the divergence of divine law

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/920.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Slash (M/M)
Fandom:	Supernatural (TV 2005)
Relationships:	Michael/Adam Milligan, Michael & Adam Milligan
Characters:	Michael (Supernatural), Adam Milligan, Lucifer (Supernatural), Sam Winchester, Dean Winchester, Castiel
Additional Tags:	Angst, Hallucinations, Low Self-Esteem, Hurt/Comfort, Learning to Trust, Enemies to Friends, Touch-Starved, Fluff and Humor, Falling In Love, Slow Burn, Grief/Mourning, Cross-Posted on AO3, Pining
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-11-01 Words: 73,115 Chapters: 14/14

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by darkmillennium

Summary

“You pathetic little worm,” Michael snarls, and Adam hopes he looks defiant, jaw tightly clenched as he stares back at the being who was the entire reason he was in this mess. “You presume to know me? Me? You don’t. You’re nothing."

And the archangel is smug, for all of a moment, before Adam leans forward—as much as he can—and tries to keep his voice from trembling as he spits out his retort.

"Yeah? Well, down here, so are you.”

Or—a human, an archangel, and the story of a thousand years in the Cage.

They only have each other, don't they? Might as well make the best of it.

[originally posted on Ao3]

Notes

hi! this is a crosspost from ao3—i debated including my original author's notes from there on here, and then decided not to. this is my high school self's magnum opus and lots of people seem to like it, so i decided to crosspost. if i can get ahold of my other fics, i'll crosspost them too!

Chapter 1

It starts like this:

Michael and Lucifer fight. A lot. Especially now that Sam's out of the Cage—which Adam is still *plenty* bitter about—and Lucifer's not distracted by ceaselessly torturing him. They circle each other constantly, supercharging their power and meeting each other in the middle with explosive strength that would easily be enough to level continents if they were still on Earth. It was terrifyingly bright and insanely loud and enough to make him feel tiny; insignificant, in a way that he'd never felt before.

And Adam found himself awake for all of it. He wasn't sure if this was Michael's way of torturing him, just as Lucifer once did with Sam, or if Michael just didn't know that he was awake. But he was, and every single time Lucifer inflicted an injury on Michael, Adam felt it too. It's just as painful as if he were actually the one experiencing it—which, to put it lightly, sucks. And they were *always screaming at each other*. Adam genuinely didn't know what was worse, getting struck by the Devil or having to hear the endless roaring of all-powerful bickering brothers.

It was never in English, either—his ears were constantly getting assaulted by their special angel language, or whatever the hell it was. He wasn't sure if it had a name, and he wasn't even going to try to poke at Michael's side of their shared body to see if it did. He didn't exactly want to accidentally annoy the big, scary archangel into treating him like Lucifer did Sam. Adam had only seen flashes, back when Sam was still in the Cage, and it...wasn't pretty.

Nevertheless, he'd gotten used to it all by now. He remembered when he'd first woken up, when he'd been coherent enough to look around and feel the grand realm of Hell ravage his senses in the same way that he thought getting crushed like a steamroller might be like. It was brutal, and harsh, and he hadn't had a choice on whether or not he wanted to experience it because he was *always awake.* His mind had practically turned itself inside out with how much it had burned, freezing cold and intense, and he'd known nothing but complete and utter pain for so long. But, eventually—well, it didn't subside so much as it became bearable. Like he'd developed a callus, almost.

Adam wasn't sure how long it had been topside, but it felt like it had been an eternity down here.

Or, maybe, he was just bored and tired of all the fighting.

He really did wonder if Michael even knew that he was here with him, sometimes. If he did, he hadn't shown any indication of it. He certainly didn't when they were at the graveyard, right before they fell into Hell. Adam had originally found himself in an odd, forced state of sleep until he was rudely awoken by the feeling of burning alive, only to die (again!) and suddenly be revived (*again!),* shoved back into his body as it was being quickly rebuilt, atom by atom. Only, this time, he hadn't been in a state of unconsciousness—he'd been awake.

Of course, all this brings him to the present. Well, as present as he can get in a place that doesn't have a concept of linear time; at least, not to his knowledge.

It's one day—month? Year?—out of the endless, steady grind of time, while Michael and Lucifer are fighting, that Adam finally begins to recognize...patterns, within the sounds the brothers are making at each other. There's one pattern that's been repeated hundreds, if not thousands, of times, and Adam's not a hundred percent certain but he thinks it's their word for *father.*

Every time it's screamed, Lucifer's essence takes on a rage-filled, hurt tinge. The tinge is mirrored in Michael, but it's not angry; instead, it's prideful, righteous, offended, but not on his own behalf. Adam's not quite sure how he knows these things, but his senses in here are much different than they were on Earth, and he's always prided himself on being observational, anyway. Maybe it's because he's strapped to one of them, but he just knows that Lucifer feels something akin to betrayal whenever this particular pattern of sounds came up—it was like he'd picked up on archangel body language, or something.

Who knows, at this point?

He'd only figured out that they had daddy issues because of the few times they'd yelled at each other in English, when they all first landed here, before they'd made a permanent switch over to their other language.

But Adam's bored, and he's so tired of only being able to focus on the pain of Lucifer's blows, so he starts actually listening to their voices instead of filtering them out as background noise.

What he finds is...surprising.

It's not that he can actually understand their language, because he can't. But he pays attention to their tinges—their *auras*, if you will, Adam really doesn't know how to describe it—and the way they react to the words that come from them. Lucifer will sometimes utter one or two particular phrases that make Michael almost soften, somewhat, before he reluctantly throws himself back against him. Michael spits out words and his entire essence will contort and warp into a defensive shield of frustration while Lucifer barks out grating laughter.

Adam, to his astonishment, finds that he can easily distinguish between anger and nostalgia, between hatred and pain and reluctance and finality. He's almost certain of the word *father* now, but he's got nothing to help him translate anything else—it's lost on his mind the way that angelic body language apparently isn't.

He stays silent and listens, anyway. It's not like he's got anything else to do.

They're going to exhaust themselves soon. Adam can feel it emanating from Michael. He can *see* it in the droop of Lucifer's wings, the fluttering of his aura as he desperately tries to stay up in preparation for Michael's next attack. He's never seen this before, from either of them, but he supposes that non-stop fighting would wear down even the toughest of the lot after a

while. He's pretty sure that the only thing keeping Michael standing was his unyielding stubbornness.

