boyish excitement crossing his face.

"You're asking me? Really?"

"Yeah," Dean nods. "Yeah, I'm asking."

"So, you... you're saying you might be interested? That you'd be up for it, if it plays out that way?"

"Um..." Dean's getting muddled now. What exactly is he being asked here?

The uncertainty seems to spur Misha into action and he jumps up, launching into an impassioned speech that, by the sounds of it, he's been waiting to break out for a while and wants to now before he loses his nerve.

"Because it would make sense, it really would!" he starts, waving his hands. "There's plenty of evidence." One flailing hand curls into a point, aimed at Dean's chest. "The way Castiel keeps dying for the guy for one. Twice now. Three times if you count that alternate future."

There's no criticism there, but Dean responds in the defensive anyway.

"No, he... he died because... because it was the right thing to do. For *humanity*."

"For what *Dean* believed would be best for humanity," Misha corrects. "Up until their spat in the beautiful room he was all for paradise, remember? And that's just the first time. When he stuck it to Lucifer humanity was pretty much a lost cause, Cas was just following Dean to the end of it all."

Dean shifts uncomfortably, leather groaning in protest beneath him as a waspish 'are you coming?' and a weary 'of course' echoes like a half-remembered nightmare in the back of his mind.

"Then there's the fact he was *dragged back to Heaven as punishment* for getting too close to the humans in his charge, remember?" Misha continues.

'My superiors have begun to question my sympathies.' Dean remembers.

"Not to mention their *profound bond*," He lifts his fingers to indicate quotations round the phrase. "And the soulful staring -"

"It's not... *soulful*..." Dean tries to interrupt, but Misha's on a roll.

"Oh, and remember how he was all up for losing his virginity last season, but freaked out by the *female* hookers? And the way he only ever answers when Dean's the one praying -"

"That's so not true!" Dean cuts in, sure enough to make himself heard this time. "He answers Sam."

This doesn't seem to deter.

"Only once Dean told him to, when he turned up answering *Dean's* prayer to help with the staff of Moses."

"A prayer he *wasn't even answering*," Dean counters. "He only came for the staff. Just like he only came for Gabriel's fucking horn and had to be dragged kicking and screaming to help out with Sam's soul."

Misha's lips quirk to the side in a small, knowing smile that Dean finds all too disturbing.

"Yeah. Whatever," is all the actor says. But he's *so sure about it*, it's enough.

Enough to turn everything Dean knew or thought he knew about Castiel back to front and upside down. Every word, every touch, every lingering glance - everything he'd shrugged at and written off or refused to examine beyond 'must be an angel thing' or 'that's just Cas' is scrutinised and reassessed. Because it's not like Cas is an open book, who the fuck can tell *what* the guy's thinking from looking alone? Maybe there *was* something going on beneath it all.

And worse. Dean has a nasty suspicion he's known it all along. He's just been too chickenshit to face it. Spent a whole year playing house and trying his hardest to forget the angel even existed so he wouldn't *have* to face it.

Because what the fuck is he even supposed to do with that?

A kiss is one thing. And something more, say, below the belt - well, call it a maybe.

But lo- but anything else? Jesus. No. Bad idea. Very bad idea. Wasn't his failure with Lisa a testament to that? Better all round if nothing came of it, no matter how much they might want it.

*Cas* might want it.

*Might.*

His thoughts are interrupted by a mighty sigh from Misha, who then flops down, dejected, beside him on the sofa.

"Oh, but what's the point?" the actor laments, with more than a little melodrama, in Dean's opinion. "None of this even matters, cos the Network's never gonna go for it."

He shakes his head, gaze kind of feverish now, and Dean can tell he's already forgotten about his inadvertent insult to Jensen, about whatever the hell he'd been trying to convince the guy of with all this, the alcohol taking his mind elsewhere.

"And it's *such* a *shame!*" he moans, before making a sharp turn to look Dean in the eye. "And I don't just mean that because you're fucking hot and I would *love* to make out with you onscreen." Dean just blinks, not even given the chance to process that one. "It's because it would be so good for the *story* if they got together! For *Castiel and Dean*, you know?" He turns away again, gaze distant. "Wouldn't it be just amazing, after this huge journey he's been on from soldier to rebel to free spirit, to see Castiel come out of his shell some more? To live a little, for himself?"

Dean pictures that night they trapped Raphael together. How Cas had been so ready to sit quiet until a morning that, for all the angel knew, would mean his death. The idea that you could actually *do something* with your life, just *because*, not even crossing his mind. Sure, the hooker had been a wash out - because Cas was socially inept and *not* because he wasn't interested in girls, like his doppelganger seemed to be implying... maybe - but Dean has to admit a lot of the fun that night had come from seeing Castiel's stoic Vulcan façade start to crack. Seeing him lose his cool. Acting nervous. *Smiling*.

So yeah. Maybe... maybe that would be pretty amazing.

"And god knows Dean deserves something of his own, after all the crap *he's* had to suffer, everything he's *sacrificed*," Misha continues, making Dean tense. What the fuck? Stuff about Cas, that was kinda interesting. Probably bullshit, but interesting. But head-shrinking Dean Winchester? Oh no, Dean's not down with that at *all*. "I mean, it's always been about everyone else, hasn't it? His dad, Sam, the whole damn *world*. He should have someone there for *him* for a change."

"Sam's there," Dean offers without thinking, nearly biting his unforgivably loose tongue off after. Like Misha needs any *encouragement* about this. Fuck. Stupid psyche 101 moment drawing him in.

"Well, yeah, there's *always* Sam," Misha shrugs. "But there are certain needs Sam can't exactly fulfil, you know? Despite some of the fans more disturbing erotic fantasies." He lifts an eyebrow in Dean's direction and Dean gives a weak smile in return, trying hard to make out this hasn't just become the most awkward topic ever. "So seriously, why *shouldn't* Dean have a real relationship? One that's more than just sex. Something stable. Something long term."

Misha fixes those wide, angelic eyes of his on Dean and Dean's mind draws a blank. There's a way out of this question, he's sure of it, but half his mind's still spinning with new thoughts about Cas and the other half's being held hostage by Blue Label's finest, so he can't figure it out.

Instead, what spills out of him is the truth.

"Because I... because he can't."

He leans forward to rest his hands between his knees, staring down at his calloused fingertips. Not exactly a working man's hands to be proud of, when they're calloused from killing more than hard labour.

Oh great, so he's moved on to the melancholy stage of drunkenness.

Should have sent Misha to bed already and called it a night.

"Can't be a hunter and a family man," he continues anyway, because he's started and some weirdass drunken logic is telling him he has to finish before they can wrap this up. "Already tried that and failed."

"Except he didn't though," Misha counters. "Just tried being a family man. It was Lisa who suggested the combination."

Dean's not so drunk that he doesn't realise it's freaky for a stranger to know that. His talks with Lisa have always been private, even from Sam, so Misha can only have known about Lisa's optimistic plan to juggle their home life with hunting from watching it on that damn show. Dean pinches the bridge of his nose. He thinks he can feel a headache coming on.

"Yeah, well," he mutters, rising to his feet and stumbling towards the liquor cabinet for a refill. "She realised her mistake soon enough."

Now if he can just find another Blue Label and a clean glass fast enough, he might be able to block out the thump and thwack sounds of Ben's back and head hitting the wall where Dean's super vamp strength had thrown him.

"Yeah, poor Lisa," Misha agrees with a strain of leather to accompany him, like he's stretching his arms out, head dropping on the back of the couch. "Though, in a lot of ways, she brought it on herself. Should have known better."

"You shut the fuck up!" Dean snaps instinctively, spinning round before he's even reached the cabinet - a little too fast for his legs to keep up with to be honest. He glares at the tousled back of Misha's head in reproach. "Lisa's a fucking... a fucking *incredible* person. Don't you *dare* talk about her like that!"

It's a step too far, even for a drunken actor, and Misha's frowning as he turns his head, blinking to try and cope with a shock his inebriated self isn't fully equipped to handle.

"Whoa, Jen, chill out, man," he says, arcing a hand over the sofa's edge in a calming gesture. Dean swallows hard and tries to get some kind of game face back on. "I'm not part of the Lisa-bashing side of the fandom, you know that. I think she's great. Just what Dean needed after an apocalypse." The TV buzzwords mean nothing to Dean, which does a lot to calm him down, actually. Idiot. Of course Misha wasn't being personal. Lisa's just a freaking 'character' to him. "But come on, even she had to have known the set-up was temporary. Dean's not the white picket fence kind of guy."

Dean opens his mouth to argue, but stops himself. He's caused enough trouble in this conversation already and besides, he thinks, remembering the weary pull he'd never quite shifted at the Braeden's, the rush he'd felt slipping back into the Impala again - maybe the guy's got a point.

"All I'm saying is, she wasn't for him," Misha finishes, confusion sliding away into a flat, sympathetic smile. Thank god for the mind-numbing effects of alcohol.

"They had a *good life* though," Dean insists. Forgetting he was trying to *stop* with the talking. Goddamn the mind-numbing effects of alcohol.

"Oh, of course. Of course," Misha nods, shifting so he's kneeling backwards on the couch. He folds his arms across the back and rests his chin, schoolboy-like, in the centre of them. "The best. He was living the dream. But, you know, that's all it was. Just a dream. There was no way he was gonna stick with it, even if Sam *hadn't* showed. No more than he could in that dream world that that... what was it...? Um... genie, no, djinn, that djinn trapped him in that time. And Lisa knew it. That's why she told him to go be a hunter again." Misha yawns, loudly, not bothering to cover it, and lays his head across the fold of his arms. He keeps talking though, even with his eyes closed. "Should have made a clean break of it then. Would have been better. But it was Dean fucking Winchester, wasn't it? If you've got someone like that, standing right in front of you, practically begging you to let them stay... Even if you know it's bullshit, you can't blame someone for wanting to hang on to that."

"I really did wanna stay..." Dean rasps, wishing he could stop himself.



But the fact is, he's in a unique situation here. For the first time in his life he has a real opportunity to unburden himself, to talk through those feelings he usually holds so close, *without* any consequences. And the temptation to roll with that is proving far greater than he could have anticipated.

Because what's the danger? If all goes well, this whole damn *universe* will be nothing but dust at their heels this time tomorrow, and in the meantime there's no one here who can actually use what he might reveal against him. His *only* enemy in this world is Virgil, and the single-minded angel couldn't give a damn about Dean's emotional state, all he cares about is reporting back to Raphael with that key.

Maybe... maybe it'd be good, opening up out of choice instead of necessity. Sam hasn't stopped trying it yet, despite everything, so there's gotta be *something* in it.

"Wow, Jen, that's amazing," Misha grins through Dean's deliberations, eyes blinking open but staring past Dean rather than on him. Probably cos the guy's got two Dean's in his unfocused vision by now and is trying to fix on the second one. "Exactly like he'd say it," he continues, lifting his head with some effort. "Like he really believes it." Misha's eyebrows curve down for a moment. "Because he would, wouldn't he?" he nods. "Yeah. I get it. A normal, apple pie life, that's like the Promised Land for a hunter. It's what Sam ran away to find. What Mary made a deal with the devil for. Hell, even John respected it, even if he did raise the boys up as hunters instead, cos that's why he wanted Azazel so bad, to punish the guy for taking it away. Yeah, that fits..." Misha unfolds his arms, grips the edge of the sofa with both hands, and pushes himself back, holding that way like a cat stretching after napping. "So it's no surprise Dean's gonna think he's supposed to want it too. Especially when Sam made him promise. His brother's last wish. And then he spends a whole year working on it. Ben's practically calling him 'dad.' God..." Misha rolls his shoulders, head circling fluidly from one to the other. Like the limber movements of Castiel's junkie alter ego, only without the accompanying ache in Dean's chest from seeing it. "No way could Dean possibly admit, not even to himself, that it might *not* be what he wants. Not after all that. Cos what would that make him? Pretty much the exact opposite to everyone he cares about. Some kind of masochist. A freak who prefers killing to raising a family."

Dean turns before Misha can finish limbering up and grips the edge of the liquor cabinet, *hard*, jaw clenching. No. No opening up is a bad idea, a fucking bad idea. He was wrong, he doesn't want to unburden himself. In fact, he doesn't want to think about any of this ever. At all.

He knows killing is the only thing he's good for. That cat lady in Calumet City had wrenched that out of him good and proper and he's trying his damnest to repress it again thanks. That way at least he can be a functioning monster, as opposed to a rabid one like Gordon had been, embracing his bloodlust until he was no better than the crap they hunt even *before* those vamps had turned him.

"It would never occur to him, of course," Misha's continuing, sofa creaking as he gets up and ambles over to the cabinet himself. God Dean needs to find a way to shut him up. He's probably far gone enough that if Dean punched him out he wouldn't remember in the morning. "That hunting might be something worthwhile. That fighting monsters doesn't have to be this dark, terrible thing it's become for him and Sam these last few seasons. That, actually, it's about keeping the darkness away." Misha stops at the end of the cabinet, a little way from Dean, and chuckles. "Which is funny, because that's exactly how he used to pitch it to Sam in the first season, right? The two of them have completely switched perspectives. And so natural you almost don't notice. This writing team, I swear... In fact, you know, I'd bet if you asked Dean he wouldn't even remember a time when hunting seemed like a good thing. Or he's convinced himself that if he ever did think like that, it's only more evidence of how abnormal he is." Dean watches Misha's fingers as they pick a couple of ice cubes from the bucket and drop them in his glass, too absorbed in what the guy's saying to look up. Not trusting himself to anyway. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Misha's head shake, lips curving fondly. "No one does self delusion quite like Dean Winchester."

The muscles in his jaw are so tight it physically hurts to work them, but Dean's not trying to be audible anyway. He's just trying to calm the fuck down so he can finish this.

"No," he whispers. "No one does..."

Misha, pouring more white and black liquid over his ice, doesn't hear.

Dean coughs and straightens up, putting a sense of finality to his next words. To bring an end to this discussion.

And maybe, just maybe, because it's the truth.

"Guess that settles it then. Dean Winchester is... not cut out for a relationship. Glad we, uh... glad we got that sorted out."

Misha chokes on his next sip in his hurry to reply.

"Well, not a civilian one, no, that's what I'm saying," he says, wiping his lips with his sleeve. "Cos he's not a civilian, and why should he be? No. He needs someone more like him and Sam, someone in the life." His gaze is bright and intelligent again, like the new drink and turn in his argument have invigorated him. Dean opens his mouth to ward off this second wave, but Misha ploughs over him. "Someone who *knows* what's out there and is strong enough to face it, so he doesn't have to worry about protecting them. Someone to hit the road with, share the thrill. Someone who's not afraid to bitch at him when he needs it, but he can trust to be with him when it matters. Someone he can stand back to back with in a fight, but who can stand just as well on their own when they need to and knows when to give him his own space. *That's* the kind of relationship Dean wants."

Dean's protests die along with his next breath.

Yeah. Yeah that fucking is what he wants.

Downing the last of his drink, Misha adds, nonchalantly, "Castiel would give him all of that. *And* more."

He shrugs, ignoring Dean's stare in favour of swirling the ice in the bottom of his glass, blending the milky dregs caught between the cubes.

"But I dunno," the actors muses. "You're right. Dean *wouldn't* think he's cut out for it. Or he'd misunderstand and think it's deviant or... or demonic or whatever to want something like that. Or he'd feel too obligated to Lisa and Ben to even try. And that's without even touching on Castiel being a *guy*, which, come on, is gonna be a *thing* for Dean, no matter what the fans say. And Cas would be too terrified to even *think* about making a move, especially when he's got so many of

his own problems to deal with." He breathes out, heavy and sad. "Maybe the Network's not the issue. Maybe Kripke and Sera really are on top of the story and it just *isn't* meant to happen..." He sighs. Frowns. "But I just... I'm *sure* there'd be a way for them to have a shot at it. If they could just, just get passed that initial -" He pushes a palm through the air, like he's straining against an invisible barrier. "That initial -" He makes a frustrated sound in the back of his throat. "You know?"

The question stays hanging in the air for what feels like an eternity to Dean, the rate his heart's pounding making whole lifetimes seem to pass in a few seconds. But he can't seem to slow it down. It's like he's on the very edge of something, all he needs to do is take one more step. One more.

But... will it really take him somewhere better? Or be just another in a long line of screw-ups?

He can't be sure. Unless.

Unless there were some way to give it a trial run first.

A rehearsal, say.

"How? How would they?"

The question sounds disembodied. Drawn out of him by an invisible hand. A line in a script he has no control over.

Misha hums, runs a hand across his jaw as he thinks, then smiles.

"By accident," he nods, looking to the distance, eyes flicking every so often from side to side, as though following something Dean can't see. "They'd be arguing," he continues, lifting away from the cabinet and taking a couple of steps forward, like the scene's literally playing out in front of him and he's trying to get a better look. "Right up in each others' space, like Dean always complains about, but never seems to mind when it's happening. All that sexual tension they have built to such a breaking point it finally, just... there's nowhere else for them to go."

Dean's breath is coming in short pants now as he watches the other man, eyes wide, like Misha's turned into some kind of Oracle. A fortune cookie come to life. Every word passing his lips cutting deep, deep to the heart of him.

"Sexual..." he breathes. No, it's just tension. Just - "What are they arguing about?"

But Misha shakes his head.

"Improv's not... really my thing," he answers, dropping his head briefly, lower lip sucked in. "I'd need something to play off. Cas might be chewing him out over Sam's soul again, I guess. Or maybe Dean would start it. Something about, I don't know, Balthazar or -"

"Or where the fuck he's *been* all this time," Dean supplies.

And when the actor looks up at him, quizzical, hair mussed from where he's been lying on the sofa, head angled to the side, eyes catching in the lamplight so they shine vivid and surreal, it's like a switch flipping. Like someone's upped the contrast on the TV set. Same image - new perspective.

Dean rushes forward, losing himself in the moment. And in that moment everything that *is* makes way for what *could be*, all the things he's wanted to say ever since Pennsylvania, ever since lies about a bond that hasn't been profound longer than Dean wants to admit he cares about, exploding out of him - sharp-edged, shrapnel-like and dark. Like text on a fresh sheet of paper.

"Seriously. A whole freaking *year* with *nothing*? Not just to Sam but to me?" He crowds in so they're face to face. Close. Familiar. Tense. "For all I knew you were dead too. You couldn't take a goddamn minute out of your oh-so-busy schedule to say 'hello' a little sooner?"

It should probably be weird to see that face stiffen - jaw hardening, lips thinning. But it's not. It's natural. Obvious. The first time Dean's felt anything remotely real for too long.

"I was fighting -" is the response and god that *voice*. Black as thunder and rasping, like sandpaper dipped in Whiskey.

"You're *still* fighting!" Dean snaps back. "And yet here you are. Free to rip me a new one whenever you feel like it! Free to spill the beans to Sam about stuff that could literally *kill him*, or *worse*, if he remembers too much! Free to recruit Heaven's answer to fucking Casanova to your war effort! And yet back when the world was falling apart, when Sam was out there *alone* and I was trying to pick up the pieces of Armageddon, where were you then, huh?!"

"And the blame for all this must, necessarily, rest on my shoulders, I suppose?" Dean gets in reply, blue eyes glinting at him hard and cold. "It does not occur to you that while you were engaged in such taxing occupations as hammering nails and raking leaves, that you never once considered calling for *me*."

"Fuck that," Dean spits, shaking his head so thoughts of this don't stick. He doesn't want to be questioned here, doesn't want the cold hard *truth* of things getting in the way. He just wants to feel. To be angry. He wants the heat and burn of blood rising beneath his skin, obscuring everything else. "Why should I have? *You're* the one who upped and left without so much as a goodbye. What was I supposed to think?"

Eyebrows lift.

"Perhaps that I offered no farewell because our parting was *never intended as one*."

"Then why the radio silence? Why keep us out of the loop? You know I'm starting to think there is no war, that you're making it all up. You and Raphael spend all your time playing chequers up there and -"

Dean's back hits the wall, but it's only his lack of breath that tells him how hard because he barely feels it, the arm across his throat more an irritation than a threat.

"My family is being torn apart, my brothers and sisters *dying*, the world once more on the edge of destruction, and you stand here making jokes!" The breath on his face is too sweet. But somewhere behind that Dean thinks he catches a scent he knows - musky, wet earth and pine. "You are the most... arrogant... *infuriating*... creature I have ever known." They haven't been this close since that night he'd gone after Michael. Dean bloody and broken where Cas had thrown him, begging for he didn't know what, and couldn't have said even if he had. "I

shouldn't care about a single word you say. I shouldn't... but I *do*... How is it, *Dean*? How is it that through everything you remain... so *compelling* to me...?"

They're closer now, breath mingling. Dean can feel hot tendrils of it trickling down his throat. His eyes shift from wild blue to soft, full lips, so near his own that looking makes them blur.

Everything slows. Fierce anger calming to a steady burn.

They don't even need to move. Both their lips part that bit wider and they're touching, easy, just like that. Like it's nothing new. Like it's something they've been meaning to get around to all along, they've just never found the time.

"*Cas...*" Dean whispers, sealing the caress as the kiss it is, the two of them pressing in together, feather light, warm and safe and quiet.

The moment holds and stretches, Dean's eyes drifting shut so there's nothing but the feel of it. Stubble scratching his jaw. The hot slide of tongue against his own. Pressure all around him like a cocoon. Heavy breath and the hard feel of a body lining up against him, strong enough to overpower him if he wasn't giving back just as much, meeting the weight, finding a balance.

The wonder comes later - a flip of shock in his stomach at what they're actually *doing*, but mostly a flush of heat all over easing his tension away, every part of him given over to this, completely. Because there's no sense of *yesthis*, no revelation - just this gentle want. Rich and satisfying. Both of them drinking each other in, like a cool glass of water on a hot summer day. Their need for this, for each other, slowly, languidly, quenched. Something inevitable, something to be savoured.

When they pull away their lips are still catching, not wanting to lose each other. But Dean needs the air and he wants to see again, to find that blue.

It's there waiting for him, wide open and clear. But when Dean leans back in the colour darkens, the arm against him sliding off.

Panic, Dean thinks.

"No," he says. "No. Not this time. You're not going anywhere."

He says it like it's fact. He's not asking, he just knows. There'll be no flying away tonight.

And with that he grips a hand round Cas' neck, another at his side, and twists him round, reversing their positions and kissing him again, hard, into the wall. Much like the angel had done with Meg not so long ago. Something Dean can't deny that, even at the time, with hellhounds inches away howling for their blood, had held an erotic charm. It was something about the way Cas had snapped so completely from his usual cool, all of him given over to the tangible, pornographic, touch and feel of the embrace. Shameless and wanton.

Now though - now Dean imagines himself sucking the taint of that demon whore away like so much poison, until there's nothing left for him but Cas, and nothing for Cas but him.

