



art by aesc

Praise The Lord (And Pass The Ammunition) (Dean/Castiel)

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Author: nekomitsu

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Warnings/Spoilers: character death (which is kind of the premise) and blasphemy (likewise, because, hello, Supernatural?) Veers off reality sometime in late season five.

Summary: When Dean dies yet again Heaven decides it's been missing an angel and it's time to fill the vacancy. It takes Dean a long, long time –and several miracles performed over cheeseburgers and lice– to come to terms with his new celestial life and his old earthly temptations. Featuring Dean's new set of wings, human Castiel, beers at the Roadhouse, the Choirs of Heaven, a naked Sammy, Michael and other angels with bard inclinations, lame pick-up lines, Zachariah's lion head, gaudy motels, and Oprah-worthy revelations that are way funnier in Enochian.

Disclaimers: the wonderful graphics –check Dean's wings in the cover; they are amazing!– have been created by lovely **aesc**, whose main art post is above. Many thanks to my beta **aviss** for saving me from myself and for putting up (and adding on to!) Chuck's horrid purple prose.

Praise The Lord (1/5)

Dean died. Again.

It happened like this. The twin Wampus cats he had been hunting lunged at Dean's throat from opposite directions. He fired his gun and a splatter of blood and gore hit his face, and then another as his throat was nearly sawed off by a sharp set of claws.

It hurt, but only for a brief moment. When he opened his eyes again the pain was gone, Dean was back in an abandoned field somewhere down Wisconsin and it was July 4th, 1996.

"Okay," Dean groaned, letting his head fall back against the Impala's upholstery, "this *really* is getting old."

There were no fallen angels on the car radio telling him where to go, but Dean already knew that he was supposed to follow the road – towards the Garden, through his own personal Heaven, to find how the hell he could get out of the gilded prison of Heaven, Groundhog Day style.

The Impala's wheels were screeching upon the asphalt as soon as the lanky Baby Hugs Care Bear Sam had been as a child had vanished from the scene. Black Sabbath blasted through the speakers, a perfect match for the thunder of the fireworks exploding up in the night.

Dean knew that time had no meaning for higher asshat planes of existence, but he still pushed the engine to its limits, patting the wheel in a silent apology to his baby. He wanted –needed– to return to Planet Earth as soon as possible. A couple of undead cats were screaming to be put down before there were any more unexplained disappearances. More important, he had to go back before Sam noticed he was gone, or he would be forced to endure an age of bitching about being too reckless and endangering his life and *Dean, you already stopped the Apocalypse, so there's no need to push yourself so hard, okay?*

Not that he didn't deserve a thorough tongue-lashing. He had known upon entering Boogertown, North Carolina, that the town was a dangerous web of unexplained vanishing acts, too many not to have to do with the underworld. Leaving the motel room without backup, information, parting notes, or anything remotely plan-shaped had been a reckless idea, but Dean hadn't had any other option. Sam had been out, buying one of his decaf mocha with soy milk aberrations, and Cas hadn't returned yet from his reconnaissance mission.

Dean had noticed a potential target walk past his window in a dazed state, and he had followed the man until finding the Wampus nest. And man, what a surprise that had been. After a short stroll to an abandoned house in the outskirts of Boogertown Dean expected sirens or witches, not a pair of giant cats he had always thought of as a sports myth.

The rest, together with his late life, was history. Sammy would chew him inside out if –when– Dean went back.

The road took a sharp turn to the right, and then another one to the left. Dean remembered it running fairly straightforward towards a family Thanksgiving in a suburban home, but it stood to reason that, without Sam by his side, his path through Heaven would differ from previous episodes. He wasn't overly surprised when a lively village green in a town Dean had visited before showed up at one side of the highway. As happy memories went, Dean wasn't overly fond of this one, but he guessed he could live through it.

He left the car behind and sat on a wooden bench. The day was bright and warm, and there were children playing in the sand square and shrieking with each squeak of the rusty park swings. It felt peaceful, and Dean closed his eyes and basked in the sun, something he had been too preoccupied to do when there were seals to protect and little brothers to stop from turning to the dark side.

"You misunderstand me, Dean," Cas said from the next bench. "I'm not like you think. I was praying that you would choose to save the town."

Dean snorted apologetically. "I know," he said. The Castiel in his memories, however, went on as if his words had been doubted and he needed to prove his trustworthiness.

"These people," Castiel said, "they are all my father's creations. They are works of art."

It had been the first time, Dean thought, that Castiel had shown in any way he could be worthy of his trust.

Perhaps that was why his subconscious mind thought this particular memory was a happy, or at least content, one.

"Can I tell you something if you promised not to tell a soul?" Castiel asked in his old monotone. He looked out of place, way too solemn and otherworldly for such a human action as sitting at some park, basking in the sun. "I'm not a hammer, as you say. I have questions. I have doubts. I don't know what's right and what's wrong anymore."

"Cas, you poor bastard," Dean answered over the next words, "that's why you fell."

"I don't envy the weight that's on your shoulders, Dean," Castiel said. "I truly don't."

"Back at you, Cas," Dean said, but by the time he was done the Castiel he remembered had already vanished. Dean sighed and stood up.

There was a book on the bench Cas had been sitting on, a novel by Kerouac with a picture of the American dream on the back cover. Dean had found his road.

He breezed past his mother taking the crust off his sandwich, past his first beer with Sam after the end of the world. His teenager car, a battered old Ford he had rescued from the Singer Salvage yard, took him to the quietly proud "well done, son" his dad had uttered after Dean learnt to shoot at the tender age of six and a half. Dean's heart had almost burst out of his tiny chest at the praise.

He witnessed Sammy's precarious first steps again. Dorothy sang about following the yellow brick road on the screen of a third-rate hotel in Tennessee.

"Dean?" his horrified mother asked when he found himself back in Lawrence after crossing yet another road. "What are you doing?"

"Mom?" Dean asked, failing to recognize the memory.

"You're not supposed to be here."

Dean took in his mother's tired face, her worn nightdress, the eerie green glow of the room. Her eyes were looking straight at him, not at the child he had been while she was alive. She could see him. She wasn't a memory. The road through his Heaven cage seemed to intercept hers at a fixed point.

"I know," he said. "I need to go back."

"You can never go back," she said.

Dean frowned. "Why?"

"Because you're not human," she answered.

"What?" Dean asked, taken aback.

"This is no place for you, Dean," his mother said in all seriousness. "Go away."

Before Dean could form a reply there was a sudden deafening noise that sounded like a thousand helicopters hovering right above the little house. A bright circle of light came in through the curtains. Dean startled and tensed, ready to either fight or flee.

"See?" his mother said, turning her head towards the ceiling. "They're coming for you."

Dean fled.

He was out of the door and into the dark night in a heartbeat. He didn't know whether this was the road he was supposed to follow, but he didn't care. The angels were after him, and he didn't want to be found. It was not like he feared what they could do to him, not after the end of the war and their shared victory over hell, but some of the winged bastards were pretty good at holding grudges and Dean was an expert at causing them. He just wanted to find the end of his road and go back to Earth through the Garden.

He ran as fast as he could, but the angels were faster. The spotlight zeroed on him, sucking him in. Dean kept on running, but his speed was of no consequence as his body was lifted off the ground. The scenery faded around him and all he could see was light, pure and blinding, and suddenly he was not running anymore but standing in an otherworldly white space as vast as the universe.

The light coalesced into shapes as Dean looked around. Ephemeral tendrils of brightness formed soft-looking feathers and fantastic outlines half-man, half-beast, half-nothing like Dean had ever seen or even dreamed. Somewhere amongst the forming crowd a particularly angry flare melted into a figure with four heads, one of which was a lion.

A powerful beam sizzled down to a nightmarish contour with sleek metal skin and uncountable arms worthy of Spielberg's alien dreams. Dean had never seen it before, but his very blood—or what passed for it up in Heaven—thrummed with acknowledgment.

"Michael," he sighed, "how nice of you to invite me to the party. I assume the douchebags around are your brothers?"

Light and feathers shimmered around him, but there was no anger in the bright undulation. Angels, Dean knew, had neither use nor knowledge of such feelings up in their clouds. There was, however, a mild wave of resentment somewhere in the crowd, and Dean waved jauntily at the lion head nearby. It was nice to know that even though Fate and Destiny had been fulfilled and the End Of The World had passed nigh, Zachariah could still be the same petty old bastard.

"Dean Winchester," Michael greeted him with a solemn echo that didn't disturb the quietness of the blinding hall but reverberated directly into Dean's brain. "I was not expecting this."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "Wait, I don't get it. What's this?"

"This, Dean," Michael answered, "is Heaven as the angels know it."

Dean snorted. "Which explains the present company, but not me. Last I checked, I was human. And dead."

Michael smiled, and Dean realized suddenly that the alien angelic eyes were exactly like his dad's back in the seventies, clean, pure, guileless.

"Last you checked," Michael agreed. His smile widened as he raised a few arms and touched something behind Dean, who jolted, startled, at the unexpected pressure between his shoulderblades.

"What the-!"

"Perhaps you should check again," Michael added, his otherworldly smile widening.

Dean did. He looked downwards, and where his body should be there was only a shapeless blob that vaguely resembled a human figure, with insubstantial limbs that sparkled with golden dust in the whiteness of the hall.

"What the hell," he said, and then, "seriously, what the hell. Golden glitter? *Seriously?* Why did I have to get twilighted?"

Michael blinked, but his heavenly smile never wavered. "Welcome to our ranks, Dean."

"Why, is it light and glitter that make the angel?"

"It is written," answered a nameless angel with a human figure and a mane of long feathers for hair, "they appear to men like angels of light: light is an effect of fire."

"Dude," Dean said mournfully, "where's my dick?"

"Dean," Michael said, "look behind."

Listless, Dean obeyed again. "Great. I have big fucking wings," he said without any real interest before going back to contemplating his dickless state of being. "I want a refund."

"Dean..."

"Don't you 'Dean' me, Mickey. Snap your fingers or whatever it is you archangels do and give me my dick back. Because this whole no dick, surrounded by dicks, angel thing? It sucks. Make me human again."

The angel in a human body snorted and spoke again. "As if an angel dropp'd down from the clouds."

"Yes, thank you, Raphael," Michael sighed, and feather-hair snorted. "I'm afraid that's not possible, Dean. Once my Father makes you an angel, you stay an angel."

"Well, tell your daddy I don't want to be an angel. Bring me back to my planet. Sam will kill me if I don't go back."

"Oblige him, Michael," said Zachariah's four heads in a cacophony of voices and animal grunts. "He can stop being one of us," he added, pulling a sharp dagger out of thin air, "at the low cost of complete annihilation. It will save Samuel the trouble."

"Look, you son of a bitch, maybe I should just anno- annihil-" Dean blinked and plunged on, "kill you and be done with it. Again."

Zachariah smiled congenially. "You forget you're in my turf once more, Winchester. And you're the one who wants to stop being an angel. I'm offering you the only way out. Permanently."

"You should be the one out. I killed you, didn't I? With the angel-killing blade and all?"

"You sorry excuse for a maggot – haven't you heard? Only an angel or an enemy at the battlefield can kill another angel. You simply vanished me away, permanently. But now? Now I can make you pay."

"Dean, Zachariah," Michael cut in. "Let there be peace. No one here shall ever be allowed to commit fratricide. Well, except for me," he added thoughtfully.

Zachariah's dagger vanished.

"Would they make peace?" interjected Raphael. "Terrible hell make war upon their spotted souls for this offence!"

Dean frowned. "What's up with him?" he asked, nodding towards Raphael. "Last I saw of the little bitch he was all about smiting. Me, in fact. And my friend."

"He has his obsessions. You're lucky you've arrived during Shakespeare, last eon he was all about some bombshell human female. He used to prance around twittering non-stop that his heart belonged to daddy. Not that Father disliked it, now that I think back on the whole debacle."

"Last eon?"

"Well, it's Raphael. He has his timeline somewhat muddled. His first encounter with you will happen in about five centuries or so."

"Okay," Dean said slowly. "That doesn't make any sense. Back to the important bits, okay? Why can't I go back to human? Wait, how come I'm an angel anyways? I thought you were a separate race."

"We are a separate species," Michael nodded over Zachariah's muttering about superior races and mud monkeys, "but sometimes my Father elevates chosen humans to our ranks after the death of their mortal bodies. It's very rare, but it has happened before."

"Never heard."

"Haven't you? Read the Bible, Dean. Look, there's Elijah over there, and David by his side. They were human once. So was Joshua of the Garden; you met him in a previous visit."

"Yeah," Dean said, "but he sounded just like the average vague prick around here."

"Did he? I understand he was fairly renowned when he was alive. He even got Father to stop the sun or some such thing."

"Nice. Daddy's favorite, was he? So, why me?"

"Why you what?"

"Why me? Why do I get angelized? I thought my role was over with the Apocalypse."

"Do you even have to ask? You were my natural one true vessel, and a main player by yourself, and your own raging war against my brother was a success. This is not a role, Dean, but a reward."

"Taking off my dick is Heaven's reward? No offense, but it sounds more like one of Alastair's assignments."

"Really," Michael said drily. "Deal with it, Dean. Stop whining."

"I'm not whining!"

"Yes, you are," Michael grimaced. "You'll fit right in, Dean. I feel your older brother already. But come," he added hurriedly, "I'll introduce you to the rest of our people. They have gathered here from every garrison to greet you. How shall we call you, Dean? That is, what title do you wish to hold?"

"I don't know," Dean smirked, "but the ladies usually call me Oh My God. Not good?" There was a gloomily reproachful ripple in the angelic light that filled the white hall. "What's up with that, anyways? Why do I need a title? I don't want a title."

"Every angel has a title," Michael explained. "It's our duty to my Father's creation."

"And therefore have we our written purposes before us sent," added Raphael.

"Sure," Dean said drily. "Whatever you say."

"What Raphael means, Dean," Michael said, "is that an angel's purpose is defined by a title. We are warriors of God and protectors of Humanity," he went on, ignoring Dean's disbelieving snort, "but not all of us protect the same side of your old race. I watch over warriors and, for some reason, people from Kiev. My brother Gabriel, may he rest in peace, used to protect messengers – mailmen, pizza delivery boys, internet mail services, you name it."

"Explains the spam mail Sammy used to find in his inbox. Sixty centimeters penis enlargements sound like Gabriel's style."

"My brother Raphael here, on the other hand, is the angel of obsessions and-"

"Okay, okay, I don't want the whole rooster," Dean said. "I get it, your title is your job description. Wait, I don't want a job description. I don't even want a job. Isn't this supposed to be Heaven? Eternal feasts, unemployment, and having a hot brunette in latex serve to my every need?"

"Angels aren't destined to be served but to serve," Michael said, earning a dark scowl from Zachariah.

"Hebrews 1:13-14, Dean, read the Bible. You must have a title, and it will become your very essence and define your place in the choirs of Heaven. I'll let you have some time, however meaningless such a concept is for you now, before making a decision," he went on, forestalling any possible objection on Dean's part. "Let's have you introduced to the rest of my brothers."

Dean didn't pay much attention to Michael's extensive presentation about angelic hierarchy. He didn't give any thought to the names and beings introduced to him, nor, when they vanished from the assembly and returned to praising the Lord or deciding what animal face to try on next or whatever it was they did during their spare time, to the position he was to hold amongst them. He turned his mind towards his recent demise. Sam would be freaking out at Dean's absence.

"Oh," he said, when he noticed that thinking about Sam meant a whole new level of weird now. It felt like holding a laser point straight at Sam's location on Earth, until Dean could see him the way he had always figured a metaphorical god would watch over his subjects.

The anti-angel carvings in Sam's ribs, which had worked so well against featherbrains in the past, did nothing to stop Dean from finding Sam. Perhaps it was a brother thing, Dean thought; Michael would be delighted to hear that yes, Dean believed in destiny as long as it was about keeping Sam and Dean close.

He looked on as Sam drained a beer, Adam's apple bobbing up and down with each gulp. From the several empty cans that littered the ground at his feet it was plain to see he had been drinking for some time. After a boring while of complete and utter *nothing*, Sam chucked his can at a waste basket near by –missing by at least a *mile*– and raised his body from its slumped position against the Impala.

Dean's heavenly gaze followed Sam's slow progress from the car to the room of the same hotel that had witnessed Dean's final night as a living being.

Dean's stealthy consciousness passed through the wall as Sam entered the room.

"Castiel!" Sam said immediately, breaking into a run towards the figure slumped on the floor.

Dean frowned.

"Sam," rasped Castiel. He wasn't unconscious, but he didn't look well. He was even paler than usual, his fingers kept on clutching the worn fabric of his coat, and there was blood running down the corner of his mouth.

"Did you do it?" Sam asked as he half-helped, half-dragged Castiel onto the bed. Dean frowned when he noticed that Sam didn't seem to be paying any attention to Castiel's poor condition; he was mainly interested in an answer. His every movement was precise, intent. This, Dean realized, was a rerun of the Sam during their Lilith hunt.

Dean hadn't really liked Sam back then, and he didn't like him any better now.

"So?" Sam pressed, grasping Castiel's shoulder in a tight grip. "Did you?"

"No," Castiel answered in a curt grumble.

"Dammit," Sam said. "Dammit." He abruptly released Castiel's shoulder and brought his hand to his face, despairingly. Dean waited. "Try again," Sam finally ordered.

Castiel shook his head.

"Hell, Cas, you have to try again!" Sam exploded. "My brother is out there, okay? He's gone and there's no reason for him to be just *gone* because it's not as if he has an Apocalypse to stop on his own anymore, and he's been missing for days and he could be hurt or dead or- no, not Dean, he can't die after surviving Lucifer. Cas, hey, he's been gone since the last disappearance around here and we still don't know what's behind those, and I've been looking for clues everywhere but so far I've found *nothing* and I'm just so *frustrated*. And you're the only one who can help, so please, please, Cas, try again. Go back to the day he disappeared and find out what happened. Please."

"Sam," Castiel said. His eyes struck Dean as very, very sad, and very, very blue, defeated by Sam's onslaught. "I seem to have lost my power to travel through time."