Then, he hears Lucifer say something. Adam frowns and listens in; it's not any string of patterns he's heard before. It sounds disgruntled and tired and almost a little desperate, and Adam feels surprise jolt through him when Michael appears to begrudgingly agree with him. That hasn't happened once, not in the entire time that the two of them have been in the Cage. He watches with fascination as the two of them back away, neither daring to turn their backs on the other as they retreat to opposite corners of the prison.

A temporary truce, maybe?

With a sudden jolt, Adam suddenly registers that if Michael's attention isn't fully focused on fighting Lucifer, the odds of him laying eyes on *Adam* have skyrocketed, and not in his favor, either.

Fuck.

Adam's still not quite sure how to manage this whole *mental acrobatics* thing, but he envisions himself pulling back, away from Michael, making himself as small as possible so he isn't seen or heard or felt. He feels an odd sense of detachment, and suddenly his view of Lucifer is much dimmer and the *storm-fire-heaven* that makes up Michael feels just a bit further away from him than before.

Oh, you've got to be kidding me. Could he have done that the whole time?

...Then again, being repeatedly hit by Lucifer did tend to distract someone from clear lines of coherent thought. Sue him, it fucking hurt. Just because he'd gotten used to it didn't mean that it was any easier to bear.

From what he could tell, Michael had sat down, pointedly looking away from Lucifer, but he was still aware of his every moment—in case the younger archangel in question decided to strike while Michael was taking a breather, no doubt.

That's when the whirlwind started.

Adam supposed that, from all the fighting he'd been doing for God knows how long, Michael had never really gotten a chance to think without being interrupted. It had just been *go-go-go* for so long. Now, though, he was actually *thinking*.

And, apparently, an archangel's thought process was fucking chaotic.

It was like he was hearing every word in every language ever created, ever. It was fast and nearly impossible to keep up with and *loud*, it was *so* fucking loud, even though he'd retreated as much as he could. He wished there was a way to cover his ears, but how was he supposed to cover his ears in his own mind?

—still have not come for me—

—brother, what has become of you?—

—He must have His reasons—

—focused—

—Raphael?—

—constricting—

The cycle continued, on and on and on and on, until Adam was almost entirely sure that his head would explode. He found himself wishing that they'd get up and fight again, or even that they'd start arguing—*anything* except having to be subjected to the torrent of thoughts that were currently assaulting him. It was like being strapped to several million suns at once, and all he could do was attempt to make himself smaller and smaller in an effort to block out the energy battering his mind.

This was it. This was it, he was going to lose it, he was going to become like Sam had been and turn into a wrecked mess of screaming pleas, everything was blending together and it was *all too much, he needs it to stop he needs it to stop everything needs to—*

Stop!

The chaos immediately halted, so abruptly that Adam wondered if it had ever actually been there at all. He was still reeling from the sensory overload when he felt Michael's presence materialize next to him, wherever the fuck they were now in Adam's body, and he instinctively shrank away from the essence of him because he did *not* want to experience anything like the inside of his mind again, thank you very much.

You still remain here? Michael's voice reverberated throughout his brain like a mallet on a gong, but it didn't overwhelm him, and Adam couldn't be more fucking relieved if he tried. Instead, he tried to make sense of Michael's words. His tone was flat, detached, but also... confused, maybe? So he apparently really *hadn't* known that Adam was still here with him. Good to know.

I had assumed that your soul departed to Heaven when Castiel set me on fire. It seems I was incorrect. Oh. Was Michael reading his thoughts? Was Adam unintentionally broadcasting them? How did this even *work?* His university hadn't exactly had a class called *Sharing A Mind With Archangels 101* that he could've taken in preparation for a career path where he had to *share a mind with a fucking archangel.*

Thank you, college, for absolutely nothing.

Adam knew he should stay quiet. He really, really did. But he was frustrated and dazed and still bitter about being left behind and he was intentionally directing the words *Wow, for someone who was supposed to beat the Devil's ass, you've got some pretty shit observational skills* before his brain could catch up to...well, his brain.

This shit was too confusing.

Michael’s presence makes no movement, no indication to show that he’d even heard what Adam had said.

You are small, Adam hears, at last. *Your soul being overlooked was only to be expected. It's why you still remain here, isn't it?*

Adam didn’t think he’d ever be able to understand how someone’s tone could be so flat and so condescending at the same time. It makes a hot burst of irritation sweep through him like a cleaver.

So—what, I don’t matter, then? he would’ve laughed, if he could. Of course he didn't. Of *course* none of this mattered. *Fuck this. Fuck you!*

Adam senses a rush of annoyance surge through the archangel’s grace, and then Michael disappears.

Adam...waited. He didn’t know how long he waited or what he was waiting for, but he waited. He couldn’t even see out of his own eyes anymore, and he wondered whether that was Michael’s doing or his own, in his effort to escape Michael’s inner turmoil.

It was too dark.

It was too quiet.

Adam waited.

He’d started trying to find his way out.

He hadn’t had much luck, but it gave him something to do. It was better than just *sitting* there, in all this nothingness. Adam thought that he’d actually rather deal with Lucifer’s constant barrage of blows and pain than have to spend one more second in the dark, by himself. It was like solitary confinement on the worst level imaginable. No movie he’d ever seen could compare to *this*—the real thing.

Sometimes, he caught glimpses of the outside world (“outside” meaning the Cage—he doubted he’d ever see the *real* outside world ever again), and it was how he figured out that Michael was definitely the one keeping him in here—most likely with a barrier, of some sort; trapped within his own mind like a mouse in a maze. He sometimes heard snippets of arguments between Michael and Lucifer, which were oddly understandable now—sort of?—and Adam wondered if they just decided to switch to English for the hell of it.

That theory didn’t make much sense, but, then again, neither did the rest of this.

From what he could gather, Lucifer had called for a temporary truce between the duo so that they could recover, and then took a swipe at Michael when his attention had been focused elsewhere.

Elsewhere, meaning Adam.