There's no hesitation in the kiss he gets back, lips moving with his like it's what they were made for, strong and slender hands cupping his face to keep him close. Like Dean has any intention of moving away.

He grips Cas' waist in both hands, aware, absently, that it's broader than the feminine dip and curve he's used to, and aligns their bodies, bringing their chests flush together, one leg locking neatly in the space Cas has left open for him.

There's a moan down his throat that could be from either of them, heady pleasure flowing upwards as their cocks meet through matching denim, both of them straining towards the other.

Less controlled than Dean, Cas bucks up into the pressure, intensifying it so it's almost painful.

"Fuck," Dean gasps, breaking their kiss. "*Fuck*, Cas. I -"

Cas strokes both thumbs down his cheeks, cutting him off. He stares straight into Dean and says, "yes." Like his litany of curses had been a question. Always with the taking things literally. And maybe Dean fucking loves him for that, he thinks, as Cas runs a hand all the way down his shirt and into his pants.



He makes short work of Dean's button and fly, like he's done this a hundred times before, and dives right in, rubbing the ball of his hand firm and smooth where Dean's waiting for him. Dean's so ready for the burn he can't help rutting into the touch, a choked back whimper hiccupping down his throat as Cas moves back up and along again, eyes holding Dean's the whole time. Like he's trying to catalogue Dean's reaction.

Apparently it meets his standards, because a small smile curves up at one side of his mouth. Small, but real. A crack in the angel's stoic armour that's only for Dean. It's enough to make his cock twitch of its own accord in Cas' hand, which, in turn, spreads that smile across the whole of the angel's face.

His other hand leaves Dean's cheek, and for a moment Dean feels cold and empty without it. Until Cas uses both hands to tug down jeans and boxers together, freeing Dean's cock to the cooling air and the warm embrace of Castiel's fist.

Dean mutters something unintelligible and grips Cas' waist tighter, fingers biting through cotton and the skin beneath as waves of ecstasy crash through him with every twist and pull of Cas' hand.

For a long time all Dean can do is hold on, the electric heat of it too overwhelming. Which is nuts, because a handjob really shouldn't be this amazing, especially when he's this intoxicated.

But it's *Cas*. Castiel, *angel of the lord*, getting down and dirty with him, with a bulge in his pants that says he's getting off on it like nobody's business and wearing a body that's very much a *man*. Which, yeah, should be an issue, but all Dean can think is that this is breaking every Sunday School taboo short of murder he's ever heard of and well, he's always had a kink for the forbidden.

Then, when Cas flicks his wrist just so, a full on growl rumbling in the back of his throat as he watches Dean shake in response, it takes everything Dean has not to shoot his load right there.

"Oh *god*," he moans instead, spurts of pre-come pooling round his head. Cas swipes over it, quick and precise, coating his hand and going straight back to working Dean's cock until it's throbbing with heat, wet and slippery and almost out of Dean's control. "Oh god oh god..."

A low chuckle at Dean's ear makes him startle. He didn't know Cas had moved in so close.

"No," the angel murmurs against the underside of Dean's jaw. "Just me."

And that's it, that's the tipping point. Except Dean snatches at Cas' wrist before it happens, yanks his hand away.

"Jesus, Cas," he pants, gritting his teeth to hold himself back. "Stop. Stop."

Cas jerks a little under Dean's hold, suddenly nervous, and Dean steps closer to reassure him, other hand reaching up to brush his cheek.

The eyes Dean meets are shuttered this time, pushed down by questioning lines across his brow. Dean doesn't like those lines. He's never liked those lines. Well, maybe sometimes he likes them. But not here and now. Luckily, he seems to remember a good way to get rid of them, a plan he had a while back, about something... The details are fuzzy, but whatever it was it must have been genius if he'd thought of it. So he moves his hand up and soothes along Cas' forehead with his fingers, stroking back further into his hair and planting gentle kisses at the corner of the angel's lips.

"Oh, baby," Dean murmurs between kisses, thumb circling the underside of the wrist he's still holding. "Keep this up and I'm gonna lose it."

Lips twitch beneath his own, shifting away to whisper.

"Well... yeah."

Something about the delivery jars. It's too colloquial. Niggling the back of Dean's mind.

He shakes the thought off before it can form and pulls back.

"No." Dean strips off his jacket and starts on the buttons of his shirt. "We're gonna sail off this cliff, then we're doing it together."

A breathless nod back - shit, *Cas breathless* - and the angel's cheeks burn red. Jesus, there's so much there. Passion, lust, excitement. So many fucking feelings where once upon a time, a time before Dean, there'd been *none*.

Impatient, Dean leaves his shirt only three quarters done, hands darting forward to ruck up the edge of Cas' sweatshirt. Part of him falters over the absence of his friend's trenchcoat, but what the hell, they're losing the clothes anyway, if there's less to strip then that's all to the good.

Cas cottons on fast and pulls the fabric up the rest of the way, giving Dean the chance to tackle the angel's zipper. In a long practised manoeuvre he opens it up and drags Cas' jeans and boxers away, leaving his cock to bounce free, warm and pink and alive in a way the bulging, angular monstrosity Alistair used to offer had never been.

Dean had been worrying, in a distant, repressed, sort of way, that those memories might stop him here, might make the whole thing too repulsive for him to continue. But he couldn't have been more wrong. Cas' skin is vibrant and clean, his chest heaving with anticipation, with a need *only Dean* can satisfy, and the sight leaves Dean giddy with desire. His fingers itch to claim his friend's arousal, to milk it and watch it grow all the way to its first, exultant, completion. He ignores the voice in the back of his head telling him to remember Balthazar and that he's a fool if he thinks Cas is still a virgin, because of course he is. Dean's the one who showed Cas how to stand up to his bosses, how to think for himself, he's the one who taught Cas about pop culture, and friendship, and other cool, human things. So it's obvious *he's* the one who's supposed to guide Cas through this as well. Obvious that Cas is *hishishis*.

So Dean flattens one palm over Cas' chest for support, heartened by the dreamy sigh Cas gives in response, and draws in closer to wrap his fingers, tight and sure, round Castiel's erection. The angel hisses, head dipping so their foreheads touch, hands reaching out to knead Dean's shoulders.

"Oh..." he moans as Dean works him, breath hitching. "Oh... J... I... *Dean...*"

"Yeah, baby, that's it," Dean smiles, turning his head to touch his lips to Cas' temple.

He presses in with his hips at the same time, hand opening to crush their cocks together, fingers circling round them both as best he can. Cas' hiss and his own moans reverberate around the room, the angel's fingers crawling under Dean's open collar, nails scratching his neck and down his shoulders.

Dean doesn't know when they start rocking, just that they are. Nice and smooth like a ship on still water. Pleasure climbing up and up between them in a sweet, relentless rise.

"Come on, come on..." Dean urges as he nears the edge. "Come... come with me... stay with me, Cas..."

He tries to hold off to let Cas catch him up, he really does, but Cas' hands are sliding that little bit lower down his shoulders, the fingers at Dean's left brushing over sensitive bumps and stretched out skin - a scar that's never fully healed and Dean's not even sure he wants to anymore - and Castiel cries out in surprise. Like touching the mark, *his* mark, has ignited something between them, activated that bond, or whatever, and it's the final push Dean needs. He comes with a shout, throat raw with it, while the rest of him pulses with delicious heat and release.

And, much to Dean's delight, Cas follows him over a second later with a deep keening noise. He buries his face in Dean's neck and stays there until they're sated and slumped against each other, weak and shivering in the aftermath.

#### INT. JENSEN ACKLES' APARTMENT - EVEN LATER

There's barely an afterglow before Dean finds himself crashing back to reality, or what's passing for it, sticky and entangled in the arms of what is really *not* an angel.

Fuck.

He extracts himself with a speed he hopes isn't offensive. No need to ruin Misha's night of finally getting some from his dick of an on-off boyfriend. Although, despite being the one who must have embarked on this whole thing with most of their awareness intact, Misha seems just as uncomfortable now they're done. It's

more than his previous panic about earning Jensen's disapproval too, the conspicuous lack of apology proves that. As does the silence and the way Misha's eyes are fixed all too diligently on the slide of his zipper, a nervous tension pervading his body and making his fingers stiff and hard to work.

If this were any other sexual fumble, Dean knows he'd have a quip ready to lighten things up - an easy chuckle and apology for the white smear he can see across Misha's stomach, perhaps, that's as much him as it is the other man. *Man*. Fuck. This is it. His first official batting for the other team.

Because Alistair, and the rest of those forty years, *do not count*.

Even that's not what's holding his tongue, though. The guy thing's weird, no doubt, but Dean's faced weirder. If this guy were a stranger his comeback might take longer but Dean's sure he'd get there eventually. No, it's the fact he *isn't* a stranger. Well. He *is* but - damn it. The fact of the matter is, the dress - or rather *undress* - rehearsal was so fucking *good* he's come out of it all but resenting this guy for standing there and taunting him with Cas' face and body and scent but not actually *being* the angel.

And yet what did he expect? That he could somehow magic Castiel into being with the power of his cock?

Cas isn't here. Cas is *never* here anymore.

And this will never, *could* never, happen.

It's been nothing but a pipe dream. A pipe dream in a drunken fantasy and down the fucking rabbit hole into Wonderland. It's not real. It can't be. None of it.

"I... uh... I should clean up," Misha stutters once he's, finally, tucked away, dashing from the room without a second look and not even bothering to collect his fallen sweatshirt.

Dean watches him go with a frown, because if either of them is due a big gay freak out he's pretty damn sure it should be *him*. What with Misha being all pride-parade earlier and everything.

He doesn't though, much to his surprise. Instead he very calmly fixes his own boxers and jeans. Then he rinses his hands in the kitchen sink next door, rebuttons his shirt and positions himself back on the sofa facing the liquor cabinet, waiting for Misha's return.

About half an hour later it occurs to him he's been waiting a lot longer than a quick wash should account for and he's just about to leave the room again to check on his absent companion, when Misha walks back in.

Ignoring Dean completely the actor makes a beeline for the alcohol, scooping up his top on the way and reaching down to pull out a bottle of vodka. He proceeds to pour this half way up a clean tumbler and swallows it straight in a single gulp. He makes a face as the aftertaste hits, even as his hands work mechanically on pouring another. This is downed in a similar fashion, but when he moves to pour a third Dean decides the self-destructive crusade has gone on far enough.

"Hey, man. You okay?" he interrupts.

Misha stops abruptly. He's angled away, but not enough that Dean can't catch his nervous, rabbit-in-the-headlights, expression.

"Fine. I'm fine," Misha answers, high-pitched and hurried, with all the sincerity of a kid elbow deep in that off-limits cookie jar.

The way he deposits glass and bottle on top of the cabinet with a clatter and takes two tries to get his top on the right way doesn't inspire further confidence in the answer.

What the fuck? Dean didn't think the sex was *that* bad. A bit uncoordinated, sure, but neither of them were exactly sober, and they'd both been totally hot for it at least, in the end. So yeah, all in all - the, uh, Cas thing aside - he's rather proud of his first above ground shot at the guy-on-guy scene.

The violence to enjoyment ratio had certainly been different to his past experience, which had been nice - unless. Shit. Is he so tainted that he can't even *tell* what's rough and what isn't anymore?

"You don't look fine," he starts, trying for tact but ending up blunt and accusing instead. Story of his life. "I... uh... I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Misha blinks, frozen expression melting away by degrees into something less crazed and more thoughtful.

"No..." he murmurs, head turning, just a fraction, in Dean's direction. "No, you didn't," he adds, soft but with conviction. "And you wouldn't, would you?"

"What? No!" Dean replies, freaked out by the *wonder* in the tone, like this is something Misha's been in doubt of for a while. Has he been misjudging this Jensen guy *that* badly? "No, of course not!"

"No..." Misha repeats, still with that same sense of discovery, finally shifting to meet Dean's eye. "I believe you."

His gaze is calmer now, Misha's shoulders rolling back as his whole body relaxes. Which would be good, if it wasn't for the complete lack of recognition on his face, piercing blue moving up and down Dean like he's a particularly fascinating stranger. Has he sexed the guy into a total loss of recall or what?

"Okay," the actor nods. "Okay. So. Just one question." He fixes on Dean, hard, remnants of Cas' unwavering focus making Dean gulp. "Who are you? And where's Jensen?"

Dean wants to crack that, technically, that's two questions. But Misha's so deadpan that the joke dies before it's finished bubbling up his throat. The laugh that was to follow makes it though, a little dry, perhaps, but serviceable.

"Ha. Funny," he tries, but Misha doesn't bite, just shakes his head.

"Not really," he answers, straightening his spine and breathing in deep before the next part, like he's just entered a spotlight and plans to make the most of it. "See, the more I think about the last couple of days, the less sense they make. For starters, I *swear* that guy cut me in that alley. More than just a scratch. I remember..." He falters, eyes growing misty, hand touching his throat. "I remember the blood running through my fingers..." He stops with effort, swallowing hard and following the motion with his thumb, checking the skin there for cracks. Finding none, he lowers his hand again, but gingerly, like he's not entirely satisfied. "But... you know. Trauma. I could have been wrong. And yeah, you and Jared talking again is weird, but you used to be such good friends

before... well... you know, the *thing*. I always figured you two would get over it eventually... Okay, yes, maybe the meltdown on set should have tipped me off. But we've all got to have bad days sometime, right? And I guess I had a vested interest too, in not questioning stuff after you were so nice at the hospital and... stuff. And even tonight wasn't so strange. It's not like we've never role-played before. Only... well. There are some things you just can't write off, you know? Some things that are *fact*. And I know for a fact that Jensen, the *real* Jensen... he doesn't have a handprint scarred on his shoulder."

There's no sense of closure at the end of the speech, so it takes Dean a moment to realise the actor's done. Then another to work back through all the relevant points to find what needs the most bullshitting to get out of this.

One of his hands slips, automatically, under his shirt to check Misha's final claim and, sure enough, Cas' print is right where it's always been, one of the few constants Dean has left. It's so much a part of him Dean hadn't thought to question its existence in this reality. But Misha's right - *Jensen* was never gripped tight and raised by an angel. Damn.

*Damn.*

There'll be some sappy reason for this, no doubt. Cas touched his soul or some crap, which is why the scar carried over when his and Sam's anti-possession tats haven't.

How mortifying.

Dean opens his mouth to explain and Misha lifts an eyebrow.

"Yeah, fuck," Dean says instead, knowing a losing battle when he sees one. "I got nothing."

EXT. SUPERNATURAL SET - EARLY MORNING, STILL DARK



It's past 3am when Sam pulls one of the many gleaming sports cars from Jared's garage into the darkened film set, trying hard not to think about the warm bed he's snuck out of to answer Dean's call. Or the warmer embrace.

He hadn't meant to take advantage of Genevieve, *again*, really he hadn't. But this went so far beyond mistaken identity. Like Gabe said, if Gen got suspicious it meant trouble for all of them, and the way she acted when they were alone made it more than clear her and her husband had, well, let's say a remarkably *healthy* sex life.

So he'd had no choice, right? Denying her might have screwed up their chances of getting home, not to mention causing god knows how much trauma for *her*. Because there was *no way* she'd believe Sam wasn't Jared. In a world without magic, why the hell *should* she? And trying to convince her otherwise would only intensify her concern for Sam's doppel, most likely to the point of hysteria considering how distraught she'd been over Misha. Which was the last thing any of them needed.

Yes. He'd made the right call. The only one he *could*.

...and if Gen has all the enticing dips and curves his fingers remember from Ruby, as well as being soft and kind and sexy in ways he'd never got, but always secretly wanted, from the demon, well then, that's... well, that's irrelevant is what it is.

Dean's already waiting by the main gate as Sam pulls up, leaning over the driver's side of a Toyota Sam doesn't recognise. Jensen's maybe?

Sam parks alongside.

Another car skids up as he's getting out - a tiny, excitable yellow thing - and Gabriel jumps out almost the second it stops.

"You better have a good reason for calling me down here," he bitches at once, pointing an accusing finger in Dean's direction. "My insiders were *this close* -" He holds his index finger and thumb half an inch apart. "- to coughing up that script."

Seeing Gabriel bitch is so familiar it takes Sam a second to realise why that's weird. But it's because it *is* familiar, isn't it? Richard's beard and tailored clothes are *gone*, replaced by the would-be-Trickster's favoured, clean-shaven appearance, along with replicas of his usual nylon green jacket, coarse red shirt and jeans. Italian leather has been swapped for tennis shoes and the jewellery's absent too.

"You changed?" Sam can't help interrupting, curious.

Gabriel's always held something of a fascination for Sam, truth be told. It's hard to spend three months single-mindedly tracking someone down and *not* have them get under your skin.

Learning the truth about the guy had been a real lightbulb moment, explaining in an instant all the parts of Sam's lost months of research that had never added up - why the guy never conformed to a single depiction of a trickster god; why his 'just desserts' followed such a strict, almost godly, pattern; why he'd seemed so bitter about Sam's brotherly affection for Dean.

After all that time spent on the guy, it's really no surprise that the chance to get back inside Gabriel's head continues to appeal. And Gabriel doesn't seem to resent being questioned this time either. Instead he strokes his shaven jaw with a sense of pride and flashes Sam a smile.

"In a few hours I'll be *home*," he explains. "The way I see it? The sooner I can ditch this Dick -" He waves a hand up and down his torso. "- the better! I mean come *on*. Dude doesn't even like candy. What's up with that?"

As though to cement his decision to drop the façade, he pulls a BabyRuth from his pocket, rips it open and bites into it with a sigh so extravagant it borders on pornographic. Sam can practically see the moustache.

"Fuck..."

Sam and Gabriel turn together at the new voice to see, of all people, *Misha* rising slowly from the passenger side of Dean's car, eyes wide and fixed on the archangel.

Sam tenses as the actor slams the door. It seems ridiculous to try and get back into character now, after Gabriel's dropped his so dramatically, so what the hell should they do? Misha's *clearly* noticed something amiss with his supposed co-stars.

A probing look Dean's way gets only a non-committal shrug from his brother, which is just great. Real helpful, Dean. What the fuck is Misha doing here anyway? Dean hadn't mentioned bringing a civilian with him over the phone, just that he might have a lead on Virgil. So what -?

"You really mean all that, don't you?" Misha's continuing before anyone can say anything. "That's not an act, you..." He waves across the car at Gabriel, looking pained. "Wow. So much for this being a prank..."

For his part, Gabriel is still motionless, caught mid-chew with the chocolate bar at his lips. His eyes flash with something like fear and when he tries to speak his voice is thick.

With candy, Sam assumes.

"Mish..."

But Misha's not done yet.

"Oh god!" he wails. "You're not even wearing the necklace." He points and Gabriel touches his chest, fingers curling on instinct into his shirt, searching for the now absent chain Sam remembers hanging there earlier as though to prove the actor wrong. "You've had that since North Beach in '96. You *never* take it off. You told me..."

Misha falters, stepping back with a jerky shake of his head. Maybe it's just the lone streetlight at the gate and the washed-out grey of his sweatshirt, but Sam thinks he looks deathly pale all of a sudden.

"Except you didn't - I mean - *he* didn't - because... because you're not..."

He shakes his head again, eyes closing as he lifts both hands to rub at his temples, and the truth dawns on Sam. Misha's not freaking out because his

friends are acting weird, he's freaking out because *he knows they're not his friends*.

Gabriel cottons on at the same time and whirls into action, throwing his chocolate to the ground and striding towards Dean.

"You *moron!*" he snaps, punching Dean hard in the arm. There's clearly more power to the swing than there looks as well because Dean flinches, rubbing the spot with a muttered 'ow.' "You *told him?* Did you not listen to a damn thing I said?"

"Look, he kinda... figured it out," Dean answers, avoiding eye contact in a way that gives Sam a fair idea of how said discovery might have been made. Playing along his *ass*. "What was I supposed to do?"

"*Anything!*" Gabriel insists, furious. "Tell him he's wrong! Tell him you're sick! Tell him *he's* sick! Tell him you're drunk, or high, or *anything* that's not gonna get us all a one way trip to the loony bin!"

"Oh my god," Misha cuts in, dropping his hands and eyeballing Gabriel again like he's become the answer to all the mysteries of the universe. "That's why you *were*. After Hammer of the Gods. When you got all secretive and obsessive over Pellegrino. I never asked, but everyone knows you beat him bloody one night and they kept you in the clinic downtown for a couple of weeks."

This distracts from the actor for a moment, because Sam remembers all too well the horror of being drugged up in a mental institution, being made to doubt your own mind and face up to flaws in your character you'd sooner avoid. He remembers too the bitterness and underlying pain in Gabriel's voice when he'd hinted at this incarceration back at Jared's and the picture he gets of the archangel, alone and low on power, at the mercy of a world far from his own, is vivid and affecting.

He recognises the name Pellegrino as well and can't really blame Gabriel for going after the guy who, in the initial disorientation of his arrival, would have been easily mistaken for the brother who'd tried to kill him.

He shoots Gabriel a sympathetic look, which the archangel promptly ignores, face twitching in discomfort.

"You didn't like to talk about it," Misha presses on. "And I figured, who was I too judge about character bleed, you know? I was a *mess* after Karla... but... but it wasn't character bleed, was it? Or... it *was*, but..."

Gabriel returns to glaring at Dean, who's riled up enough now to give as good as he gets. Until Misha starts cursing.

"Fuck. Fuck. This means... oh god... this means I fucking *died* last night!"

Dean and Gabriel break from their face-off to turn as one, eyebrows pressing down. The concern seems a bit much to Sam, until Misha's breathing grows laboured, one of the actor's hands circling his throat like he's re-living the cut he'd suffered there.

It's not surprising. Trauma like that is bound to have repercussions on someone unused to such things - read: a normal person who *doesn't* hunt monsters for a living. Sam's kinda shocked a Trickster and his brother seem to have figured that out before he did though. It's stuff like this that makes him worry if his soul really did make it back intact.

Dean makes an abortive movement towards Misha, but hesitates at the hood of the car, half an eye on Sam. Which sort of implies he'd have kept going if he didn't have a younger brother looking on and gives Sam the sudden urge to punch him, because *really*? Haven't they moved past the need for the macho big brother image by now? And what makes Dean think whatever he's got going on with Misha - *or* Cas - would lessen that anyway? Jerk.

Fortunately, Gabriel has no qualms about following through with his instincts and hurries right up to his panicking friend.

"Mish. *Mish*," he says, voice low and commanding, one hand resting on each of the guy's shoulders. "Hey. Come on, man. Look at me."

Misha shivers under the hold, then stills, inward gaze slowly focusing down into Gabriel's. They hold for a second as Misha chokes back his fear, then Gabriel nods and moves away, letting the guy get a handle on himself again.

"See? It's okay. You're fine," Gabriel assures with a final squeeze of Misha's arm, tone light and soothing and, Sam thinks, *practiced*. This isn't the first time he's coaxed the actor down from a panic attack.