Sam gave a deep breath. "But you'll keep on trying," he said. It wasn't a question.

There was an expecting pause.

"I will," Castiel finally affirmed. "I'll look for an alternate ritual," he said before vanishing away.

"Okay," Sam said after a heartbeat. "Nice to see you can still pull a disappearing act."

Dean was trying to focus his heavenly spotlight into the Playboy Mansion—a feat that was proving to be far more difficult than watching Sam, which struck Dean as unfairly predictable—when he felt two blazing sources of power ignite into his little corner amongst the clouds and Michael and Raphael materialized by his side.

"My friend, I spy some pity in thy looks," said Raphael.

"What the hell," said Dean, peeved.

"You look sad, Dean," Michael translated. "I take it you've been watching your darling little brother?"

"A guy needs entertainment," Dean answered defensively. "The centerfold Playgirls aren't exactly easy to find from up here, you know."

"It's fine, Dean." There was something akin to perfect understanding in Michael's green alien eyes, but Dean wasn't taken in; angels, and particularly archangels, couldn't feel. Zachariah was a mere deviation, and so was Castiel. "We understand your need to check on Samuel. There is a strong connection between you – your brother has it, you have it."

"Yeah," Dean deadpanned, "the Force runs deep in my family."

"You can watch all you want," Michael said, "but Dean, never, ever, try to start any contact your brother. Your true form at the moment would be too much for his humanity to take in."

"Right, I had forgotten about the whole sparkly blob of righteous mightiness. Found my dick yet?"

"That's funny, Dean."

"Hilarious. So. I can be a peeping tom all I want, but I can't show myself?"

"That's right."

Dean smirked. "Being an angel is kinkier than I thought." His face fell. "Still sucks, though."

"You'll be able to interact with men of faith in due course, Dean," Michael said. "And, of course, you can always visit the souls that reside with us."

"Dead people basking in their cages. No, thanks."

"Then decide your place in the earthly plane and those who fall under your protection will see and hear you, as long as they believe, and you will be able to deliver them from harm. Which, actually, takes me to the very point that has brought me to you," Michael added in a businesslike manner. "Have you decided upon your title?"

"I'm still thinking Oh My God... still don't like it?" Dean faltered at the stiff waves of disapproval emanating from the angels. "Then no. I haven't."

"The sooner you do, the sooner you'll take up your duties." Dean shrugged, and Michael pressed on. "Come on, Dean, cooperate. I've seen inside you- I could have been inside you," he said, ignoring Dean's snorted 'kinky, Mike'. "I know you care about things."

"Well, I care about hot playful women, tequila, and good sets of wheels," Dean sneered before suddenly

brightening. "Hey, should I become the angel of wheels? I could protect vintage cars from engine malfunction. Or something."

"Will thou aspire to guide the heavenly car and with thy daring folly burn the world?" Raphael roared.

"Sorry, Dean," Michael said, ignoring Raphael's outburst. "That position is already taken."

Dean snorted, mildly surprised. "Huh, seriously? There's an angel of cars? Who is it?"

"Elijah. Came up here in a whirlwind and with a giant chariot of fire."

"In a chariot? That's ancient, I bet-"

"He's been keeping up with the times," Michael explained with faraway distaste. "He even walks the earth with disturbing regularity to know about the new models of moving vehicles he protects as is his wont."

"Sounds like a lot of work."

"It is," Michael agreed. "Human evolution has made him one of the busiest angels around. Any other ideas, Dean?" Dean shrugged. "Fine," Michael sighed. "You shall have longer to consider."

The only idea Dean could consider once he was alone in his glittery glory was that, unless he waited until his brother's demise or decided to bring it forward by angelically exploding his eardrums, he would have to find an alternate way to talk to Sam about his disappearance and eventual death.

"That the last of Bobby's books?" Sam was saying when Dean took a quick peek at Earth.

"No," Castiel answered, and disappeared again.

Between the two bookworms they had turned the motel room into a library, complete with poor light and ages of Singer dust. There were huge volumes on magic lore piled up in every corner. The floor was littered in manuscripts, and the musty red of the bedspread could barely be glimpsed beyond the brown leather of old reference books.

Dean thought it was a waste of a fairly impressive example of magic fingers. Sam, contrary bastard that he was, thought it was brilliant, if his satisfied nod was anything to go by.

"Okay," he said out loud as he surveyed the scene from his Sasquatch height. "Let's see. Books on travelling through time. And Harry Potter doesn't count."

"You again?" Dean asked the next time Michael materialized by his side.

Michael snorted. "Now that's a nice way to greet your brother."

"You're not my brother," Dean said curtly, because, really, the nerve of the *guy*. "Anyways, why is it always you? Did you get stuck as the mentor? 'Cause no offense, dude, but I'm not sure I want to play the Vincenzo to your Michael."

Michael sighed in a familiar 'I'm an angel and I fail to understand your human references, Dean' long-suffering way. "I do feel somewhat protective of you," he said, patting Dean's golden blob of a shoulder. "You were Heaven's true servant once, after all. But I'm actually here to ask you again about your title." Dean rolled his eyes. "The Host is very interested in having you finally join the choirs of Heaven," Michael added. "We've had many losses recently. Every tune we sing to praise my Father sounds like a funeral march."

"Oh no, buddy. I'm not joining you for weekly hallelujahs."

"Music is good for the soul," Michael frowned.

"That's because you've never been close-quarters with Sammy. His shower renditions have endangered my faith in humanity more than once."

"How curious, that's exactly what I bet I would have heard Samuel say had I ever possessed your body. 'You're not that bad,' he'd have said, 'you can do the Devil in and you don't hog the shower with the same five songs over and over. Actually, you don't even shower. Dean's going to kill you as soon as he's back, but seriously, I could get used to this,' I'm sure he'd have said."

"Good old Sammy," Dean said fondly. "So predictable." He felt like turning his searchlight towards Boogertown, North Carolina, and watch over Sam for a little while, make sure he was okay, eating enough, getting some sleep, not pushing himself too hard.

"You know," Michael said pensively, "you'd make a good angel of obsessions."

"You have the wrong brother."

"No, really. You've always been so focused in your dad, in your brother. In hunting things and stopping the Apocalypse. You know what obsessive souls feel like, you could help them."

"I'll pass. I'm sparkling golden dust in the eternal sunshine of the spotless sky, okay. I don't want to deal with obsessive fangirls for the rest of my eternal afterlife."

"Yes, better not to tangle with fangirls. They already have too many gods, they don't need another angel. Luckily for you the post is already taken. Will you-"

"-keep on thinking about it? Yeah, yeah."

There was a small silence before Michael resumed the conversation.

"It's a pity you didn't get here right after the war," he mused. "Those of my brothers and sisters that were killed left a few empty posts you would have filled well."

"Excuse me for not dying sooner," Dean sassed, "while the empty angel seats were still hot."

"Well, there was a vacancy as the angel of chance and gambling," Michael said.

"Okay," Dean conceded, "I'd have dug that. What else?"

"There were spots as protectors of people in emergencies, of human sexuality," Dean hummed his appreciation, "of the third hour of the night, of students, of sweet smelling herbs – I lose count. We had too many fatalities."

"Which of those was Cas'?" Dean asked, interested despite himself.

Michael's aura grew grave. "He was the angel of Thursdays and one of the protectors of travelers," he answered.

"What happened to that when he, you know, fell?"

"Those of my brothers and sisters with similar interests widened their duties to encompass his."

"I've never understood why you didn't take him back. Afterwards, you know," Dean said in a low voice after another pause.

"We couldn't."

"Right," Dean said. "For a minute there I forgot that righteous bastard is any angel's middle name. You know, we wouldn't have done away with Lucyboy and his army without Cas."

Michael shook his alien head. "It was your destiny to defeat my brother, Castiel or no Castiel."

"To hell with destiny," Dean snarled. "You accepted that pompous ass Zachariah back, why can't you accept Cas?"

"We're not discussing fate and destiny again, Dean," Michael said firmly. "And regarding Zachariah – well. Maybe he's been arrogant, but he's still my brother."

"He's *Zachariah*," Dean said. "I can't see why you'd want the petty asswings back. What he did-"

Michael interrupted him. "Heaven is all about forgiveness, haven't you heard?"

"What about Cas, then? Sorry, we're out of mercy, baldie over that table ordered a large slice, chop chop, and that's it?"

"Believe me, Dean," Michael said, "if I could reverse Castiel's fall and have him back with us, I would. Low in the ranks as he was, he's my brother too."

"But why? Why yes to Zachariah, but no to Cas? That's kind of unfair. Cas has done more for humanity than the rest of you put together."

"Perhaps, from a certain point of view." Dean rolled his eyes at this. "But Castiel *fell*, Dean. He renounced my Father."

"Sam ran out on dad too many times to count. He was still welcome back. Dad took it out of my hide every single time, of course, but-

"It's not the same. You see, Dean, Castiel willfully renounced to his faith. Faith is what defines an angel."

"Listen, Mike, if you believe even for a second that I have faith in any of your-

"Yours is a different case," Michael said. "You're not a regular angel; you were human once. It's different. But Castiel committed an offense against his very nature. Had he only repudiated the Host, well, that would have been forgivable. See, disowning my Father in such matters is final. He fell, he lost his grace. His life as an angel is over."

Dean pursed his lips. "I think that's just bullshit. He still has his powers."

"Fading shreds of what he used to hold. They'll vanish in time."

"Bullshit again."

"If that's what you want to think," Michael said, shrugging. "And, Dean. Not having faith in my Father doesn't mean that you don't have any faith at all. You do. You believe in your brother. In your family. In your friends, or you wouldn't speak about Castiel like this. In the human race," he added quietly, "or you would never have considered saying yes to me."

Praise The Lord (2/5)

Watching Sam became a habit for Dean, a natural evolution from the way he had used to watch out for his little brother while alive. Dean thought it particularly important now that Sam was on a case, and a rare one to boot – it had achieved what the top demonic beings hadn't managed to do, namely Dean's demise.

In the end, Bobby's books hadn't done squat to help with the Where's Waldo search for Dean.

"Cas!" Sam had squealed one morning. Dean, already used to his part as a secret observer of his brother's

increasingly frustrated efforts in locating him, had startled. "Another guy has disappeared!"

"This may hold no connection with Dean, Sam," Castiel had cautioned him from behind his share of the local and nationwide newspapers.

"Maybe, maybe not," Sam had countered. "But Bobby's books didn't help us with the time-travel fiasco and you can't go back to find what happened to Dean. The failed case is the only lead we have – and anyways, a case is a case. Let's hunt down some monsters."

Castiel had followed him in silence, acknowledging that, as Raphael would have said, the game was afoot.

It wasn't as if Dean was worried about Sam's ability as a hunter. His survival during the Apocalypse alone spoke of his skills, regardless of his brief visits to the afterlife after the rare encounter with a rogue angel or a vengeful hunter. To Dean's chagrin, he had to admit that Sam wouldn't have much trouble with the hunt. Wampus cats weren't that difficult to kill. Dean's untimely death hadn't been caused by lack of expertise but by recklessness; he had rushed into the fray expecting the usual vampire or demon to be behind the vanishings, not a pair of André the Giant undead cats that even dad's comprehensive journal mentioned only in passing. Besides, Sam had backup in Castiel, who had barely left since Dean's disappearance and was helping Sam keep focused and not panicking.

No, Dean's worries about Sam were of a more general nature. Sam's reactions towards anything Dean tended to be desperate and unbalanced; Dean had always imagined that there was a hidden switch in his brother's mind that turned on whenever he was left alone, convincing him that hitchhiking with blonde demon spawns and entering kinky bloodplay games with evil brunettes was a capital idea. So far Castiel's stoic influence had stopped Sam from going round the bend, but Dean was fairly sure that not even Castiel's remnants of grace would be enough when time went by without any news.

He *really* needed to find a way to contact Sam and let him know what had happened.

For the moment, Dean had to make do with following his brother around. Sam and Castiel had managed to track down the trail of the most recent disappeared guy into the same outskirts house-turned-warehouse Dean had found on his own.

"Be careful, Cas," Sam whispered as they forced the front door. "We still don't know what we're dealing with. You have all the basic weapons to hand?"

Castiel nodded wordlessly.

Sam signaled Castiel to check the upper level while he took care of the lower floor. Castiel nodded sharply and disappeared up the stairs. Dean followed Sam into the closest room, which was, coincidentally, the last place Dean had seen with his human eyes – not that he had taken any time in looking at it, what with the supernatural attack and the subsequent fight. Just like his brother now.

The twin Wampus cats lunged at Sam's throat from opposite directions, and it was Dean's death happening all over again.

"Sam!" Dean shouted.

The windows exploded.

A rain of glass fell inside the room. A large shard hit Sam's head and he dropped to the floor, clutching at his ears, while blood started leaking from a fresh gash on his forehead. The ghastly cats faltered, and it was enough; Sam blindly shot at one, and Castiel ran into the room, silver knife in hand.

It was over in minutes.

"Thanks," Sam said as he took Castiel's outstretched hand to help himself back on his feet. He surveyed the monsters' corpses, slowly disintegrating into thin air the way their victims had after they were done with them. "Wow," he said. "I've never seen one of these before."

"Wampus cats," Castiel said detachedly as he frowned and tilted his head sideways, as if trying to hear an elusive faraway melody. Dean had always thought he looked a bit like a bird when he did that, or like a kitten. "They are very rare. Very dangerous."

"Yeah, I noticed," Sam said dryly, lifting his hand to touch his forehead. His skin was pale and clammy. "Anything wrong, Cas?"

"Yes," Castiel said. "No. I don't know." He looked frustrated.

"Cas, what is it?"

"The scent in here," Castiel finally answered. "Lime. Ozone. It smells like home."

"Home?"

"Heaven."

Sam shifted, uncomfortable. "Oh," he said, glancing at the huge cats again. Their remains were nothing more than a pale flicker of smoke by now, rapidly vanishing into nothingness. "Hey," he exclaimed, "they're gone."

"The Wampus cats are creatures of blood and illusion," Castiel the Ex-Angel Encyclopedia said. "They drain their victims before making them disappear into thin air. When dead, they disappear too."

Sam paled even further. "Do you think Dean-?"

Castiel merely looked grave and didn't answer.

"No," Sam said. "No. Dean's a better hunter than this." Dean rolled his eyes. "He's alive, I know it, we just have to find him," Sam pressed on. "I'll, I'll start searching for leads elsewhere. You'll help me, you have to. You can follow them faster than I ever could. We'll find Dean, we will."

Dean recognized the expression on his brother's face from being on the receiving end of it countless times before. It was always a treat to see someone else subject to Sam's patented puppy eyes. Castiel was made of stronger stuff than Dean, though, because it took him a very long time –seconds stretched into eternity when Dean would have already given up– to succumb to the plea.

"Fine, Sam," he finally capitulated.

Dean didn't turn his searchlight away from North Carolina until he had seen Sam safely back at the hotel, Castiel tending to his wound with his usual mechanical meticulousness.

"I told you that trying to communicate with your brother would be useless," Michael told him back amongst the fluffy clouds of Heaven. "You almost killed him with that stunt."

"I wasn't trying to communicate with him, I was trying to warn him," Dean said indignantly. "It worked, didn't it? Those sons of bitches didn't kill him like they did me."

Michael sighed tiredly. It made his alien green eyes look like John Winchester's more than ever, and Dean felt uncomfortable, as if he was sixteen years old again and trying to cover Sam's latest escape.

"You'll only end up hurting him if you insist on interfering. You don't have a vessel, you can't simply troll around Earth as you please."

"I just saved Sam's life," Dean protested.

"Unasked, and probably unneeded. If your brother's time has come, then it has come, Dean. You have accepted it for yourself, accept it from him. Or else death shall carry him off in an increasingly gruesome fashion until his destiny is fulfilled."

"Final Destination was a blockbuster around here, huh?"

Michael shook his head. "Okay, Dean, that's it," he finally said, all sudden decision. "We've given you too much leisure time. What you need is a job to keep you busy and away from trouble in your former human life. You're not getting out of this conversation without reaching a decision upon your title. If it helps," he added, seeing Dean's face, "I don't think it's Samuel's time to die yet – he'd have survived even without you. He doesn't need you protecting him at every moment. So forget about it, choose a title already, and fulfill your duties as an angel."

"I've never been one for duty," Dean replied. "Just make me the angel of dorky younger brothers and let me go my own way."

"No," Michael said, "that's just not possible. Come on, Dean, cooperate. Think. There must be something

you're interested in, some anecdote in your late life that you'd want to protect everyone from reenacting."

"Like the time I was with this weird waitress and ended up with the worst case of crabs in the history of Winchester men? Sported a goddawful rash for weeks," Dean said, shuddering. "Man, Reno. Crazy place. Yeah, I wouldn't want it on anyone, except maybe Zachariah, but that's hardly Heaven material, buddy."

"Dean, that's-" Michael frowned, and paused. "Actually, that's good," he said, brightening up. "That's very good. There's an angel of cat-owners and even an angel of jockeys and other horse riders, but there are no angels of crabs and intimate rashes. You'd fill up the void nicely."

"What, are you serious?" Dean snorted, and shrugged. "I'm cool with that. I really couldn't care less."

Michael ignored Dean's impudent lack of interest. "It is decided," he said pretentiously. "From now on, you shall be the angel of unfortunate people with rashes in embarrassing spots and of sorry hosts of lice. Okay," he said, breaking the solemn mood, "that just sounds ridiculous."

Dean shrugged.

Michael sighed one last time, and finally smiled. "Well, never mind. Now you shall join us at the choirs of Heaven, and together we shall raise our voices to praise my Father."

"No we shan't," Dean recoiled, appalled. "I'm not singing. And that's final."

Dean searchlighted the human dimensions of Heaven until he found the Roadhouse. Its familiar smell of beer and wood polish was overlaid with a citric tang of ozone Dean hadn't noticed on his previous visit to the place.

"Thought you'd be calling round sometime," Ash said.