To Adam's surprise, however, Michael hadn't shifted the blame onto him. Instead, he'd simply shrugged off Lucifer's taunts and snapped at him to either fight or shut up—granted, he'd said it in much more eloquent terms than Adam felt like thinking in right now, but...whatever.

So, other than the brief flashes of sound, Adam found himself entirely alone.

It was a fucking nightmare.

Without the ability to watch the archangels to distract himself, his thoughts had quickly taken a turn for the darker. He didn't want to think. He didn't even want to *be* anymore. He, above all else, would rather be dead than try to suffer through this isolation any longer. And he'd *been* dead before. If he had hands, or a body, or anything, he probably would've torn himself apart by now, just as those monsters did to him before he'd died; would have ripped out his hair or scratched at his skin with his nails until he found bone. Anything to feel like he actually existed in this stupid fucking cage.

He even missed the screaming, at this point.

...He missed his *mom*.

Fuck. He hated this. He hated John and Sam and Dean and Lucifer and Michael and Zachariah, all the stupid *fucking* angels that had gotten him to this point. And he hated himself, too, for not being able to hate them all as much as he felt he should.

Well...he certainly hated *Zachariah* above and beyond anyone he'd ever hated before, but as for the rest of them...

Hate was just another way to pass the time.

Time. What he wouldn't give to know how much time had passed, whether it had been a hundred years or five minutes or three hours or two seconds. Or, on second thought, maybe time was just another thing that would drive him insane, to know that people were out there living their normal lives by a clock and he was in here rotting from the inside out.

Adam isn't sure when he started the singing.

One minute, he was in the middle of remembering the day that he'd gotten his college acceptance letter—one of the best days of his life, he and his mom had spent the entire day on a celebratory high—and the next minute, he was humming along to a song from *The Polar Express*; not long after that, he was belting out song lyrics as loudly as he could.

It filled the silence in a way that his thoughts never had before, and he made his way through as many songs as he could remember, from all the songs that made his mom turn up the local radio with a grin on her face to the eighties music that his college roommate played on an obsessive loop. What lyrics he didn't know, he made up, and he even managed to laugh at some of the funnier things his brain came up with. The laughter was harsh and biting, even to his own ears, but you know what? He'd take it.

It almost reminded him of when he was little, of when he would put himself to bed in a dark, empty house and would wake up crying three hours after falling asleep, desperately wishing for his mother as paranoia from his latest nightmare made him shake under the covers of his bed. But his mother had always been at work, and so he'd sing to himself—lullabies, tunes from TV shows, the funny instrumentals from cartoons. It was a habit he'd grown out of as he'd gotten older, when the nightmares became less *oh God, there's evil monsters trying to eat me* (He probably shouldn't laugh at that. He does, anyway) and more *oh God, I've failed my math exam.*

Seems like the habit had resurfaced.

Adam wasn't the best singer in the world, by any means, but with the limited options of either listening to the sound of his own voice or allowing the silence to overtake him until he really *did* go insane, he figured he'd made the better choice.

Well, until Michael decides to pop back in for an impromptu visit.

What are you doing?

Adam, who had long grown used to nothing but himself at this point, and who hadn't noticed when Michael drew near, cuts himself off in the middle of an AC/DC song and turns to face the direction that Michael's voice was coming from. If he had a face, it would be split apart in the wryest grin he had to offer.

Oh, I'm having a blast down here. Why, you wanna join in?

As it turns out, he hadn't lost his sixth sense for archangel body language, because he could easily pick out the slight bewilderment that quickly emanates from Michael's grace before being smothered by indifference.

Huh. Grace? Where'd that word come from? He was pretty sure he hadn't ever referred to Michael's silvery-blue essence as "grace," before.

What? No. No, I'm here to tell you to stop.

Adam should be cautious. He knows that. But he's also so, so fucking tired of being alone. And if mouthing off means that he'd have to spend eternity getting tortured by an archangel for pissing him off, then so be it.

'Tell me to stop?' Why should I? What's in it for me? 'Cause, let me tell you, dude, it's either I sing or I start fucking screaming. Take your goddamn pick.

Michael's grace twists with irritation. *I cannot properly battle my brother with your insufferable screeching! Do you, human, have* any *idea of the tremendous concentration it takes to hold steady against my brother's attacks?*

Adam would've snorted, if he could. *In case you forgot, jackass, I was awake at the beginning—for however long that was! Trust me, I* know! *If you're so tired of concentrating, why don't you just quit fighting?! It's not exactly like there's a fucking point to it!*

Michael goes entirely still. Adam...isn't entirely sure how to interpret that. *Of course there's a point.*

Really? Adam snarks. *What is it?*

Instead of answering, Michael's presence was silent, for a moment, and then he disappeared.

When Adam begins cursing, he hopes Michael hears every word.

Michael starts popping in more often, after that.

Mostly, it's to try and get Adam to shut up for two seconds. Other times, he'll just sit there and watch him, not saying a word no matter how many times Adam verbally poked him with a stick, which makes Adam wonder if the fighting between him and Lucifer was beginning to slow down. Or maybe he'd actually realized that there wasn't a point to it; to any of it. Either way, he was getting more and more used to being stared at by the archangel he was housing.

As many snide comments as Adam constantly makes at him, however, a part of him is still grateful for his presence. Even his weird staring was so, *so* much better than being alone.

But, Adam is curious; too curious for his own good. He always has been, probably always will be.

Michael, why do you keep coming back here?

Michael's form shifts, like it always did when he was expressing emotion. Adam couldn't *see* it—he didn't exactly have eyes to see it with, after all— but he could *feel* it, all the nuances in Michael's grace and how it moved and warped and twisted to match his reactions.

He remembers seeing his true form, back in that room, and feels something akin to a shudder race through him. It had been…b—

No. Forget about it. Adam doesn't want to think about it.

Michael doesn't answer, so Adam presses a bit more. *I mean, you've probably still got Lucifer to deal with, unless you two have up and stopped for whatever reason. All I do is sit in here and sing and get on your nerves. You could shut me up for good if you wanted, I know you can.*

He thinks of hemorrhaging under Zachariah's hand, he thinks of Sam screaming under Lucifer's sadistic precision, and he would've sighed, if he could.

So, what gives?