Except this isn't your average panic attack, as the sceptical look Misha shoots the angel proves. His eyes roam over Dean and Sam, before resting on Gabriel again.

"Nothing about this is fine," he counters, voice quiet but stronger. "I... that guy *slit my throat* -"

"Yeah, but -" Gabriel interrupts, holding up a hand, as though to physically ward off more panic before it starts. "But you're better now."

"Because you..." Misha points at Gabriel, not so much accusing as disbelieving. "You... you're..."

Gabriel sighs, arm dropping.

"Is it really gonna help you if I say it out loud?" he asks, pressing on over Misha's stutters like his lack of response is answer enough. "Yes. I'm *Gabriel*. The archangel. The show's *real*, Mish."

Misha opens his mouth.

Shuts it again.

"You need another drink?" Dean offers from the car.

Misha shakes his head, eyes still on Gabriel.

"No..." he starts, sounding calmer. "No. I think... I think I'm good now. Thanks..." He glances Dean's way. "*Dean*." There's a beat, then his gaze shifts to Sam. "And you're... Sam?"

Sam punctuates his nod with a grimace. The implied apology in the gesture, an apology for who and what he is, feels dishearteningly familiar.

Misha seems to be getting more of a grip on things this time, however, staying focused as he nods back. He then takes a deep breath before turning back to Gabriel. Steeling himself.

"Did I ever know the real Richard?" he asks.

Gabriel folds his lips together, thinking hard. Trying to decide on the kindest way to answer, Sam supposes.

It's the 'tear off the Band-Aid in one go' way, apparently.

"No. Not really."

Misha nods again, but doesn't look as upset as Sam thought he might. In fact, the blue of his eyes seems to flash brighter as a growing interest sparks into life there.

"You saved my life," he says.

Gabriel shrugs.

"More like restored it. But yeah."

"Why?"

There's a pause as Sam and Dean both look to Gabriel as well, just as curious as Misha about his answer. The archangel catches their gaze and looks away, shaking his head with a chuckle that rings hollow.

"Pal, the words you're looking for are 'you' and 'thank.' Not necessarily in that order."

Misha blinks, face switching in an instant to crumpled apology.

"Oh. God. Of *course*. *Thank* you!" he exclaims. "I... I can't tell you enough!"

"Yeah, well. I know," Gabriel responds with a typical lack of modesty, pretending to wave the praise away. "No need to gush."

"But, still," Misha persists, turning sombre again. "Why...? Because Jen - *Dean* says that, um, your batteries are running low?" Gabriel tilts his head in the affirmative, while Sam glances at Dean, wondering exactly how much his brother *has* told the guy. "So why waste them on me? Why... why bother with me at all? We've been hanging out for, what, almost a year now? And all that time you've been, you know, *you*? I don't get it."

"What's there to get?" Gabriel shrugs, although there's something in the way he won't meet Misha's eye over the question that suggests there's more to the answer than he's letting on. "I was stuck here. Figured I might as well make the most of it."

"With *me*? But I'm... nobody."

A snort.

"Hardly."

"Get out. I'm an outsider, always have been. I never fit in, no matter where I go, and especially not here." He gestures to the set beyond them. "I'm nothing but a third wheel on the show, everyone knows it, and it's pretty much common knowledge at this point that the writers want me killed off by the end of the season."

"*What?*" Dean interjects, head snapping up, voice sharp.

He's ignored.

"Seriously Rich - Gabriel - *whatever*, you already *had* friends. You could have spent your time with *anyone*. Why me? Was it all some kind of joke to you? What?"

It's like he's got beseeching down to an art form - voice just short of reedy but shrill enough to stop him from being ignored. Sam's impressed. He should be taking notes.

Gabriel, of course, who Sam remembers winning over himself with the right combination of pleading and tears, doesn't stand a chance.



He spins round with a roll of his eyes.

"No, it wasn't a joke! It was... it was because you're the one angel still on the show who isn't a total dick, okay?" he confesses. "You're my best link to home."

Misha flinches from the intensity.

"Why? Because I play one of your brothers?"

"No. Because you *are* one of my brothers." This gets a blank look from everyone and Gabriel tuts. "Okay. Look. This is how it is. I don't know why and I don't know how, but there's a *reason* the actors on this show are who they are. There's a... I don't know, a connection, between them and who they play and it's more than just physical."

Dean quirks an eyebrow Sam's way that Sam translates as 'yeah, whatever.' He shrugs back. He'd agree, except... Gabriel sounds so earnest. And that happens so little you can't help taking notice when it does, however absurd what the Trickster's saying might sound.

Noting the exchange, Gabriel sucks in a loud breath.

"Hey! You're looking at the king of hoaxes here!" he tells them, stretching his arms out in the kind of grand gesture of his Trickstering days of old. "You think after dishing out the wacky for centuries I'm really gonna let myself fall under the same delusions? This isn't wishful thinking on my part. Richard made notes, okay? Of his time on the show. Of *me*. I found them at his house when those bastards at the clinic finally let me back there. Annotations on his scripts, ideas about characterisation, you know, shit like that. And I'm telling you, I'm not a 13 year old girl or Sam Winchester over there -" He points to Sam without turning. "- I've never kept a diary, but hell, if I *did*, that's what it would have read like. And *you* -"

He points at Misha, who doesn't flinch this time but holds the gaze, matching Gabriel's stare with such a sombre, angel-like one of his own it makes Sam start back, wondering if he blinked and missed the quiet flapping that usually accompanies Castiel's arrival. He glances at his brother and the way Dean's transfixed by the actor, like he's waiting for him to turn so they can start one of

those freaking staring contests he and Cas are so fond of, suggests Dean's made the same comparison.

"- the things you come out with about Castiel sometimes," Gabriel continues. "You have *no idea* how spot on you are..."

Misha takes a long breath in the quiet that follows, breaking from Gabriel and staring to the distance. A small, awestruck smile flickers at the corner of his lips.

"Wait. Hold up," Dean cuts in, gesturing across the car. "You're saying -" He waves at Gabriel. "- whatever he says -" A point at Misha. "- about Cas, that's... that's *real*? In our world?"

Sam narrows his eyes. He knows that tone. That's Dean's 'I'm playing it cool but this is *really fucking important*' tone. What the hell has Misha been saying that Dean cares so much about? And, come to think of it, what the hell was Dean doing driving with Misha anyway? They still don't know why the actor's here, and, as far as Sam's aware, Dean was supposed to be spending the night *alone*.

"I'm saying there's a good chance," Gabriel answers. "But it's not an exact science. Sometimes the actors are way off the mark. According to Dicky Speight here, for instance - you're my favourite."

He scrunches his nose at Dean. The archangel equivalent of sticking his tongue out, perhaps. Or pulling pigtails, Sam thinks with a smirk.

"Are you saying it's Sam?" Misha adds, smile twitching up a notch.

Which isn't half as interesting as the death glare he gets from Gabriel in response. What?

But then Misha's shaking his head some more, smile dropping as the insanity hits him afresh.

"Oh man, this is so surreal," he moans. "Angels. Alternate realities..." He looks to Dean. "I was mad to let you bring me here."

"Yeah, Dean," Sam starts. *Finally* seeing a way into the conversation. "Why *did* you bring him? What are we even doing here?"

"Hey, don't get mad at *me*," Dean answers, looking between them. "This wasn't my idea."

"What wasn't?" Sam presses.

"Finding Virgil," Misha half sighs in reply, resigning himself to the fact that the crazy won't be ending any time soon. "I think I know how you can."

"Really?"

"Yeah... I mean... I only suggested it because I thought, I don't know, that maybe this was gonna turn out to be the biggest prank ever and I figured I'd play along, but... But it might just work for real. All I need is a picture, and there were plenty of cameras rolling on set yesterday. One of them's bound to have caught your guy."

"Whoa, whoa!" Gabriel calls, moving in-between Sam and the actor, pressing the tip of one flattened palm to the centre of his other hand in a 'T' shape. "Time out." He glares at Misha. "No way are you getting involved in this."

There's that brotherly tone again. At least Sam understands it better now, but still, would have been nice of Gabriel to show the real Cas the same consideration.

Misha gives a flat smile.

"Kinda late for that. What with the dying and all."

"No, it's not." Gabriel walks up and puts a hand on Misha's shoulder, staring intently. "Listen to me. All you need to do is say the word and this whole night has been nothing but a bad dream. I can do that." He lifts his other hand, miming a snap of his fingers. "You got jumped after work and hit your head. You'll wake up safe at home. Won't remember a thing."

Misha bites his lip. Thinking.

"Nothing at all?" he asks.

"Nothing at all."

"Oh..."

This clearly *isn't* the response Gabriel was hoping for because it makes him frown, eyes turning dark. Misha notices and shrugs in apology.

"It's just..." His gaze travels to Dean. "I don't think I want to forget... *everything*..."

Dean looks down quickly, but it's too late, Gabriel and Sam have already followed the glance and the crimson on Dean's cheeks shows extra bright in the white glare pooling around them.

Sam just stares at Dean. He's shocked, in spite of everything, at how far beyond his usual ultra-heterosexual persona this implies his brother's gone tonight. Apparently on a whim.

Gabriel recovers faster, dismissing the whole thing with a roll of his eyes.

"Congratulations," the angel deadpans. "You're every fangirl's wet dream right now. If only they knew." Misha also blushes at this and Sam gets the feeling there's more to the tease than he understands. "But just stop for a moment and ask yourself if it's worth it, alright? You've seen the show. You *know* what working with these boys means. Damn it, Mish, even as a *fiction* it was enough to give you nightmares, you told me so yourself."

Gabriel hesitates, eyes softening, hand gripping Misha tighter. If he didn't know any better, Sam would say the angel looked *scared* for the guy.

"You've died once already, man," Gabriel continues, voice dropping to a whisper that, if not for the still night air, Sam might have missed. "And I don't have the juice to bring you back a second time."

A tremor of fear passes over Misha's face. But he swallows it down.

"I know," he nods. "I know, but..." He glances at Dean again, who's recovered from his embarrassment enough to give the actor a full on 'For Castiel's Eyes Only' stare in response. "I'm always taking the easy way out. Letting others push

me around." He takes a breath, eyes darkening with resolve. "No, I need to see this through. It's time I acted for myself for a change."

#### INT. EDITING ROOM

"Okay."

Misha grabs one of the swivel chairs lining the office walls, drops into it and rides up to the nearest computer screen. He looks it over for a second, nods briskly and links his fingers together, arms stretching out in front of him. The faint pop of clicking bone breaks the quiet.

"All today's shoots will be downloaded already," he explains, pulling his hands apart and flexing them. "But I'll need some cables to connect to the CCTV in case that picked up a better image." He leans forward and switches the machine on, eyes fixed on the screen as it powers into life, garish white flaring outwards across the black. "It'll take a while to configure the files but -"

Behind him, Sam is already looking round, eyes moving over the untidy collection of coffee cups and piles of printouts covering the rest of the place, looking for where hardware might be stashed. A search that's rendered moot when Gabriel moves up beside Misha and snaps his fingers in front of the screen.

Immediately a series of images with a familiar, yellow CCTV tinge start to flash up, too fast for the human eye to follow, before being sucked down into a single icon at the bottom of the desktop.

Misha leans back in his chair, making it creak. His palms lift in astonishment, jaw turning slack.

"Wow..." he breathes, boyish excitement filling his eyes.

Sam smiles a little. Yeah, he remembers that. The sudden thrill when he'd first watched his dad recite a spell to banish a spirit and the terror of 'monsters are real' had been overpowered, just for a moment, by 'oh my god, *magic* is real!'

When Misha looks up at Gabriel this time the wonder there is unmistakable. The truth of Gabriel bringing him back to life properly setting in.

"That's..." he tries. "Amazing. Thank you."

Then his smile drops.

"Oh. God, Rich -" He shakes his head impatiently. "Gabriel. You're bleeding."

He reaches out, but Gabriel stands back to tend to himself, pressing a couple of fingers to where a line of red is indeed dripping thick and slow from his right nostril.

"*Damn...*" the archangel murmurs as he pulls his hand away. "Didn't even feel it that time. I -"

His words start to slur and he sways without warning, legs buckling.

Misha shifts quickly and Dean tenses at his other side, but it's Sam who catches the guy, hands wrapping easily about Gabriel's shoulders as the angel slumps against his chest.

"Whoa..." Sam mutters, shocked at how very small and frail Gabriel feels. All that godlike power, millennia of existence, reduced to this fragile knot of sinew and bone. Weak enough that it seems he could almost crush the angel with his bare hands if he's not careful.

Huh. If the Sam of a couple of years ago could have seen this he'd never have believed it - the mighty Trickster, a creature so vast and incomprehensible he'd never even *considered* killing him for real because the possibility had seemed too remote, now nothing but a man collapsed in his arms.

That Sam would tell him to go for it, no doubt - snap the monster's neck while he had the chance. In fact, the Sam of a few months ago might have thought the same. But not anymore. Sam isn't either of them anymore. Although... they're a part of him still, somewhere deep down, he supposes. God, when did he get so fractured?

Gabriel jerks back to consciousness beneath his hands and Sam holds him steady as he stumbles to his feet.

"Take it easy, man," Sam tells him, keeping a hand at the archangel's back, resting firm between his shoulder blades. "You okay?"

The way Gabriel blinks and shakes his head, each close of his eyes tight and deliberate, tells Sam he's still disorientated. Then, when Gabriel turns, Sam can't shake the feeling he's seeing something new. Or rather, something very very old. Because this is Gabriel without any of his personas in place. The real Gabriel, raw and undefined.

He looks drawn. Tired and lost with eyes terribly dark. Dark and deep and full of the of the past, eons of memories buried or locked away. Painful, frightening things he needs to forget so they don't consume him.

Then it's gone and Gabriel's shrugging Sam's hand away, eyes glinting with familiar scorn.

"I'm fine, Bullwinkle," he quips, wiping his nose with a thumb and smearing the drying blood down his jeans. "Don't sweat it."

Noting the anxious stares from the others Gabriel rolls his eyes and waves a hand. Conspicuously slower and less focused than usual.

"Look, we all know I'm winding down here. Just... hurry it up, okay?"

Misha looks set to protest, spider web patches of worry still dragging down the corners of his eyes. But Dean nods, leaning down beside him.

"He's right," he says, gruff tone negated somewhat by the light touch to Misha's shoulder. "We don't have much time. Show us what you got."

Misha takes a breath and turns back to the screen.

"Right..." he nods, tapping out a series of commands on the keyboard and navigating the resultant windows too quick for Sam to keep up. "So, I can set up a facial recognition programme that'll go through all the images, discounting all the usual staff on set yesterday and flagging up anyone new. Like Virgil. It might

take a little time to go through everyone, but it shouldn't take us long to pick him out of the line up."

"Like *hell* you can do that," Gabriel exclaims, staring at Misha like he's just sprouted a second head. With horns. "You're a klutz when it comes to technology."

A tiny smile flickers at the edge of Misha's lips as he taps a final key and the computer sets to work, bringing up captured headshots from a combination of CCTV and camera footage and jumping through them.

The actor glances sideways to where Gabriel's leaning a little way along the desk, one eyebrow arching up.

"What? You think you're the only one with secrets?" The smugness is subtle, but it's there. "The technophobe thing is a... handy smokescreen. Plus the fans seem to find it endearing, so..."

Gabriel tilts his head, lips twisting in a crooked smile, eyes lighting up, and this is something else new, Sam thinks. This isn't archangel *or* Trickster. This is *human*. This is Richard Speight, friend and confidant. More than an act now, with his audience stumbling over that fourth wall and joining him onstage. If, indeed, it was ever an act to begin with...

Is that how it goes? Sam wonders. Play a part long enough and before you know it fiction and reality are strange bedfellows behind your back? Black and white, truth and deception, breaking down until you start to believe the lies you're hiding behind?

It's not far off what happened with Ruby. He'd been so fixated on his mission to kill Lilith, so full of confidence from past success, the idea that all that power might be too much hadn't even occurred to him.

And that wasn't the first time he'd cast himself into delusion either. What else would you call his time with Jess? Jess, who he'd only met because of 'Brady.' God, it makes him sick to think about just how much of a lie Stanford had been. A real life stage show with Azazel and Lucifer directing, while he, like a fool, followed the script to the letter.



Only...

The love had been real, he's sure of that. On both sides.

Just like Gabriel's affection for this man, a would-be brother at best, has broken through that wall between them as surely as Misha has.

Sam doesn't know if it's a comfort or not, that an archangel should be plagued with multiple facets of self as much as he seems to be these days. Perhaps, ultimately, not. Because if something as ancient and powerful as *Gabriel* can't control his personas, then what chance does Sam have of ever becoming whole again?

"So, you're telling me," the angel's saying over his thoughts. "All this time you've been some kind of... techno wizard?"

Misha gives a modest shrug.

"How else do you think they let someone like me intern at the White House?"

A full on grin breaks out over Gabriel's face, chasing away some of the fatigue there.

"Oh, snap!" he says, holding out a palm which Misha promptly slaps with a grin of his own, sliding his hand away in sync with Gabriel's move of the same. A familiar gesture. Private. Personal.

There's a pause as their smiles soften at the corners - the realisation that, impossibly, everything that *was* between them is both radically altered and exactly the same.

"Hey," Dean interrupts, pointing at the screen. "That's him. That's our guy."

With the moment broken everyone follows his gaze and, sure enough, Sam catches a glimpse of the man he recognises as Virgil frozen in passing a decrepit-looking campervan somewhere outside the studio.

The image switches to someone else after a moment, but a quick tap on the keyboard by Misha has the slideshow doubling back. He pauses on the shot of

Virgil and they examine it in more detail. The angel's turned away from the camera slightly but the picture's clear enough.

"Yeah..." Misha agrees, turning quiet. "That's him. Quicker than I thought. Guess there weren't many new faces in yesterday..." He pauses. Swallows. "That's, um..." He waves a hand at the campervan. "That's my trailer. That's where he jumped me..." He takes a breath and Dean's gaze flickers down to him, hand twitching at his side. "My car's behind it... can't afford CCTV everywhere the producers said..."

Dean snorts.

"I'll bet," he mutters. "Not when half their budget's wasted on the show's two leading ladies here." He indicates himself and Sam. "Seriously, *that's* your trailer? Have you seen fake mine? Got a freaking *helicopter*. What kind of show forks out for a freaking radio controlled *helicopter* and not basic security?"

Misha smiles a little, tension draining from his shoulders, and Sam has to wonder if the sudden levity is intentional on his brother's part. A conscious decision to stop Misha being triggered by dark memories again.

Even not it's a good plan. Sam continues the distraction.

"So what next?" he asks. "Hack into the police database and get an APB out on the guy?" It's what he would do. "Chances are the cops'll get round to that themselves when they clock on tomorrow, but I guess getting the ball rolling a little early can't hurt."

Misha shakes his head.

"The police will be too slow for you," he answers. "And they'll want to confront him, which could be... dangerous. Besides, I've got a wider network than them anyway."

Gabriel starts to chuckle.

"You mean what I think you mean?"

The question has Misha smiling again.

"The Amigos haven't let me down yet," he answers, and Sam and Dean frown at each other, wondering what they've missed.

"What are you thinking?" Gabriel presses, shifting closer and leaning into Misha's space, voice low and conspirative. "Put up the picture for five seconds then delete it?"

Misha bobs his head from side to side.

"Eh, I was thinking three."

Gabriel lifts a shoulder, conceding.

"They're your minions. You know how to play 'em best."

"*Amigos*," Misha corrects. "I've told you - 'minions' is a derogative term."

"Whatever..." Gabriel answers, grabbing a near-by chair and sitting himself down at the computer next to Misha's. He powers it up quickly and rolls closer to the actor. "Gimme a sec, I'll log in too. Once you're done I'll wipe your history so there's no record of you ever posting."

Misha blinks, staring at him.

"You can do that?"

"Sweetheart," the archangel smirks. "If I knew this was your plan I could have done the whole thing solo."

"Yeah, right," Misha scoffs, turning back to his screen as Gabriel's glows into life, bringing up a web browser and typing in an address. "You'd need my password for one thing."

"Please. Cockles74? You're an *open book*, Collins."

Misha freezes with his hands above the keyboard, cheeks turning a particularly vibrant shade of pink under the tepid glow of the building's low level security lights - Gabriel had broken them in easy enough without tripping any alarms, but,

due to his waning power probably, access to the set's main lighting seemed to be out of bounds.

Dean looks from the actor to Gabriel and finally Sam, face moulded in a silent 'what the fuck?' expression.

Sam shakes his head, palms raised helplessly in response. Is this what it feels like for outsiders listening in on *their* brotherly banter? Like hitting an impenetrable wall? One that's built on subtle looks and in-jokes and unofficial - or, okay, sometimes official - code.

The site Misha's on finishes loading and leaves Sam even more confused.

"Twitter?" Dean reads. "I keep hearing about that. Thought one of Ben's friends must have a parrot or something till they started talking about it on the news. So, what, it's a website?"

Sam just shakes his head again. He still remembers how hard it was trying to explain MySpace to his brother. He's not even going there this time.

While Misha's still hesitating, Gabriel brings up his own browser and accesses the site himself. Instead of logging in though, he clicks a few magic buttons and a smaller window full of code appears in the centre of his screen.

"How long have you -?" Misha starts.

"Oh, only always," Gabriel smirks, glancing Misha's way. Seeing the flush on the guy's face, he lifts his eyes in a silent 'tut.' "Don't sweat it. Your dirty secret's safe with me."

"Yeah?" Misha presses, sounding nervous.

"I promise," Gabriel answers dismissively, before clapping his hands, loudly, and rubbing them together in a fit of excitement. "Now come on, let's get this show on the road!"

"Uh... yeah, okay," Misha nods, returning to the screen. He logs in with a practiced tapping of keys - @mishacollins - and immediately starts forming a message.

It's at this point something clicks for Sam - what Misha had laughingly called after them when they first met and why the guy always seemed glued to his phone. Like a lot of celebs back home, he's a convert to the recent trend for social networking and become something of an addict.

How this supposed to help them Sam still has no idea and he can see Dean's given up trying to work it out, watching the others with the same grimace he'd worn that time a wrong link had taken him to a site full of midget porn - fascination mingled with disgust.

"S'up Twitter?" Misha reads aloud as he types. "Rumours of my death..." A quick pause as he makes a conscious effort to breathe through his fear and move on. "...have been greatly exaggerated. Fear not."

He posts and starts a new Tweet.

"But heed this call to arms. This is my attacker..." A few minutes uploading Virgil's image into twitpic later and Misha's copying a link into the message. "Twit me if you find him but DO NOT APPROACH. He's dangerous."

He glances at Gabriel, who's been following his every move with rapt attention.

"Sounds good," Gabriel nods. "Should get the crazy rolling nicely. Ready when you are."