Dean frowned. "You knew I was up here?" Ash tilted his head towards the laptop on the wooden counter. "Right," Dean said. "Heaven gossip."

"You're hot stuff on angel radio, man." Ash said. "So. How's life in Enochian treating you?"

"Well enough," Dean shot back. "I see dead people."

After grudgingly answering a few desperate prayers about delivering the faithful from embarrassing parasites, Dean realized he rather enjoyed his joke of a job as an angel. He got to travel the world, all languages turning into one in his now incommensurable angelic brain –and wouldn't Sam seethe when he realized that Dean's Spanish had become perfect overnight while he had had to spend whole *nights* actually studying it from

books— and witnessing the weirdest situations.

Most people didn't even know that they had had help, but they were so grateful to the universe when their problem was solved that Dean thought it was worth the trouble to snap his fingers and make the lice just go away. The sheer number of people who didn't pray to be rid of crabs but to actually give them to someone else—mostly 'the ex' or 'the ex's new interest'— surprised Dean, though. He rarely granted them, but they made him reconsider his sorry condition after his affair with the waitress. They hadn't exactly parted in the best of terms.

In Memphis, he delivered a man dressed as Elvis from a very painful-looking eruption, and granted him a glimpse of his golden-glittered angelic mightiness. "It totally was Elvis," the man told his friends. "I saw his face in my egg yolk. Plus, there was that sighting at the seven-eleven down the corner last week, you know?"

Dean snorted, but it gave him an idea.

"Lord, what fools these mortals be," Raphael declared when news about his latest good deed reached Heaven, and Michael rolled his alien eyes.

"Your face on a burger, Dean?" he asked in mock disbelief "Seriously?"

"Hey," Dean smirked back, "Jesus gets his face on loaves of bread everywhere. I figured I could do with the extra popularity."

Still, the best part of Dean's title was that it allowed him to roam the Earth freely while helping his petitioners. Nobody kept tabs on him, and therefore he was able to check on Sam even with Michael's express ban, which Dean had never actually taken to heart. Seriously, Michael had been inside his head and should know better than to think Dean would obey without question, especially where Sam was concerned.

Sam's life those days was complicated, in a Winchester-complicated way. He travelled the country looking for information about his brother and refusing to think or accept that the Wampus cats could have had anything to do with his sudden disappearance. Considering the family history, Dean could hardly blame him. To pass the time between one fake trail and the next, Sam hunted the local monsters, the odd rogue vampire and the ambitious suburban witch.

All things considered, it was pretty much like the old days of their search for John Winchester and his hunt for the yellow-eyed demon, except that this time Sam was driving, Castiel was riding shotgun, and the music blaring from the Impala's speakers was, in Dean's opinion, a sissy piece of girly crap.

Sam's laptop was out at every road diner. He kept on searching for clues about Dean around the net, taking in both the possible and the extremely improbable. His bookmarks ranged from shared lore on time travel to alien abductions. He never seemed satisfied.

Castiel, who kept on following Sam on his quest for reasons known only to himself, rarely called Sam upon the apparent futility of his endeavors. He teleported wherever Sam told him to, and always came back with a solemn expression on his face and a "no" forming on his lips.

They were driving towards yet another forgotten town in rural America when Castiel decided to knock some sense into Sam's stubborn skull.

"Dean is not in Needmore," he said curtly, interrupting Sam's flow about the girlfriend of a hunter's brother of their acquaintance seeing a guy that matched Dean's description in a local pastry store in Needmore, Arkansas.

Sam's lips were pursed into a thin line. "Cas," he said in warning.

"No, Sam," Castiel insisted. "Dean is not there. He is not anywhere."

"And what do you suggest?" Sam said. "That he's been whisked to another dimension by a flying saucepan? That he found a pixie circle in North Carolina and will come back in a hundred years still a young man? That's-"

"Impossible," Castiel said in his clipped low voice. "Sam, I do not think Dean is around anymore."

"Where is he, then, Castiel?"

There was a long pause. Dean had forgotten about the question when Castiel finally answered.

"Dead."

Sam started, and his grip on the wheel tightened. "No."

"There is no other possibility. The Wampus cats-"

"No," Sam repeated more forcibly. "He's not dead. We'll find him, we just have to try harder." He breathed deeply, reining in his anxiety. "Why don't you. I don't know. Go back to Boogertown," he said after a while. "It's been two months, maybe there's news about Dean. I'll meet you in Needmore."

Castiel sighed, and looked out of the car window.

"Okay," he finally said, disappearing away.

Dean hated it when angels –or ex-angels, for that matter– did that. The day he realized it was in his power to follow his view changed somewhat.

He started following Castiel whenever Sam sent him on a mission instead of staying behind for a silent and brooding time with his brother, who stubbornly refused to listen to common sense and understand that Dean had to be dead, or else he'd have already found his way back to his brother.

Castiel always landed spot on wherever Sam told him to. He rarely bothered to ask the locals for about trail sightings anymore. He usually sent out subdued tendrils of broken grace, looking for Dean.

When that failed, as it was wont to, he simply walked to the nearest park, a lonely, forsaken figure in an old

coat. He sat on a bench and let time pass in silent contemplation before going back to Sam with no news.

"We'll keep on searching," Sam always said.

The search took Castiel from the Impala to sunny Los Angeles to Galena, Alaska, following the whispers Sam dug out. He looked tired and hollow-eyed after teleporting so many times in a row, Dean thought. He watched Castiel make his way on the ice, having failed once again to locate Dean through his grace probes.

They were both so absorbed by their own thoughts that they didn't notice the cracks growing in the lake until it was too late. The ice broke with a loud snap. Dean barely had time to register Castiel's mildly surprised face before seeing him fall into the cold water.

Dean immediately looked into the lake.

Castiel, half-frozen already, was trying to vanish out. He tried to wrap his lost grace around himself and move outside, but it wasn't enough.

Without pausing to think about it, Dean took Castiel out of the lake and teleported him to the backseat of the Impala. He apologized silently to his car for the wet mess he was making of the upholstery.

Castiel's skin was deadly white, his lips were turning blue and his teeth were chattering.

"Cas?" Sam cried out from the front seat, looking backwards. He swerved from the road and immediately pulled over, worried. "Cas, hey, Cas. Castiel!"

Castiel's condition didn't look good at all. Dean thought for a moment and then figured, what the hell, in for a penny, in for a pound. He snapped his fingers and willed Castiel's body temperature back to normal.

Just to keep on the safe side of Heaven, though, he added a small plague of lice to his angelic gift.

"Cas!" Sam said. He reached out, twitching awkwardly around his seat, and shook Castiel's shoulder. "Cas, are you okay?"

Castiel blinked and slowly pulled himself straight. "Sam," he said. "Yes. I'm fine. I'm fine.."

"What happened? Did you find Dean?"

"No," Castiel said. "No, I did not find Dean. Something found me."

"What?" Sam asked, frowning. "You sure you're okay? You're soaking wet."

"I'm fine, Sam. I'm closer to human than I was. But I'm fine."

"Okay. Okay, man. You really scared me for a second. What happened?" Sam asked again.

Castiel took his sweet time before answering. "I think I am not able to teleport anymore," he finally said. "And I think I have an idea. About Dean."

News travelled fast in Heaven.

"Dean Winchester," Michael thundered at him. "You went out of your destined way. Against specific orders."

"Whoa, hold your horses," Dean said. "I just helped one of mine. The guy had the worst case of parasites I've ever seen."

"Yes, because you gave them to him afterwards!"

Dean rolled his eyes. "C'mon, Mickey baby. You should know me by now. Beyond the wings and the twilighty glow I'm not exactly angel material – just don't come at me with rules."

"Okay," Michael said. "Let's try it this way. You join the choirs of Heaven up front, and I overlook your little lice-and-a-rash trick."

Dean figured he could get a worse deal.

And if he kept on mixing hallelujahs with ramble ons and highways to hell, well, he fancied he was only improving the whole heavenly music thing.

"I'm placing a ban on you from acting on the human plane," Michael said, exasperated, after Dean ignored his standing orders and teleported Sam out of a siren's nest. "You won't be able to interfere unless there are crabs involved or a man of faith summons you. No matter how much you try. So don't try."

Being scolded by Michael and sentenced to Heaven community services didn't stop Dean from visiting Sam and Castiel between lice smitings and burger imprints.

Dean was worried about Castiel. He had been steadily losing his powers since his fall, and it was plain to see that he found his humanization disconcerting. Dean had found him sleeping at the motel once – not unconscious from a fight but fast asleep, like any regular John Q. Public. Castiel was losing faculties he had always relied on in exchange for human limitations, and even though he never complained about it his frustration was written right on his face.

Being with Sam at every waking moment wasn't exactly helping with the situation. Dean knew from personal experience how obnoxious his little brother could be when obsessed, and at the moment Sam was obsessed with finding Dean alive.

He refused any evidence to the contrary.

"What theory," he had asked a thoroughly soaked Castiel. When Castiel had failed to answer he had pressed on. "C'mon, Cas, what's your theory about Dean. Talk to me, man."

"The thing that brought me here," Castiel had finally said. "It felt like Dean. But it also felt like my brothers."

Sam had looked dubious. "You just lost your flying mojo, Cas. I get that it must have been pretty traumatic, but really, what you're suggesting is just impossible."

"I'm not sure," Castiel had said quietly.

Sam had stopped at the next motel to get Castiel into a hot shower and dry clothes. He had Castiel tell him what had happened twice. He rejected Castiel's musings as a natural result of the shocking ordeal he had lived in Alaska. He even convinced himself that nobody had actually brought Castiel back but that he had unconsciously managed to call last shreds of grace to him and had disappeared into the car and even healed himself.

Still, the loss of his teleporting powers brought Castiel a respite from helping Sam in his search. They kept on travelling together, and Castiel fought the supernatural motherfuckers in his way by Sam's side, but that was the extent of their collaboration. At every stop Sam took out his laptop and resumed looking for his brother.

Castiel, unused to the human ways of passing the time with television and books, was left alone to mull over his loss of grace, and to take care of Dean's saving present with a wise use of a LiceMeister.

"I remember now," Castiel said one day.

Sam waited. At the lack of forthcoming information he looked at Castiel over the rim of his laptop. "Remember what?"

"The thing that brought me here. From the ice. I had felt it before."

Sam didn't look particularly interested. "You had?" he asked perfunctorily.

"Yes," Castiel said. "When we defeated the Wampus cats. I remember a high-pitched noise. And the windows breaking. And this feeling."

"What," Sam said, "so you think it was the same? That thing with the cats, that was just part of our regular gig. Weird. Hunt weird. But nothing else."

"It felt like Heaven," Castiel insisted.

"Right," Sam said. "Dean died, went up to Heaven, and then decided to come back whenever we were in trouble. That what you're suggesting, Cas?"

Castiel shook his head. "Yes. No. Maybe."

"Look, Cas, I know Dean," Sam said. "If he died and went to Heaven he'd either spend his whole day in his private paradise, surrounded by half-naked women and enough beer to fill a pool, or else try and come back immediately. Dean's not one to enjoy a prison made of gold while the wings run the show."

"Heaven goes deeper than human paradise," Castiel said.

"Sure," Sam said. "But Dean's still not dead," he added, going back to his Dean sightings online.

Crippled from interfering with most human affairs, Dean couldn't see how to tell them that Castiel was right and Sam was wrong.

"Dean. I don't think 'I ain't had, Lord, my right mind since my rider's been gone' is a verse of this song," Michael said during one meeting of the choirs of Heaven.

Dean shrugged. "Need to lay off the hallelujahs."

"Dean. Choirs of Heaven. Not choirs of Hard Rock Cafe. Do you see any guitars around?"

"No, but they'd really improve the place," Dean said. "And just so you know, Led Zep is heavenly stuff."

"Dean Winchester," Joshua of the Garden butted in, looking up at Dean from his lower row. "Stop plucking the feathers out of my wings. They are more difficult to grow than poinsettias after Christmas."

"You stop poking my eyes out with them."

"Look who's talking," Zachariah's four heads grumbled from behind Dean.

"Off with his head," Raphael said.

Dean ignored the angels. Travelling Riverside Blues was calling.

There was a house in Beersville, Arizona, that sheltered both a poltergeist and a hot chick with freckles and a secret rash. And, of course, her family, but they were unimportant as far as Dean was concerned.

While Sam and Castiel got rid of the poltergeist Dean took care of the secret rash. The chick wasn't exactly a believer nor a woman of upstanding faith and morals –hence the rash– but she looked nice in her short dress and turned out to be a good person, going so far as to invite her saviours for dinner. Her grateful family seconded the request.

"Sam," Castiel said upon finding Dean's face sketched on the meat of his burger. "I smell Heaven."

"Why, thank you," the cook beamed.

Castiel ignored her. "It's Dean."

Sam frowned. "Not now, Cas," he said. He took a bite of his tofu eyesore and resumed his conversation about school soccer with the lady's brother.

Castiel stood up abruptly. His chair screeched against the floor, and everybody turned to look at him. "Excuse me," he said curtly before leaving the room. The front door clicked shut behind him shortly after.

"Is your friend okay?" asked the chick.

"Yeah," Sam answered, covering for Castiel's failure at mastering basic social niceties. "Just had a rough day. That poltergeist was vicious."

"It was, wasn't it? I was terrified, but you were so, so brave!"

Dean watched on, smirking, as dinner progressed and Sam charmed the girl. He was about to witness Sam's awkward moves when about to get lucky, thinking that his brother owed him a huge one for the fast de-rashing, when he felt a pull tug at him elsewhere. Just to be contrary, he tried to resist it as much as he could.

He let go when he noticed that the pull was coming from Sam's current motel. In the blink of an eye Dean was conveyed to Castiel side.

"Amate spiritus obscure, te quaerimus," Castiel was reciting. Dean, whose Latin had improved dramatically after Angel Babelfish had downloaded into his brain, recognized the words at once. "Te oramus, nobiscum colloquere, apud nos circita."

Castiel finished the incantation and threw what looked like sandalwood into a bowl filled with fresh air. The pull at Dean's being tightened. Castiel opened his mouth to recite the summons again, and Dean cringed at the thought of the tug becoming even stronger.

"Talk about irony," he said. "We used that invocation on you. The first time. After Hell."

He only thought about breaking Castiel's eardrums and the mirrors in the room after it didn't happen.

"Dean," Castiel said, raising his face. A soft glow illuminated his face from above. Dean suspected that was his

fault.

"Guilty," he said.

"Dean," Castiel said again. Then he frowned. "You're golden. And. Glittery."

Dean groaned. "Don't remind me. Wait. You can see me?"

"Yes. I summoned you," Castiel said.

"But I can't interact with the human world," Dean said. "Michael placed a ban on me. I should know, I've tried to break it."

"No ban can be imposed upon the duties of your title, Dean," Castiel explained. Even though their roles had been reversed, Castiel still knew more than Dean about angels. "You're an angel now."

Dean felt somewhat guilty for holding in so little esteem what Castiel had lost. "Yeah," he said. "Sorry for the lack of postcards from the clouds. It's been--"

"Difficult," Castiel said quietly. "I know."

"Right," Dean said. "Why did you call me?"

"To test a theory," Castiel answered. "It has proved right. You are dead."

"Yeah."

"The Wampus cats," Castiel said.

Dean nodded again. "Yeah."

"I was not expecting you to become an angel. But it makes sense."

"It'll never make any sense, but whatever. My time had come. Getting wings is marginally better than the hairy-ape cage alternative. Sense, though? Seriously lacking here."

"No," Castiel said. "Sense isn't wanting in this situation. You were a true servant of Heaven."

"Yeah, well." There was an uncomfortable silence. Castiel kept looking upwards at Dean like he held all the fascination in the world and Castiel couldn't bear to take his eyes off for a moment. With the angelic glow bathing his far-seeing blue eyes and the paleness of his skin, he looked inspired, a biblical prophet.

Dean didn't know what to talk about. Asking for updates was pointless since he had spent months spying Sam and Castiel's every move, as Castiel probably knew. Inquiring after his well-being was cruel given what Castiel had lost.

"I'm glad to see you, Dean," Castiel finally said.

"Yeah," Dean replied. "Hey, Cas. Can you tell my brother to stop looking?" Castiel frowned. "I'm dead, he should accept it and move on. Tell him to stop wasting his time."

"I already tried," Castiel said. "I failed."

"Say you summoned an angel and I came. You can show him the sigils," Dean said, looking at the Enochian writings in white chalk covering walls and floor.

"He will not believe me, Dean."

"Tell him you know about his Snow White pjs," Dean said. "We were at this Walmart, he saw them, and he wouldn't stop crying on the way back because dad wouldn't buy them for him. I caught him sneaking out that night to go back for them." Dean frowned. "I can't believe I haven't given him hell about it recently. Must be losing my touch."

Castiel looked doubtful. "I do not think that will convince him," he said.

"Cas, believe me," Dean snorted, "Sam would never willingly tell about sleeping in Snow White flannel. I'm the only one who remembers that."

"Fine," Castiel said. "I will tell him."

"That's my boy," Dean said. "And Cas? Just. Tell him to be careful. You be careful too. I can't interfere and I'm not around to protect you anymore."

"Yes," Castiel said quietly. "I used to feel the same way."

Sam was predictably skeptical about the whole affair, but he was in a good mood –Dean had always told Sam he needed to get laid more often– and agreed to give it a thought. Given his firm refusal to believe Dean was dead, it was more than what Castiel had achieved in months of failed persuasion.

Praise the Lord (3/5)

It took Dean several attempts to master control over his form. He knew it was possible –he had seen Raphael change his mane of feathers to blond cherubic curls and back– and he understood that Heaven wasn't made of physical matter. Therefore, it was possible to change his looks.

Dean went back to his human appearance. Slipping back into his own skin, at least while he was amongst the heavenly clouds, felt right and was easy to keep up – and it didn't hurt that it rid him of the blasted golden sparkles.

Getting rid of the whole asexual Ken doll no-dick nightmare was good.

"Looking good," Ash toasted him with a beer the next time Dean visited the Roadhouse.