As time ticked onward, it didn't seem that Michael would answer. For the first time in a long while, however long it had been since Adam had started barking out melodies, things were silent between them; the suffocating sense of deafness returned, and Adam feels icy-cold despair begin to creep in on him once more. He aches to say something, *anything*, to scream

or sing or even just babble like a damn maniac until Michael snapped at him again or left him alone, but he wants a fucking *answer*.

Then, the world seems to shift—instead of being nothing, having no form or being or sense of conceptual reality, Adam suddenly finds that he...has a body. His body. Except it's *not* his body, but it *is*.

Fuck. What he's trying to say is that this is his body, his clothes and everything (though, where did this green jacket come from? He's never owned this in his life), but it doesn't...move quite right. It's too light, too dream-like. He could move his hands, but there was a sense of disconnectedness about it, like he wasn't the one actually moving them.

He looks up and he sees a mirror. Only, it's not a mirror. Because mirrors reflected the user, and Adam didn't have his arms crossed, and he was pretty damn sure he didn't have his face pulled into such a cold smirk, either.

"Isn't it obvious?" remarks the copy of his mouth, eyes glittering with a blank, glassy glint that makes Adam supremely uneasy. "I *come* to watch you make a fool of yourself. After all, I get two free shows out of this disgusting mess—watching you humiliate yourself with your... *humanity* in an attempt to hold yourself together, and watching my brother continue to throw himself at me like he thinks he'll ever be able to win."

Adam doesn't need to have any sort of sixth sense to be able to call someone out on their shit. The only question is: is he willing to be a smartass to someone who's probably one of the most powerful beings in the history of ever?

The answer, as it turns out: yes.

"You're full of crap," Adam scoffs. The archangel's eyes snap to meet his immediately, fierce exasperation flickering across the face that's a replica of his own—God, it's so weird.

"Oh? Is that so?" Michael sneers, narrowing his eyes. He's mocking, now, cruelly so, and Adam's just—tired. The Cage is a cold, heavy weight bearing down upon his soul, and, by now, he's nothing short of well and truly exhausted. Exhausted and lonely and just a little to the left of hysterical at every given moment.

"Yeah. Yeah, it is."

"And...what makes you think that?" Michael's voice has gone soft. Dangerous, he realizes. If Adam were in his actual body, he's fairly sure that his hair would be standing on end.

"Well…" Adam pauses for a moment, his last, tiny shreds of self-preservation screaming for him to shut his mouth, but he takes a metaphorical breath and keeps going. "For one thing—I don't know if you remember, but I've been inside your head, asshole. You don't think that way. You're talking a lot of shit for someone who was going—" and words slip past his metaphysical tongue, then, words that *shouldn't* have had any meaning to him because they were in a language unfamiliar to him, but they did; and he spits them like poison from his mouth. "'*Brother, what has become of you?'* just a few—"

As soon as the words leave his nonexistent vocal cords, Adam finds himself being pressed against something—what it is, he’s not sure. There shouldn’t be any physical walls in his mind, but whatever he's being held against begs to differ.

Before he can puzzle it out, he’s made doubly aware of the fact that he's nose-to-nose with one extremely livid archangel who’s got a hand on his windpipe, squeezing barely hard enough to hurt but more than enough for Adam to feel the pressure. It’s almost like a message: *Don’t forget who I am. Don’t forget what I can do to you.*

Adam wants to pretend like he doesn’t care; that he can’t feel the sharp press of fear that urges him to flinch away, to apologize. He almost convinces himself, too. After all, it’s been—how long has it been? Years and years, he thinks, of darkness, of nothing except his own voice to keep him hanging onto the thread of sanity he has left. He’d never been like this before—so impulsive, so desperate for attention that he’d goad an archangel into complete and utter rage.

He’s terrified. He holds steady anyway.

“You pathetic little worm,” Michael snarls, and Adam hopes he looks defiant, jaw tightly clenched as he stares back at the being who was the entire reason he was in this mess. “You presume to know me? *Me?* You don’t. You’re nothing.”

And the archangel is smug, for all of a moment, before Adam leans forward—as much as he can—and tries to keep his voice from trembling as he spits out his retort.

“Yeah? Well, down here, so are you.”

Michael stares at him for a moment, eyes widening in outrage, and Adam doesn’t have time to read his emotional state before cold detachment flashes over his face once more and then he vanishes. To the outside world, like all the other times.

There’s a distinct feeling of being pressed down on, suddenly, like he’s being shoved far, far away—and then, there’s...nothing. No flashes of sound, no bursts of light, just—*nothing*.

Adam wants to scream, but he doesn't. Instead, he takes a step back, glances around at the sudden emptiness he's left with, and tries really, really hard not to cry.

God. He's so screwed.

Chapter 2

He doesn’t know how long it’s been.

He doesn’t sing, anymore. Can’t find it in himself to. It’s like all the despair that he’d been fighting for so long had finally made a permanent home in his heart and mind, dragging him down, down, down until he was numb, number than he’s ever been before. He doesn’t wish for death, anymore.

He doesn’t wish for anything.

Adam just...sits. It’s cold in here, too, and he lives under the assumption that it’s simply a reflection of what his body’s feeling out in the real world. The cold settles around his soul, harsh and biting and all-consuming, and he doesn’t remember what warmth feels like—if he’d ever actually felt it at all. All he knows is the gelid rawness of this place; this world.

Did this even count as a place? A world?

He’s still in his weird not-body. It gives him a sense of something, at least. A reminder of what it was like to exist, when life had been *life* and not something damning, something that brought him nothing but misery when he was vaguely sure of the fact that it...wasn’t supposed to do that? The word *life* didn’t even have any meaning anymore, not really. It was just a concept, something saved for those who walked the Earth, who weren’t locked away and rotting within their own minds. And he wasn’t angry, not anymore, because anger took energy and he didn’t have any of that.

All he has is himself, consistently curling into a metaphorical ball and shutting his metaphorical eyes, all so he didn’t have to look at his metaphorical body. It gave him sense, but it brought him no joy.

He probably looks pathetic.

He doesn’t care.