Misha nods back, returns to his screen and lets out a puff of air, like an athlete before a sprint. He clicks the mouse and a split second later the Tweet with Virgil's picture appears in his timeline. As soon as it does Misha starts counting down.

"Three..."

"Two..." Gabriel says in tandem, turning to his own screen.

"One..."

The two of them burst into action - Misha deleting his Tweet and twitpic while Gabriel types furiously, code swimming up and down his pop-up like something out of The Matrix.

"Done!" the angel exclaims after a minute, lifting off the keys with a flourish and dropping back into his chair. He links his hands behind his head and swivels round to Misha, beaming.

"Cool," Misha smiles absently, still busy on his Twitter page checking replies and mentions.

There's a *lot*.

A mind-blowing amount, actually, considering Misha barely logged in two minutes ago.

Sam counts ten retweets about Misha being attacked, and that's just what fits on the screen. The site indicates at least twenty more and counting. Then, once it's clear the link to Virgil's image has been removed, the conspiracies start. Twitter's in league with Misha's attacker, the FBI are wiping evidence because he's a known felon or an assassin under government protection and so on and so on.

"Whoa, dude," Sam cries after the fifth page of this when claims that the Queen of England must be involved start to crop up. "How many followers do you have?"

"Last count?" Misha answers over his shoulder. "About two hundred thousand. And that covers eight countries at least. I figure with that kind of man power simple probability dictates that someone following me is bound to find Virgil eventually."

Two hundred *thousand*? Sam thinks.

"Wait, wait," Dean starts, holding up a hand. "Followers? What is this, some kind of cult?"

Gabriel and Misha both laugh.

"You could say that," the archangel grins.

"No," Misha counters, turning to Dean, amusement scrunching his nose up above his smile. "It's just a social networking site. A way to connect with the fans, you know? Find out what they like about the show, the stuff they wanna change, that kind of thing."

"So let me get this straight," Dean continues, eyebrows climbing his forehead in disbelief. "You're using *fans*, of a fictional show, to find a *real* angel."

Misha shrugs.

"That's the plan."

"Dude, no offence. But that's insane."

"I dunno, Dean," Sam argues, earning an incredulous look from his brother. "Remember Becky? She was kinda the same deal, and she *did* help us out with the Colt."

Not that that had turned out so great for any of them, least of all Ellen and Jo... But the blame for that rested with Lucifer, not the innocent girl who'd led them to him.

Dean rolls his eyes and, as much as he's arguing *for* Misha's plan, Sam can't help sympathising. He knows better than anyone how... intense... Becky could be. He can understand why his brother might be reluctant to get involved with others like her, even indirectly.

"Okay, fine," Dean relents, however, turning back to Misha. "But how are these fans of yours supposed to find our feathered assassin? You took down the picture."

Misha and Gabriel share a look.

"Five bucks," Gabriel says and Sam once again feels like a large chunk of the conversation has gone missing somewhere along the line.

Misha chuckles, reaching into his pocket.

"Make it ten."

He pulls out a battered wallet and extracts a couple of bills.

"Fine," Gabriel concurs, taking a wallet of his own from his jacket and matching the bet. "You wanna throw your money away, I got no problem with that."

"Come on," Misha protests. "You really think your fans are gonna outdo mine on *this*? I'm the one tweeting."

"Yeah, to a bunch of mindless drones. *Mine* are the smart ones."

Dean waves his hands in defeat, leaving the others to it and looking to Sam for answers. Sam just gestures back in the same manner - like he has any idea!

"Okay, I'm checking..." Misha announces, moving his cursor to the refresh button. "Ready for disappointment?"

"Bring it on," Gabriel answers as the actor clicks.

A new set of tweets appear, Misha scrolls down them and -

"Yes!"

"Damn..."

Sighing, Misha clicks a Tweet by a user declaring themselves @magic\_sunrise. Whoever they are, their icon looks suspiciously like an anti-possession ward and Sam wonders if they have a tattoo to match. It would be something of an irony that - so many people protecting themselves in the one place demons are guaranteed not to harm them.

Anyway, the message reads:

*Guys! I saved a copy of the pic - spread it round! #calltoarms #goamigosgo*

There's a link directly after which Misha follows and, incredibly, it turns out to be the same image of Virgil he'd deleted only moments ago. Sam shares another look with Dean. Fans...



Less than thirty seconds later the message and link is being retweeted all over the place while Gabriel snatches up the money on the side and holds it to his nose, closing his eyes and breathing in deep.

"Ah, the sweet smell of success."

"Hey, no wait," Misha starts, trying to back peddle out of his failure. "We didn't establish parameters. She's a fan of *both* of us -"

"Don't try and weasel your way out of it, Collins," Gabriel responds, unsympathetic, as he tucks his winnings away. "She followed me first, that makes her mine. Them's the rules. You just have to face it, my minions are better than yours."

"They're *not* -"

"Sorry to interrupt such an important debate," Dean cuts in, the sharp rise of his voice indicating he's rapidly losing patience with the two of them. "But can someone tell me what the hell's going on here?"

Gabriel turns, smirking, but Sam talks over him. Knowing Gabriel he'll be planning a smug, drawn out explanation that will only aggravate Dean further.

"Deniability," Sam answers. "If Misha posts an image of his attacker, the cops are gonna start questioning him about it, which will be a waste of all our time. But if the *fans* are passing an image round amongst themselves, well what's that got to do with us? It's just the fans being crazy, right?"

Misha nods.

"Exactly."

Dean sighs and Sam spares a moment of pity for him. His brother's always been more of a 'run in guns blazing and sort out the details later' kind of guy. This Internet nonsense must seem needlessly complex to him.

"Okay. Whatever," Dean says eventually, shaking his head. "Just... what now?"

"Now..." Misha shrugs. "Well, if anyone spots Virgil they'll contact me here." He taps the computer screen, where Twitter is still a buzz of activity. "Until then... we wait."

INT. EDITING ROOM - LATER

Twenty minutes pass with nothing but more conspiracy, each one even nuttier than the last, like the fans are competing. Last Sam checked they were talking electromagnetic pulses at Stonehenge and arguing over something some radio host claimed to have found on the moon - an alien head maybe.

Dean's pacing by the door, restless, while Sam's in a chair of his own next to Misha, arms folded over the side, head resting in the crook of an elbow. The actor's still manipulating the site like a pro, swiftly checking through his followers for anything of relevance.

Still nothing.

Except, oh. It was a robot head.

Sam sighs.

"Time to up the game," Gabriel announces after another few minutes of this, settling back at his own computer.

Everyone stops to watch him. They've got nothing better to do.

Dean moves up behind the archangel, while Sam and Misha lean over. Sam can't quite see the screen from this angle but, to be honest, it's creeping up to dawn now and he's tired enough not to care.

This means he misses the name of the site Gabriel's loading.

Misha, close enough to see everything, doesn't and gives a short 'ha.'

"Livejournal? Really?"

"*Duh*," Gabriel sings back, typing in a user name and password. "This place is my home away from home, man. I don't have the juice to pull the pranks I want most of the time, but here?" He waves at the screen as it loads. "Here, anything goes. I can screw with as many people as I want, take out a couple of trolling assholes before bedtime, reshape the world to my every whim. All with a single -" He hovers over a link and presses down on the mouse. "- *click*."

A blogging screen appears, ready for an update, but just as Gabriel's fingers touch the keyboard Misha jolts upright, staring.

"Wait!" he starts and Sam follows his gaze to the screenname in the corner. It reads *hung\_arian*. "Hungarian? *The* Hungarian? The one behind the Bring Back Gabriel campaign?"

"Guilty."

Misha smiles and shakes his head as Gabriel types.

"Figures I guess..."

Then his eyes flash.

"Hold on... the same Hungarian who co-mods the Hell of a Height Difference community?" Gabriel stops. "And writes all those En See seventeen -?"

"Hey!" Gabriel twists round and holds a finger to the actor's face, cutting him off. "Yes. Okay," he continues, voice clipped. "We all need a hobby."

Gabriel stares Misha down and the actor bites back his smile, eyes continuing to sparkle as he glances at Sam.

"Sure..." he replies, lips curving despite his best efforts. "Whatever..."

Misha ducks his head in an, unsuccessful, attempt to mask a chuckle.

"Oh..." Gabriel sniffs, eyes shifting from Misha to Sam and quickly back to his screen again. Is Sam imagining it, or is there a touch of pink blooming round the archangel's ears? "You can talk," Gabriel continues, pissy, as he restarts his

typing. "Don't think I don't know about those Ahr Pee Es comms you run on the sly. *And* all those sock puppets you post under..."

Misha coughs away his amusement at once, head popping up.

"Touché," he nods, schooling his face into a more sober expression.

Gabriel nods back without taking his eyes from the screen or halting the rhythm of his fingers. Acknowledgement of some kind of victory - though what the hell about is anyone's guess what with all the unknown acronyms and private lingo flying around.

Jeeze. Sam's *sure* he and Dean aren't *this* frustratingly insular.

Are they?

"So what's the idea?" Misha asks.

"More of the same," Gabriel answers and Sam sees him move a copy of Virgil's picture into the entry he's making. "Having a Bee En Ef in your corner should generate more interest is all. And, ah..." A slyness twitches into his grin as he types in more after the picture. "A few insinuations that the people in charge aren't taking care of their recently hospitalised and traumatised staff might just get shooting postponed tomorrow..."

"You can't do that!" Misha gasps, sounding scandalised, but Gabriel's posted before the actor can stop him.

"Wouldn't be the first time I've rocked the executive boat," Gabriel grins, folding his arms as he leans back, chair spinning round with a squeak. "Sera's gonna find a *lot* of complaints about her treatment of you in her inbox when she gets in. As she should. Last campaign I started finally got you that pay rise they promised with your Regular status. Maybe you'll get enough for a decent trailer this time."

There's wonder in Misha's eyes again - discovery of Gabriel's so very human efforts for him every bit as amazing as magic. If not more.

"Hey... um... there's, ah..." Dean waves a hand between them, pointing at Misha's screen. "Something's flashing... or..."

Misha blinks, turning with a different kind of excitement.

"Ooh, a message!"

This is from an e-mail provider, not Twitter. The words 'you've got mail' under a 2D image of an envelope blink in the bottom corner of the screen. Even though this means it can't be about Virgil, everyone crowds round to see anyway.

Until the username of the sender shows up and Gabriel drops back, muttering under his breath, arms folding tight across his chest.

"Who's... sebrowsh?" Dean asks.

"Sebastian Roché," Sam supplies.

"Balthazar," Gabriel mutters darkly.

"Come on, he's not that bad," Misha tells him. "And this is sweet, he wants to know how I am."

This is true, Sebastian's message reads:

*Misha, darling! Heard about the accident. How awful! How are you holding up? & what's all this about a hunt for your attacker??*

Misha sends a quick sentence back:

*Doing okay, thanks Seb. & I don't know! Fans, right?*

Sebastian must be online because he responds at once:

*Haha! Yes. My Balthie fans are growing!! I'll reach those speedos yet! have one girl who asks every day when we're going to see Balthazar/Gabriel. Haha. Perhaps you should introduce me to Richard??*

Sam's surprised to find he *recognises* some of the lingo here - Chuck's fans had used the slash symbol too, and from the look of it in exactly the same context. Ugh. Does that mean this universe has Sam-slash-Dean fans as well?

Probably best not to think about it...

Although, from what he remembers of his research into Carver Edlund, most of the slash stuff in their world had come from a blogging site called Livejournal. The same Livejournal Gabriel has an account with. And hadn't Misha been ribbing him for *writing*...?

Sam narrows his eyes as he turns to the archangel, suspicious. But Gabriel isn't looking. Instead he's frowning at the screen while Misha chuckles at him.

"...huh," the angel breathes, sounding... curious?

"New ship?" Misha teases.

"Shut up," Gabriel answers, shoving the actor lightly on the shoulder.

INT. EDITING ROOM - MORNING

"Will you cut that out!" Sam snaps, twisting round in his chair as what has to be the hundredth rubber band zings past the side of his head.

Dean just grins, childishly, from his position across the table in the centre of the room, reaching in the stationary box he'd uncovered about half an hour ago for band one hundred and one.

Sam tries for a death glare, but his heart's not in it. Barring what had become a rather absurd and lengthy Twitter conversation with Sebastian about what Balthazar would call his followers, the last few hours have been tediously long and uneventful. He can't blame Dean for feeling restless. Not when the same is true for him, limbs itching in protest at the way he's kept them stationary so long. Screwing around is just how Dean deals with that and honestly? It's better than moping over Lisa or bitching about how Cas is never around anymore.

And it's always nice to see his brother smile. Those are rare nowadays.

Shame Misha's plan looks to be a bust though. Nuts as it is, it really was their best shot.

"Wow, Sebby's really going for it," Gabriel nods, leaning over where Misha is dozing to gently tug the mouse from the actor's slack fingers. "Gotta admire the guy's stamina at least," he shrugs, clicking on the new set of @mishacollins mentions the open Twitter feed claims have been made. "You think he went to bed at all?" Except - "Oh, wait..."

These mentions *aren't* by Sebastian. They're from an @casfan87. The first one reads:

*Hi @mishacollins! This youre guy??*

"No way..." Sam mutters, shifting closer as Gabriel opens the link that follows.

Misha snorts awake at the move.

"What?" he murmurs, voice syrupy with sleep.

"Misha," Gabriel announces as the picture loads. "You're a genius."

The actor rubs his eyes with a fist and focuses on the screen, Dean discarding his rubber bands and moving up behind them.

The picture's grainy - camera phone quality - and the figure being snapped is a street away and to the side. But it's Virgil all right - black coat billowing out behind him, face blank and emotionless.

Dean gives a short, incredulous laugh.

"Awesome," he grins, slapping Misha on the shoulder. "Where was this taken?"

"I can find out, gimme a sec," Misha starts, taking the mouse back from Gabriel and navigating back to Twitter.

The rest of @casfan87's tweets fill the page in a neat list.

*@mishacollins AND he dropped something. Any help?*

**7 seconds ago**

*@mishacollins totally just walk past him on my way to work! freaked me out... esp. since there was a robbery at a gun store few blocks down*

**10 seconds ago**

*@mishacollins don't know if u really looking for this guy but thought what the hell, get a pic anyway*

**18 seconds ago**

There's a link to a second picture in the most recent tweet, which Misha follows. This one is clearer - a close up of a pale hand with black polished nails holding a business card. The name on the card reads - Carlos Sanz, Manager. Orchard Inn Motel, Arizona.

"Arizona?" Dean exclaims. "How the hell did he get *there* so fast?"

But Misha's shaking his head, dumbfounded.

"He didn't," he says, still staring ahead in disbelief. "He never even left Vancouver."

"But the card says -" Sam starts.

Misha stops him by wheeling his chair back abruptly and standing up.

"I know," he agrees. "Obvious when you think about it..."

He paces outside and down the corridor, leaving the others to hurry after. They follow him on set, past the eerie replicas of Bobby's house and panic room and into... a motel room. It's pretty generic - all 'calming' yellows and blues, sparse furnishings and cheap still life pictures on the walls. If it wasn't for the single bed, it might as well be any of the dives they've camped out in over the years. Which is strange, actually, Sam thinks. Because if the show is about him and Dean, then what's a set for a *single* motel room all about?

Misha reaches over and picks up a leaflet positioned just so on the bedside table. He holds it out to Dean who's snuck up behind him and Dean takes it automatically, skin tightening over his brow as he looks it over.



"Welcome to the -" he starts to read, then stops, eyes growing wide and flicking to Sam. "Welcome to the *Orchard Inn, Arizona*," he finishes. "We hope you enjoy your stay."

### ACT III

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#### INT. SUPERNATURAL SET - BOBBY'S HOUSE

There's no real reason for them to be crashing in the set of Bobby's the following afternoon, but Dean figures it's a comfort thing. The closest thing to home he and Sam have. Both in this world and their own.

Although in many ways that makes it worse. The cameras and director's chair outside the window stand in contrast to the otherwise familiar setting and act as a painful reminder of just how far over the rainbow they are.

Still, at least there's no film crew this time.

Much to Misha's astonishment, it seems Gabriel's Internet bitching, or whatever, really *had* made it all the way to the Powers That Be. A message had gone out as soon as working hours kicked in that morning scheduling the rest of the week for tech work and granting actors the time off. The official line on the decision was that it was out of respect to Misha and to give the local PD access for their investigation. An investigation that had taken twenty minutes, tops - five minutes questioning and another fifteen combing through CCTV, identifying Virgil and getting an APB out on him, like Sam had predicted.

Gabriel's confident Virgil will be able to avoid the cops, though, so all that's left to do is wait. Again. Now they know it's here the double-oh-angel's gonna be heading for - right where they started all long, what a joke - an ambush is the best option.

Dean hates waiting.

He's already flattened a line in the motel room carpet from pacing across it - something the tech guys quickly put a stop to when they realised, muttering about not damaging company property - and now he's trying to re-create the grove he's sure he's walked into Bobby's floorboards but that seems to be absent in these. One of many flaws to the replica that only serve to emphasise how unreal the place is.

As the hours tick closer to that unspecified 'time of the crossing' Dean can see Sam getting anxious too, breaking away from the small talk he's managed to engage in with the crew and coming to wait it out in silence with Dean instead.

But this isn't companionable silence. No, Dean recognises this silence. This is the silence before a battle. Thick enough to swim through and full of all the things it might be their last chance to say, because if they fail against Virgil...

"You know," Dean says, loathe to let Sam be the one to start because the crap his brother's gonna wanna talk about is guaranteed to be the stuff he *doesn't*. "If we drop Virgil, get the key, this might be it. We might be stuck here."

It's the one possibility none of them are talking about, but it's there. Sure, odds are more in favour of Virgil giving them the slip, hopping back to the future with the keys to the kingdom and their world's destruction - not to mention Castiel's - but there's just as much chance that even if they beat the dick Raphael's summoning won't work on them. Gabriel's spent the best part of the morning assuring them a call back from the other side, whoever it's intended for, will be able to pull them through, but he's fuzzy enough on the details when pressed that Dean can't help thinking he's working more on hope than fact.

Sam sighs, leaning back against the doorway that *should* lead to Bobby's hallway and staircase upstairs but actually leads to an open corridor with a stairway to nowhere.

"No, we'll figure out a way back," he insists.

"Yeah..." Dean answers, turning to pace back to the window. Sam *sounds* sure of himself, but Dean hasn't forgotten the way he'd looked at Gen the night before. "You wouldn't be that broken up if we did though."

"What?" Sam counters at once, scoffing and a little indignant. "Don't be stupid."

When Dean turns back Sam's angled away from him, like he's already dismissed the idea, and Dean loves him for the loyalty, he does. But, while the thought of being stuck here is pretty much anathema to *him*, he hadn't meant to sound condemning of his brother about it, hadn't meant to sound like he disapproved of Sam finally getting a chance at the good life.

Dean never has been good at saying what he means.

"I'm just saying," he tries again, stepping closer as Sam turns to face him. "No hell below us, above us only sky?"

He gestures with his hands, below and above, then shrugs. It *is* a nice thought.

If it weren't for Cas...

And Bobby, of course.

Sam pushes from the doorway, turning sombre.

"Dean, our friends are back there," he says, like he's reading Dean's mind.

"Yeah, but..." Dean smiles, bittersweet. That's always the sacrifice, isn't it? Happiness, at the cost of the people you love. "Here you got a pretty good life. I mean, back home the hits have been coming since you were six months old. You gotta admit, being a bazillonaire, married to Ruby, the whole package? There's no contest."

Sam stops, hands in his jacket pockets, and thinks about it, while Dean watches closely. Because if there's even an inkling, anything at all to suggest his brother might *prefer* it here... then damn it, even if Raphael's spell *can* pull them back, even though it'd be Stull Cemetery all over again, Dean thinks he'd go ahead and leave Sam behind. After all the hurt and the sacrifice, goddamn, the kid *deserves* to be happy.

But Sam sucks in a breath and shakes his head.

"No. You know, you were right," he says. "We just don't mean the same thing here." He waves a hand at Dean, adding, almost as an afterthought, like it's too obvious to need saying. "I mean, we're not even brothers here, man."

There's no lie there, no acting going on when Sam meets his gaze, just open affection. And it makes Dean feel soft and warm inside, makes his lips curve up and forces him to look away before the moment goes any deeper.

"Alright then," he answers. "Let's get our crazy show back home."

Sam smiles back. Nods. And the quiet that falls after - *that's* companionable. Warm and safe.

Until a nervous cough from the doorway breaks it.

Both hunters turn to find Misha looking apologetically between them.

"Hi... sorry..."

"Showtime?" Dean asks, tensing. But Misha shakes his head.

"No, no sign of Virgil yet," he answers. "But... we might have another problem."

Dean senses his brother lifting his eyebrows along with him in question.

"Kripke just pulled up outside."

"Kripke?" Dean starts, then remembers. "Oh, right, your prophet guy. So?"

"So, he doesn't work here anymore, not officially. Which means he must have been called in for you guys. I mean - for Jensen and Jared. Because they're, because *you've*, been acting out. He's gonna want to talk to you."

A quick check of his watch tells Dean it's coming up to four thirty - they're running out of afternoon. Can't be long now.

"We don't have time for that," he says, shaking his head. "Can't you stall him?"

"Gabriel's trying right now, but..."

Misha shrugs, expression all 'what can you do?' like this Kripke guy is some kind of unstoppable force.

"I'll go. I'll talk to him," Sam nods. "One of us should be on the lookout outside anyway, in case Virgil gets trigger happy on the way in."

He glances at Dean who nods in agreement. It's a sound plan.

"Okay. Go," Dean says. "I'll hold the fort here. Shout if there's trouble."

"Sure thing," Sam answers, heading out. He gives Misha a friendly smile and pat on the shoulder as he passes, which Dean doesn't blame him for. The actor looks *freaked out* - shoulders bunched up, jaw clenching.

"You okay?" Dean asks once Sam's gone and Misha continues to stand there, staring at nothing.

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm fine."

Dean lifts an eyebrow.

"Okay... no," Misha admits, breathing out a long gust of air in an effort to relax. "It's just... last time I saw this guy he *killed* me, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," Dean answers, voice softening. He tries to smile in a way he hopes is reassuring. "Look, don't worry, we're good at this. We'll stop him. You'll be fine."

Misha's expression changes abruptly, lines of anxiety hardening as he lifts his head to glare.

"Don't bullshit me. I might not be a Lead but I'm still *in* the show. You can't guarantee anything about this, least of all my safety."

Stupid fucking *show*.

Although, in a way it's better that Misha knows the truth. At least now the danger won't be coming at him out of the blue, like before.

A flashback of the guy on that hospital trolley - pale and lifeless, throat raw and bloody - hits Dean unbidden and he fights not to shiver. It was bad enough thinking about *Cas* that way and now, what? Suddenly there's this whole *other* guy with the same face who matters as well? Whose life Dean's *also* invested in, like Jimmy Novak all over again? When did that happen? Nice going, Dean. That's not gonna be a distraction in a fight... it's times like this he understands what the Sam-that-wasn't meant about soullessness having its advantages.