"I know," Dean smirked.

"Nice to see you got rid of those wings, man. Weapons of mass destruction. Kept on smashing the alcohol every time you came by."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Dean said. "It ain't easy keeping the damn things under control."

Ash handed him a beer and they sat at the counter.

"Heard you managed to find a loophole," he said, nodding at his laptop. The screen was buzzing in white Enochian wave frequencies.

"Getting my body back? Nah," Dean said, "that's allowed."

"No, man, I'm talking about the man of faith clause," Ash said. At Dean's blank face he elaborated, "The way you were forbidden to get in contact with your brother but still did it?"

Dean frowned. "Cas called me," he said.

"Exactly. The man of faith clause. You know, thou shalt deliver thy flock and visit the faithful?"

"Michael's rules," Dean said. "I've never really cared about rules."

Ash drained the last of his beer and opened another can. "No, dude, angel rules. They're strict about these things up here. They forbid you to get in touch with your human past, and pop, there's your ex-wings being a man of faith and talking to you. Loopholes, man. Gotta love them."

"Cas? He's not a man of faith."

"Dude," Ash said, rolling his eyes, "ex-angel."

"No, seriously. He doesn't believe in God. Renounced Him long ago, you know," Dean said. "Then he fell."

"Who mentioned Sugar Daddy? Look, there's the loophole," Ash said triumphantly. "Rules are you can only talk to humans when a man of faith calls you. But faith in whom, the rules don't say."

"Huh," Dean said. "Wait. I still don't get it."

"That ex-angel of yours?" Ash said. "Doesn't need faith in God to summon to you. He has faith in spades." Dean, who was starting to understand, felt uncomfortable. "In you."

The thing was that Castiel actually did have faith in spades. Believing souls shone with a particularly attractive light to angelic X-ray vision, and Dean still had to find a soul whose brilliance could even rival Castiel's.

It was actually pretty strange, because Dean had witnessed Castiel's steady loss of faith during his long fall towards humanity. There had been some points in time, not many but enough, when Castiel himself had said he had lost all belief – in his family, in God, even in Dean. And yet his soul still shone brightly to Dean's eyes, which could only mean he had held fast to a tiny piece of the intense conviction that had always formed an integral part of himself.

"I remember him as a very devoted angel," Elijah said when Dean told him about it after the daily choirs of Heaven torture. "He believed in our Father to the point of pigheadedness. It's hard to understand for us former humans."

"You don't say," Dean snorted.

"It might have to do with him being stationed with an Earth garrison," Elijah mused. "I've noticed the soldier types tend to be a bit extreme in their faith, if such thing is possible around here. They remind me of the devotion of the Pharaoh's personal guard back in Egypt, before the milk and honey craze of my forefathers."

"Sorry, man," Dean said. "A bit before my time."

"Is it? Of course it is," Elijah conceded. "My, how time flies."

Dean frowned. "Yeah, about that," he said. "How does that work? I asked Raphael, but – you know, it's Raphael."

"What did he answer?"

"More things in Heaven and Earth."

"Predictable, Horatio," Elijah said. "Well. I may not have an Archangel's omniscience, but perhaps I could help you. What do you want to know?"

"How does time work around here?" Dean asked. "Michael's always going on about time being meaningless. But it's not. Time passes on Heaven like it does on Earth."

"Indeed it does. Michael is probably referring to any angel's ability to bend time to their will when they visit

Earth – go back in time, go forth to the future."

Dean thought about Zachariah sending him five years forward and about Anna travelling to the past to kill his family. He nodded. "Go on."

"When time is possible to alter by moving through it," Elijah elaborated. "it loses its meaning. I suppose that's what Michael meant, or what any angel would say after time travelling."

"Not any angel," Dean said. "I can't do it."

Elijah smiled patiently. "What comes easily to a pure angel we must learn through time and trials. We were human once, Dean Winchester. There is only so much knowledge our souls can take. I see you've made a breakthrough, though," he added, looking at Dean's human appearance. "You have controlled your image. Well done. It took me several centuries to restrain the pink beans off my laser eyes."

Dean waved the raise away. "Can you do it? Can you bend time?"

"No," Elijah said. "I've been here for millennia, but I can't bend time yet."

"That must suck," Dean said.

"It could be worse," Elijah said philosophically. "I could be Adam. He can't bend time either. And he's been here way longer."

Sam and Castiel came up against a banshee in Bethlehem, New York. Sam looked at Cas when they pierced her heart with an iron knife and her wail shattered the windows of the apartment.

"That wasn't Dean," Castiel said.

"Can't hear you," Sam said.

Castiel frowned, and Sam pointed at his earplugs.

"No," Castiel vocalized, shaking his head. "Dean is not here."

"Hey," Dean said, "I am here."

When the earthquake ended Sam and Castiel stood up again, brushing the lint from their clothes and taking off their earplugs.

"Sam," Castiel said, smelling ozone and lime in the air. "That was Dean."

"Okay," Sam said, still not fully convinced. "You know, Cas, I think maybe we should repeat that summoning ritual."

Dean knew that neither Cas nor Sam could hear his angelic voice without a proper invocation, but he couldn't help himself. "About time, Sammy" he thundered, causing the earth to shake again.

Sam covered his hurt ears with his hands. "Shut up, Dean," he told the ceiling.

"Bitch," Dean said.

"Jerk," Sam said after the next quake, just because.

Dean smiled fondly.

The pull at Dean's being came as soon as Castiel finished his incantation and threw the sandalwood into the pot of herbs.

"Dean," Sam said as soon as his brother materialized where he was hovering near the door. He walked towards him as if to engulf him in one of his sasquatch hugs, but stopped after a sad few steps. He frowned. "Dean," he said. "You're, like. Sparkly. God, Dean, that's so gay."

"Wait until you hit the dirt, Sammy," Dean said. "Your glitter? It'll have all the colours of the rainbow."

Sam sighed. "Is it true, then?" he asked with a sideways glance at Castiel. "You're dead?"

Dean's voice had lost its levity when he answered. "Yeah," he said. "I'm sorry, Sammy."

"I can't believe you're apologizing to me, Dean," Sam said, roughly. "Even if you totally should." Dean kept silent. "Seriously? Do you know how long have I spent looking for you?"

"Nobody asked you to," Dean answered.

"No, but I still did, Dean. You could have told me it was useless. Hell, you could just have given me a sign, or something."

"Michael is giving me crap for giving you too many signs," Dean said in a hard tone. "Cas told you. You didn't listen."

"Yeah, Dean, but-"

"But nothing. You didn't want to believe I was dead, but I am. And I'm fine with that, it was my time to go. I'm tired, Sam. I'm tired of living and dying and I'm tired of always coming back."

"I want you back, Dean. We didn't stop Lucifer to have you die soon after. I think we should, you know. Look up a way to bring you back. Permanently"

"Well, don't," Dean said. "I'm surprisingly okay where I am."

"I'm not."

"I don't care," Dean said, then added a little less harshly, "Look, Sam. I'm happy where I am. I was tired of our life, you know I've been for a long time. Since before that whole crap with angels and demons and the Apocalypse, way before that. Since dad died. I should have died then, you know that." He made a pause, and said, "I'm really okay with this. And so should you."

Sam thought it over. "Whatever," he finally grumbled. "But I'm still looking up possible ways to bring you back. Just in case you change your mind," he said, quickly forestalling Dean's objection.

Dean sighed. "You're way too bullheaded for your own good, Sammy."

"I learnt from the best," Sam smirked. "So," he said, changing the subject, "this is how you look now, huh? Golden glitter is so Saturday Night Fever, Dean."

"Bite me."

"The wings kick ass, though."

"This isn't my true form up there," Dean said. "Just a 2.0 version. Tuned down for human eyes." Dean stopped himself from making a joke about always having known he was the superior species when he caught a flash of Castiel's eyes. "Still sexier than you, Sam," he said instead.

"Yeah, Dean," Sam said. "Because unicorn sparkles are such a turn-on."

"Wow, Sammy, who knew you were so kinky."

Sam snorted, and Dean smiled back at him.

"What will you do now?" Sam asked when the mood simmered down.

"Some smiting," Dean said. "But I'll be watching over you, Sammy."

"That sounds seriously ominous, Dean," Sam said. "Will you come down and just, you know. Talk? Every now and then. I kind of, well. I miss my brother."

Dean's eyebrows shot up. "Wow, chick flick moment. Cue to angel D. flying back to some fluffy cloud."

Sam shook his head. "Dean, seriously. I do miss you. Will you come?"

"I will," Dean said. "But I can't talk to you unless you summon me first. Angel rules. I'll just, I don't know, break your eardrums and melt your brain otherwise."

"That isn't necessarily true," Cas said, butting into the conversation for the first time. His voice sounded rough and scratchy, unused. "There's something you can do. Something about vessels."

"Vessels?" Dean asked.

"Yes," Castiel said. "I think. Vessels. There's something about them. I forget. The human brain is so limited."

"Okay, Cas," Dean said. "I'll look that up. Vessels."

He thought about vessels as he popped back to Heaven.

With Michael giving him the cold shoulder after his disobedience –or perhaps simply too busy with the citizens of Kiev, complicated people that they were– Dean's options to turn to for help were severely limited. He could hardly go to God for advice. Raphael was out of the question unless he wanted sonnets. Consulting Zachariah would probably end up in a steady flow of petty pain for the next few millennia or so.

"Ask Elijah again," Ash told him. "He's okay, for an angel."

Dean went to Elijah.

"Dean Winchester," Elijah said. "What can I do for you today?"

"You can tell me about vessels."

"Why?" Elijah asked, genuinely perplexed. "You don't need one."

Dean frowned. "I don't?"

"No," Elijah said. "You already have your human form."

Dean thought about it for a while. "Awesome," he said. "See, meatsuit's dead and I doubt chicks dig the whole maggots and decay getup. That's precisely why I'm up here."

"Why would it matter if your body or your whole vessel lineage was dead? You aren't a pure angel. You don't need to ride some poor guy to walk the Earth again."

"Run that by me again," Dean said. "With matching diagrams. I don't need a vessel?"

Elijah sighed patiently. "There is a morphic resonance in our vital cores," he said.

"Okay. I didn't understand a word of that."

"Our souls remember our late forms," Elijah said. "We can go down to Earth and simply will matter to become our late bodies, and it shall. Pure angels can't, for they have no human memory to go back to."

"That why they need vessels?"

"Indeed. We, on the other hand, need only incarnate to walk again amongst our kind. I do it quite often myself."

"Oh, I get it," Dean said. "No tortillas in the sky up to your standards."

"Actually, you are surprisingly correct. There's no tortilla in Heaven. But there is this mex place in Reno where they prepare the most delicious tortilla I've ever tasted." Dean shuddered at the thought of the place. "Still, no, that isn't the reason why I walk the Earth."

"Surprise me," Dean deadpanned.

"I enjoy motor shows."

Dean blinked. "Wow," he said. "You've really managed to surprise me. Congratulations."

"I don't see why," Elijah said. "I am, all things considered, the angel of motor cars, chariots of fire, and other moving vehicles."

"Okay, Eric Liddell. You forgot sexy women in short racing jumpers," Dean smirked. "Yeah, I like motor shows too."

"Do you? I see. Perhaps you will consider attending one with me sometime?"

Dean snickered. "Smooth, man. Smooth," he said. "But one, drop the beard. And two, I have no idea how to will matter to become a louse, let alone my body."

"It is such a pity long shaggy beards aren't fashionable in this day and age," Elijah said as he caressed his fine example of one. "Don't worry about incarnating. I will show you how. After that, it will be up to you."

"What will be up to me?"

"Practicing what I teach you," Elijah said. "Training. Training, and training, and then training a bit more on top of that. You will get it in the end."

Dean went back to Earth and trained.

"Try obscuring your wings faster," Michael told him after popping in one day without previous warning.

Dean stopped. "Nice to see you're dropping the silent treatment already," he said. "Or are you here to tell me I'm breaking the rules? FYI, I'm not."

"No," Michael said, "even though you are treading the boundaries in a dangerous way, Dean."

"Screw you," Dean said. He intended to go straight back to his practice when he noticed that Michael was staring at him with a sparkle akin to yearning in his alien green eyes. "Oh, c'mon, princess," Dean said. "Don't tell me that offended you."

Michael shook his head. "No," he said. "I just wonder, Dean, if you even realize how blessed you are."

"Sure. Every single day. I look in the mirror and I think, wow, aren't I lucky to be a dead blob of golden dicklessness. Except not, because, no mirrors in angel sky."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," Michael said, waving a hand to dispel Dean's whining. "You can complain about lacking of a body in my Father's image and likeness because you know how it feels like to have been made in my Father's image—"

"—and likeness, I get it. And you don't?"

"Dean," Michael said, sad and infinite, "I've never been human. I don't know what it's like."

"You wanted to use me as a human puppet, sunshine. As a matter of fact, you actually used my dad."

"And my every sensation was filtered through him and therefore changed from reality," Michael sighed. "Keep training, Dean. And stay out of trouble. Don't believe for a second I don't know why you want to incarnate."

"Your pep talk's somewhat lacking, dude," Dean said, but Michael had already flashed out.

Sam didn't summon him during the time Dean trained to look on Earth as he had managed to in Heaven – like himself. Dean, who wanted to surprise his brother by strolling nonchalantly into Sam's room in his own body one day, threw himself fully into willing matter to form his body. After several fairly disturbing and utterly failed attempts he managed to sustain a close enough version of himself when alive.

The first thing Dean did as soon as he had a body to walk the Earth with was to walk into a Wendy's and order a triple Baconator. Drawing faces on burgers instead of stuffing his face with them hadn't been completely satisfying.

Nobody at the burger joint seemed to find his vessel-substitute weird or glitteringly twilighty, and no one's eyes burned off. Dean counted the experiment as a success.

The next thing he did was looking for Sam. He searched the Bethlehem motel he had seen his brother last, and, sure enough, there were Cas' faith and remaining grace flashing like a big neon vacancy sign.

Dean strolled into the room. The effect was somewhat different from what he had pictured since Sam turned out not to be at the motel.

"Dean?" Castiel blinked at him, glancing up from his previously silent contemplation of the tacky Van Gogh reproduction hanging on the wall. "You have a body," he stated in typical Castiel Angel of the Obvious fashion. "It isn't golden. Or shiny."

"Yep," Dean said, "but it's even more awesome. It's my body. Thanks for the tip about vessels, Cas. Turns out I don't need one."

"You don't," Castiel said, thinking hard. "Ah. I remember now. The provision for ex-humans. I'm sorry I forgot the details, Dean."

"Nah, it's cool. Got me this body."

"You created it," Castiel said, and at Dean's nod he added, "It's a nice body."

Dean considered teaching Castiel the subtle nuances of accepted manly-male-to-manly-male compliments when a thought about his original purpose crossed his mind. "Hey, Cas, where's Sam?"

Castiel made a complicated gesture that looked as if he had been learning how to shrug the human way but didn't fully master the mechanics yet. "I'm not sure. He left."

"Didn't he say where to?"

"He mentioned someone called Sarah," Castiel said. "He said she lives near here. I offered to go with him. He wouldn't have me."

"Sarah," Dean said, thinking hard. "Haunted pictures Sarah?"

Castiel nodded. "Yes. I think."

"Good old Sammy," Dean said fondly. "Sure knows how to pick them." He sat on a chair and comfortably stretched his brand new body. "So, Cas. How's life?"

Castiel glowered at him. "It's human, Dean. It can be... frustrating. But it's fine when I'm doing things. Feeling useful."

"You're hunting?" Dean asked.

"No. Not much. After Lucifer's demise supernatural beings have been scarce."

"The sons of bitches must be in hiding," Dean said. "We make one frightening team."

Castiel looked unconvinced at the plural form but didn't call Dean on it. "Dean," he said instead, changing the subject. "The other day. During the ritual. You said you couldn't talk to us unless we summoned you first."

"Yeah," Dean said. "Michael's rules. His prohibition works on my true form, but it looks like it doesn't when I incarnate. Kind of stupid, though. If I showed up in golden sparkles without you and your fancy Enochian wards summoning me first I'd melt your eyes out. Guess the ban just stopped me from using my superman powers on you, huh?"

"You shouldn't disobey an archangel, Dean," Castiel said.

"Pot calling kettle." At Castiel's blank face, Dean added, "Never mind."

"Will you get in trouble with Michael for coming here?" Castiel asked.

"Maybe," Dean said, "maybe not. I don't care."

Castiel mulled it over. "He doesn't have to know," he finally said. "I will make new warding hex bags for Sam and myself. You learn how to conceal yourself the way I did before falling."

Dean agreed it was a good idea. "Okay, Cas. Bossy," he still said, out of his Winchester need to have the last word. "Gee, you sure wear the pants in this relationship, huh?"

Castiel looked down at his clothes and nodded. "Indeed, Dean," he said in all seriousness, "I do wear pants."

"I'm going to start charging you for the lessons by the hour," Elijah said when Dean went at him with his problem.

Dean took advantage of Sam and Castiel's next hunt to test his concealment prowess. He had asked Ash to hack his laptop into Earth frequencies and search for him during the hunt. He intended to see whether he could keep his concealment shields up the whole time. If so, then he was safe to incarnate whenever he wanted and definitely give the metaphorical finger to Michael's interdiction.

Sam wouldn't let Dean drive, uneasy about his control over his human form. Dean found it rather unfair since, all things considered, the Impala was his.

"Not really, Dean," Sam told him as he folded his ridiculously gigantic body on the driver's seat. "Inheritance laws say the car's mine now."

Dean scowled. "She still loves me better," he said, patting the dashboard.

The three hour ride to Beersville, Pennsylvania, was just another one in the Winchester's series of roadtrips. Dean and Sam broke the comfortable silence every now and then to bicker like an old married couple. Castiel sat quietly in the back seat, staring straight ahead, just like the automaton Dean had always thought him to be.

The only difference between this ride and all the others before was that this time over Dean had to make a conscious effort to keep his form and his camouflage shields up. It got easier by the second, though, as Elijah's previous experience had proved it would.