He sees people, sometimes. Flashes behind his eyes of people who he once knew, years and years and years ago. Sometimes, it’s his mother standing before him—and she is still beautiful, even if his mind conjures up different versions of her every time. She has a full head of blonde hair that matches his own, sometimes. Other times, it’s streaked with gray, and the lines around her eyes when she looks at him and worn and sad. He wonders if he looks similar.

“Adam,” she says, and that’s when he’ll know that she isn’t talking to *him.* Not really. “You have to get up. You can’t spend all day in bed!” Her eyes are warm and blank, cheerful and hollow, speaking to an Adam from a different world.

And then she’ll shift, and she isn’t Kate, anymore. Instead, she’s now a he, and *he* is his friend Evan from college, and Evan laughs, and he *isn’t real.* And Adam can barely even

remember what he looks like—was his hair dark or light? Were his facial features amiable or mischievous? Had he been stocky or slim? He looks different every time, and Adam can't stand it.

"Dude, can you believe how *old* Professor Daniels is? I swear to God, it's like he climbed out of a fuckin' *grave,* man. Why is he even working here?"

The voices don't reverberate. It's like they're there, but they aren't. He hears them, but he doesn't.

A lifetime ago, the deeply-buried science nerd he'd once been would've jumped at the opportunity to explore such a topic. Now, he does nothing.

Another shift, and it's Sam, now, standing in front of him—except it's the Sam from when he was in the Cage and there are long marks tattered over his skin, torn and bleeding, chains protruding from his stomach and going into nowhere.

"We're blood," he whispers, and Adam doesn't respond. If he looks up, meets Sam's scarred face, he knows that his eyes will be just as false; just as empty.

He keeps his eyes shut. Shift. Shift. Shift. More people. More memories. More lies.

The worst shift is when the person changes into Michael, staring down at him with an unyielding, fierce coldness, because then Adam can't tell what's real and what isn't. Michael's the only one who can visit him, down here, and that changes *everything.* Had he dropped in since that last time? Had Adam just been hallucinating him this entire time? Were all those encounters with him even real? Adam couldn't even sense his grace, anymore. Or maybe he could, and he'd just forgotten the feeling of it.

God, what had it felt like? What was it like to feel?

Michael never spoke, either, which never helped him out with his predicament. How was he supposed to figure out if he was real or not if Michael didn't speak?

...Is *Adam* real?

No. No, that was stupid. Of course he was real. Of course. He has to be.

He *has* to be.

Michael appears again.

Adam is just as still and as silent as he's ever been, for however long it's been. He doesn't move. Barely thinks, anymore. He can't bring himself to make noise, not with the silence around him so deafeningly loud. It's all he is, all he has. It's the only constant remaining, what with his memory of life failing him and the lack of anything else to sense, to see, to do.

Michael appears again, and he is silent. Adam can feel himself being analyzed, stared at, just like usual. If the "usual" was actually a thing that happened, of course. He was still on the

fence about it.

“You’re quiet. Why?” Adam hears, and he would’ve sucked in a breath, if he had the energy to. Or, if he could, y’know, *breathe.* As it is, he minutely raises his head, cracking his eyes open to look at the archangel across from him. Michael doesn’t speak—never, since their last conversation—but he...just did.

This...this is new.

It’s jarring, enough to make something inside of himself crack. It reminds him of surprise—or, well, what surprise used to feel like, if he was reading the emotion right. It was odd. He didn’t know.

Michael keeps staring at him, and Adam stares right back, and they inspect each other like it’s something that they’ve always done. It’s always interesting to see Michael. If not for the mirror image of himself, Adam would have probably forgotten what he looks like by now.

Then, Michael sighs. He sighs and, suddenly, he’s sitting across from Adam on the not-floor, leaning back against a wall that isn’t there.

None of his hallucinations had ever sat down before. Certainly not Michael.

Adam tracks Michael’s movements with more ferocity, now, his mind desperately trying to reject the hope that’s beginning to flood his system. Hope is dangerous, hope is foreign, hope is *new.* He watches the way that Michael crosses his arms, his eyes beginning to take on a moody, annoyed glare, and—they aren’t hollow. There is no blankness to them, only exasperation.

He starts to laugh.

At least, he thinks he’s laughing—for all he knows, he could be crying—but there’s noise, bubbling out of his fake throat and through his mouth for the first time in God knows how long, and it feels like he’s vibrating, almost. Like everything in his soul is on fire after being shoved underwater for so, so long.

“You’re—*real.*” He gasps out, at last, and Michael is looking at him in a manner that could almost be described as perturbed, like Adam’s gone completely and irrevocably insane, and maybe he is—he *probably* is—but he doesn’t care.

He just laughs and laughs and laughs.

Michael doesn’t shift into anything else, after that. He doesn’t leave, either. Adam wants to ask why—he *wants* something, after so long, it’s fucking amazing—but he remembers how that went, last time, and he keeps his mouth shut about it. Instead, he hesitantly talks; about anything and everything that he can think of; he hopes that maybe, just maybe, if he makes himself interesting enough, Michael will stay.

Sometimes, he quietly describes what little bits of individual memories he remembers of his past life. Michael never answers, like how he never answered before, but it's the company that counts—the archangel could be silent forever and Adam would be grateful for the simple fact that he was *there*. It's a fierce, desperate gratefulness, one that didn't compare to the grudging appreciation he'd had for him back when he'd been singing all the time.

The hallucinations still appear, but they're easier to ignore with the knowledge that someone *real* is there. He doesn't talk about them, doesn't tell Michael about them, because some things are just...private. Even if Adam had accidentally been in Michael's head, once.

One day, though, he decides to risk a question—when something in his mind begins to mock him for the idea that this might all be a hallucination, too. He needs an answer. Any answer.

"So...what's going on with the whole Lucifer thing?"

Michael meets his eyes briefly, before looking off to the side.

"Ceasefire," he says, at last.

Adam nods, trying not to slump in relief. "Ah. Right." A...younger part of him, one that had been recently reawakened, wants to take the chance to snap an *Oh, so you finally realized that there's no point to it?* at him, but Adam silences him, brushes him out of his mind. There's no point in upsetting the peace; not when he's just getting used to the company again.

"Why?" And there Michael goes, asking him *why* again, like he cares. Adam knows he doesn't, knows that him asking is probably just a formality, knows that Michael could split apart his mind any time he wanted and just take the answers to any question he could ever ask—and isn't that just a lovely guy to have for a roommate? Someone who could rip you apart at any time if he feels like it?