"I *can* guarantee it, actually," Dean counters. "If you go back home. Or to Jensen's. Or anywhere that *isn't here*. That way whatever shit goes down tonight, you'll be out of it. I wouldn't blame you. You don't need to stay."

Misha takes a breath. He's tempted, Dean can see it in his eyes - a far off, hungry look he's never seen on Castiel, and isn't sure he wants to. It's the kind of look he remembers on Sam as he struggled with blood cravings. The same glint he imagines in his own eye, and Dad's, when the thought of demon dealing first came to mind. It's not a look for Castiel. Cas might be a dick sometimes, but he's better than that.

And so is Misha, it seems, because he shakes the idea away.

"No. No I'm seeing this through..."

Dean can't help smiling, just a little.

It's stupid, because getting the guy out of Virgil's reach *is* the better option. They're just courting disaster keeping him around. But seeing him want to face his fear, to fight instead of run - it makes Dean proud. Like watching Cas banish Zachariah that time.

It might be stupid. But it's also brave and life changing and the right thing to do. Dean doesn't want to take that away from the guy.

"Misha...? Um... Misha?"

They both turn at the call.

"In here," Misha answers and a second later one of the PAs Dean remembers from the other day walks on set, a cup of steaming coffee held somewhat precariously in one hand as he struggles to balance a bunch of papers in his other, a bundle more tucked under his arm.

Misha hurries over to take the cup before the kid drops it and helps him rearrange things in a less unstable fashion.

"Thanks Todd," Misha smiles, lifting his cup.

The kid blinks and waits a beat, like he thinks Misha's gonna continue with some kind of brutal punchline at his expense. When the moment passes and he doesn't, the guy smiles back.

"No problem," he nods, thick-rimmed glasses slipping down his nose. "I'll, uh... I guess I'll see you."

He tries to simultaneously wave goodbye while also pushing his frames back, causing more drama as his tidied papers twist apart again. Misha reaches out to stop them falling and holds on while the kid gets himself back under control.

"Thanks, um..." Todd mutters, turning quickly away, cheeks flushing. "Thanks..."

Dean watches him go with a frown while Misha sips nonchalantly at his coffee. Something's not quite adding up here.

"So you do know his name," Dean says eventually.

"What?" Misha answers, confused. "Oh, Todd? Yeah, he's my PA. He's really good."

"And the... err... the make-up lady?"

"Emily?" the actor supplies. "She's not in today. No need since we're not shooting any scenes. She'll be happy about that, actually, I know she's been trying to get more time off since her son was born. She's probably not gonna stick with the show much longer to be honest, which is sad cos she's one of the best."

"Wait, wait. How do you know all this?"

"Um..." Misha looks at him sideways, utterly perplexed. "Because... I talk to them?"

"No, you don't." Dean shakes his head. "I saw you yesterday. You were a dick to those guys. And having some experience with the PA gig I gotta say - didn't endear me. What gives with the Jekyll and Hyde routine?"

"Oh. That."



Misha looks down, holding the rim of his cup to his lips with both hands, as though hoping to hide behind it.

"Yeah, um..." he murmurs against the Styrofoam. "I, err, I was just... trying something..."

"What? Being a douche?"

Murky blue eyes glance up at him, guilty and ashamed. Another look Dean can't imagine on Castiel.

"Kinda?" Misha offers, hurrying on when Dean frowns at him. "See, there's this guy. Steve Bacic. He's -"

"Doctor Sexy. Yeah. I know," Dean cuts in without thinking, only realising how quick off the draw he'd been when Misha turns his head at him, right eyebrow climbing up. "I mean... I've *heard*..." He continues, flustered and defensive. "You know... cos we, err, we get the show too..."

The actor's lips curve very slightly in one corner.

"Right. Yeah," he nods, taking another swig of coffee. "Well. Jensen's been working with him, like, a lot recently. They met at a copyright meeting, or something, because, you know, since it's a real show... as in, a real, fictional show... in *both* our worlds, I guess, which is weird.... But anyway, we had to get permission to use it, in *Supernatural* I mean. So, yeah. They met. And Steve is like, so out he was basically never *in*, so he was *all over* Jensen from day one. Next thing you know, Jensen's got a spot on the show, now they're talking about making him a Recurring and just..."

Misha sighs and shakes his head.

"So he's after your guy," Dean summarises. This isn't news - that picture in Jensen's hallway pretty much told the same story, without the theatrics. Although, hearing confirmation that someone who, in a way, could be considered a whacked out, alternative version of him, is on the verge of a genuine relationship with *Doctor Sexy*... well, it's *doing things* to Dean he'd rather not think about. "What's that got to do with the way you treat your crew?"

A pause, then Misha shoots him a flat, self-deprecating grin.

"Steve is... well he's a real hotshot, you know? Just because he's a Lead and the show's won a couple of Emmys he thinks he's god's gift and has the right to whatever he wants." The actor's lips curl. "Last I heard, he threatened to quit unless he was brought caviar canapés before every shoot. *Caviar canapés*. With pitted olives on the side and an ice cold glass of champagne." He rolls his eyes. "And because the show can't go on without him and it's, like, the Network's big hitter right now, the producers cave to his every whim, of *course*. He's such a scumbag..."

Misha scowls and Dean bobs his head, sympathetic and kinda impressed. The actor's been such a pushover all this time, it's sorta cool to learn he *does* hate on others like a normal human being on occasion.

Then the fire in Misha's eyes dies abruptly.

"Jensen seems to like him though," he continues. "So... I thought maybe... maybe if I acted a little more like that, then..."

He shrugs, head dropping, and picks at the edge of his cup.

"Wow..." Dean breathes into the falling silence. "You got it bad for the guy, huh?"

Misha purses his lips and shrugs again.

It's the kind of soap opera situation Dean usually steers well clear of. But the guy looks so small and vulnerable all of a sudden - like Castiel when he'd learnt his father had gone AWOL on them on purpose - that Dean wants to reach out and make things okay for him.

Dean rubs a hand across his jaw to curb the impulse.

"Hey, ah... word of advice?" There's a flash of blue fixing on him so quick Dean has to fight not to shy away. "Move on. Guy's a dickwad. Class A. You can do better. Seriously."

But Misha's shaking his head before he's done.

"No," he insists. "You just don't know him. Yeah, sure, he's got issues, but no more than the rest of us. And underneath it all he's a *good guy*. You just have to... get past all the other stuff."

"Riiight," Dean nods, humouring. Hey, he tried, but if Misha doesn't wanna hear it...

"No, really," Misha presses, more adamant now, gesturing with a hand for emphasis. "It's just... he's been going through a tough time lately. After what happened with Jared and Danneel and everything..."

He shouldn't care, he really shouldn't. Not his problem. And besides, any minute now he and Sam might be outta here, for good.

But Dean finds himself asking anyway.

"Danneel?"

Misha takes a breath and Dean can see in his eyes this is a *long* story - a long, tedious and ultimately irrelevant story. And yet here he is arching an eyebrow at the guy, urging him on with a nod.

"Okay, so, Danneel and Jensen were engaged, right?" the actor starts, moving to the sofa in front of the window and dropping down, coffee held loosely between his knees, head angled up.

"That's legal here?" Dean queries, settling down beside him.

"What?" Misha questions, eyes tracking Dean as he moves. "Oh. No. Daneel's a girl's name."

"Oh. Right. Cos *that's* obvious," Dean mutters. "Jeeze, can't any of you have *real* names?"

This earns him a smile before Misha continues, wide with a flash of teeth. Dean wonders what it would take to get Cas to smile like that.

"It was gonna be a double wedding, with Jared and Gen," Misha explains. "The whole thing was planned out to the last detail, over six months in the making. But

then... something *happened* at Jared's bachelor party... I don't know... I wasn't there. But the next day Danneel called it off." He looks down, lips folding together for a moment. "It was a nightmare. All over the papers. Every day someone was calling for Jensen. If it wasn't the press it was caterers, florists, whatever, wanting to know if they were still gonna get paid, if they should cancel their orders, you know... and in the middle of all that, Jared and Jensen had this *epic* blow out. You could hear them shouting all over. And then..." Misha lifts a shoulder. "Nothing. They haven't talked since. Or, at least, beyond what they need to for the show. Jensen... I mean, he still went to the wedding. He was best man for god's sake. And he was great. Friendly. Funny. Everyone thought the two of them were over it. But as soon as Jared got back from his honeymoon it was right back to how it was. Standoff. I know Sera and Eric have both tried to break it but, no dice."

"So... what's the 'something that happened?' Anything to do with your guy switching teams?"

Misha hums - a muted, rueful laugh.

"Yeah, I figure..." he answers. "I think it was as much a surprise for Jensen as anyone. And Jared, of course. Word is he tried real hard to be a gentleman about the whole thing, but to say Jensen took the rejection badly, well, understatement." Misha stares into the distance, lines on his face softening, eyes sad. "I wasn't exactly born out of the closet either. It was... tough, when I figured myself out. I mean, liberating too. Having everything about yourself *finally* slot into place like that, like the world suddenly *makes sense* in a way you never even realised it didn't. But society has such a clear message about stuff like that. Boy meets girl. Marriage. Kids. The longer you've lived that, the harder it is to admit to anything else. And Jensen was with Danneel for *years*... so I get why it's hard for him. I do. Why it's easier to flirt with players like Steve, where it's all just a game and nothing's gonna come of it. But me..." Misha closes his eyes, face scrunching up for a second in something like pain, before he drops his head down to stare at the floor. "I want something real... and I think he's starting to get that. That's why he called it off. He's afraid."

Boy meets girl. Marriage. Kids. Lisa. Ben. Barbeques. Picnics. White picket fence.

Yeah. It *is* hard, letting go of that.

"Yeah, okay," Dean mutters. "So maybe the dude's alright, all things considered... but that doesn't give him the right to take out his problems on you. And it doesn't mean you gotta bend over backwards for him. It's not gonna kill the guy if you stand up for yourself once in while. You got a problem with the way he treats you then say it. Don't let him walk all over you."

There's a pause as Misha's eyes come back into focus, then he starts to chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Dean asks.

"Nothing, it's just..." Misha shakes his head, still smiling. "That's the same advice the fans have been giving me all season. For Castiel."

What?

"What?"

Misha's smile drops at the tone and he hesitates before looking up. Dean hadn't meant to sound so harsh but *what the hell?* He hasn't been screwing Cas around like that, it's... they were... it's totally different.

"Sorry, I didn't..." Misha answers, contrite.

"I'm not walking all over Cas," Dean continues, because it's important, like, really fucking important, that Misha understand this. "*He's* the one who's never around."

"Yeah, yeah, of course," Misha nods, glancing away and Dean can't help thinking *he's* the one being humoured now. "Except, you know, that he *is*. All the time. When you call. I mean, when you *really* need him."

"Well... well, yeah, but," Dean stutters, confused as to how he's ended up on the back foot here. "Yeah, *now* he is. But he's got a lot to make up for, hasn't he?" Even as he says it Dean's thinking about Castiel's *two* suicidal stands for him, about his rebellion and all the last minute saves and he knows that bitching about one absent year and a few unanswered calls against all that is bullshit. "And besides," he continues, trying to cover up his uncertainty with more words. "He's cool with it. Answering prayers is, it's what angel's are supposed to do, right? He's fine with it."

"Yeah. Sure."

"He *is*. And what else am I supposed to do, huh? You said yourself, he's got, you know, a war to fight. I can't exactly call him up and say 'hey Cas, wanna chill out, catch a game?' can I? So yeah. I call when I need him, otherwise I leave him to it."

There's a sharp displacement of air as Misha inhales, holding the breath a moment as he thinks, lines on his forehead bunching together.

"That's... um..." he tries. "That's not really how you pitched it last night."

Dean turns away.

Damn.

He'd been hoping Misha was gonna leave that alone. They'd been doing such a good job of ignoring it so far.

"Well, I was drunk last night," he says sharply, hoping that'll be enough to get Misha to drop it.

The way the actor nods, careful and slow, suggests he's got the message. But then Misha presses on anyway.

"Do you... uh... do you wanna talk about -?"

"Fuck, no," Dean snaps, jumping up and pacing away, stopping short at the doorway when he remembers that, oh yeah, there *isn't* a kitchen beyond it, much less a stash of hunter's helper.

Behind him Misha breathes out another laugh.

"Of course. No chick-flick moments."

He says it like it's supposed to mean something and Dean turns back with a frown. Misha tilts his head at the unspoken question - which pisses Dean off

because now is *not* the time for the guy to start channelling Castiel again damn it - then the actor's face clears, cheeks flushing.

"Right. Yeah," he mutters, eyes flicking away. "Everyone forgets that it's been, like... oh wow, over *forty* years for you... you probably don't remember."

"Remember what?" Dean asks, although he's pretty sure he doesn't want to know.

Misha grimaces in apology as he looks up.

"It's something you say to Sam in the pilo- I mean... when you pick him up from Stanford. He's getting emotional and you don't wanna... you know what? Forget it." He waves a hand, jerky and tense. "I'll just shut up."

He hunches over, gripping his coffee in both hands. After a moment he starts tapping a finger against the side of the cup.

Seeing an outward expression of his own discomfort Dean feels himself start to unwind again. It's freaky as hell to think this guy, still to all intents and purposes a stranger, knows stuff about him Dean has long since forgotten. Because while he remembers getting Sam out of Stanford, of course, like hell he could recount it word for word. But it's not Misha's fault he knows the stuff he does - it's his job to. And finding yourself thrown in with a group of fictional characters can't be a walk in the park. This is a messed up situation for all of them. There's no point making it worse by being awkward around each other.

"Look... I'm sorry, man," Dean sighs, leaning against the doorframe. "It's just... this whole thing is nuts, you know? It's hard to know what's up and what's not at the moment."

Misha nods and offers a small, close-mouthed smile in response.

"You're telling me."

In a sudden rush of memory Dean recalls how the actor gasped as his fingers inched along Dean's shoulder, finding the handprint there - not a gasp of arousal after all but one of amazement. Of disbelief. Of fear even. Yeah, poor guy. This past day can't have been easy for him.

Although... Dean follows that train of thought a little further and yup, the memory of the sex is still good. Everything else about it might be a mindfuck of the highest level, but goddamn it felt fantastic. And Misha had to agree, or else he wouldn't have been so keen to stop Gabriel whitewashing the memory. So hey, at least there was *something* good amidst the madness.

Thinking about Gabriel's offer reminds Dean of the other stuff the archangel had told them that morning - about how Misha and Cas had some kind of psychic link. What if that *was* true? What if everything Misha was saying last night really *did* cross over into their universe somehow?

Assuming they made it back, a little clarification on a few points might not be a bad idea.

"Hey. All that stuff you said last night about Cas. Was it -?"

A sharp crack followed by two more in quick succession cuts him off and instinct kicks in, turning Dean's head towards the sound. Outside, for sure.

"Was that...?" Misha whispers, legs shaking as he stands up.

A voice somewhere near by mutters about gunfire not being on the call sheet for the day.

"Stay here," Dean instructs, leaving a trembling Misha and bemused looking crew behind as he rushes out.

INT. SUPERNATURAL SET

Dean reaches the door just as it's smashed open from the other side.

"Whoa, bro! Chill out."

Fortunately for Dean Gabriel's shout turns Virgil away from him, so the homicidal angel with the *shotgun* - and packing a lot more heat besides if the bulge under



his coat is any indicator - doesn't notice him standing dead centre on the other side of the doorway.

Dean knows he can be overly gung-ho sometimes, but even he's not stupid enough to face those odds head on. He uses the distraction to jump to the side and behind the open door, praying - to a Cas who can't hear him and a god that doesn't care - that Gabriel hasn't proved himself a turncoat and will continue to distract his brother enough for Dean to get a couple of hits in.

He makes the move just in time because Virgil dismisses Gabriel a second later and turns back, marching inside, gun aimed ahead of him.

"See?" Gabriel says, hurrying through the door after his brother and waving at the empty space Dean has just vacated. "A clear path, like I told you." He rests a hand, gingerly, on the barrel of Virgil's gun and angles it down. "All we gotta do is walk in, nice and easy. No need to shoot the place up."

"So you say," Virgil answers, looking round. His body remains tense, eyes weary. It's clear he's not pacified in the slightest by Gabriel's assurances.

Dean presses back against the wall, inching as far as possible behind the open door as Virgil glances over his shoulder, eyes narrowing as he scans every corner. He pauses in looking at the door and Dean holds his breath. Then -

"What, you don't trust me?" Gabriel pipes up. Dean can't tell if it's a deliberate distraction or pure dumb luck, but either way he's grateful when the assassin's focus is broken and he turns his gaze to the archangel instead. "I used to be the one giving *you* orders, Virgil, don't forget."

"You used to," Virgil answers, voice cold. "Centuries ago. But times have changed, Gabriel. You were lost. Michael told us you were dead."

Gabriel nods, trying to school his expression into some semblance of his brother's hard-edged, emotionless one. He's positioned in front of Virgil now, and when Dean edges back into the open he sees the archangel's eyes flick up over Virgil's shoulder and catch sight of him. Gabriel's self-serving history makes it a gamble exposing himself like this. But it's a calculated one. Dean's ninety-five percent sure Gabriel's still with him... maybe ninety. Eighty-five at least.

"Understandable," Gabriel nods, eyes holding Dean's just for a second with the gesture before moving back to Virgil. "I mean, how was Mikey to know Lucifer had trapped me in this godforsaken place, right?"

"Lucifer trapped you here?"

"Yeah. Ambushed me right out of the sky. It was terrifying. I thought he was going to kill me."

Dean starts creeping up, very quietly, behind Virgil's back.

"Really?" There's an edge to Virgil's tone now. Something dark and suspicious. "Because there was talk in Heaven. Some believed you'd left to join Lucifer's forces."

"What?" Gabriel protests, startling back. "I would *never!*"

"And yet I find you here with Lucifer's chosen."

There's a point. Where the fuck *is* Sam? He was outside too, wasn't he? Shit. One shotgun blast was more than enough to take a man down and Virgil let off *three*. Dean remembers each crack very distinctly.

"Hey, not through choice," Gabriel's continuing and Dean forces himself to press on as well. If something *has* happened to Sam... well, he just can't think about it now. They've still got a murderous angel to take out. "I just figured sticking close might get me a way back home. You've no idea how happy I was to see you rounding that corner."

"Then why not let me kill him?" Virgil counters and relief pulses hard through Dean, so strong it's like a shot of pure adrenaline filling his veins. Sam's still alive.

"Killing one of those boys?" Gabriel chuckles. "Waste of time, trust me."

It's the slip Virgil's been waiting for, hands gripping tighter round his gun.

"What would you know of the vessels, if you have been trapped here all this time?"

“Uh...”

Virgil lifts his gun, barrel pointing at Gabriel's chest, while the archangel holds his palms out and backs away, stammering some defence. Dean doesn't give Virgil time to respond. He flattens his hand and hits as hard as he can with the edge into the weak spot at the back of the de-powered angel's neck.

Gabriel takes full advantage of his brother's stumble, yanking the gun from his hands and smashing the butt into Virgil's face.

Dean's ready for another hit as Virgil staggers back, but instead finds himself dodging a pistol shot as the assassin whips a hidden weapon from inside his coat.

The shot's still echoing as Virgil spins round, smacking Gabriel in the jaw as the archangel fumbles with his stolen gun. Gabriel drops embarrassingly quickly, blood spurting from his nose, shotgun flying from his hands and skittering across the floor.

Without pausing, Virgil whips back to where Dean is running towards him, forcing the hunter to duck and roll to avoid the volley of shots aimed his way. Fuck.

Although clearly in a bad way with his nose still dripping red, Gabriel tries to get back on his feet, swaying like a tree branch in a hurricane. He's not even half way there when Virgil knocks him down again with a brutal backhand across the cheek.

He lifts the pistol and cocks it, aiming at his brother's head.

Even if Dean *could* tackle the guy without risking a fatal response he'll never make it in time, and he's surprised at the amount of regret he feels about this. Gabriel might be a dick, but he deserves better than a piss-poor execution in some backwater alternative dimension.

Then Virgil stops and tilts his head.

Shaking off his confusion, Gabriel does the same.

They hold like that for a second, then turn as one in the same direction. A blink later Virgil drops all thought of Gabriel and breaks into a run, heading for the nearest set - the Orchard Inn Motel.

"Stop him!" Gabriel cries, trying once more to stand.

But Virgil's way ahead, and besides, Dean has other priorities.

He hurries over and clasps Gabriel by the arm, heaving him up.

"Where's Sam?"

"I'm here..."

And so he is, stomping in through the door and panting beside them. His hands and jacket are blotched with dark patches of scarlet and Dean stares at the blood in alarm.

"What-?"

"Not me," Sam gasps, shaking his head. "Kripke got hit. That Singer guy's waiting for an ambulance." He nods to where Virgil's disappearing. "Shall we...?"

*Virgil, Dean. Keys to Heavenly Weapons. Lucifer. Castiel. Get a grip.*

"Right."

All three of them hurry towards the replica of the motel - nothing but a flat wall of plywood from this angle. They're just rounding the edge when a loud smacking sound cuts through the air, followed by a grunt and a thud. A body hitting the floor, maybe. Another innocent unlucky enough to have found themselves in Virgil's way.

Dean's the first inside, feeling like an idiot having to open a door to a room that isn't a room, but he soon forgets all that once he's there, shock turning him stock still.

INT. SUPERNATURAL SET - ORCHARD INN

Virgil is sprawled face down beside the bed, out cold by the look of it, with Misha standing above him. The actor has a clapboard gripped tight in both hands, upside down so the movable strip is firmly closed. There's a spot of blood at the far wooden corner and a second look reveals a corresponding gash above Virgil's ear.

"Oh my god!" Misha exclaims, eyes wide enough to show how impossibly blue they really are, fingers gripping his weapon hard enough to turn his knuckles white. "Did I kill him? Is he dead?"

Dean's too busy staring at the guy, naked admiration plastered all over his face, and Gabriel's breathing hard against the doorframe, working on cleaning up the aftermath of his nosebleed, so it's Sam who examines the body. After a quick touch to the angel's neck he shakes his head.

"He's alive," he tells them. "Just out for the count."

He then proceeds to frisk Virgil's prone form, grinning in triumph when he finds the stolen set of keys. Dean grins back at him, slumping in relief. Whatever happens now, at least Castiel and their world will be safe.

"Wow..." Misha gasps.

The actor looks less manic but his eyes are kinda glossed over, staring into nothing, hands still stuck to the clapboard.

"You okay, man?" Dean asks, walking over and tugging the makeshift weapon carefully from Misha's stiffened fingers.