Once they defeated the rising wendigo Dean flashed back up to Heaven.

"Did it work?" Dean asked, stopping at the Roadhouse.

"Like a charm," Ash said. "Not a ripple. You're safe for mischief, Winchester."

"Good," Dean said. "Thanks. Hey. Can I ask you something else?"

"Shoot."

"Find me good cases downstairs," Dean said.

Ash wrinkled his brow. "No, man," he said. "That's over. I got better stuff up here. This place? I'm turning it into the Enochian Pentagon."

"C'mon, pal. For old time's sake." Ash still looked doubtful. Dean changed tactics. "Look. I'm not asking for comprehensive lists of every omen in the country," he said. "Just, you know. A folder every now and then. Classic Roadhouse style. It's not asking for much, is it?"

"Sam put you up to it? Can't find his own cases?"

"Sam's fine," Dean said. "Not hunting much lately. Not much to hunt, actually. This is for a friend."

Convincing Ash to help took more working on, but it was worth the extra effort when he popped back down to Earth and told Castiel they were hunting evil again.

"You can't keep yourself holed up in this room while Sam's off with Sarah," he said. "And you want to feel useful. So buckle up, because I got us a case and we're smiting some evil sons of bitches."

Castiel frowned. "We should wait for Sam," he said.

Dean shook his head. "Nah. Sam's more interested in the normal than in the paranormal. Not that I blame him, because, really, Haunted Portrait Sarah? Best piece of normal I've ever seen around these parts."

"You have always hunted together."

"Not really," Dean said. "Destiny's over, monsters are history. Let the kid have his fun."

"Why don't you," Castiel asked in his flat monotone. "Have. Your fun, Dean? You can, now."

Dean wiggled his eyebrows. "That's exactly what I'm trying to do. And that's what you're going to do too. You can't remain holed up in here, Cas. Communing with that sunflower painting will only keep you entertained for so many hours."

"I like being here. It's calm."

"It's unhealthy, that's what it is. C'mon, Cas, let's go."

"Wait. Hunting can be dangerous."

Dean made a show of exasperation in his great heaving sigh. "Dude," he said, "I'm a freaking angel of the Lord. And I have you as backup. The odds must be in our favor, right?"

Castiel's face had gone stony at Dean's remark. When Dean went over his words he realized he had put his foot in without realizing – again.

"C'mon, Cas," he huffed, uncomfortable. "Get your knickers untwisted already. Let's go."

Without stopping to check whether Castiel followed him Dean walked out of the motel room. He paused at the side of the parking lot and surveyed the vehicles.

"Where did you leave my car?" he asked when a sullen Castiel paused his noiseless steps by his side.

"Sam has taken it," Castiel answered.

"Dude, no," Dean said. "Sam really has to stop doing whatever he pleases with my baby now I'm around again. Besides, what if there was an emergency and you had to get out of here fast, huh?"

"Dean," Castiel said. "I don't know how to drive."

Dean blinked. "You don't? I can't– I mean– really? You've never learnt? What have you been doing all this time?"

Castiel's voice was flat and his face was unimpressed. "Saving the world. With you."

"That's no excuse," Dean said. "Driving totally makes the top ten pleasures ranking. It's right there after classic rock, juicy burgers, and sex. I'll have to teach you sometime."

"This body relishes red meat," Castiel volunteered. "I like juicy burgers."

"See? There's hope for you yet. Now," Dean said, turning his mind to the problem in hand. "We need transport."

There was a battered red Ford near Dean. He eyed it with distaste, but he still walked to its door on the driver's side and knelt down to pick it open.

"We don't need a car, Dean," Castiel said. "You can bring us there."

Dean looked up at him. "Enlighten me."

Castiel raised a hand, keeping his wrist straight and his index and middle fingers rigidly pressed together and pointing upwards.

"Cas," Dean said, smirking, "I'm flattered, really. But here's the thing. We're in public. And I don't really swing that way. "

Castiel frowned at looked from Dean to his fingers and back again with incomprehension. "I mean you can teleport us there, Dean."

"My version was more exciting," Dean said. "I'm not teleporting both of us there, Cas. I just learnt how to teleport myself and will this body and keep up the anti-angel shields. I can't do all that and get you there too. I'm made of awesome, but not of so much awesome – I'd probably leave your legs here, or something."

"I trust you, Dean," Castiel said, and it was so painfully, obviously true that Dean had to look away from Castiel's guileless blue eyes.

"Good for you," he said, "because I don't. In any case," he added quickly, cutting off Castiel's soft rebuke, "didn't I just mention that driving was one of the top pleasures? Well, I'm just about to experience it."

Castiel shrugged. "Whatever you say, Dean."

"Right-o," Dean said, turning to look speculatively at the car lock. "Wait. Here's an idea."

Instead of forcing the door open, Dean popped out and reappeared immediately inside the car. It took him about a second longer than it would have forcing the door. He flashed a grin and two thumbs up at Castiel before easily opening the locks. Castiel slipped into the passenger seat.

Heaven's goody-goodness hadn't rubbed on Dean as much as to impede his abilities at car hijacking. A skilled hotwire stunt later and they were on their merry way to Dean's case.

The miles rolled under the Ford's wheels in the seven-hour trip to Crapo, Maryland. They stoppeded at a roadside café for lunch, a silently comfortable affair in which Dean took the offshoot opportunity of solving a case of crabs in its early stages –prevention being the key to success, or so Zachariah used to say when fondly remembering the Spanish Inquisition– and imprinting his face on several burgers.

A little kid, no more than eight, took a look at his meal and then stared at Dean. Dean cheerfully waved at him.

"I think I do understand what you mean about certain food groups being a pleasure," Castiel said, wolfing down Dean's right ear.

Dean winced sympathetically.

"Call Sammy," he told Castiel when they were back on the road. "Tell him you won't be back today. I don't want him worrying."

Castiel nodded and fished for his cellphone in the huge pocket of his oversized coat.

"He says to have fun and be careful with the hunt," he summarized upon hanging up, "and to bring back some local delicacies."

"I think our target is actually a pastry cook," Dean said, handing Castiel the small case file Ash had provided him with. "Run me by the details."

Castiel took the folder and opened it. "Sandra Lewis, 42," Castiel said, scanning the file with fast eyes. "She died five years ago during a fire at her bakery. The police thought it was an accident and closed the case."

"It wasn't?"

"It says here that it was not," Castiel read. "Some hooligans torched her and threw her into an oven."

"Wow. No wonder she's gone all evil witch after that."

"She hasn't gone evil witch, Dean," Castiel said. "She has remained a ghost. But every person under the tender age of thirty to enter the bakery has died. Forensics haven't been able to pinpoint the exact cause of death in any case."

"Think she's taking revenge on them for the kids that killed her?"

"Probably."

"Bad news is she died from a fire. There are no remains."

Castiel nodded. "This is serious, Dean. She seems a powerful spirit in her anger." Castiel looked up from the file. "There were no mentions about this case in the papers."

"I have my sources," Dean shrugged. "So, Cas. Are we game?"

"No, Dean. We are hunters. Even if technically none of us is."

The case turned out to be a regular salt-and-burn-the-creepy-lock-of-hair one, but Dean enjoyed it to the end. Castiel's FBI persona hadn't improved much after their last outing of the kind, back during the early days of the Apocalypse, and it fell on Dean to save his blunders and laugh at his social unease.

Dean felt more comfortable in this sad replica of his pre-apocalyptic life than he did amongst all the fluffy clouds of Heaven. He would have stayed longer at the motel –Sam hadn't been back in the couple of days they had spent investigating Crapo and he figured that Castiel, who cut a lonely figure in the best circumstances, could do with the company– but for his lack of angel stamina. He hadn't been on Earth long when he had started noticing the taxing results of his many efforts, and by the time the case ended Dean figured it was time to ditch his incarnated body, drop the non-scrying wards before they fell on their own and gave the game up, and recharge in Heaven.

He went back to the attic in a shuffle of dejected feathers, looking for prayers about lice-smiting that allowed him to return to Earth as soon as possible, but believers were thin in the air in this age of skeptics. There was a constant prayer without words tugging at him, but Dean couldn't even make out its general tone, much less its actual content, and therefore he didn't even bother to look for its source. Sometimes, when the boundaries of the request weren't well-defined, prayers reached Heaven in this messy way, disjointed and wordless.

"Only filthy mud monkeys have flies around," Zachariah sneered during the recurring choir of Heaven. "Monkeys and donkeys."

Even Dean had to admit that the faint buzz of the prayer was somewhat annoying, but that didn't mean that he was about to take any crap from the old bastard. "Monkeys and donkeys," he said. "Aren't you the poet, grandpa."

"It's only one of my many talents," Zachariah said. "So, which one are you, Winchester?"

"Oh, I don't know. But donkeys sound right up your alley, you ass."

Zachariah looked murderous.

"Asses are made to bear, and so are you," Raphael recited self-importantly.

"He means you," Dean told Zachariah, even though he couldn't be a hundred per cent sure.

It was hard, but Dean waited to be called before making the trip down. When a coherent prayer came from a lady of disreputable fame but reputable family Dean almost tripped over himself in his haste to make it to the Roadhouse.

"Catch," Ash said from behind the pool table, throwing a small folder straight into Dean's hands.

"Sweet," Dean said. "Thanks, man."

"You'll thank me later," Ash said, "when you see what's in there. That's a classic, man, that is."

Dean saluted and flew out.

"A classic," Dean seethed when Castiel read the file and told him about the pimpled teenage witch with a grudge against golden-haired, long-limbed, smooth-skinned cheerleaders. "How the hell is this a classic. It's a cliché, that's what this is."

Castiel did that complicated shoulder thing where he shrugged, only not.

Tweeny Evil Hannah Montana proved herself a tough opponent.

"Look," Dean said, fighting to keep his hold on his human form and pour vast amounts of angelic persuasion on his words at the same time, "I'm not saying that they don't deserve to be punished. I'm just saying, what you're doing is dangerous." It was at time like these that he missed Sam and his well-prepared speeches about doing the right thing – more than usual.

"They're bullies!" the witch said. "They keep hurting me!"

"And if you keep on this road you'll end up hurting yourself," Dean tried to tell her, but Sabrina refused to listen.

"Now they'll learn!" she screamed. "They told me I was ugly, they said, they said I was so ugly and they were so pretty, they thought they were dolls, and now they are dolls!"

Turning people into Mattel figurines was somewhat extreme in Dean's book. In a movement too fast to follow he had stepped into the teenager's personal space and pressed the point of his sharp knife against the power-source amulet at her throat.

"Here's what we're going to do," he calmly said. "I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse. You're going to say yes. Understood?"

The witch swallowed. "Yes?"

"Good girl," Dean nodded, approving. "Now, here's the thing. I'm going to keep this shiny gadget against your spell," he said, pressing the knife further into the amulet. "You're going to release those poor Barbies. And then I'm going to take the hex bag off your throat and dispose of it so the spirits you've trapped don't get angry and come at you. Best offer you'll ever get, kid."

The Barbie dolls strewn on the ground turned into a number of disoriented underage cheerleaders.

"There," she said in a tremulous voice. "Can you, just, not tell dad? He'll be furious."

"Not so fast," Dean said. "There's still one left. Turn my partner back. He's tried the action figurine deal before and he didn't like it."

Castiel appeared where a second ago there had only been a toy, with a soft plopping noise that sounded a bit like a bubble exploding.

"Good girl," Dean said, raising his free hand to yank the hex bag off its leather cord. "I'll be taking this now. You run back home and stop playing with magic. Live a little. Meet some boys. Whatever. But straighten up or else I'll come back for you."

The teenage witch was running away the moment Dean moved the knife away from her throat. He shrugged and bent down to help a confused Castiel to his feet.

"You okay, Action Man?" Dean asked.

Castiel nodded. "I think I am," he said. "Will they be okay?"

Dean looked at the cheerleaders and shrugged. "I think they'll be," he said. "They'll never mess again with people with spots, though."

"You sound like you sympathize with the witch," Castiel observed.

"Me?" Dean said, raising a sardonic eyebrow. "Nah, I wasn't the one looking like a box of fried rice during puberty," he smirked.

Castiel refrained from asking about Sam. Dean's gaze swept the scene one last time before nodding decisively and wrapping up the case.

"C'mon, Cas," he said, tucking the amulet in his pocket for later destruction. "Let's go have pie. There's no real pie in Heaven. Kind of explains the high number of dicks up there, doesn't it? No pie. I miss it."

"Let's go have pie, Dean," Castiel agreed solemnly. "You deserve it. You have done well."

"I've saved the world," Dean said. "Again."

Castiel frowned. "The witch was vicious, Dean, but I wouldn't say a child like her--"

"Shut up, Cas," Dean said affectionately. "I've saved the cheerleaders. That means I've saved the world. Logical conclusion."

Castiel didn't understand it yet, but Dean figured he could always explain over pie.

Praise The Lord (4/5)

Dean wasted no time in beaming down to New York as soon as Ash handed him another case.

"Sammy," Dean said, appearing at his brother's side for once, "I got us a case. You're- holy shit!"

He looked down. Sam stopped moving. On him, Sarah tried to make herself look smaller.

Ah. Sexy times.

"*Dean*," Sam said in a half-threatening, half-confused voice.

"Crap, Sammy," Dean said, scrunching his eyes shut. "There were situations I never wanted to see you in."

"*Dean*." Sam was speeding down the track halfway between frantic and incensed one hundred miles per second.

"Although it's nice to see you've grown since I used to bathe you," Dean said. "Guess the question of grower or shower is answered now, huh?"

"Dean. Go. Away. Now."

"Okay, okay, Sammy," Dean grinned. "Don't get your pants in a twist. Oh, wait, you're not wearing any. Nice to see you, Sarah."

Dean dematerialized before Sam's well-thrown pillow hit him in the face. He was laughing when he appeared again in the physical plane, this time at Castiel's motel room.

Castiel, as usual, was sitting straight-back on an uncomfortable chair while holding a blinking contest with Van Gogh's sunflowers. Even though one of the contestants was a still picture, Dean was ready to put his money on Castiel.

"Don't you ever get tired of that?" he asked.

Castiel frowned and tilted his head. "What do you mean."

"Doing nothing. Being, you know, around this dump day after day. Alone."

"I do things when you're here," Castiel pointed out.

"That's not what I mean, Cas," Dean said.

"I don't know what else to do," Castiel said. "I am- ill used to normal human life. There's nothing I can do except hunting."

"You're in luck," Dean said, "'cause I'm awesome like that and got us a case. But-

Castiel's phone went off. Castiel frowned at the screen and accepted the call.

"Sam," he said. "Yes. Yes. Dean is here. Yes. I'll put you through."

Dean held out his hand. "It's Sam," Castiel announced unnecessarily as he handed him the phone.

Dean grinned.

"Hey there, Sammy," he said. "Done already?"

"You're a bastard, Dean," Sam's whining tones came through.

"Three and a half minutes, Sammy. I'd have thought you could do better. You know. Winchester men last longer."

"Go to hell, Dean."

"Been there, done that, didn't like it," Dean said. "No Roadhouse in Hell. Heaven's better. Except for the angelic company."

"Is it some Heaven thing, Dean?" Sam asked. "It is, isn't it? You get a fresh set of feathers and you forget all about knocking. And I thought it was bad when Cas did it."

Dean laughed. "Wait until you grow your own wings," he said. "You'll change your mind."

"Yeah, as if that'll ever happen. Anyways, Dean. What did you want?"

"To see you at your most glorious, what else."

"*Dean.*"

"Nah. I just wanted to tell you to get your ass in gear and come on a hunt. I have the best case ever. True-to-heart bad evil Sasquatch sighting in Oregon. And here we thought it was only a myth."

"Huh," Sam said.

"Huh?" Dean repeated. "*Huh?* That all you have to say?"

"Well, Dean. I think. I don't. I mean, that's far. It'll take time; I don't think I'm all that interested."

"What? Why?"

Sam's voice was small when he answered. "I've promised to help Sarah at the gallery."

"What, hammer your long nail in, make sure the ink fits well in her inkwell?"

"Seriously, Dean, grow up," Sam snapped.

"That'll never happen," Dean said. "You're really not coming?"

"I'll take the safe option and assume that's not innuendo, Dean," Sam said. "I'm not going. You take Cas with you and have fun."

"Right."

"Look, Dean," Sam began, "it's not that I don't want to go hunting with you. It's just, Sarah really needs some help and-

"-and it's the life you've always wanted. I get it," Dean said curtly. "I'll have Cas call you when we're done."

"Dean, that's not-

Dean hung up the phone and passed it back to Castiel. "Sam's not coming," he said. "Let's get on the move."

Castiel followed him out the door without a word. It took them sixty miles and several runs of Master of Puppets to strike a conversation.

"You're humming," Castiel observed. "You're not mad at Sam anymore."

Dean flashed him a quick look and shrugged. "I wasn't really mad at Sam. I get it, Apocalypse's over and kid's out of this life. Good for him. I just-

"You miss him," Castiel said softly. "I understand. I miss my brothers too."

Disposable Heroes turned into Leper Messiah. Dean drummed at the wheel with his fingers.

"I like Sarah," Castiel announced unexpectedly.

"You do, don't you," Dean said. "So does Sam. A lot."

"She's a good person. But a poor drunk," Castiel said. "She taught me to knot cherry steams with my tongue."

Dean choked and lost control of the stolen car for a moment.

"Sam made the same face when we told him," Castiel said. "I do not understand why. Sarah said it was a very useful skill. That I do not understand either."

"It's just-" Dean glanced at Castiel's pale lips and tried to erase the image from his mind. "It's only a human thing, Cas. You'll get it when you're a grown-up."

"I see," Castiel said before turning his head to the right and looking out of the passenger window.

Not really, Dean thought as they fell again into a companionable silence. Castiel was like that. He failed to understand the concept of propriety –not that Dean was a big fan, especially where Sam or a good lay were concerned– and he tended to drop bombs of insinuations that sounded plain wrong coming out of his mouth.