Well, at least he hasn't. Yet. Though, if Adam's being honest, he'd take the torture over the solitude any day.

But he shrugs, now. "I don't know. I knew you guys were fighting, and I knew that you probably wouldn't have come in here if you had something better to do, so...I guess I just wanted to make sure everything was alright?" He trails off near the end, making it sound more like a question than an answer.

Michael furrows his eyebrows at him, peering at him suspiciously. "Lucifer isn't your problem, he's mine. Why would you care?"

Adam raises his eyebrows and looks away, threading the fingers of both his hands together as he did so. "Not much else to do down here, right?"

It's a lame answer, but he hasn't got anything else. He keeps his eyes trained firmly on the blackness of the not-ground, waiting to see if Michael will answer. Unsurprisingly, he doesn't, so Adam captures the loose end of a thread of a memory in his mind and starts to ramble on about it. Occasionally, he makes up details as he goes, to fill in the ones that have become entirely lost to him now.

He wonders if that makes it more fact or more fiction.

Adam's halfway through a story about the time he tried to jump out of a tree with a trash bag to see if it would work like a parachute when he was little when another hallucination appears, standing directly over Michael with an ominous air. There's chunks of flesh missing from the hallucination's skin, ragged blonde hair sitting awry on the body's head like a patchwork scarecrow, and with a dull thrum of alarm, Adam realizes that it's his *mother*—how she looked before she died, and he immediately stumbles over his words as he gazes up at her in muted horror, his mouth immediately snapping shut.

She stares down at him with the same vacant look as the rest of his hallucinations, her head tilted at an awkward angle, and Adam is dimly aware of Michael frowning in confusion and turning to look behind himself, and then turning back to Adam when he sees nothing.

"What?"

But Adam doesn't reply, too busy gawking in fear as Kate opens her mouth to speak, only for blood to dribble out of her mouth like saliva, and that's when he thinks *no, no, that's enough,* and draws his legs up to his chest, tilting his head downwards to shove his eyes into his knees as he presses his lips together. He doesn't want to look at this—having to see her, knowing he never will again, was bad enough as it was. But having to see her like *this,* all mangled and broken?

That's just insult *and* injury.

He doesn't know if Michael's still there or not, whether he's decided that this is just Adam *making a fool of himself* or if he's more confused than he is annoyed. He can't bring himself to look up to check, either, not with the chance that she could still be there.

He's shaking, he realizes—and it's so strange, he thinks, to be shaking in a place where he doesn't even have a body, just some weird projection of himself that Michael had conjured up, still with the odd disconnectedness that always made it feel like he was wading through filmy water with every movement. But, he is, and he doesn't appreciate it.

Adam isn't sure how long he sits like that, curled into an upright ball like he would in the past times of solitude. What he *is* sure of is the fact that, when he eventually does look up, the hallucination of Kate is gone.

And Michael is still there.

So, what else is Adam supposed to do except carry on like it never happened?

"Uh," Adam says, somehow managing to pull his lips in the directions that he's pretty sure a smile is supposed to go in. "Sorry about that. Anyway—"

"And what was that supposed to be?" Michael's voice cuts him off, paramountcy still lacing his tone like a dull poison, and Adam pauses for a minute before looking the archangel straight in the eyes and letting the smile fall from his face.

“It isn’t your problem,” he parrots, a little slowly, “it’s mine. Why would you care?”

Michael is silent, and Adam resumes his story.

Not much changes, even after that. Adam talks, Michael listens—and sometimes interjects with a “Why?” or a barbed comment, something that Adam is growing too used to deflecting—and that’s that. His hallucinations still pop up, on occasion, but none of them are ever as bad as that one had been, so Adam does a pretty good job of ignoring them. He still stumbles over his words, especially when some of them begin speaking—and he knows Michael notices it each and every time—but he always presses onwards, regardless.

It manages, it works, and that’s how they keep things.

Over time, Adam’s come to understand at least *one* thing about Michael—for someone who was so keen to pick fights, he didn’t actually seem to like unnecessarily fighting anyone, something that was contradictory in and of itself. When he thought back on when he used to be able to watch Michael and Lucifer fight, it only backed up his theory. Michael had never really made to attack Lucifer until Lucifer struck first, or until Lucifer spat out some great insult that pushed all of Michael’s buttons at once.

He doesn't know why that sticks with him. It's like he's trying to find proof of some concept foreign to him—it's just useless information that digs a hole in the back of his brain and refuses to leave.

Whatever. It wasn't like he would ever mention his observation to Michael out loud, so it wasn't worth dwelling on. He's just not risking Michael pulling another one-eighty and deciding to head back out and leave Adam alone. He may not necessarily like the winged bastard, but it was either him or the frosty silence—and Adam was not going back to that, not if he could help it.

He *was* getting a little tired of the biting interjections of Michael about how dumb he was (being a human and all), though, but it wasn’t like he had much room to talk—after all, it was exactly how he’d acted at first, too. It would make him a hypocrite to call Michael out on it now.

...But he didn’t exactly want to keep just sitting there and taking it, either.

He figured that passive-aggressiveness was as good a solution as any.

Adam’s in the middle of going on about the time he’d accidentally gotten lost on the first day of classes at college when Michael scoffs and says, “Well, of course something as small-minded as a *monkey* would get lost in a place where the buildings are *labelled*.”

And Adam immediately goes quiet, staring impassively at Michael for a few moments before glancing down and starting to play with his hands, tapping absentmindedly at the back of his knuckles. He isn’t sure *exactly* how long he stays quiet for—it’s not like time can be measured, down here, where there’s no days and no nights—but he stays quiet. And when he

eventually looks up, Michael is staring at him with something that vaguely looks like annoyed confusion marring his face.

Adam takes a breath and continues on.

He doesn't have the fingers in the world to keep track of how many times the same thing happens, but he *can* pinpoint the moment that Michael's insults start to slow down, and it's around the same time that his silences get longer.

It's horrible, of course, to the both of them—to sit in nothing except darkness, staring at nothing in particular, barely holding on by the simple knowledge that they aren't alone; but Adam is firm, unyielding, trying to at least put a little distance between the him of now and the near-thoughtless vegetable he'd been, not so long ago.