"Okay?" Misha repeats as Dean chucks the card on the bed, rolling the word around his tongue like it's some strange, foreign language. "Okay?" His eyes snap back into focus and fix on Dean. "Dude. I just knocked a guy out. A guy with a *gun*. Wham! Just like that -" He gestures with his hands, imitating the move he'd used to smack Virgil round the head. "- I'm fucking *fantastic*! That was *amazing*!"

His smile fills up half his face, open-mouthed and jubilant, and Dean can't help responding in kind.

"Well, good job," he offers by way of thanks, slapping Misha on the shoulder. And if his hand lingers there, finger's trailing down the guy's back, well, screw it - guy's just been through another trauma, he's *comforting*. "We owe you."

"So, what happens now?" Sam asks, getting up and twisting his fingers through the ring of his prize so he can better hold the keys and their label in his palm.

"Now," Gabriel answers, moving inside to stand in front of the fake window. "Click your heels together, boys. We're going home."

"You're sure?" Sam presses.

Gabriel tuts at him.

"Of course. Raphael's casting his spell right now, can't you feel it?"

Dean and Sam look at each other blankly, then Misha, and shrug.

"Freaking humans," Gabriel mutters, shaking his head. "Well he is, trust me. There's so much magic bleeding through it's making my extremities all tingly. More than enough to carry us all back."

Trusting a Trickster. Who would have thought? But Dean thinks about the way Gabe and Virgil both turned their heads earlier, almost in unison. Like they were sensing something. That must have been Raphael's spell he realises.

"How long?" he asks.

"Any minute. You two better stand close. This is where the power's converging and it wouldn't do to miss your ride back cos you were outta range."

Sam and Dean move to either side of the archangel and stop. When nothing happens Dean starts to shuffle on the spot, already impatient.

"So..." Misha starts, hesitant. "I guess this is goodbye, huh?"

Sam smiles at him, friendly, but he's the only one who does. Dean and Gabriel are too busy finding something really fascinating in the pattern on the walls and in the carpet.

"Yup," Gabriel nods, gaze moving to the bedcovers. "Guess it is."

"I... ah..." Misha's voice starts to crack, the blue in his eyes rippling round the edges. He coughs and bites the emotion back. "I'm really gonna miss you, I... I dunno what I'm gonna do without you around."

Dean thinks he hears Gabriel sniff, but it could be his nose still hurting, it does look raw enough to give Rudolph a run for his money. In any case, when the archangel finally looks up his eyes are dry, face cheery.

"You'll be fine," he insists with a wave of his hand. "More than fine, you'll be better off. I'm the last person anyone wants as a friend, really."

Misha scrunches *his* nose up, shaking his head.

"That's not true, you--"

"Yeah it is," Gabriel counters, eyes hardening, lips a thin line. "I'm not Richard, Mish. I'm not *human*. Don't presume to know me."

The words fall hard and cold between them and whatever Misha was going to say next comes out as nothing - just a brief, hurt, exhale of air. He looks away.

Dean shoots a scowl at Gabriel and in doing so catches a change in the angel - the hard line of his jaw melting away, eyes pressing down a moment. He allows the vulnerability only until Misha turns back, then he takes a breath and with it wipes his face clean, eyes bright again, expression blank. Dean's scowl drops.

Yeah, okay.

It's easier to leave someone mad at you than leave them heartbroken. Easier to be a dick than admit how much you care. He gets that. Boy, does he.

"Wait, Richard. That's a point," Misha says, quieter. "What's gonna happen exactly, when the spell's done?" He glances up, gaze moving swiftly over Gabriel

to rest on Sam and Dean. "You guys'll, zap out, or whatever, and Jared and Jen, Richard too, will all just, wake up or something?"

Dean opens his mouth, then stops. God, he hadn't thought. Where *were* their doppelgangers right now?

Since Gabriel's the closest they have to an expert on this, he and Sam look to him. But Gabriel's twisting his lips and looking away. Misha stares at the angel, panic flashing in his eyes and making his voice tremble.

"They will... be okay? Right? Gabriel?"

"The Jeys'll be fine," Gabriel answers. "It's been, what? Two, three days? That's no big. They'll come to with what feels like the mother of all hangovers, but they'll be fine. Richard... eh." He shrugs. "I've been riding him for almost a year, and even back in our world where there are people tailor-made for it, that long sharing space with an archangel? It's gonna take a toll."

"Wait," Dean interrupts, skin crawling. "Are you saying we're *possessing* these guys?"

Gabriel chews the corner of his lips, thinking.

"Technically it's a little more complicated than that," he muses, nodding to himself. "But essentially... yeah."

Dean lifts a hand, a thick, prickly feeling of revulsion tightening around his - around *Jensen's* - skin as he stares at it. The body was so like his - the fact he had no right to it hadn't even crossed his mind. But the truth was he'd been running round in it, *having sex* with it, without Jensen's consent, not even giving him the chance to offer it, no better than a demon. And fuck, did this mean Jensen was *still in here? With him?*

He glances at Sam who's patting himself down, lips curling. No doubt he's recalling his own less than pleasant demonic, and angelic, experience of possession.

"Are they conscious?" Sam asks.



Gabriel shrugs.

"Dunno," he answers, carefree. Well practised in ways of taking control of people, of course. It occurs to Dean then, for the first time, to wonder about the archangel's form. Was the short guy with clownish hair a vessel or what? And if he was then, Jesus, how long had Gabriel been riding him? "If you haven't been hearing voices then probably not, but it's hard to say for sure. Dunno what's gonna happen to old Dicky here when I leave either."

"Don't know or don't care?" Misha asks. His voice is soft but the glare he's giving is dark and cold.

Gabriel holds it for a moment, then shrugs again, slow and deliberate.

"There's no reason for you to either, you know," he says. "It's not like you knew the guy."

A moment passes as Misha takes this in.

"You're right," he says evenly, eyes not leaving Gabriel's. "I don't know you at all."

He gets a smirk in response and there's genuine triumph in it. Gabriel's got what he wanted - Misha's affection for him is waning. But Dean knows it's a bittersweet victory and thinks that maybe, just maybe, he can see that in the angel's expression. There's a softness around the eyes that says Gabriel might not as happy about his success as he could be.

"Uh, thanks, by the way, Misha," Sam cuts in, nodding at the actor. "For everything."

"Err, yeah," Dean agrees. Gratitude's cool, he can handle that, and there's no doubt the guy deserves it. "Thanks, and... um... take care of yourself, okay?"

There's another pause as Misha softens and smiles at them both, gaze holding on Dean. He purses his lips then blurts out -

"Oh, what the hell."

The next thing Dean knows he's got an impassioned actor in his arms. Misha's lips find his and the actor crushes them together, breathing Dean in like he's the best kind of high, deceptively strong hands fisting in Dean's shirt and, ah, fuck it, Dean's kissing back, gripping the other man's shoulders for an anchor. It's not Cas, Dean knows that this time, this one's just for Misha and he's okay with that. More than okay. And he doesn't care who knows it. Yeah Sammy, that's right, sometimes I like guys too, so what?

It's pretty intense for a goodbye, but Dean keeps it up, using the touch and the feel, the rich taste and smell of the man in his arms to blot out the fear and frustration that's been dogging him these last couple of days. Hell, the last year and a half. All his life. He gives himself over and loses himself in the simplicity of it, the mindless press of their bodies. Sure it's not Cas, but neither was Lisa. Dean's well versed in taking comfort as and when, and with who, he can.

He's even sad when it's over, a chill running down him as Misha steps from their embrace.

"Sorry, I just..." the actor mutters, licking his lips with a grin and not sounding the slightest bit sorry at all. "You're Dean fucking Winchester, you know?"

Still dopey from the kiss the phrase sounds like a blessing and Dean's lips quirk up. Yes he is. And today? Today's a win. Not even Sam's embarrassed coughing beside him is gonna break Dean's high over that.

"You know, I'm... I'm Sam Winchester," his brother mutters, half to himself. "I'm in the show too. I mean, people like me too... don't they?"

"Oh, Sammy. And how," Gabriel answers, eyes flicking up and down Sam in a parody of a leer. Or, at least, Dean thinks it's a parody.

Sam frowns at the angel, but before he can question there's a humming behind them. Dean glances over his shoulder and sees a familiar sigil burning red hot into the hotel room window. The same one he'd watched Balthazar paint in blood back at Bobby's.

"Raphael," Gabriel says. "Better stand back."

This last is directed at Misha, who does as he's told, eyeing the mark with wide, awe-struck eyes.

"Whoa..."

The humming intensifies and Dean braces himself, bending his knees.

"Wait, Dean!"

Misha has to shout to make himself heard over the droning and when Dean looks up he finds the actor's face taut, dark lines across his forehead. It might just be the pressure of the spell, but, there's something in his eyes that tells Dean it's more than that, more than shock at the magic and the sadness of goodbye. There's a kind of conflict in the twist of Misha's mouth, like he's working through something, frantically, in his mind.

"I just - You don't..." Misha's words trip over themselves he's so desperate to be heard in time. "Just don't blame him too much, okay?" he shouts. "He meant it for the best!"

"What-?"

But it's too late. Dean feels a tug at his navel and finds himself pulled upwards and back, Sam beside him. The glass breaks...

EXT. ORCHARD INN MOTEL

...smashing them back to reality.

## FINAL ACT

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EXT. LIQUOR STORE - SOUTH DAKOTA - LATE NIGHT

The rain, which had eased up some when Dean first stepped out, begins a second downpour, the narrow ledge above the store offering scant protection against the onslaught. Dean curses as the thin shards of water find their way down the back of his neck and jacket collar and kicks the door with its cheery 'sorry, we are CLOSED' sign a third time for good measure.

His mind is in turmoil, a swirling mass of disjointed images vying for attention.

Chaos, with a constant.

Castiel.

Castiel standing off against his older brother, the archangel who'd *killed him* not so long ago, in the darkness outside the Orchard Inn, confident and self-assured. Castiel zapping them back to Bobby's, hand hot and prickly with power on Dean's shoulder. Castiel turning away, refusing to talk, gone after barely a word, leaving Dean abandoned and unsatisfied.

Castiel unfurling his wings - dark shadows moving higher up the wall behind him with every lightening flash, blowing any and all possible connection to his double away in an instant, as awesome and terrifying as when Dean had first seen them. Or rather, not seen them, because shit, *shit*, those were *shadows* and those wings were *always there*, too vast for the human brain to comprehend. Jesus, how could he forget that? That there was so much more to Cas than a trenchcoat and twisted tie?

Then there was Cas and Balls' tête-à-tête after Raphael's hasty retreat at his trenchcoat clad brother's show of power. "Well Cas, now that you have your sword, try not to die by it." All without a single look Dean's way, not a single one. Because this whole thing - Virgil, Bizarro world, them, the *fake keys, everything* - had been masterminded by Cas and his smarmy, Hell's Kitchen look-alike sidekick. All that time he and Sam had spent freaking out about the fate of those weapons, the fate of their world and *Castiel's life* - all a lie. A *distraction*. While Cas and Balthazar cleared out the hippy angel's vault together, and who knows what else besides, happy as clams, those two freaking...

He can't even focus his rage on Balthazar either, because while it might have been his plan, Cas "would have done the same" apparently. *And* his apology was token at best, the dick flying off almost the second the words past his lips. Just when Dean was ready to talk to him too!

"Fuck..." Dean mutters, turning up his collar and twisting round, ready to brave the storm.

He should have waited for Bobby to get back really. No point both of them getting drenched. But while Sam had been happy enough reacquainting himself with the old hunter's library, smiling whenever the walls he patted didn't wobble and generally using the place as reassurance they were *back*, the whole thing had left Dean too restless for that. The walls might be sturdy, but they were too narrow tonight, too close and confining.

So he'd made a gruff comment about helping with supplies and left, ignoring Sam's 'let's talk about this' puppy dogs and hoping the feel of genuine American soil under his feet would quiet his thoughts.

No such luck.

And if it wasn't Cas or Balls he was raging over, it was fucking Gabriel. Because it sure would have been nice to have another archangel in their corner when Raphael had been tying their insides in knots before Castiel's last minute save. Would have been nice to have something unexpected to show Cas and wipe that cool, impenetrable, military expression off his face.

Maybe Cas would have stayed then. Maybe the war would have been over. An archangel on side had to be hefty ammunition, something Raphael would think twice about leading his - no her, dude's got a chick as a vessel now Dean reminds himself - forces up against. In any case, having Gabriel there to lead a charge once in a while would have taken a load off Cas' shoulders if nothing else.

Except the fucker hadn't been there, had he?

Dean's sure he remembers Gabriel crashing through the window along with him and Sam. But when the two of them hit the parking lot on the other side,

forearms scraping asphalt, glass splinters digging in their palms, the archangel was nowhere to be seen.

They could try and hunt him down. Probably. Tell Cas he was out there so he could put a crack team on the job. But deep down, Dean knows it's a lost cause. Gabriel's running again. He's shirking his responsibility, just like the first time Heaven split. Staying out of it so he doesn't have to pick a side, doesn't have to fight his family. So no. No matter how hard they try, they're not gonna find him. Not when he doesn't want to be found.

Dean wants to think *coward*... But Gabriel's given his life once already to stop an apocalypse, stood up to his brother and got stabbed in the heart for his trouble. He can see why the guy wouldn't want to risk that again.

He sighs and takes the plunge, pacing out into the rain, which chooses that moment to fall harder just to spite him.

Except - huh? Why isn't he -?

Dean stops and looks up, exposing his face to the falling water.

He can see the drops coming at him, feel the chill as they cool the air around his cheeks, but somehow, impossibly, not a single one is touching him. It's not like they're splashing some kind of invisible barrier or anything either. The rain's still falling as normal, it just... isn't having any affect.

There's a dull thud at his feet and when Dean looks down he sees an open bottle of scotch resting on the sidewalk, a scruffy haired figure in a trenchcoat hunched over beside it staring into space. Also unaffected by the rain.

Ah.

After a fleeting moment of hesitation where Dean contemplates turning on his heel and leaving Cas there, he sits himself down next to the angel and scoops up the bottle, taking a long swig.

"Found time to explain after all?" he growls, throwing Castiel's parting words at Bobby's back at him - a promise to explain everything 'when I can.'

Cas looks down, eyes tracing the painted lines on the road like they might hold the meaning of the universe if he just looks hard enough and Dean feels his frustration start to ebb. Because this isn't the Sergeant-General he's been at loggerheads with the past few months, this is the quiet, unassuming angel he'd once shared a confession with on the bench of a children's playground - struggling and a little lost and so very *human*, whether he knew it or not, Dean couldn't stop his heart reaching out to him, couldn't stop the shift in his opinion of the guy from 'unknowable dick' to 'vulnerable individual.' The rest, as they say, being history.

Then Cas sort of ruins everything by answering.

"No."

Dean rolls his eyes.

"I have a... respite," Castiel continues. "Thanks to Balthazar's horde. But while the weapons are formidable against Raphael alone, their power is not as strong as I had hoped. Certainly not enough to take on all of Raphael's forces. There is still much to be done."

"Fine," Dean spits round another gulp of scotch. "Better get on with it then. Can't afford to waste any time talking to your friends, right?"

Cas sighs.

"Dean," he starts, voice low and heavy and nothing like Misha's, which is both a comfort and a disappointment. Because while it's a relief to have *Cas* back, even if they are bitching at each other, Dean had grown accustomed to the lightness in the actor's tone. It was easier in comparison. Refreshing. Although... had Cas really sounded *this* burdened before? "I am sorry -"

"Screw sorry, Cas," Dean interrupts, eyes blazing as he finally turns his head, taking in the angel's profile.

Cas does look sorry, it's true - the blue of his eyes dulled to grey, head still angled down - but Dean's not about to let him off because of that, no matter what Misha said. Because this must be what the actor meant, mustn't it, about not blaming him? Cas setting them up as a wild goose chase so he could get

those weapons? Dude must have read ahead. But if he thought Dean *wasn't* gonna lay into the guy about it then he was softer than Dean realised.

"I don't want an apology. Fuck it, I shouldn't need one! I thought we were *done* with this chess game crap, man. If you needed help, all you had to do was *ask*."

Cas half jerks, half flinches his head towards Dean, but not quite all the way to facing him.

"I..." he starts, a feverish brightness in his eyes Dean doesn't understand. The sharpness of it reads almost like pain, though he can't see what Cas has to feel hurt about here. "There wasn't time -"

"Bullshit," Dean cuts in again, not giving Cas the chance to think up any more excuses. Now he's finally got the guy here, to himself, he's gonna get some answers, damn it. "You had enough time to powwow with Balthazar. You had enough time to run me and Sam through the plan."

Cas' shoulders tense and he purses his lips. Dean braces for an earful, but when Cas speaks he's soft and cold. Which is worse.

"Perhaps you're right. I should have consulted you first." This should be another apology, or a concession of the point at least, but there's a catch in the angel's tone that makes Dean think Cas doesn't mean it that way. "But I had faith in your capabilities. I know your strengths, Dean. I knew you would be able to withstand Virgil, especially stripped of his powers." There's a brief hesitation, like he's debating whether to continue. Or preparing to. "It's not as if I went behind your back to bargain with an ancient, extremely powerful, extremely dangerous being. Risking my life, and that of a dear friend, for something that had a far greater chance of failure than success."

...touché.

Why had Dean thought it would be a good idea teaching Cas sarcasm again?

He fights the barb at first, letting an angry fire bubble and hiss in his gut. It's the same old argument - what was he supposed to do? Just let Sam run around soulless, a danger to himself and others? And since all Cas seemed good for was



whining about how damaged Sam's soul would be, without offering any solutions, well, it had fallen to Dean to take the initiative, hadn't it? Stupid, fucking -

Dean opens his mouth, fully prepared to shout himself hoarse until Castiel actually *listens* to him. But as he does a car rattles past, headlights flashing garish yellow on the angel, washing his face of colour and putting dark shadows under his eyes, exposing the weary sag of skin down his cheekbones. It's like some hidden lighting team are cranking it up to eleven, ready for a close up, and for the first time since getting back Dean sees the similarity, for a split second he sees not Cas but Misha sitting there. And it's like a floodgate of memory opening up - Misha sweating under angel make-up; Misha chugging back sweet smelling liqueur and telling him Castiel loves him; Misha looking away, self conscious, as he explains Dean might have been taking Cas for granted.

The car moves on, putting the angel back in shadow, and Dean's anger fizzles out. He sags forward, shifting his gaze from Cas and toying with the bottle in his hands. This was *not* how he meant this to go.

He'd told himself after that talk on set, while running towards a potentially suicidal confrontation with Virgil, that if he managed to make it back, if he ever saw Castiel again, things were gonna be different. He wouldn't be so quick to shout. He wouldn't be so demanding.

But carrying through with those promises back in the thick of it, faced with an angel who might as well be stone the amount of give Dean's getting from him - it's hard. And sliding into bad habits is so much easier than the effort it takes to change.

Take now for instance - Dean *wants* to say 'you're right, I'm sorry,' wants to tell Cas he matters, that he's probably the best friend he's ever had, maybe even... maybe even more than that.

But his mouth is forming wisecracks on instinct and what comes out instead is -

"That all you came for? To bitch at me? With a bottle of cheap scotch to soften the blow? Well, gee thanks, Cas. You sure know how to make a girl feel special."

As cracks go it's not his best, lacking venom enough to be effective, but the words make Cas' eyes flash nonetheless. Steely blue. Another layer to the wall

between them. Dean grimaces and steals another mouthful from the bottle in his hands, trying to pretend he doesn't care about the distance, doesn't hate not knowing how to break it.

"No," Cas mutters. "I came to..." He stops and makes a rough, growling noise in the back of his throat, like a broken cassette tape, insides all mangled up in the machine. "I don't know why I came. I saw you and I thought..."

Dean risks a glance at him, part of him thinking that if he can just catch the angel's gaze and hold it like he used to, like he'd practiced with Misha, then maybe they'd start seeing eye-to-eye again. But Cas is frowning down at himself, at the hands he has interlocked across his lap.

"I have been... distracted," he continues, voice softening, almost to a whisper. "I am not a born leader, Dean. At least, not on such a scale as has been required of me. I... this war has proven more difficult than I anticipated."

There's that hint of humanity again.

Not knowing what else to do Dean holds out the bottle, mimicking an offer Cas had made him back when he'd been fretting over Sam. Before the cat lady, before they'd learnt about that vital part of his brother still lost in the Pit. It's messed up, he knows, using alcohol as an olive branch this way, but it's the best he's got.

Cas eyes the bottle beneath his lashes. The whiskey won't do anything to him, of course - it's just a bottle, not a whole store - but it's the gesture that's important and Dean is surprised by the weight that lifts in him as the angel curls a hand round the glass neck, accepting.

Rough fabric brushes Dean's fingers as Cas tugs the bottle away. He takes a quick sip. Licks his lips and stares at the bottle. Takes another. His throat ripples as he swallows, just like Misha's, just like in 2014 when he'd been chugging back those amphetamines, and the weight sinks back into Dean, rolling deep into the pit of his stomach. Because how can he tell what's real here? If this is really Cas and not some imitation, not some act the angel's putting on for his benefit.

"Talk to me, man," Dean blurts out, pleading. "Tell me what's going on."

Finally, *finally*, Castiel's eyes make that long journey up to him, crossing the distance between them, but it's still wrong. Dean remembers back when they were fighting Lucifer when that gaze had been a lifeline, his one constant in the whole mess, a fixed point in a world gone mad, a shining truth in a sea of lies. Meeting it now is like drowning, falling into a vast, fathomless pit of blue with the tide ever changing, dragging him under and washing him away.

"I've told you," Cas says, a distant voice across the sea. "I keep telling you -"

"I'm not talking about the big picture here," Dean cuts in, trying hard to keep his head above the water, to swim through everything Cas isn't saying. "Blah blah civil war, blah blah Raphael. I *know*. I'm talking *numbers*, Cas. I'm talking battle plans. I'm talking recruitment. Where's the dotted line? Sign me the fuck up."

But Castiel's shaking his head.

"This is not your fight, Dean."

The burn of these words is more than enough to re-ignite Dean's fury.

"Not my fight!" he snaps. "What the *fuck* do you think I was doing against Lucifer? You think that was, what, a *hobby* for me? A way to spend my free time? Of *course* it's my fight! *Our* fight. You remember that? When we fought the apocalypse *together*? I know I've been hung up on Sam lately, but damn it, he's my brother. Doesn't mean I can't take on a few dick angels as well. Tell me *how*, Cas. If the weapons aren't enough you must have some other plan, right? Some endgame you're working on to finish Raphael for good? Well I want in."

There's another flash of almost-pain in Cas' eyes as the angel sucks in a breath he doesn't need.

Dean stays quiet.

He's been around Cas long enough to pick up on certain subtleties so he can tell the angel is on the verge of something. The words are right there, waiting, all Cas needs to do is -

"No," the angel breathes, looking down at the bottle in his hands. As he speaks his fingers run anxiously up and down the glass. "No. There are some things... it's better you don't know."