It was part of what made Cas, well, Cas, like the steady glow of faith that surrounded him or the uncanny endless stare of his blue eyes, and what attracted Dean to him in the first place.

Dean noticed his mental slip, one he had been hiding in a secret box at the back of his head since forever.

"Whoah, Oprah," he muttered between his teeth, "stop channeling Sammy."

Castiel turned to give him a weirded-out look, one that Dean decided to ignore.

Dean had come to view the choirs of Heaven as some sort of social club for the humanity impaired, but he might as well have been the only soul in Heaven to think so. When he went back to the communal cloud after an absence of a fortnight he was accosted by several angels inquiring after his well-being and workload.

All of them flew away in the wake of Michael's forceful howl.

"Dean Winchester," he thundered. "You missed the last session of the choirs of Heaven."

"And good morning to you too, sweetheart," Dean said, automatically falling back to a defensive posture.

"What, don't they overwork you in Kiev?"

"You weren't in Kiev," Michael said.

"No, genius," Dean said, "I was answering my own prayers." Dean meant it in a literal way, as in 'his own prayers to get back to the main floor and kill a sonofabitch or two,' but Michael didn't have to know.

Michael hummed. "I did not realize lice had gone up in such numbers," he said, waving Dean's stalker of a prayer away from his alien face. "Ah. I see that you haven't cared for that buzz that is following you around."

"Can't find the source," Dean explained.

"Would you like my help?"

"Nah, I'll manage on my own."

"I pity you, Dean," Michael said. Dean frowned. "You will never be one of us at heart – you will never become used to being part of something bigger. Your human individuality still lingers in you." Dean shrugged. "It must be an ex-human thing," Michael added. "I see Elijah is absent today."

Dean asked several of the angels about Elijah, but none were able to offer him a clear answer. He hadn't been walking the Earth –some garrisons only did so every couple millennia, but apparently Elijah strolled amongst Hummers with certain regularity– and no other angel had seen him as of late.

"I have missingly noted, he is of late much retired from court and is less frequent to his princely exercises than formerly he hath appeared," Raphael said.

"You ex-humans angels," Zachariah told him, "you lot come up here and grow wings, yet you are unable of the most basic angelic functions."

"That's okay," Dean answered, "I already know how to be a dick on my own."

"I was talking about telepathy, you cheeky monkey," Zachariah said. "Something to keep us all from worrying. Not that I do, obviously."

Dean decided to hunt for Elijah's favored spots. After a few nudges in the right direction, he found himself on the borders of the human realms of Heaven, at the shore of a great lake neatly parted in two.

Elijah waved at him from a comfortable hammock placed right in the middle of the bottom path. He had a convoluted Scalextric highway at his feet and a throttle in his hand, and Dean was reminded of the blue car he used to play with as a kid.

"Dean Winchester," Elijah said. "I hope you aren't here to ask me how to travel through time or read a goat's mind or anything remotely similar." His voice wasn't as boomingly biblical as Dean was used to hear around the celestial plane, which was a welcome change from Michael's Voice of Destiny, TM.

"Actually, for once it isn't hunger that's making me move," Dean said, moving down to Elijah's level. He stepped carefully around the car track and sat on the hammock. "I noticed you didn't attend the weekly tuneless mess."

"Indeed," Elijah nodded. "I have been here some time."

"Mike's gonna chew you a new one, you know?"

"I know. But I am still recovering."

"Recovering? From?"

"I am attempting time-travel," Elijah said. "I have had a little setback in my efforts."

"I thought angels could heal instantly. I can."

Elijah nodded. "This is not a physical wound, but one in my soul, which has been tattered. And of course you can – you're a good apprentice."

"Thank you, master. Shall I go get my lightsabre?"

Elijah's frown was nearly obscured by his ancient bushy eyebrows.

"Don't worry," Dean said, "in another few millennia or so spaceships will replace cars and you'll understand."

"Ah," Elijah said with a nod, "the natural evolution of moving vehicles. Is that what you want to know today?"

"Not really," Dean shrugged, "but you're going to tell me anyways, so shoot."

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth-"

"Just skip to the good part," Dean interrupted.

Elijah sent him a dark look, but complied. "In *my* beginning," he said, "there were chariots. I'm sure you know the thing; open, fast, light, drawn by a small number of horses."

"I think I saw one on a movie once," Dean mused. "I wouldn't swear by its historical accuracy, but man, that scene was open, fast and light. 'Sporntacus? Yeah, that was the name, 'Sporntacus.'"

"Chariots changed," Elijah went on. "Empires spread and brought on the biga, and the triga, and the quadriga, which were normal developments of a chariot and of which I became the natural angel, for lack of one. Carriages followed with their suspension of leaf springs and their golden elegance, and so did stagecoaches."

"Nice history lesson," Dean said, trying to conceal a yawn.

"And then there were the modern vehicles. Odd, they were, scary machines that belonged more to Hell than to Heaven with their toxic fumes. Have you ever noticed how irate people get when there is a problem with their vehicles? They shake their fists and scream their defiance at Heaven in anger and fear."

"The path to the Dark Side," Dean said, and frowned. "I think I'm running out of quotes."

"With the first Benz Motorwagen I felt the buzz of a new prayer ascend the sky-"

"Hold on a second," Dean said. "The buzz of a new prayer. What buzz of a new prayer?"

Elijah considered Dean carefully. "One very similar to the one that is humming around you."

"You recognize it?"

"I recognize its type," Elijah said. "It's a faraway prayer, one that doesn't have a clear target, either because there is no angel to receive it or because the angel it is actually destined to is not the right one to hear about it. It is the way angel titles change – it changed mine, as I just said. Motor vehicles, Dean Winchester, are strong and needed."

Dean considered this new information. He concluded that unless crabs had evolved into MechaDarwin Crabs there was no explanation for the faint prayer buzzing around him.

Chuck the Prophet had developed a very embarrassing rash in his nether regions. He didn't pray to get rid of it –from what Dean had heard Chuck never prayed, except to praise the Lord for vodka and curse Him for hangovers– but Becky did, and Dean laughed himself sick when the request reached Heaven.

He delivered Chuck from his rash, and he took the chance to send him a pseudo-prophetic vision that involved Sam, Chuck himself, three cans of whipped cream, and some sexy quality time together.

"Fuck my life," Chuck whined when he woke up in the morning. "I don't want this shit to happen, like, ever. This prophecy thing? It sucks. Sucks. Where's the vodka?"

Becky made him tell her all about it. Then she wrote the story, including several allusions to shafts and manly love, and published it on the internet, and Dean laughed himself sick again.

He stopped chuckling when he actually read the monster fiction and realized that *samlicker81* at fanfiction dot net had replaced all mentions of Chuck with pre-Hell Dean and had added the word 'brotherly' before every mention of manly love.

"Dude," Ash said as he looked over Dean's shoulder, "tell me you're not using my laptop for the wrong kind of porn."

Dean's head fell against the wood counter dejectedly. "Fuck my life," he said, paraphrasing the prophet.

Ash skimmed over the story and laughed, and Dean smashed his forehead against the counter a few times for good measure, until a foreign sizzling sound made him stop.

There was a radio on a corner shelf of the Roadhouse. It was made of rough wood, like everything else in the place, and Dean hadn't even known about its existence until it flared to life in a blur of statics.

"Dean," Castiel's voice said.

Ash rolled his eyes. "Dude. Secret liaisons? A bad idea," he said as he closed the tab with Becky's Winchester love-love-fiction and went back to his rigged Heaven system.

"Shut up," Dean said.

"I will not," Cas answered from the radio.

"Not you," Dean said. "I'm at the Roadhouse, it's- you know what, whatever. What is it."

"Get down here. We have a case."

"There's this human word you really need to get the hang of, Cas. Please."

There was a pause in which Dean could almost hear Castiel's brain cogs a-turning

"Have you told Sam?" Dean asked when it became clear that Castiel was going to keep on thinking about Dean's remark unless somebody cut him off.

"Yes."

"And?"

"He said no. He's busy."

"What, banging headboards?"

"That activity doesn't sound like one Sam would enjoy," answered Castiel with his literal-track mind.

"You'd be surprised," Dean smirked, but Castiel had already interrupted him.

"Dean. I don't have the time. This communication spell is extremely difficult. I need your help."

"Fine," Dean said. "What kind of case is it?"

"A ghost haunting."

Dean groaned. "That all? C'mon, Cas, you can take that one out by yourself. Ghosts are easy."

"I know that," Castiel snapped amongst the increasing radio statics. "I do not need you with the case. I need you to drive me there. It's in California."

"Ever heard of public transport?"

"Yes. I have never felt the need to use it."

"That's great, Cas. You can pop your cherry now."

"Dean," Castiel said, unveiling the heavy weaponry. "Sam left your car here."

Dean didn't need to think about it. "I'll be right down," he said, disappearing with a fast hand-wave at Ash.

It was, as Dean had predicted, an extremely easy case. The ghost was hardly dangerous –most of its victims had been product of shocked wrong steps on the stairway it haunted– and the long ride there, in Dean's opinion, wouldn't be worth the effort weren't it for the pleasure of driving the Impala again.

"We really need to teach you to drive," Dean told Castiel on their way back. "Only not on this baby."

"I don't think I shall enjoy driving," Castiel volunteered. "I enjoy watching you drive."

Dean looked at Castiel from the corner of his eyes. "Creep," he said fondly. "I can't always be around to drive you, you know."

Castiel nodded. "I know," he said. "You have your angel duties."

"Not that I care much."

Castiel flashed Dean a hard look. "Devouts will be disappointed if their prayers to you aren't answered."

"I think LiceMeister has it covered, Cas," Dean said, and Castiel started by his side. "By the way, sorry about that."

"It was an embarrassing side-effect of being human," Castiel said matter-of-factly. "Why did you give them to me?"

Dean shrugged. "I didn't know how else to save you from the ice back then," he said, re-writing history somewhat.

"That was you," Castiel mused. "Thank you, Dean."

"Hey, that's why I'm here, right? To help my poor crab-ridden believers?"

"Yes," Castiel said with his usual sincerity. "I believe in you, Dean."

Dean was uncomfortably aware of Castiel's earnest stare. He had to swallow another lump of attraction – wrong, Oprah, wrong, because Dean had always preferred the ladies, at least until Castiel came into the picture– before speaking.

"Well," he said for a lack of a better answer, "yippee."

Dean decided, after parking the Impala at Castiel's motel, that he didn't want to go back to Heaven yet. Heaven was boring when compared to remaining in Earth, hunting monsters and teaching Castiel how to be a proper human. Speaking of which-

"Time for your driving lessons," Dean told Castiel.

The first thing Castiel did upon finding himself on the driver seat of a hotwired Chevrolet Malibu, and after carefully nodding at Dean's instructions, was to put his foot on the gas and promptly smash the car against a nearby lamppost.

"Dude," Dean said once they were both safely out, "talk about a crash course."

"You make it look easier," Castiel frowned.

"I'm awesome like that," Dean said. "Don't worry, Cas. You'll learn one day. Just, you know, when the shock is over and the matter of my body stops rebelling against me."

It wasn't until he popped back in Heaven that Dean realized he hadn't heard a single buzz from the bothersome prayer that followed him around the clouds during his stay on Earth. It was steadily becoming stronger around the celestial plane, but there was no way for him to understand what it wanted yet.

He brought his problem to Ash, who, even with the help of his rigged laptop, could only establish its source was the physical world of humans.

"It's changing you, man," Ash added after his unsatisfactory news. "It's weird. Your dimension is becoming bigger than just the angel of crabs and rashes. Never see anything like it before."

Dean had an idea. "Elijah told me about something similar once," he said. "Maybe I'm evolving."

"As an angel?" Ash mulled it over. "Could be, yeah. Would explain the increasing fluctuations."

"Great," Dean said. "Time to add 'being the official angel of faces in food' to my Heaven profile."

"Negative," Ash said. "I can't get this prayer yet, but it looks more personal than you stamping your face on a burger. Nice touch, that. Classy."

"Yeah," Dean smirked, looking into his frothy pint of beer and raising the shape his face on the white foam, just

to keep up the good work.

Dean and Castiel became used to their hunting routine. Castiel's base would be the motel near Sarah's place, where Sam had moved almost permanently. Every now and then, whenever Castiel called through the radio spell or Ash handed him a new hunt, and at an increasing rate whenever he simply felt like it, Dean forwent his lice-smiting and materialized on Earth.

He took the Impala for interstate rides with Castiel on the passenger seat. He drove for days, stopping every now and then at third-rate motels but mostly going on, Castiel sleeping with his head pressed against the window when his humanity called for rest.

Hunting was slow in the post-apocalyptic world. Ghosts were scarce, vampires were all but practically extinct, and demons had been forced to crawl back into Hell after Lucifer's big burst. Dean and Castiel stretched their operations across the country, a necessary feat even considering the small number of evil monsters, since there weren't many hunters still alive – the Apocalypse had seen to that.

From time to time, however, a dangerous case out of the old times jumped at them. One such hunt was waiting for Dean and Castiel in aptly-named Hell, Michigan.

"What the fuck, Cas," Dean said upon reaching the outskirts of the small community. Castiel sat impossibly straight and stared at the devastation ahead.

Instead of the expected assortment of classic cars, tourist-trap stores and Hell citizens –in a human, non-demonic way– there was only a huge black crater running from the smashed road they had been following to the dam they could see in the distance

There was a red *something* the size of a small skyscraper in the epicenter of the mass destruction.

"Hmm," Cas uttered, frowning.

"What. The fuck. Is that thing?"

"The Behemoth," Cas said.

"That little piece of information doesn't tell me much apart from big evil monster," Dean said.

"The Behemoth is Hell's gatekeeper," Castiel explained. "It's one of Lucifer's pets, one that has rarely seen the Earth. The power it yields is that of lightning and fire, and its death shall only come by– I do not know. I have forgotten."

"C'mon, Cas," Dean said, "your nerdy brain can't forget that. That's important. You can't remember so many stupid little details and forget how to kill the humongous thing."

"I'm sorry, Dean."

"Why do you do that anyways? Why do you forget?"

"I don't exactly forget," Castiel said, still staring straight at the Behemoth. "All the knowledge I used to have is forever etched into my brain. My mind is human, though, and weak. I can't— gain access to what I know."

"Okay, spotless mind," Dean said, glancing at Castiel. "Never mind. We'll just have to find how to kill Godzilla here by ourselves, right?"

"Yes."

"Exciting," Dean said wryly, climbing out of his car and making a straight beeline towards the Behemoth.

Silver, as it turned out, didn't work against the monster. Neither did iron or common exorcisms. The one thing that did actually work, even if they found it by accident, was to trick the creature and have it be hurt by its own lightning.

"Lucy never learnt how to train his pet at home, did he?" Dean said as he avoided one lean flash heading his way. "Bad dog!" he told the Behemoth, frowning at it.

"Dean, pay attention," Castiel said, pulling Dean back just in time to avoid a second flash.

"Thanks, Cas." Dean turned to smile at Cas, whose cheeks were stained red from the exercise and who looked ruffled and heaving, and there was that damned Oprah attraction again tugging at Dean's core. "Shit," he said, jumping back with a snarl and dumping his angry frustration on the Behemoth.

It turned out that once the huge red monster had zapped his midriff in his haste to get to a vanishing Dean there wasn't much else to do. Dean popped out to a safe distance, watching the Behemoth stumble drunkenly until falling slow-motion on a field of torn debris.

Where, as Dean noticed with an abrupt blow, Castiel's leg was trapped by a thick piece of masonry.

"Cas!" Dean shouted.

Castiel made a feeble attempt to free himself, but the weight on his body was too heavy and the Behemoth was already falling dead on him.

With a pop, Dean flashed into the obscured mess the second before the Behemoth touched it, grabbed Castiel's arm, and disappeared with him.

They appeared in Castiel's motel room in Bethlehem, New York, in a stumble of limbs, and Dean fell over Castiel on the floor.

"Ouch," he complained, making a face and opening his eyes slowly.

Castiel's face was inches away from his own. His eyes were an endlessly clean blue, and Dean's hateful attraction came back full force.

He moved away from Castiel's body in a hurry.

"Shit," he said, sitting back on his heels once he was a safe distance away. "Sorry, Cas. Sorry. Are you okay?"

Castiel frowned and took a short while to answer, as if checking the condition of his every limb. "I'm fine," he finally said, looking at Dean straight in the eye.

"Your leg okay?"

"It feels sore. It doesn't hurt much. It's not broken. Dean?"

"Yes?"

"You teleported both of us out of there."

"Right."

"I thought you didn't know how to do that."

"Yeah," Dean said, looking away from Castiel's unfathomable blue eyes. "Me too."

Dean zapped back to retrieve the Impala just in time to avoid the crowd of curious onlookers and media reporters assembling around the Behemoth's corpse.

When he returned to the motel he found Castiel asleep on the bed, fully clothed, as if he had tried to keep conscious but had had no other choice than succumbing to fatigue. He hadn't even taken his shoes off.

Dean sat by his side, rubbing at his face tiredly. "I take it you're not up to a celebratory beer, huh?"

Castiel's only answer was a soft snore.

For the first time in his life and post-life, Dean, who couldn't lose his consciousness and dream anymore, fully understood the appealing points of spending a whole night watching someone else sleep.

Spending time amongst the clouds was heavenly boring. Tired of not having anything to do –not even bothering Zachariah at his job– and at the lack of prayers to answer to, Dean decided to visit the real world.

"Dean," Castiel said, looking up from Project Runway. Dean had convinced him to watch TV like the regular Joe Six-pack during a previous visit, but Castiel insisted on liking realities better than Doctor Sexy M.D. "You found another hunt."

Dean plopped on the sofa and nudged Castiel's shoulder with his own. "Nope," he said. "No hunt. Pass the remote."

Castiel frowned. "I like this show," he said.

"Which comes to show your lack of adjustment to being normal," Dean said. "C'mon, Cas. The remote."

"No," Castiel said, gripping the remote tight to save it from perdition.

"Cas."

"No."