He had pride, once. Maybe this isn't like the pride he once had—maybe it's just a replica, an imitation meant to simulate the real thing—but it's all he has. So, he implements it.

They never actually talk about it. There's no conversation that goes between them about the subject, because they've been down here for God knows how long and they still barely know each other, which means actual genuine conversation is apparently a no-no.

Well, Adam barely knows Michael, at least. He's pretty sure he's talked enough about himself for Michael to get to know him at least a little bit. That is—if Michael actually *listens* to him.

They don't speak about it, but, eventually, the comments begin to subside. Adam makes it through seven nonsensical ramblings before he realizes that they've stopped entirely. Instead, Michael just...sits there.

There's only so long that Adam can talk, though, before he eventually runs out of things to talk about. Hence, his current dreadful situation: *small talk.*

With the archangel Michael.

Yeah, he's pretty much out of options, at this point. As if he didn't know that already.

"So...what's Heaven like?"

Michael raises an eyebrow at him. "You've been. You know what it's like."

Adam nods. "Right, yeah. But is it different for angels?"

"Well, of course."

Patience. Adam *needs* to have patience. He gets the feeling that he's going to be repeating that mantra a lot, if this continues. "Okay. But how?"

Michael looks blank and his voice is monotone—business as usual. "Humans each have their own personalized heaven, where they live through their happiest memories. Angels have the ability to walk outside of these memories—and, enter them undetected, if they wish. We are what keep Heaven standing."

Adam thinks about that for a moment, and then he snorts. “Undetected? So it’s like...I don’t know, a zoo?”

The archangel frowns, tilting his head a bit to the left. “A zoo?”

“It’s—a place. For, uh, humans to go. It has animals in it, and stuff, and humans can come in and look at them.”

Michael seems to pause, and then, finally, he nods. “I suppose they're similar, then.”

Adam wonders, for a brief moment, if any angel had ever gone poking around his heaven, and resists the urge to pull a face. Instead, he carries on. “Alright. Is that all it is for angels, then? Just wandering around in a bunch of dead people’s memories?”

The archangel’s face quickly morphs into a scowl. “Of course not. Don’t be stupid. There is no way to explain the magnificence of Heaven to a human—it would be far too complex for you to understand.”

Sighing, Adam is about to acquiesce before an idea strikes him. “Well...could you *show* me? Like, I don’t know, could you...project images of it in my mind or something?”

“Living humans can't perceive Heaven, and they certainly can't perceive it from an angel’s point of view—” Michael immediately begins, flat and rebuking, but he stops, face contorting in a sudden, unexpected pain, the most emotion Adam's ever *seen* on him—and a second later, Adam finds out why.

There’s a throbbing anguish, suddenly, flaring upwards from the pit of his stomach, and Adam gasps, hands flying down to fist at the space near his abdomen.

“*Lucifer,*” Michael hisses, making Adam jump at the intensity of it, and his eyes flare a bright, threatening blue before he completely vanishes.

Just like before.

But Adam doesn’t have time to wonder whether or not he’s coming back, though. He doesn’t have time for his mind to seize up in terror at the thought of being *alone.* The eternal darkness is, suddenly, abruptly shifting and morphing around him while the pain in his body begins to spread, pausing at odd and erratic intervals before speeding up again. It’s like all those years when he was feeling what Michael was feeling, back when he and Lucifer had fought all the time, and suddenly every nerve ending that he shouldn’t have is on fire with white-hot—white-*cold?*—pain.

Adam screams and screams and screams until there’s nothing left to do except to sink down into the feeling and accept it, finally letting it bolt freely through his limbs faster than anything he’s ever felt before.

He’s so tired. The pain doesn’t feel so bad, if he thinks about it. God, how long had it been since he’d felt this much?

Was he still screaming? He couldn’t tell.

For a second, he thinks he feels something wreathe around him, but then there's a bright flash of extra-vivid agony and he's—*gone.*

He's floating.

It's still dark, and he's still cold, but he isn't being ripped apart, anymore—instead, it's like he's in stasis. Nothing hurts, but there's no numbness. And he's not asleep, either.

Adam just *is;* there's no other way to describe it.

When he finally comes to, or whatever the closest wording for that *is* when he's in a place where sleep and unconsciousness don't exist, he's met with...a living room.

His living room, from his house in Windom. At least, he thinks it is—his memory has almost completely gone to shit, at this point, but it isn't like random people's living rooms would just be floating around in his brain. It's his best guess.

The sight doesn't sit right with him—not after the Cage, not after the darkness he'd suffered in for so long. As he pushes himself up from the couch that he was splayed out on, he looks around, noting the little inconsistencies that pop up here and there—there's a picture frame on the side table, but no picture in it. It's just blank. And there's an old throw pillow that his conceptual head had been resting on, but it's an almost unnatural shade of white; nothing that would have been present in his and his mother's home, he's pretty sure.

He wonders if it's just his brain trying to fill in details for long-forgotten memories. Probably.

Adam stands up, surprised to find his movements a little more fluid, a little more *real.* Less dream-like and more...human-like? Or whatever.

But…

"Michael?" he calls out, a little halfheartedly. When there's no answer, he presses his lips together and curls his hand into a loose fist, rubbing absentmindedly at the side of his index finger with his thumb. A soothing motion, almost.

Fuck. What had *happened?*

There was pain, he remembers. Pain, and then...nothing. Michael had said something about—about *Lucifer,* hadn't he? And then he'd vanished, presumably to go fight him.

So why was Adam here? In a house—well, the memory of one, anyway—instead of in the darkness? For someone who had wished for so long to be anywhere but there, he realizes, he sure was anxious when confronted with something that seemed remotely peaceful.

But, he couldn't stand here forever. He could, actually, but that would be ridiculously boring and there was finally something down here in this nightmare of a Cage that looked material enough to explore *and* was accessible to him, so like hell was he just going to stand around and look pretty.

As he wanders, more and more inconsistencies pop out at him—a transparent outline of a chair, like it's not sure whether or not it's supposed to be there; more blank pictures frames, a jacket or two hovering in midair, thrown over something that was once there but apparently can't be remembered now. Could be a chair, or a footstool, or a table. Who knows, at this point? Certainly not Adam.