Dean's nostrils flare, anger rising again. It burns all the brighter for having disappointment at the heart of it. Disappointment, and the nagging suspicion that the blame for this lies as much at his door as the tight-lipped angel's.

"Why? Cos I can't handle it?" he snarls, falling back to the warm, familiar realm of insults. "Screw you, Cas. Do I look like a damsel to you?"

"No, Dean," Cas answers in kind, impatient now. "Your skills are not in question. That is not why."

Dean shakes his head, lips twisting in a mirthless grin. His eyes shift to follow the gush of rainwater down the low angle of the road and he watches as it flushes down an open drain a few paces away.

"It's because you're too important."

Dean blinks and turns back with a frown, ready to scoff. But his denouncement of destiny and all that crap dies in his throat as he meets Cas' gaze, the angel's eyes wide and shining, suddenly full where seconds ago they'd been clouded and empty.

"To me," Castiel adds and Dean can't tell if it's yearning or fear making his lips tremble. "You are too important to me."

The whole world seems to mute around Dean, passing cars and the heavy patter of rain fading to white noise as Castiel leans closer, as he rocks forward in return. There's a tingling rush of *deja vu* then -

The tinkle of the bottle falling on its side is what first alerts Dean to Castiel's absence and he just stares as its contents spurt out over the edge of the sidewalk, deep amber mixing with the ever-flowing stream of rain. A split-second later whatever protection Castiel had been enacting over the elements vanishes and Dean is soaked to the skin, bone dry to dripping wet in less time than it takes to draw a breath.

There's little point trying to escape the downpour now with the damage done, so Dean just stays where he is, pushing sopping hair back away from his eyes.

"Son of a bitch."

FADE OUT.

## EPILOGUE

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INT. SUPERNATURAL SET CANTEEN - ALT. UNIVERSE

"You don't have to be ruled by fate. You can choose freedom. I *still* believe that... that if there's something worth fighting for, this is..."

Misha shakes his head, swallowing down the bite of pastrami and rye he's been mumbling around for the last ten minutes.

"No... That's not quite..."

He places his lunch back on its small, unadorned white plate, next to the crumpled leaves and spiky shards of carrot making up the accompanying salad, and pushes it aside, grabbing a biro from the inner jacket pocket of wardrobe's latest angelic trenchcoat. He bends over the pages laid out across the table and scribbles out a couple of lines, writing something new in their place.

"You don't have to be ruled by fate. You can choose freedom. I still believe that's something worth fighting for."

He nods. Yeah, that's it. That's how he'd say it, straight to the point.

God, lines are so much harder now. Now he knows there's a *real* Castiel out there.

Not that this is his first biopic but Paul Bernardo... fuck, that was different. That guy was a monster. He'd figured - who cared if he fluffed a line here or there? As long as the general sense of evil came across, that was what mattered. And shit did it. He still had nightmares.

But an *angel*? An honest to god, loyal, righteous *angel*? He wanted to do that justice, wanted to get it *right*. Castiel deserved that.

Especially now, with the war and how much he was struggling. Because it was all too easy to misconstrue, for people to see Cas as distant and unsympathetic, when Misha knew better than anyone that wasn't true at all. The reveal about his partnership with Crowley was going to be a particularly hard pill for the fans to swallow and Misha was anxious to soften the blow as much as possible

beforehand. Anxious to show exactly how *conflicted* Castiel was about the whole thing. Jared and Jen should be learning about the partnership any day now, actually, which would be a relief. It had been hard keeping it just between him and Mark after the two of them were tipped off - and sworn to immediate secrecy - during Caged Heat, to help them with the demon's infamous 'death' scene.

From the way Sera pitched it back then it sounded like the reveal was going to be an episode ender too, which could only aggravate the situation. As was the intention no doubt. Nothing like a good cliffhanger to send the fans into a frenzy.

Although, to be honest, it wasn't the fans' opinion that mattered to Misha anymore.

It was *Dean's*.

Dean Winchester. The original. Honest to god flesh and blood, living, breathing, *real*. It was impossible to be objective about the 'character' now. Impossible *not* to think of him without affection after he'd swaggered into Misha's life for less than a day and changed everything. Given him the confidence he'd never quite managed before, the ability to take on a gunman and *win*. And that was without even thinking about how they'd... well... yeah.

So these days Misha is constantly finding himself reading scripts with an eye to Dean's welfare, worrying how events will affect him. Because, unlike most of the sadistic fanbase, he *doesn't* want Dean to get hurt.

The physical hits he can just about accept because Dean's used to those, those the hunter can handle, but emotional ones? He's seen first hand how deep those run and how bad Dean is at dealing with them. Stuff with Sam and Bobby isn't so bad because at least Dean has practice coping there, but with Cas? Fuck, how can Dean be expected to protect himself from emotions he won't even admit to?

And emotions so *intense*. Misha can still see the look in Dean's eyes that night at Jensen's, still feel the quiet, desperate tenderness in each caress, the grip of his fingers, the *need* in every kiss. He can still hear the longing in the way Dean had whispered Castiel's name. And he knows without a doubt, from the very depths of, well, his soul, he guesses - where else could the link between them Gabriel had talked about be coming from? - that Castiel feels the same. There's a chance for something there, there really is. Something incredible. That night proved it.

Which means above all else, Misha doesn't want the truth to be Dean and Castiel's undoing. Not when they're *so close* to finding each other.

Goddamn, if only he'd thought to tell Dean sooner! Or even just mentioned Crowley before Raphael wrenched the three of them back. Because the sooner Dean knows about the deal, the less of a shock it's gonna be. The less of a betrayal. And maybe, *maybe*, he won't cut himself off because of it, like he usually does when emotions run too high.

"And in celebrity news, the gossip is all about Supernatural star Jensen Ackles at the People's Choice Awards in LA last week, isn't that right Janice?"

Distracted, Misha can't stop the smile as he glances up at the small, communal TV screen on the wall of the canteen. The sound is low but easily discernable with the place as empty as it is, just him and the canteen staff and a couple of tech guys talking quietly in the far corner. One of the perks of not sharing scenes with Jensen and Jared, who, naturally enough, have all the crew members flocking them almost constantly.

The newsroom with its conservative presenters sitting up straight behind their desk cuts to a much smaller, enclosed space taken up almost entirely by a monstrous pink sofa Misha can't help thinking must moult something terrible the amount of fluff on it. Sitting on this crime against nature is a woman wearing so much make-up her face looks frozen as a Barbie doll, long blonde hair sprayed into a similarly plastic flick over both shoulders. Ordinarily he wouldn't give this segment the time of day, but this time he knows what's coming and finds his eyes fixed on the screen, heart already starting to race.

"That's *right*, Laura," Janice simpers, giggling like a hyena in heat. "Now, as you know, Supernatural was in the news only last month when a deranged man carrying several stolen firearms broke on set and assaulted many of the crew, claiming to be working for this season's Big Bad, the archangel Raphael. Show Leads Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki both suffered severe concussion as a result of the attack, but thanks to a timely intervention by co-star Misha Collins, the man, now identified as Hotel manager Carlos Sanz and being held at Saint Michael's Mental Hospital in Vancouver, was incapacitated before there were any fatalities."



Misha's grin falters a little. Not that he minds the way he's ended up the hero of this story, in fact he's loving being the centre of attention for once and hasn't been above embellishing certain details in the run of interviews following Virgil's arrest. It's just that, while this cheap-talking presenter might be making out a happy ending, Misha knows otherwise. J and J were okay, aside from some short-term memory loss, but Eric needed serious surgery on his shoulder, while Richard...

Poor Richard.

He's still in a coma at Vancouver General Hospital.

Something Misha really doesn't know what to think about.

He's visited, brought flowers and all that, but... it's not his friend lying there. Just a guy who looks like him. Or... In fact, he's beginning to wonder, from the cold words they'd traded at the end, if Gabriel had ever been his friend either.

Blinking the unhappy thought away he concentrates on the rest of the story.

"Fans are hailing Collins a hero for the act, but it seems Ackles thinks of him more as his personal guardian angel. Take a look at this."

The shot cuts to footage of Jensen on the red carpet outside the Nokia Theatre. He's a little out of breath - that carpet was *long*, jeeze - but he's smiling, open-mouthed and wide, at the reporter and cameraman who'd managed to grab him for a few questions on the way in.

It's always hit and miss with these things when it comes to the press. Sometimes you get real douchebags who are just there for controversy. The kind who only want to ask really bitchy, intrusive questions about your personal life so they can edit it to hell the next day and take it *way* out of context. So you have to be careful.

Ever since Danneel Jensen's been especially wary and tends to hurry on without stopping for anyone. But Misha remembers recognising this girl. She'd interviewed Jensen before, he thinks, with no ill effects. Which was probably why Jen had been happy to give her some time.

She certainly comes across as the friendly type. Enthusiastic without being disrespectful. Clearly a fan.

"Jensen, hi," she greets off-camera, voice warm and bubbly.

"Hey," Jen nods back.

"So, how d'you feel about Supernatural being up for an award tonight?"

"I feel great, obviously," Jensen grins. "I mean, it's always great to know your work is being appreciated, whatever line of work you're in, so yeah, yeah, it feels great."

"Can you tell us anything about what's in store for Dean the rest of this season?"

Jensen nods, politely, but Misha can see his eyes looking to the middle distance. It's a familiar look. One Misha knows he must have made over and over that night as well when reporters asked about the future of the show. The look of that mental overview they all have to make of what's aired already and what they've been told not to talk about.

"Right. Yes. Well... Sam's got his soul back... which is good..."

"Yes, very good," the interviewer agrees when Jensen pauses. A nice gesture on her part - giving him time to figure out what to say without pushing. "Not something that usually happens to Dean," she adds, joking, and the light-hearted approach gets her a chuckle. Jensen's green eyes sparkle under the continuous glare of camera flashes coming at them from all sides, the rest of him relaxing as he realises this Q and A will be safe.

"In fact, well, actually it's not as good as it could be, of course," he continues, licking his lips as he thinks, gaze turning inward this time as he formulates his response. He always takes questions about his character so seriously. Far more than Misha ever has. Although, that might change now. "See, Sam might have his soul back, but it's, um... it's a very, precarious situation. He's got that wall up keeping him safe and everything and neither of them, him or Dean, know how well that's gonna hold. So that's a concern. And, ah, you're gonna be seeing that come into play -"

There's movement to the right of the screen and Jared lumbers into view, grinning broadly. In an impulsive, childlike move he lunges over and ruffles Jen's hair.

Jensen ducks and bats at him with his hands.

"Aahh, get off!"

But he's laughing as he says it, eyeing Jared fondly as the taller man gives the camera a quick 'hey' and a wave before moving on.

Jensen looks after him for a moment and Misha's taken by the simple delight on his face, lighting him up so bright he's practically glowing. It's the look of a man who's just got a friend back. A best friend. A friend he thought he'd lost forever.

He coughs. Grins back at the camera.

"Not that I was ever upset about the soulless thing," he teases. "I was just glad the world got a chance to see the real Jared Padalecki, you know?"

There's a tinkle of laughter offscreen, accompanied by a glorious full-body guffaw from Jensen.

"Naw, I'm kidding... mostly... mostly I'm kidding..." He lets the laughter run its course then tries to be serious again. "But yeah. Dean. So -"

"Jensen!" "We love you Jensen!"

Misha remembers the girls who are shouting - a gaggle of three who'd been particularly boisterous. One of them - she'd had a shock of curly red hair, he recalls, and glasses - had been waving a sign. She's the one who shouts next.

"MARRY ME, JENSEN!"

While obviously a mock proposal, it's loud enough to make it impossible to ignore, so it's no surprise Jensen hesitates. There's a short breath of laughter from the interviewer as well and a second later the camera swirls round, grabbing a brief shot of the girls in question behind the barriers lining the walkway.

The redhead beams and waves her 'I ♥ JENSEN' sign high above them all, while the two girls on either side of her make opposing gestures. The shorter one with dark, cropped hair puts a hand to her mouth and squeaks before waving enthusiastically, while the blonde-haired one freezes for a second, eyes growing wide, then ducks her head in embarrassment, long hair hiding her blushing face.

Another woman a few paces away, auburn hair bobbing lightly over the shoulders of her flowing, medieval-style dress, glances over at the commotion. She spares the excitable group a smile and an eye-roll before turning back to Mark Sheppard, who's leaning over the metal barricade to sign the page of a notebook for her.

Gradually, other fans in the crowd start to notice they're being filmed and grin and wave in turn just as the camera moves away. In the shift there's even a glimpse of Misha himself on the other side of the line, engrossed in an interview of his own, hands waving as he re-enacts his tussle with Virgil for the interviewer's benefit.

Then back to Jensen, whose surprised smile still lingers.

There's a beat, then his eyes flash. Misha's watching this part closely, it's the part he's been waiting for. He sees a wildness there - a flush in Jensen's cheeks as the idea hits. Then, almost imperceptibly, a nod. A short flick of the chin that warms Misha all over because it means Jensen *thought about it*. He wasn't just caught up in the moment - he saw an opportunity, and he *chose* it.

"Sorry, sweetheart," Jensen says, nodding off camera. "But I think my boyfriend would have something to say about that."

The hush that follows from the fans close enough to hear is almost palpable. A magic bubble of silence in the surrounding chatter. Even the interviewer finds herself lost for words.

Misha wishes he could see her face - the constipated pinch of professionalism versus fangirl excitement.

"Boyfriend?" she prompts, finally. Because it would have been foolish to ignore a set-up like that, no matter how uncontroversial you were trying to be. "Anyone we know?"

Jensen takes a breath and nods, smile inching up and up. For all he's trying to look casual and unconcerned, Misha can see the tension in his shoulders, the excitement thrumming up and down him and making his fingers twitch.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure you've seen him around," he answers. "In fact, you guys have been taking up almost all his free time lately, I'm fraternising with the enemy here! Excuse me..."

He turns and walks off, camera following him all the way. As Misha's sure now he must have intended. He doesn't stop until he reaches the recorded Misha's side where he brushes a hand up and along the curve of the black jacket Misha had dug out for the occasion. Misha can still feel the tingle.

Jensen leans in and whispers something in Misha's ear making him turn, head whipping round like lightening, breaking mid-sentence, straight into the hottest, deepest, most perfect kiss of his life. Like, *weak at the knees* perfect. Misha had to practically *cling* to Jen to stop himself melting away. And that was before the cheering and the wolf-whistles started. Before the ear-splitting, open-mouthed grin Jensen had given him when he pulled away.

The dopey grin Misha gives in return, captured by what felt like a hundred different cameras from just as many angles, might have been mortifying. If Misha hadn't known how close he'd come to making an even bigger fool of himself by swooning into the carpet.

He's just glad Jensen kept an arm around him as they walked inside is all.

Because while the kiss and the public announcement were awesome enough - he's the only one who knows what Jensen said to him that night. The three words that put his heart right in his mouth and made all the rest nothing but noise.

The TV screen cuts back to the studio with its alien-like sofa, where Barbie Doll is yapping excitedly about what this means for the future of television. But Misha's not listening anymore. He's dreaming about the soft give of Jensen's lips. The way he'd waited for Misha to start kissing back before going any deeper...

"So you and Jensen, huh?"

The question breaks his thoughts and Misha starts, then gapes, at the man sliding into the chair across from him. His beard is long and saggy from weeks without attention and but he's fresh faced beneath it, hazel eyes alight, wild and energetic.

"Richard?" Misha gasps.

The other man lifts an eyebrow and the gesture gives nothing away - Gabriel didn't have a monopoly on it.

"Expecting someone else?"

Wordlessly, Misha shakes his head, not knowing how to deal with this unexpected turn. It was hard enough when the man was silent and comatose. Having him suddenly vibrant and alive, watching him eagerly, is sending the actor into something of a panic. This is the man he'd once considered his best of friends, now a total stranger. It doesn't seem real.

"How are you even...? When did you...?"

"Wake up? This morning. Discharged myself a couple of hours ago."

"Oh..." Part of Misha wilts away inside and he hates himself for the disappointment. For the way he'd been hoping, just for a moment, that Gabriel had decided to stay. And yet... the recovery seems incredibly fast, and the angel did like his tricks. "Can you do that? I mean... you were in pretty bad shape. Shouldn't you have been kept for observation, or something?"

A shrug.

"The doctors were stumped by it too. Did a bunch of tests." Misha finds himself scrutinising the other's every move - the way he lifts his hand, the bend of his finger and thumb as he strokes his moustache - looking for some sign that might expose him as more than human. "But I'm perfectly healthy, apparently, so there was no reason to keep me. Well, I say perfectly. Got a few side effects. But after that kind of trauma they say it's to be expected."

Trauma?

It takes Misha a second to realise this means the cover story he'd given for the night of Sam and Dean's departure - Virgil attacking out of the blue and smacking Rich about a bit before Misha took him down. The CCTV confirmed this, after all, with the hit Virgil gave his brother after Gabriel stole the gun off him. The only part the police couldn't confirm was what happened in the Orchard Inn set. The cameras there all mysteriously short-circuited while Virgil, Gabriel and Dean were tussling outside.

With everything else clear-cut, though, save for the ramblings of a mad gunman no one was listening to, the cops had accepted Misha's version of events without a struggle. It's still not clear just what happened to those cameras, but Misha has his suspicions, most of which involve Raphael's spell and ways its power might have bled through the temporary gateway between universes.

He's been brushing up a lot on his sci-fi since then.

"What kind of side effects?" Misha asks, because this doesn't really fit with the kind of trick he's been assuming. In fact, the explanation sounds a lot like the kind you might give if, say, you'd just woken up in hospital, with no knowledge of how you'd got there, and had to be filled in by your doctors.

"Oh, you know, the usual. General wooziness. Headaches. Memory loss."

Misha's heart sinks.

"Memory loss?"

Richard nods but his eyes stay focused.

"Yeah. In fact, they said, what with the amount of time I was under and how touch and go it was, it wouldn't be surprising if the last few months, maybe even the year, was blank for a while. It'll come back in patches they say. Maybe."

Misha draws in the breath he didn't realise he'd been holding, the last vestiges of his hope for Gabriel draining away. Because what Richard's saying makes too much sense. Jen and Jared lost all memory of their possession as well.

It's probably for the best.

"Oh, right. Um..." He glances at his unfinished lunch on the table and starts picking at the lettuce on the side. If Richard really doesn't remember the last year, then he won't know they used to be friends. Or fake friends. Or whatever. Misha doesn't see any reason to confuse things by bringing that up. "Well..." he starts, head lifting, forcing a cheery, polite, smile. "If there's anything I can do to help..."

"There is something," Richard says and Misha gives himself a mental slap round the head for offering. Stupid small talk. He should have realised it might be taken literally. Now the guy will want to ask about the gaps in his memory, of course, which means he'll have to lie and think up a fake life for Richard to have lived, which will end up needlessly complicated and impossible to keep straight and - "You can tell me I'm not crazy."

Huh?

Misha blinks and finds Richard staring at him, focus unwavering.

"Because the doctors got it wrong, Mish," he says and the nickname sounds weird - spoken in the voice Misha remembers, yes, but with a different inflection, the emphasis on the 'mi' instead of the 'sh.' "I remember everything."

There's a pause as Misha grapples with this.

"What?"

"I couldn't tell the doctors," Richard continues, leaning across the table. "Not when they were so adamant I had amnesia. And especially since it turns out I have a history of mental illness. How's it gonna sound to them when I start talking about archangels and magic spells?" His focus finally wavers, turning inward as he shakes his head with an incredulous smile. "Even I'm having trouble with it... and I can't tell my family, same reason. Can't talk to Jared and Jensen cos they won't remember. Gabriel..." He closes his eyes in a grimace, tapping his forehead. "Gabriel knew that. So I do too..." He stops and takes a breath, opening his eyes again to look up beseechingly. "So that just leaves you. You're the only one who might have any idea what I'm talking about, so Misha, please, I know you barely know me, but I'm begging you, *tell me* you know what I'm talking about."



Misha opens and closes his mouth, thrown by the intensity and the responsibility he's landed. A man's mental health could be riding on his answer to this and he has no idea what's for the best. Does he tell Richard he's wrong? *Of course* fictional characters aren't real. He must have had a crazy dream and should stop fretting about it and move on. Write off the past year as lost to him - a tragic accident. Or does he tell the truth? Shock the guy's world the same way his was and explain how a year of his life was stolen by an archangel that shouldn't exist?

"Stop it," Richard adds, interrupting his debate. "I see that look in your eye, man. Don't try and sugarcoat it, don't go thinking up something to say that's *best* for me. I just want the truth, alright?"

Well, that kind of takes the issue out of his hands, doesn't it?

Misha looks over his shoulder - no one near by. He takes a breath.

"Okay, so..." he starts, leaning in as well, elbow knocking his plate further along the table. He meets Richard's eye and forces himself to hold there, voice lowering. "You're not crazy."

Richard swallows.

"It's real?"

Misha nods.

"All of it."

The moment stretches, then Richard breathes out long and slow.

"Wow..." he murmurs, jittery, trailing off into a quiet puff of laughter. "I had an *archangel* in me! Gabriel, *the* Gabriel..."

His eyes snap back and behind the shock there's a glow of relief burning in the brown. Relief and wonder and a kinship Misha wasn't expecting. Both of them united by something no one else in the *world* could hope to understand. Like soldiers in arms, Misha supposes. Because they are brothers in this, in a sense. Not part of the frontline, but together on the outskirts of battle at least.

"Yeah," Misha nods. "Yeah you did."

Richard smiles at him.

"And you... you really fuck Dean Winchester?"

Misha ducks his head in a laugh of his own.

"Uh-huh," he answers and they chuckle over the insanity of it all.

Once the moment's past, the edge of hysteria draining away, Richard pulls back and holds out a hand.

"So. Hi. I'm Richard Speight. Good to meet you."

A warmth spreads inside Misha as he reaches out in return.

"We should, like, hang out, or something," Richard adds as they shake.

"I'd like that," Misha says.

They're still grinning when the door opens and Jared and Jensen tumble in, laughing and patting each other on the back. Jared stops to eye up the cakes on the counter, but Jensen makes a beeline for Misha once he finds him.

"Hey, babe," he greets, gripping Misha's shoulders from behind and leaning down.

Their lips brush together and Misha's eyes flutter closed, a deep, surprisingly Castiel-like, hum of approval growling in the back of his throat. It's not even a deep kiss, just a peck, a quick and casual mouth-to-mouth. But it's *Jensen* and it's *public* and oh god his insides already feel like mush and how on earth is he ever going to get used to this?

"Great shoot," Jensen's continuing as he pulls away, like kissing his co-star is no big deal, an everyday thing. "We totally nailed it. I -"

"Oh my god!" Jared shouts behind them, hurrying over. "*Richard!*"

Jensen jerks back, noticing the table's second occupant for the first time.