Dean tackled Castiel and tried to grab at the control. Castiel drew in a sharp breath at the impact and defended his ownership of the remote as best as he could, squirming under Dean's grabby hands and sticking his knees and his elbows –and he was too bony for Dean's liking, but it wasn't the time to think about likings, thank you, Oprah– to retaliate.

In the end, tired and breathless and having tumbled over the ugly rug on the floor at some point during their struggle for TV domination, they decided to compromise.

Dean wasn't a big fan of zombie flicks, but he enjoyed nitpicking Resident Evil with Castiel to no end.

Dean learned that he could control the television channels with an angelic thought and a flick of his hand. He didn't tell Castiel. Instead, he kept on bodily fighting for the remote every now and then, reigning in his heavenly strength and enjoying the feeling of being only another human dude.

Castiel probably knew the extent of Dean's powers, but he never said a word, not even when Dean emerged victorious from their battles and forced him to watch episode after episode of romantic hospital politics nobody understood anymore.

The hundredth variation of Hallelujah –marginally improved by the Sweet Child o' Mine theme Dean insisted on introducing– finished with the familiar pull of being summoned. Dean, who hadn't felt it in months, waved at Michael and disappeared away.

"Can't live without my charming presence, can you, Sammy?" he asked when materialized. "And look at all those candles, how romantic. I'm flattered, really."

Sam, predictably, rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Dean, right," he said, blowing off the black candle in front of him. "Should start charging you the materials for this ritual. Angel-approved candles are expensive."

"Stop whimpering, Sammy. You sound like Chuck."

"And look at him, with a nice house, a nice girl, and a nice franchise of new books."

"Yeah," Dean said, "remind me to lice him up again one of these days for publishing my lack of sexy times after Hell. A man has a public face to keep."

"That's not very angel-like, Dean."

"Nah, that's one hundred per cent old me," Dean said. "So, Sammy, what's up?"

Sam shrugged. "Nothing much," he said. "Sarah's hosting a fauvist auction tomorrow."

Dean smirked. "I have no idea what that is, but it sounds hot," he said, flashing his brother two thumbs up. At the way Sam rolled his eyes Dean shrugged and added, "C'mon, Sam, you haven't called to tell me about your love life."

"Can't I just want to spend some time with my older brother, Dean?"

"No. What is it?"

Sam sighed and conceded defeat. "Actually, it's Castiel."

"Cas? What about him?"

"Okay," Sam said, "this is going to sound weird, Dean, but what are your intentions towards him?"

Dean snorted. "Why, roses and chocolates, obviously. What in hell, Sammy."

"No, just. Just hear me out, okay?" Sam said. "Look, I'm worried about him. He's either alone in his room or out hunting monsters with you. That's not exactly a healthy life."

"Yeah, well, Cas isn't exactly a normal guy, you know?"

"My point exactly, Dean," Sam said. "He doesn't know how to be human, and hanging around with you and only with you – well. It's not exactly helping."

"Why don't you invite him with you, then?" Dean asked. "Oh, wait, I forgot. You're too busy having Sarah check your brush, right."

"Har har har, Dean," Sam deadpanned. "I've actually invited him over a couple of times, you know."

"Okay, problem solved. He gets the full Samuel Winchester's Stanfordlike Life tour, he decides he likes it, he finds a lady for himself and he goes full-throttle on normal." Dean realized halfway through his tirade that he didn't like the sound of the plan at all. It would mean that he'd have no reason to incarnate and hunt supernatural beings with Castiel anymore.

"There's part of the problem," Sam said. "When he decides to accept and come with us, which is strange by itself, he never, ever tries to socialize or meet anyone. Ever."

"It's a nerd thing," Dean said. "You should understand, Sammy."

"I'm serious, Dean," Sam pressed on. "It isn't normal, and it sure as hell isn't healthy."

Dean shrugged. "I don't think Cas wants normal," he said. "Normal's overrated."

"Dean, you've never had normal in your life," Sam said. "The way things are going, neither will Cas. The first time he was around I threw one of Sarah's friends at him, this really cute blue-eyed blonde, you know, and she left after a few minutes saying he was downright hot, okay, but really creepy."

Dean cackled. "It's not me you want to ask for help, Sammy, it's Doctor Love. Oh, wait, that's me too."

"It's not funny, Dean."

"Okay, sure, whatever, not funny," Dean said, still chortling. "What did he do to spook her?"

"Nothing much," Sam said. "Apparently he wouldn't stop staring at her. When she asked him why, he said her eyes were the wrong colour, whatever that means."

"Creepy staring, yeah, sounds like Cas alright."

"And that's not all. I told him he needed to socialize, pick someone up-

"-tough chance, you need to throw Chastity at him if you want him to react."

"Dean, I honestly haven't a clue what you're talking about," Sam said. "Anyways, I took him to this pub, told him to pick someone up, and he went straight at this guy in the corner. Actually, Dean, you really need to tell

him that you lied when you said the UPS line is an appropriate way of establishing first contact."

Dean cracked up again. "Priceless," he hiccupped. "Don't tell me he went to that guy and told him to check his package."

"Yes," Sam said with the straight and disapproving variation of his patented bitchface.

"Oh, Cas," Dean said, laughing. "This is just. Hah. Little Cas sure is learning fast, huh?"

"Doesn't it bother you that he went for a guy?" Sam asked.

"Nah, why?"

"I don't know. Maybe because the guy had really lame bowlegs Cas said reminded him of you."

"Hey," Dean said as he sobered up. "I don't have bowlegs."

"Right. And you don't secretly read Becky's online stories either." Dean frowned and blinked, and Sam plunged on before he could open his mouth. "The point is, Dean, Cas really needs to go out more, enjoy himself. Learn how to be human. And he won't ever do that if you're always around to drag him on one hunt or another."

"What if I'm always around to drag him on hunts? He can keep on being Cas and doing what he wants."

"Well, you'd better always be around and never leave," Sam said, "or I'll come after your ass with a feather plucker."

"Wow, girlfriend," Dean said, wiggling his eyebrows, "aren't you a feisty one."

"I'm serious, Dean," Sam frowned. "Cas is my friend. I want him to be happy. God knows he deserves it."

"God's a jackass," Dean said, "but whatever you say. Is the chick talk over or do you want to move on to hairstyles? Because, man, your floppy bangs are kind of lame."

"Says the golden, dickless blob."

Dean pulled a face and willed the matter that formed his earthy body all the harder. "Bitch."

"Jerk."

Dean flashed a quick smile at his brother. Sam returned it with a grin.

Dean mulled over his little chat with Sam for days, but no matter what angle he looked at it from, he couldn't

make head or tails of it.

Trust Sam to talk for hours on end and never convey a single coherent idea.

Castiel snored.

It was a light, soft noise, but it was an unquestionable snore. Dean smirked every time Castiel, a mint human exhausted by a whole day of doing nothing at all –no hunt, no research, no Sam to ply with failed attempts at socializing– exhaled air with a rasping sound that didn't exactly befit an ex-angel of the Absent Lord. Dean had tried to move Castiel to lie on his side more than once, but Castiel had started awake with the merest touch.

He was showing the natural instincts of a hunter, Dean had thought with a small twang of pride, because, hey, who was it that was teaching Castiel how to be a proper human hunter?

Castiel only slept stretched on his back as some freaky ramrod Dracula. He never seemed to fall asleep as much as he seemed to simply *fall*, his eyes drooping no matter what he was doing –in the latest example of this phenomenon watching Doctor Sexy M.D. with Dean– as his body simply tuned itself out. Dean thought it came with the lack of a proper training in humanity, what with angels being born insomniacs and Castiel flapping wings for several millennia.

Castiel's face was bizarrely relaxed while he slept. Dean had never seen him so free of strains, with his brow unfurrowed and smooth and the usual crunch over the bridge of his nose almost gone. With his eyes closed and his face slack he looked normal, human, like any other thirty-something everyman around.

The bottom line was that he didn't look at all like the dangerous, glorious angel Dean had met at an abandoned barn years ago, and yet he looked all that and even better.

Mortality suited Castiel, thought Dean, far more than unfeeling angeldicklessness ever had. It gave him a certain fragility and turned his cold compassion into an understated feeling of strength, and, great, Dean thought, Castiel's sleeping face made him wax Oprah-poetic about gay shit.

Castiel snored again, swallowed, and his brow furrowed as if during a bad dream. Dean wondered what it would feel like, now that he was an angel –not that he had ever tried before, or at least not with Cas– to kiss the thin wrinkles until they smoothed back into a soft stretch of pale skin.

Dean leaned down, entranced by his own thoughts, until his lips were inches away from Castiel's forehead and he could feel his own breath warm against Castiel's skin.

Castiel, immersed in his troubled sleep, twisted lightly on the bed, and Dean jumped back.

"Shit," he said with feeling.

It took Dean a long and intense case and Castiel bleeding profusely on the Impala's upholstery to face that his Inner Oprah and Sam's failure of a talk were meant to tell him the very same thing.

"You sure you're okay?" Dean asked as he glanced at Castiel with worry.

Castiel returned his look with a stern face. "These wounds are not of import. I will survive."

"Yeah, well," Dean said, squirming uncomfortably, "don't be so sure about that. You do realize you're mortal, don't you?"

"I know, Dean," Castiel said wearily.

"Okay, then you know you can't jump unarmed in front of a werewolf, right?"

"Dean," Castiel said, "there was no other way. I managed to stop it enough for you to put a silver bullet through its heart."

"Still-"

"You never stopped when jumping into danger when you were human," Castiel said. "It would be hypocritical to stop me now."

"Yeah, but-"

"No."

"You know you can't-"

"No, Dean." The flat look Castiel directed at Dean could have frozen Hell a thousand times over.

"Okay, okay," Dean conceded, "don't go all smitey on me, I'm zipping it up now. It's just, next time, dude, be a bit more careful. I'm not asking you not to hunt, I'm just- be careful, okay?"

Castiel shrugged and grimaced at the painful pull of his wounds at the slight movement, and Dean pulled a face in memorial empathy.

"Shit," he said, frustrated, as he gripped the wheel tighter. "I really need to learn how to be a proper angel. I can't even heal you. I think if I try I'll end up pulling your intestines through your ears or something."

"I would appreciate if you didn't," Castiel said. "I have been told humanity is fragile."

Dean snorted. "That much I got from personal experience," he said. "Seriously though, Cas, I really want to

heal you. I just don't know how."

"I don't need you to heal me, Dean."

"Yeah, well, excuse me from trying to repay the favor," Dean said. "You've healed me before, what's the difference?"

"I don't need your help," Castiel snapped.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Dean's fingers itched to reach the radio and turn some music on to diffuse the tense atmosphere, and he was seriously considering the benefits of a Black Sabbath séance when Castiel spoke up again.

"I didn't mean it that way, Dean," he said in a low tone. "I have nothing against you healing me."

"Gee, Cas," Dean said. "Lay down the fangs next time and maybe I'll believe it."

"Dean," Castiel said, softly, "you misunderstand me. These wounds, they aren't fatal. They aren't bad. They are just- messy. It isn't a necessity to heal them." Castiel spoke in clipped fits and starts, and Dean, perhaps for the first time in his life-and-thereafter, decided not to put his two cents in. "I have never felt these before, Dean. Most of the physical sensations I'm feeling, I never did before. They are new. With these," he gestured to the bleeding gaps on his torso with a feeble hand, "I feel each heartbeat. It pumps through my body. I never- I, it feels, Dean. I feel. I'm learning how to feel, I've been learning since we met. Don't try to take it away from me if it isn't requisite, now that I'm feeling everything. Angels don't feel."

"I feel," Dean interjected.

"Dean," Castiel said, "it will never matter what you are. I saw you in Hell, I see you now. You may be an angel. But you will always embody all that is human. Because you're Dean."

Dean glanced at Castiel, who was staring right at him in his intense way of old, as if the whole force of Heaven still backed his words. His eyes were preternaturally blue in his pale face, earnest and bare of any artifice.

Worshipping.

The strength of the unfathomable prayer that buzzed in Dean's glittery trail in Heaven chose that moment to make an appearance on the mortal plane, colliding against Dean in abrupt understanding. The prayer was Castiel's voice. "Dean," it hummed, "I believe in you. I'm yours, Dean, I believe in you, Dean. Dean."

Dean swerved to the right and pulled over. The Impala's wheels screeched against the mix of asphalt and gravel.

Castiel, alien to Dean's heavenly revelation, wrinkled his brow and tilted his head to the side.

"Dean?" he asked.

Dean kissed him.

"Oomph," Castiel said. The up-close blue and black of his dilated pupils was making Dean feel drowsy, drowning, until Castiel relaxed against him and closed his eyes, melting into Dean's lips and answering hesitantly, clumsily.

The hard kiss mellowed as Castiel's body molded into Dean's, his hand finding the crook of Dean's elbow and clinging to his clothes. It went on and on until Dean's front felt sticky with Castiel's blood, and when it trailed off into nothing Dean pressed his forehead to Castiel's while their breathing mingled in the spare space that separated them.

"Dean. I. I think I adore you," Castiel whispered against Dean's lips, and then he opened his eyes, endless and all-giving and Dean's, and Dean felt he was suffocating.

"Shit," he said, panicking.

He disappeared away in a flash, wishing himself in the unlikeliest spot in the country, away from Castiel's eyes, and from his lips, and from the damnable Oprah attraction in his chest Dean couldn't make light of anymore.

The unlikeliest spot in the country turned out to be an industrial cellar in Sioux City, Iowa, that Dean linked vaguely to a magician's crude sense of humor. There were several men in an orgy of leather and rope, and they stopped and blinked at Dean's unexpected apparition.

"Shit," Dean said again, and then, "I'm not gay."

"Don't worry, big boy," said one of the men, cracking his whip against a metal contraption straight out from Alastair's fondest dreams. "The Chief will teach you."

"*Shit*," Dean repeated, with feeling.

He vanished again, this time to a place far away from humanity. Heaven called.

"No," Dean said, strolling around a deserted spot amongst the clouds and kicking at random cumulus heaps in his way. "No. No no no no."

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks," Raphael said in the background as he sipped his heavenly daiquiri.

"Shut the fuck up," Dean said, turning his back on the chorus of peeping dickwings.

"Curse you, Dean," the prophet Chuck raged at Heaven. The choirs of angels rejoiced, for it was the first time the prophet prayed for himself and not because of the effects of spirituous beverages. "I mean, what. I've been putting up with lice for days. Are you too busy now with your great gay sex to help a friend, huh?"

Dean frowned as Chuck's –admittedly unorthodox– prayer reached him while moping around the angelic celestial plane. Still, it distracted him from thinking about Castiel and their kiss-and-love situation, which was a welcome change.

"Oh, and I wanted to get into that too," Chuck ranted on. "The gay sex. I need drugs, man. And I don't mean I need drugs for, you know, the embarrassing problem Becky says I need to get rid of before she's okay with touching me again, I'm just. It's all those images, you know. I. I've dreamt about porn before, but, honestly? Breasts have always been in the equation. Not this, this penis orgiastic whatever of yours."

"What the hell," Dean muttered on his cloud. "I'm not having gay sex at all. I'm not."

Castiel's blue, blue eyes flashed through his mind.

"I heard that, you liar," Chuck whined. "Prophet, remember? Dammit, Dean. Purple prose is difficult enough without the whole two guys in bed together thing, you know? And when I say in bed, I mean in bed, on the couch, on the backseat of your car, on the front seats of your car, on your car, in random toilets across the States, just, just stop it for a moment, okay? I don't want to get mind-flashed with porn about you while I'm, I don't know, at the dentist or buying some booze or whatever, okay? It's, like, if I keep on publishing the gospels, this book will so be sold with a complimentary Busty Asian Beauties out of their synergies. Like, totally."

Dean wondered how this counted as a prayer while Chuck stopped for air.

"I thought writing was hard, but, you know, just try to write man-on-man smut without becoming repetitive. Hard doesn't begin to express it. It's, like, impossible. I mean," Chuck added, turning on his laptop and donning his glasses, "listen to this. Just, just listen to this. It will make your ears *bleed*."

Chuck cleared his throat and started reading a fragment of his latest *opus*:

Castiel's gaze is ardent and beautiful as his eyes lock against Dean's. The heavenly hunter gulps, air knocked right off his lungs in a figurative sense.

No matter how many times they do this –and it has been seven times in the past forty-eight hours, not that he is counting, except he totally is– kissing Cas always feels like the first time. Minus the awkward car angle and the crick at his neck, of course.

Luckily, this time they have managed to keep their hands off each other long enough to book a room at the Gold Pot Inn and stumble up the stairs. The bed is hard and a few broken sprigs threaten to damage Dean's

back, but he doesn't really care, what with a divinely naked Cas straddling his thighs and trading soulful looks of passion with him.

"Cas," Dean gasps as the blue-eyed ex-angel bends forward and their turgid shafts rub against each other. The friction is as glorious as the burning sun, and the shiver of desire running up Dean's spine intensifies a thousandfold.

"Dean," Cas growls as his sapphire orbs stare right into Dean's sizzling soul with the intensity of an ultra-strong laser ray, until the green-eyed hunter feels his being stripped to his core, laid bare for his lover's viewing pleasure.

The ex-human is helpless against the onslaught, and his manmeat twitches against Cas's thick member. "Cas," he says again, trying to keep at bay the needy whine that trickles into his voice like fine honey.

"Dean," Cas repeats.

"Cas. Oh, Cas."

"Dean," Cas says, and his raspy voice sends a torrid puff of hot air straight against Dean's tender and full lips.

"Cas," Dean moans. "Cas, please, please. Oh, Cas. Fuck, will you move already?"

The timeless ex-angel frowns. "Be patient, Dean," he says in a tone of voice that is pure musk, and Dean kind of wants to answer 'bite me' except he knows that Castiel's literal mind would take it at face value.

He has a welted crescent on his shoulder in the shape of Cas's teeth to prove his expertise in the subject.

"Well, blow me," he says, instead, writhing on the bed, his cock throbbing with arousal. His pupils are widely dilated and there is barely a thin ring of forest green around them. He looks ravishing.