"Dude!" he exclaims, rushing round the table to lay a hand on Richard's shoulder. Jared bounds up to Richard's other side and slaps his back.

"Hi, boys," Richard grins up at them, so short between them in his chair it's ridiculous.

"What happened man, when did you get out?" Jensen beams.

"This morning," Richard explains again. "Perfect bill of health. Bit of memory loss but -" His eyes drop back to Misha. "- nothing my friends can't help me out with."

"That's great," Jared enthuses, squeezing Richard's shoulder. "It's so good to see you, man."

"Good to be back," Richard answers. "Misha's been filling me in here on what I missed while I was sleeping. Looks like a *lot*..."

He waves over the three of them, going back and forth between Jensen and Misha and quirking an eyebrow.

Jensen ducks his head, cheeks burning as he laughs.

"Yeah, well, ah... guy almost kills you, you start to re-think a few things..."

"Figure out what's important in life, you know?" Jared finishes.

They sound casual, but the look they share is anything but, charged enough that Misha and Richard leave a moment's silence.

Then Jared nods the emotion away and gestures wildly over Richard's head.

"Dude, dude," he starts at Jensen, grinning. "You haven't given him the thing!"

"Oh, yeah!" Jensen switches from sombre to excited in a split second, grabbing a chair from the table behind and spinning it round with a clatter. He slides up in it next to Misha and draws something from inside Dean's jacket. A set of crumpled pages. "Here."

He thrusts the printouts at Misha, almost stuffing them up his nose in his enthusiasm. Misha glances from him to Jared and back again as he takes the paper, bemused.

"What? New pages?"

"New script," Jensen answers, bouncing a little in his chair. "For 6.20. It's just a draft, but. *Fuck.*"

"Good?" Richard asks.

"*Amazing,*" Jared tells him, pulling up a chair of his own so he's not towering over everyone. "You're gonna love it," he adds to Misha, eyes dancing with the same thrill buzzing through his friend.

"Ben and Eric collaborated," Jensen continues, seeming unable to keep quiet over this for long. "They were working on this thing in the fucking *hospital*, man."

"Wow..." Misha offers, not sure how to respond. That's dedication, sure, but he doesn't get why a new script, however dedicated its writers, should have the show Leads watching him like he's about to receive a medal of honour. "So... it's got Cas in?"

Jensen and Jared share a look, both of them biting down inside their lips. Jared's even shaking slightly from the effort of not saying anything.

"Just read it," Jensen says.

Misha does.

*The Man Who Would Be King* announces the front page. Cool title. Kipling? He'll have to look it up later. Flipping the page over reveals a close up of Castiel. Castiel as the first character on scene? That's something of a coup for him, maybe that's what the guys are talking about.

Wait.

*Let me tell you my story. Let me tell you everything.*

Misha frowns. Flicks to the next page. Castiel. The next. Castiel. The next. Castiel. Castiel. Castiel.

"Holy shit."

"I know, right?" Jensen grins beside him.

"Yeah," Jared adds, breathless from holding the words in so long. "Looks like you'll have to actually earn your keep for once."

"I..." Misha tries, lost for words as he skips to the last few pages and it's still all Castiel all the time. "This is... this is a lot of voiceover."

Jared and Jensen laugh.

"What about that final scene though, huh?" Jensen says, clearly enthused by it. "We are gonna knock that outta the park! Can't fucking wait."

Before Misha can respond there's a shout through the door.

"Jensen and Jared on set!"

"Damn," Jensen mutters.

"No rest for the wicked," Jared shrugs. "Catch ya later guys."

Jared gives Richard another slap on the shoulder as he stands while Jensen just nods, more interested in drawing Misha in for a kiss goodbye. The kiss lands in Misha's hair as he fails to turn, too absorbed in the final scene.

Jensen chuckles, ruffles his oblivious lover's hair and gives a final wave as he follows Jared outside.

"Something wrong?" Richard asks once they're alone again and Misha realises the growing horror he's been feeling with each new page must have been showing on his face.

He shakes his head.

"No... I mean... They were right, this is great. Hard work, but, nicely put together..." Because that prayer Castiel's making all the way through? Eric must have seen that, must have heard it word for word, and he's broken it down into parts and used it as framing. Adapted it perfectly. It's smart, really. Slick. Clever. "Except..."

"Not a happy ending for your guy?" Richard offers and Misha sighs.

"No..."

But hey. At least he has someone who *understands* now.

He holds out the script and Richard takes it, scanning the final scene. Dean and Castiel's big showdown. The two of them head-to-head, when what they *needed* was a heart-to-heart. Each of them trading ultimatums when they *should* have been making a compromise.

Should have. Should be. Will be. Won't.

He doesn't really get how that works - if it's happened already or not. But it doesn't matter because he can't stop it. Dean and Castiel *are going to stand against each other* and that's that. All he can do is try and act it out as accurately as possible.

"Eric must have known this the whole time," Richard mutters and when Misha looks up he finds the other man flicking back to the beginning. "All this stuff Cas was doing with Crowley, raising Sam... he knew it from the start. But he didn't write it in. Why? He think it would make Cas unsympathetic?"

"No," Misha answers. "It's the opposite. He held off so Cas *would* seem unsympathetic. So the audience wouldn't know his reasons. So they'd expect the worst."

His voice sounds distant, dull and heavy.

"Well," Richard starts, tone unnaturally light in response as he tries to counteract Misha's despair. "They'll know the truth after this."

He puts the pages back together and holds them up, lips quirking to one side with an optimism that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

Yeah, sure, Misha thinks, that'd be great. If having a Castiel-centric episode so late in the season didn't feel like a consolation prize.

"Might be too late," he replies. "Like it was, will be, for Dean..." And suddenly he's angry. Angry at Eric for not showing Castiel's story sooner. Angry at Dean and Cas for letting things get so bad between them. Angry at himself for not explaining things to Dean when he had the chance and... there's someone missing. Who..? "Wait. Wait. Where the fuck's *Gabriel* in all this? Why isn't *he* doing something?"

It's not Richard's fault, Misha knows that. Richard's not responsible for his doppelganger any more than he's responsible for Cas. But Misha can't help scowling at him anyway.

And Richard flinches in response. Guilty. Paper crackling in his hand. Like he *does* feel somehow responsible.

"I think I might have an answer for that," he says, reaching in his jacket with his free hand and pulling out some more pages. "I checked my e-mail when I got home and I found this..."

He holds the pages out and Misha takes them with a frown.

"It's from Ben," Richard explains. "The final scene from the *original* 6.15. Back when it was called *The French Mistake*. I asked him for it, apparently... it, well..." He sighs. "I know you care about the guy. But the thing you gotta understand about Gabriel? He's kind of a dick, you know?"

Misha nods. He can't argue with that.

He glances down at the first page.

CUT TO:

## CODA

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### EXT. ORCHARD INN MOTEL - NIGHT

Arizona is just how he left it - dark and hot and dry. His skin is coated with a fine sheen of sweat almost the second he returns. His vest quickly mops up the worst of it and Balthazar takes a moment to wallow in the experience, relishing the prickle of heat under his arms and the acrid smell of sand and motor oil. A feeble breeze circles the air about him but it serves to heighten the humidity of the place more than counteract it.

Most would find the climate unpleasant at best, but not Balthazar. For Balthazar, human sensation, even - or especially - the sordid kind, has never stopped being a wonder.

But he isn't here for that. He's here because something's calling, a thrill of power. He'd sensed it the moment Castiel's pets crossed over from the other world, but he'd put it down to Raphael's spell - piss poor as it was, if he does say so himself, in comparison to the one he'd used to send the boys off in the first place. That or some combination of it and the energy required to transfer the weapons from his care to Cassie's anyway. But those energies are long since dispersed and still this tremor remains, skirting over his vessel, wings and grace alike, like ghostly fingertips. A memory half forgotten.

It's distracting quite beyond endurance, it really is.

So he's tracked it back to its source, the last opening between worlds a new power could have sprung from, hoping to put a stop to it as soon as bloody possible. There are so very many far more interesting things he'd much rather be doing, such as a couple of redheads back in Ibiza, for instance, wearing nothing but a pair of garters and a feather boa between them. If he could just nip this annoyance in the bud he could be back to give them his full attention in a jiffy.

Now, which god-awful motel had old Raphie pulled the buggers back through? Ah, yes, there it is. The Orchard Inn.

Balthazar ruffles his feathers, ready to fly round to the parking lot were Castiel made his stand, when something small but surprisingly hard drops onto his



shoulder and rolls off to the ground. Another of the same bounces off his head, while another narrowly misses his nose.

Before long the whole sky is full of the tiny, teardrop shaped missiles, hundreds of them raining down on all sides. What on earth?

It's most certainly not rain, but it's too dark to be hail. Besides which, who heard of hail in *Arizona*, especially at this time of year? After whipping up a quick shield to end the sharp, irritating patter of the things, Balthazar bends down and scoops up a handful with a frown.

Well, but, they look like -?

He brings them to his nose and breathes in deep. A rich, bitter aroma hits his palate. He tastes one as well, just to be sure, but it's as he thought - chocolate chips.

Brushing the chips off his hands in disinterest, Balthazar walks, slowly, round the back of the motel, keeping to the shadows. A chocolate downpour might be daft, but to manipulate the weather in such a fashion, changing it not just from the normal climate of the area but to something earth atmosphere isn't even designed for, requires an *incredible* amount of power. With a being capable of that in close proximity, it pays to be cautious.

Trying to ignore the soft, unappetising squish beneath his shoes with every step, Balthazar peers round the edge of the building and identifies the cause of the trouble immediately. He's not even trying to hide, standing boldly in front of the broken window the Winchesters had crashed through, arms outstretched, head thrown back. He's laughing wildly, trying to catch the spiky pieces of chocolate in his mouth as they fall, the glass beneath his feet almost obliterated by the stuff already.

Balthazar watches a moment longer, enough to convince himself he's under no threat from such a buffoon, then coughs politely.

The rain stops and the figure turns his way, arms dropping, a lazy smile on his face.

"Impressive," Balthazar acknowledges with a nod. "Somewhat crass, perhaps, but... you have a talent."

The other's smile stretches wider, hazel eyes glinting with a flash of amber as he looks Balthazar up and down.

"Gee, thanks," he answers. Rather disrespectfully, but Balthazar lets it pass. While something of fool, whoever this is still has remarkable power, it wouldn't do to upset them. The casual snap of fingers that has all the fallen chocolate dissolving in an instant only serves to reinforce this opinion. "Just testing. All in working order, thank god. Or, well, maybe not." His smile quirks to one side, sharp and mischievous.

"You came through the portal, didn't you?" Balthazar asks, moving closer.

Now he's found the cause of his discomfort he has to admit he's more curious than annoyed. Foolishness aside, this creature is fascinating, radiating energy like a newborn. Even now Balthazar can feel it crackling through the air around him as he draws nearer, piercing the thick, oppressive weight of it smooth as a blade through the jugular.

Just think of all the pain and pleasure such a power could invoke.

The redheads might have to wait.

"That I did."

"Strange," Balthazar muses, glass crunching under his heel as he stops a few feet away from the stranger, not wanting to observe him too close just yet. "When the world you must have come from has not the slightest touch of magic at all. Believe me, I'm quite sure of the fact. I mean, good lord, it took us long enough to find the place. Could have used any old reality, but no, Cassie wanted the very best for his darlings. Couldn't risk the children getting so much as a paper cut, could we?" Balthazar shakes his head and waves a hand. Got a little carried away there. "But that's beside the point, of course. You probably don't even know what I'm babbling on about -"

"Pal, let me give you some advice," the stranger cuts in, stepping forward to rest a hand on Balthazar's shoulder, like they're old friends. Balthazar frowns. "Give it up."

"I'm sorry?"

"It's been, what? Five, six millennia you've spent mooning over the guy? The two of you practically joined at the wings. But when he gets his big break, pulls that Righteous Man from the Pit and takes on Heaven's biggest mission since freaking Calvary, does he call for you? No."

Shocked, Balthazar tries to pull away, but the hold on him runs far deeper than the hand on his shoulder. Ah. There's a distinct possibility that he might have, perhaps, miscalculated here.

"You speak out for him Upstairs," the other continues with the same uncanny accuracy. "And what does he do? Runs off with that same Righteous Man that got him into trouble in the first place! And now? After all that, here you are, *still* giving up everything for him, and it's *still* that Righteous Man he's running around after." Fingers grip tighter, moving up Balthazar's collarbone. "*Bal*, when are you gonna get the message?" The other leans in, whispering in his ear. "You're not the one he wants. You never will be."

Balthazar swallows, torn between fear and anger at the intimate knowledge being thrown, so casually, in his face. He wants to shout back, to tell this tiny, clownish creature he knows *nothing* about Castiel or the way things are between them.

But at the same time the weight on his shoulder remains a pertinent warning of what might happen if he does.

Until it isn't, and the other is slapping his back and moving away with a shake of his head, chuckling softly to himself.

Balthazar blinks, twisting round in confusion.

"Who are you?" He wants to sound strong and commanding, but the words come out strained and high-pitched instead, for some reason.

The other stops, staring away from him.

"Who am I?" he repeats over his shoulder. "I'm the guy you should have been taking orders from, not your blue-eyed boy. Hell... if I had you in my garrison... I might have had a reason to stay..."

"Your garrison? I don't -?"

Another laugh and the other is smiling again when he turns, somehow looking down at Balthazar despite being a head shorter.

"Always were a few fries short of a Happy Meal, weren't you kid?" he says and Balthazar is too bewildered to feel insulted. "You haven't figured it out yet? And after everything I've done for you?" He paces back and starts to circle, forcing Balthazar to twist and turn to keep him in sight. "After I turned a blind eye in Israel when I caught you making eyes at Bathsheba? After I let you watch when I delivered my 'message' to innocent little Mary in Nazareth? And as for that time in Babylon with those concubines, ha! Nice to have some good memories of home -"

"Gabriel," Balthazar cuts in as all the facts crash into place, his vessel's heart leaping about in a most unseemly fashion as it reacts to the wild shock, joy and terror trembling through the rest of him.

No wonder the power he'd felt had been so enthralling, so tantalisingly familiar. No wonder he'd been so attuned to it.

*Gabriel* stops and glances at him, unveiling his wings - a brief flash across the wall behind - in acknowledgement. Unlike Castiel's trick of the same this leaves almost every brick in sight in shadow and black scorch marks remain once Gabriel folds himself away.

A glimpse is more than enough to tell Balthazar the span and glint of every golden feather is just as beautiful as he remembers.

"But... but..." he stammers. "But... this is impossible. Michael said -"

Gabriel's face darkens, lips curling, nose scrunching up.

"Michael said a lot of crap," he says, sharp and cold. "He could be as silver tongued as Lucy when he wanted to be. Don't believe a word of it."

Silence falls between them, Balthazar's lips parting and closing again. Wordless not just at the return of a lost brother but because Gabriel *never* spoke out against Michael, *never*. He'd barely expressed disapproval of Lucifer, even - at least, not openly. There can be no doubt that, for all his glory is still intact, Heaven's Messenger is greatly changed. And then there's the matter of where he must have come from to get here...

"You... you've been living in another universe?"

He hates how small his voice sounds now. How his posture has automatically reverted to that of a subordinate - straight-backed, hands clasped behind him. It's a mark of respect - an instinct very few inspire in him these days - but at the same time it feels... wrong, and Balthazar wishes he could fight the impulse. He wants, has *always* wanted, to be his best for Gabriel, to gain the archangel's approval, and he's sure he's not managing it here.

Not like he used to, somehow, back in the day.

Even in Heaven orders from Gabriel had been strangely informal compared to instructions from others. Most of the lower ranks had found this uncomfortable, Cassie especially, who disliked Gabriel's use of phrases such as 'if you can' or 'when you have time' or 'try,' finding them weak and imprecise.

Not Balthazar.

Balthazar had never been what you'd call creative, never had an affinity for anything in particular. He wasn't a natural leader like Anael, he didn't have a knack for spell casting and sigils like Castiel or skill with the sword like Uriel. So freedom for him wasn't about honing a craft or choosing your path and sticking to it. Freedom was about trying out everything and anything. It was about making mistakes, *getting things wrong*, until you happened on the right thing after a lengthy, exhilarating course of trial and error.

And that was what Gabriel had always allowed him - error.

Mistakes had ranked amongst the highest of sins back home. To be less than perfect was inexcusable and risked you being thrown to the fire like Lucifer. Or worse - taken away for 'correction.'

Yet time and time again Gabriel had found him wanting and said nothing.

It was one thing for Castiel and Anael to cover for Balthazar's ineptitude - they were brothers and sisters in arms, there was a code of conduct there that the Higher Ups couldn't possibly understand. But for an *archangel* to - as far as Balthazar knew it was unprecedented. It's no wonder he was smitten.

And when Gabriel had taken him aside one sticky hot night in Judea, both of them taking liberties after a successful mission and sampling the local 'produce,' to ask, *in person*, if Balthazar wanted to join *his* garrison...

No language was adequate enough to describe the way Balthazar *felt* about the offer.

But despite the absolute thrill at being singled out, the *want* that had coursed through him in a way he knew any other angel would have reprimanded him for, despite that - he could never have left Castiel.

If Gabriel was angry at his refusal he hadn't shown it. On the contrary, he'd been raucous in his revelry that night, boasting a string of conquests - men *and* women - singing and dancing long into the morning, until one of his underlings had to remind him of their overdue return home to make their report. None of the orgies Balthazar has arranged for himself even came close.

Then, within days of arriving in Heaven, before new missions had even been assigned, the Host found itself mourning the sudden and unexpected loss of their herald.

Gabriel's garrison was disbanded and his soldiers found new purpose under different leaders, many of them secretly relieved. Several of them joined ranks under Anael and Balthazar watched as Castiel welcomed them in that plain, no nonsense way of his, watched as Uriel regarded them with thinly veiled distrust until they proved themselves in battle. He watched as they grew focused and obedient under Anael's rule - traits that were transferred seamlessly to Cas after her Fall. He watched all trace of Gabriel's softer teachings get stripped away.

Balthazar watched. And he resigned himself to the same. He worked hard at being a just and honourable soldier like the rest.

It made Cas happy if nothing else.

Except it was all a lie - Gabriel wasn't lost at all. Just misplaced.

"Why weren't we sent to retrieve you?"

Gabriel pulls his head back, eyes widening in a way Balthazar has learnt indicates an affront has been made.

"Dude," the archangel replies. "I have *not* been in that craphole the whole time! That was..." He waves a hand. "A miscalculation, a blip, in an otherwise perfect escape plan."

That's when Balthazar understands.

"You left of your own accord," he says.

"Bingo." Gabriel flashes that grin again and Balthazar sees it for what it is now - a perfection of the smiles they used to practice on each other whenever the need for a vessel gave them the opportunity. "And look at you..." He swaggers closer. "Following in my footsteps, without even knowing it."

There's more emotion in those words than Balthazar has the experience to unravel - mocking, perhaps, and scorn, he thinks, from the way the archangel's eyes narrow, but the look isn't cruel and beneath it Balthazar senses something he thought he'd long since stopped caring for, save in one. He senses pride. And it relaxes him enough to break his stance, to ease back his shoulders and offer the cocky smile he's also perfected in return.

"So it would seem," he answers, delighted at the way his words come out, the cool, lazy drawl of it.

Gabriel's eyes meet his and sparkle. He lifts a hand and runs his fingers down the edge of Balthazar's jacket.

"They're calling you my replacement, you know."

"Who are?"

"Doesn't matter. Point is, way I see it we got two options." He draws his hand away and holds up a finger between them. "One - I bust out the tried and tested 'this world ain't big enough for the two of us' speech and rip you apart, one feather at a time -"

He probably doesn't mean it, but the fact he *could* sets Balthazar's heart racing, eyes growing wide.

"I would prefer opinion two," he says quickly.

Gabriel pauses, finger curling down, mouth inching up, softly, at the corners.

"Bal." Gabriel rests his hand on Balthazar's shoulder. "I was hoping you'd say that," he says, and kisses him.

Balthazar spares a brief thought for Cas, still a virgin despite his best efforts, who he'd always hoped would be the first, and only, of his kind he'd share this kind of pleasure with.

Then kisses back.

Gabriel is here, after all. Castiel is not.

When they break away Balthazar's gasping and Gabriel is chuckling.

"Not bad," the archangel hums, running a finger down Balthazar's jaw, angling the young angel's face towards him. "You'll learn, I guess. Hope you're still the dogged, dedicated student I remember."

"I..." Balthazar breathes. "Yes, of course..." He's forgetting something, what is it? "But... no, wait, I've got to..."

Gabriel rolls his eyes and steps back.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he mutters. "Gotta do your bit for the war effort, right?"



Balthazar swallows. It's like Judea all over again, and he certainly doesn't want to lose Gabriel for *another* millenia.

"I'm not interested in the politics. *Really*," he insists. "They can burn the homestead to the ground for all I care. But..."

"But how *will* little old Castiel survive without you?"

The bitterness is a surprise. Since Castiel's rebellion Balthazar's gotten used to standing against most of the family when it comes to opinions of their defiant little brother, but considering Gabriel's own exile from home he doesn't understand why the archangel should be so disapproving.

He stands up straighter - if he could speak out to a council of elders against Castiel's treatment at the hands of Zachariah, he can speak up to one lowly archangel.

"I abandoned him once already," he says, and the pain of Castiel's second death - the one after faking his own, the one Balthazar had left Cas to, deliberately, too afraid to join his rebellion and unwilling to help hunt him down - still haunts him sometimes. "I can't do it again. He has this sort of, feckless charm. Makes you almost believe in what he's saying. It's ridiculous, but there it is."

Gabriel stares at him for a moment, then sighs.

"Freaking daddy's boy," he mutters under his breath. "Should have done worse than trap him in a porno... Okay, fine." These last two are louder, directed at Balthazar. "Just don't expect any help from me. I tried taking a side in the last war and it didn't work out so great, so if you breathe one word about me to our Little Angel That Could, I will smite you where you stand, kapish?"

Keeping an all-powerful, not unsympathetic, archangel a secret, when Cassie needs all the extra man-power he can get, is something Balthazar suspects he should balk at. But the thought of having Gabriel all to himself is stronger.

"Of course," he nods.

He's scrutinised a moment longer, but his answer must be acceptable because Gabriel's tension drains away soon enough.

"Okay then, partner," he nods back, the start of another smile creeping over him. "What say we blow this popsicle stand and I show you some tricks? Because kiddo?" He throws an arm over Balthazar's shoulder. "Swiping a few trinkets from the family vault is great, if you're looking to be a cat burglar. But you stick with me and I will make you a criminal mastermind. For starters - faking your death? You're doing it wrong... But that's for later. First, come on, I know this great place in Scandinavia..."

Gabriel lifts his free hand and curls his fingers with a snap.

THE END