Cas bends even closer and licks two messy, straight stripes up Dean's lips before sitting back up. "I shall," he says, "but later."

"Oh, God," Dean whimpers, letting his head fall against the pillows. He hopes Cas doesn't get squicked by the casual taking of his dad's name in vain. To be honest, at this moment in time the ex-angel is the closest thing to the Lord above for Dean, and their congress is a greater gift than all of Heaven.

Castiel's hand slithers between their bodies and grasps at their tumescent manhoods, and Dean looks down, his toned chest heaving with pure unadulterated desire. Cas's fingers are sinfully long, and their pressure on Dean's meat popsicle the closest feeling to divine perfection the emerald-eyed ex-human has ever experienced.

"Yeah," he says, watching, mesmerized, as a few sticky and premature pearls leak from the tip of his erect burrito and Cas leans down to collect them with the tip of his tongue as if they are pure ambrosia. Dean moans throatily and thrashes on the motel bed with wild primal abandon. "Yeah, Cas, that's good-"

"Seriously, I'm running out of tasteful synonyms for expressing your cock!" Chuck spluttered, cutting into the sick reading. Dean didn't dwell on the utter *wrongness* of Chuck's wording decisions; he was still stuck on the narrative, and, particularly, on the image of Castiel –a very naked, very male, very much in control Castiel– straddling his human body. "I've already used everything I can think of, shaft, manhood, little fellow, pecker, *everything*. And not even the internet is helping, you know? Namingschemes dot com sucks, man. It sucks ass. I totally don't want to write down 'wiener schnitzel of love'." Chuck sighed and let his head drop on his keyboard. "Look. I'm really, really happy you've hooked up with your ex-angel, I am. It's just, please, please, man," he said, "lay off the streaming porn, will you? My head *hurts*. And while you're at it come deliver me from lice again."

Dean blinked up above. Kissing someone had never meant hooking up, at least not in Dean's books, which were fairly comprehensive in the subject of mouth-to-mouth (and mouth-to-other-body parts) contact. It had certainly never meant the torrid porn Chuck had just read out loud without succumbing to a strong case of the giggles.

In any case, Dean never had 'hooked up' with Castiel nor indulged in mind-blowing sex activities with him, no matter how warm Dean's inner Oprah felt when thinking about it; he had left him stranded on a highway to nowhere. Either the angels were having a few laughs at Chuck's expense, sending him weird prophetic dreams, or Chuck's alcoholism had driven him round the bend.

Dean knew his prophet.

"Okay, Chuck," he said slowly. "You've definitely had one shot of vodka too many."

"I heard that too, dammit," Chuck snapped at his plaster ceiling. "And just so you know, I haven't had a drop. It totally makes the prophetic porn way clearer."

Dean kept on (manfully) moping around Heaven, trying not to think about Castiel, about kissing Castiel, about adoring Castiel, and, above all, about what Chuck would term 'happy adventurous times with Castiel's thick burrito'.

Contrary to Sam's lifelong belief about Dean's grey matter, or lack thereof, Dean utterly and catastrophically failed at not thinking.

"Dean," Michael sighed as he plopped down on the cloudy ground right by Dean's side. For once he had forsaken his natural appearance and had invested himself with John Winchester's youthful looks, unruly curl of black hair over his forehead included. His eyes remained the same, though, and Dean looked away from him

rather fast, uncomfortable. "When will you ever understand?"

"I think I might be gay," Dean answered in a dull voice.

Michael sighed. "And?"

"And. I don't know, will I get smitten for this? I'm an angel dude that's gay for an ex-angel gay dude. This is so fucked up."

Michael waved away the prayers that milled around Dean. He hadn't bothered to answer to any of his petitioners in what felt like a lifetime, and some of the prayers, the most fervent, had taken to following him around like lost puppies.

At Michael's hand flap most of the prayers scattered away, but one of them remained, buzzing around stubbornly. "Dean," it fervently went on and on, "I'm yours, Dean. I believe in you."

Dean didn't understand why the poor bastard persisted in his belief, when Dean had left him alone and stranded on an American highway after what could possibly have been the first kiss of his almost eternal existence.

"Do you think Heaven cares about that?" Michael asked.

Dean snorted. "I'm pretty sure the Bible doesn't exactly support gay shenanigans, man," he said. "Either that or most of the preachers I've met have it all wrong."

"Love is love, Dean," Michael said. "It's my Father's message no matter where."

"Now that's what I call a drastic change of mind," Dean said. "Couldn't you have thought about that while you were tearing Heaven and Hell apart to kill your little bro?"

Michael waved the comment aside in the very same way he had flicked the prayers away earlier. "Do not bring up the past," he said. "These days we're all about following the path my Father set us on, and, Dean, what you're doing veers away from it rather abruptly. You're only hurting yourself and harming Castiel while you're moping up here."

"I don't mope," Dean said, feeling for all the world like he was back into one of John Winchester's I'm-your-father-and-know-better rebukes, minus the alcoholic breath.

"Yes, you do. It's unseemly. Angels do not mope, Dean."

Castiel's words about Dean being overly human no matter his transitory breed or condition came sharply to the front of his mind, and he cringed.

"Follow my Father's commandments," Michael said, hypnotically. "Give in to love."

Dean shook his head and tried to dispel all thoughts about Castiel. "See here, Lennon, I don't recall any commandment about sexing an ex-angel up. Stuff about not coveting your neighbor's donkey? Check. But not the other part."

"Then, Dean, you haven't read my Father's message the way it must be read. God? God is all about love."

Dean sighed. "Yeah, yeah, love, peace, and Jesus' face on flatbread everywhere."

"Go back to Earth, Dean. Castiel wants you."

"Okay, creepy. Why are you so intent in playing matchmaker between me and Cas anyways? I thought you didn't want me approaching him, or anyone else for that matter."

Michael smiled. "That was when I thought meeting him, or meeting your brother, would only hurt you. Both of you. My eyes are open now, and I see that it's your duty to go to him."

"Right," Dean said, shoos the buzzing prayer away. "Men of faith and their traumas."

"Not a trauma, Dean," Michael said, with the kindest eyes John Winchester had ever shown the word. "You have evolved as an angel. I'd say you have been elevated as the angel of, ironically, fallen angels. Congratulations. Now drag your ass off your cloud before I smite you down to Earth myself. Oh, and take care of my little brother. Or other angels smiting you will be the least of your problems."

Dean flipped Michael the metaphorical bird, and Michael sighed and flashed away, leaving Dean to his lonely thoughts.

Okay, so there seemed to be something more than friendship going on between Dean and Castiel. That was no biggie. Dean had tended to form few connections during his human life, but those he had actually formed had meant more than friendship – his brother, for whom he had forsaken his soul, Bobby, whom he thought of as a father, and now Castiel, who, to be honest, Dean had no idea whatsoever how to categorize.

He had always factored Castiel into the equation of his life, though, ever since the bastard had walked into an abandoned barn to tell Dean he had plans for him. For better or worse, Castiel's approval –or, at the very beginning, cooperation– had been crucial. Even his unconscious psyche knew how important Castiel was from those earlier days; Dean remembered clearly that his road through Heaven had taken him past shared conversations with Castiel in sunny parks.

And fine, okay, Dean could admit he cared about Castiel. He had always told himself it was all about trust; Castiel trusted Dean to succeed, and Dean trusted Castiel in return. If he took extra trouble when looking out for Castiel was only because it was Dean's fault the poor bastard had been cut out from Heaven and eventually from everything angelic. Someone needed to teach him the human ropes.

That didn't explain, however, the compulsion Dean had felt to check upon Castiel every other day, dragging him around even when Dean knew he had better things to do with his celestial unlife. It didn't explain why Dean wanted nothing more than to stop overthinking the whole business, because he was turning into Sam,

and flash to Castiel's side to kiss him a bit more. It certainly didn't explain the warmth Dean felt whenever he felt Castiel's faith in him buzz by.

"Angel of fallen angels and embarrassing rashes, huh? I hope this load of crap doesn't mean I'm Lucifer's angel," he told a passing cupid, "'cause that sounds just like a goth teenager band waiting to happen."

The cupid hugged him blissfully, and Dean didn't begrudge the grabby hands. Hell, he knew his ass was just that awesome, and now he even knew that Castiel thought about its awesomeness too. Which, admittedly, wasn't the best point to consider, since it brought him right back to Castiel and his penchant for gruff loving revelations during roadtrips.

In the end Sam's summoning invocation was the only action that managed to pull Dean back to Earth. He didn't know how long had passed since leaving Castiel stranded on a lost highway, but he suspected that it had been at least a few weeks, maybe months.

Sam was looking good. The average everyday life agreed with him, or maybe it was getting laid regularly. Dean felt vindicated after telling Sam so many times that it was just what he needed.

"Okay, Dean," Sam said. "Sarah's working on a few antiques and I'm on a really tight schedule here, but you were in a hurry when you told me to call you so I'll be brief."

"Wait, what?" Dean interrupted. "I haven't called you. You've just called me. See? Enochian. Black candles. Sammy? What's going on?"

"Shut up, Dean" Sam said, curt but not unkindly. "You said not to let you speak, and hey, sounds like the perfect deal to me. So shut your mouth and let the clever brother do all the talking here, okay, Dean?"

"I didn't say shit. The hell's going on, Sam?"

"Shut up." Sam was clearly enjoying the moment. "Okay, Dean, here's the deal. You're a bastard."

"Hey!"

"You're a bastard. You left Cas stranded somewhere in rural America after the only person in the world he's ever really believed in kissed him." Sam smirked. "You kissed Castiel, Dean? Really? Not that I haven't seen this coming from miles away, but, really, like, for real?"

"I hate you, Sammy," Dean said with feeling, rubbing at his forehead with his hand. "Yeah."

Sam's was the poster face of the carpe diem motto. "What? Didn't catch that, Dean."

"Yes, okay," Dean said in a voice only marginally stronger. "Yes. I kissed Cas. Throw me into the bonfire or whatever, I probably deserve it."

Sam shook his head. "Oh, Dean," he said with unlimited fondness.

"What."

"Look," Sam said, "you were in a rush when you told me this," Dean's face was a picture of pure incomprehension, "and I didn't get half of the story, but I understood the gist of it. You love Castiel." Dean yelled, but Sam pressed on. "You have loved him for *forever*, and yes, it's obvious to everyone except maybe to you two thickheads."

Dean opened his mouth to answer. He thought for a second, pulled a face, and closed it again.

"Cas loves you back, Dean," Sam said. "Don't look so surprised, man, it's obvious. I mean. He told you, right? And how many times has he given his life over for you anyways? I can't think of a bigger love declaration than that."

"Yeah, but. No." Dean was still processing the word 'love'. "I mean, Cas did it because. To save the world. Humanity, you know. Whatever. He said he didn't believe in me, he said he thought I'd fail."

"Yeah, and you said you thought I'd give Lucifer the big yes without a proper plan, but look at what actually happened. Never mind that, Dean."

"Yeah, but Cas-

"-kissed you back, didn't he? He loves you, Dean. Hell, he forgave you for giving him a bad case of crabs, and if that's not true love I honestly don't know what is. Look," Sam added, forestalling Dean's reserves, "just believe me. You love Cas, he loves you, you two deserve each other. Who cares if you're both men? That's technically and theologically debatable. So you go back to his side now and talk to him this instant."

"I can't simply go talk to him after all this time, Sam," Dean said. "Shouldn't I, I don't know, make a detour for a few roses and a Hallmark card beforehand?"

"Dean," Sam said patiently, "you don't get it. It doesn't have to be after 'all this time'", he added, fitting in the quotation marks with a wave his fingers. "You can go back to him now and appear there, right? Angels can. And then, instead of wasting a few days moping around Heaven or whatever, you two can spend them frolicking around Earth. Just," he said, looking decidedly uncomfortable, "don't give me any details later. I'm serious, man. I don't want to know."

Dean stared at Sam. A foxy grin started to form slowly on his face.

"Sammy," he said, "you're a genius. A weird-ass genius who uses lame words like frolicking, but a genius anyways."

Sam smirked. "I know," he shot back, "but it was actually you who came up with the idea in the first place. Just remember to come ask me to call you and tell you all this shit sometime in the future, once you're done with your frolicking for guy-on-guy beginners fast course, okay? I don't want to mess with the time-space continuum."

"Got it," Dean said.

"Dean," Sam called out. "I'm happy for you. For both of you."

"Thanks, Sammy," Dean said, locking eyes with his brother, who returned his words with a sharp and proud nod.

Dean closed his eyes tight and focused.

He had never travelled in time. He hadn't ever tried to, like Elijah had, or even considered it. He knew only pure angels were capable of doing it right, and that even Castiel, pre-fall but post-rebellion, had found it difficult.

Without a second thought, he went back to the past.

"Dean?" Castiel said from the passenger seat of the Impala, furrowing his brow. The blood on his chest was starting to harden into flaky crusts, and his face wasn't completely pale anymore. In fact, there were two bright spots of red blazing on his cheeks. Dean rather liked them.

What Dean didn't like so much – apart from the gore on Castiel's chest, but he had already covered that matter – was the swirling mix of feelings that crossed Castiel's solemn face, joy, surprise, anger, suspicion and dejection all rolled into one. Castiel, who had always been accused of not knowing the concept human emotions, had learnt them all from a single vanishing act.

Dean had been the one to show him the ropes in mortality, after all.

"Yeah," Dean said, staring at Castiel straight in the eye and trying to swallow a nervous lump of anxiety, "Cas."

Castiel decked him, hard. It didn't hurt as much as it did back when Dean was human and Castiel still kept his angelic powers, but it still tingled.

Castiel's jaw hardened and he gripped his knuckles with his other hand. He had learnt first-hand what it meant to hit an angel from the other side of the fence.

"What the hell," Dean said. "Where did that come from?"

"What, Dean," Castiel answered, smoldering back at Dean and pressing his lips in a firm line. "Maybe I don't know everything about being human, but at least I know I wouldn't leave someone who had just told me what I told you stranded and alone for half an hour."

"I missed the mark by half an hour, huh? Not bad for a first try."

Castiel stared at him without dropping the angry face. "I have no idea what you mean," he said, "but I'd appreciate it if you left again. For real this time."

"Look-"

"No. You've already said what you wanted."

"Cool your jets, loverboy. I haven't said a word."

"You left. That's enough."

Dean shrugged. "Payback's a bitch like that," he said. At Castiel's incensed look he raised his hands up in the air, placating. "Look, I- shit, Cas, this is way too difficult."

Cas crossed his arms against his chest and stared straight through the Impala's windshield, thinning his lips into a barely-there line.

"What I mean is, Cas, I've never-" Dean stopped, rubbed his face, and started again. "Saying stuff like that, it's seriously- You know what? Screw this."

He reached over, tugged at the lapels on Castiel's coat, and pulled Castiel to him until their mouths had smashed together again.

Castiel punched him again, weird angle and all, but Dean refused to let go.

"Look," he said against Castiel's lips, curbing his struggles with angelic strength, "I'm not used to this shit. I know you love me, and you know I adore you, and hell, I bet all the major newspapers know by now, but I'm just- I'm not used to hearing it, okay? Not when it's true."

Castiel went slack in Dean's arms.

"You startled me, okay, Cas," Dean pressed on. "When you said it. You startled me. But you know, I've given it some thinking and this? You and me? You don't need to hear me tell you I love you to make it real, it's already real."

"So you say," Castiel said in a low voice.

"So I know," Dean said. "Look, I know I have a lot of groveling to do before you forgive me for taking off like that, but really, Cas, it's us. I'm your angel, and no, that's not a cheesy pick-up line, that's literal. I adore you."

Castiel laughed in Dean's arms in his usual gruff manner. "I thought you weren't going to say it."

"Yeah, well," Dean said, "changed my mind. It was easier than I thought. And it's true."

Castiel's eyes were bottomless when he finally looked straight at Dean, and his belief in Dean buzzed around them in a comfortable murmur.

"I adore you too," Castiel finally said, before adding a warning, "But if you leave this time I will hunt you down

and make you die."

"Is that a promise?" Dean said, wriggling his eyebrows. "The little death by your hands? 'Cause I'm honestly thinking about leaving if that's the case."

"Shut up, Dean," Castiel said against Dean's lips before covering the small space that still existed between them.

As far as kisses went, Dean could think of no other as perfect in the history of the world.

"Cas?" Dean said an indeterminate period of time later, during a lull in their frolicking. "We really need to teach you how to drive."

Castiel hid his snort against Dean's bare shoulder.

Eventually, Dean also became the angel of cherry stems tongue-tied into knots, for Castiel was a faithful soul of unexpected virtues and a fast learning curve.

Had Dean know that as many angels as could dance on the head of a pin were enjoying the free show from Heaven, he wouldn't have been exactly thrilled.

"Journeys end in lovers meeting," Raphael sentenced from his fluffy seat.

"That's all good and well," Elijah said as he absentmindedly blessed the Impala's tires for the zillionth time, "but next time I suggest they take better care of their wheels. This poor car's brakes scream their pain to me every other week."

"Next time we puncture their wheels, yes?" Zachariah's four mouths asked in dissonance.

"Zachariah," Michael reproved absent-mindedly. "Don't piss Dean off. It's already been hard enough on Heaven to bring these destined two together on their own free will."

Raphael sighed. "Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear; where little fears grow great, great love grows there."

The chorus of angels nodded in agreement.

"Amen, brother," Michael said, blinking in curiosity at the variation of frolicking Dean was kissing up the inner side of Castiel's thigh. "Well," he added, "as Raphael would say, all's well that ends well. And this, praise the Lord, has ended better than well."

The angels smiled heavenly and nodded again, sipping on their drinks and magicking buttery popcorn out of thin air whenever the lovebirds' scene below called for a recess.

(Until, that is, Dean realized what was going on and materialized his wings on the physical plane, shielding him and Castiel from the bunch of peeping, bored, perhaps not-so-bad angels.

The final bonus? Castiel adored Dean's new wings almost as much as he adored Dean himself – and, you know, adoration over golden glittery wings? It felt *awesome*.)