He finally makes it to a door, stopping in front of it in a way that makes him think it was muscle memory, at one point, and with a jolt he realizes that this was *his* room, all those years ago. This was where he grew up; where he spent all those lonely nights when his mother was gone. Adam reaches for the doorknob, hesitating only for a moment before twisting it and throwing the door open, and what he sees makes him come to an abrupt, screeching halt.

It's...Michael. But Michael is laid out on the floor, seemingly dead to the world. His eyes are closed but his eyebrows are drawn together, and Adam genuinely can't tell if he's "awake" or if he's in the same weird stasis that Adam had originally found himself in.

"Michael?" he questions, softly, creeping forward like he's trying not to startle a scared animal. There's no response. Michael just lays there, entirely still, and it scares Adam to death because if Michael's not... *awake*, for lack of a better term, then what's standing between the two of them and Lucifer?

Nothing makes sense. *None of this* makes sense. Where did the house come from? Why is Michael suddenly fucking *incapacitated?*

And...his form, his body—it's flickering, almost, fading and out of transparency like the outline of the chairs in the dining room. It raises several alarm bells in him, alarm bells that he didn't think existed, and it almost makes him wonder if Michael's even tangible. But...if he wasn't tangible, he'd fall through the floor, wouldn't he? Or...does it not count, since this floor doesn't exist?

Adam has a lot of questions, zero answers, and a whole lot of sudden exhaustion, so he reaches out and grabs Michael, trying to ignore the fact that this is the first time he's felt another physical form since Dean had lifted him up in that room on Earth. When Michael doesn't even react to the touch, he sighs and works to lift him up, maneuvering him and his dead weight until he can shove him over and up onto the bed.

Michael lands in an uncomfortable-looking position, rolled onto his stomach with his arms pressed under him. Adam gives him a quick once-over, decides he's done enough, and hurriedly makes his exit.

Chapter 3

Time trudges on, and Michael shows no signs of coming out of his own personal oblivion.

Adam shifted him over into a more comfortable position...eventually. Once it became clear that Michael wasn't going to do it on his own. He wasn't even sure if it would make a difference, but he couldn't just—let him sit there.

It's nothing short of strange, to see him like this. Adam's so used to Michael being bigger-than-life, superior and cold and immortal. He's used to seeing him act like a self-righteous dick, even when he'd only been listening to Adam ramble on in silence for all those years. It was visible in his eyes, in the way he held his body all haughtily and the way he cocked his head in that arrogant way of his—Michael was a being of epic proportions, and Adam? All Adam was to him was a distraction, a way to ignore his devil of a brother and a way to abate whatever celestial version of loneliness he must've felt.

Ugh.

But now he's still and quiet and—Adam would almost have to call it *vulnerable.* He still doesn't have any answers to what the actual *fuck* happened when Lucifer attacked, but, seeing as Lucifer apparently hasn't figured out a way to break into... *this,* he's decided to save all the questions that are forming in his mind for when Michael comes out from his period of inactivity.

Because he *will.* He has to. If Adam did it, as weak as he must be in comparison to an archangel, then Michael can too.

For now, though, he's stuck here, in a house that doesn't exist. He's already nearly looked over the whole place from top to bottom, and there's really nothing of value. No food in the cupboards, the TV doesn't work, the faucets are dry and the inconsistencies get worse and worse as he goes further from his room.

The one room he hasn't gone in is his mother's, and he isn't ashamed to admit to himself that it's because he's scared—scared of walking in and finding nothing more than a wall of unnatural white. If there's anyone who doesn't deserve to be forgotten about, it's his mother, and now he can't even remember her favorite color or if she liked coffee or tea better when she woke up.

His hallucinations keep him from forgetting her face, though, which is just about the only good thing to come out of them. His mind still conjures them up; blank, ghostly figures whose sole purposes are to make him feel like a certified crazy person. Well, he *is,* at this point, but the constant reminder isn't very nice.

Occasionally, he makes his way back into his room to check up on Michael. It never does any good, and Michael never opens his eyes. When Adam had tried to feel for his grace, closing his eyes and focusing as hard as he could, he'd found it—but it was so distant that he could

barely make out the *thrum* of its power. Which was odd, because they share a body, but...metaphysics. Gotta love ‘em, right?

Double ugh.

If he thought about it too much, it made Adam think of an armadillo or a porcupine, curling into a ball to shield itself from its enemies. Only sometimes, though—the rest of the time, he just remained well out of reach.

Maybe that was what had happened—Michael had gone too far on the defensive and shielded himself from everything. It was as good a guess as any. Didn’t explain the house, but hey—nothing’s perfect.

Nonetheless, Adam sits in the same room as him and watches him—like a creepy stalker—and reminds himself that, even if his only companion is a supercilious ass of an archangel who’s currently in some weird coma that’s *not actually a coma*, he’s not... *alone*. Michael’s there, even if he’s not actually *there.*

Somewhere along the way, Adam starts singing again.

A lot of the time, lyrics completely and utterly fail him. All he has are remnants of melodies that mix and match together in his head until he can’t tell one song from the other, and, when he can’t find words to string together into song, he hums or he whistles.

Christ. He’s singing to an audience of one who’s not even listening, and how pathetic is that? Very, probably. Adam *knows* what he’s doing—comforting himself—but some part of him wants to believe that it’s comforting Michael, too. At least a little bit.

It’s a stupid thought. Michael doesn’t care, never has, never will. They don’t even *like* each other. But there’s no one else down here aside from Satan and nothing *else* to care about, and it’s the first thing Adam’s felt in so, *so* many years that makes him feel... *human.* And Michael’s “asleep,” so it isn’t like he’d *mind,* right?

And even if he woke up—it’d be better to have care thrown back in his face than sit in numbness again.

Right?

Adam sighs, running a hand through his hair.

He’s not sure how long Michael stays down. It could be days, weeks, *decades,* and all Adam does is sit at his side like a nurse tending to a patient and sing. He never tries to shift him or move him around, no matter how much he desperately craves the feeling of physical contact. Even in a place where *physical* doesn’t actually exist.

Until one day.

One day, Adam decides *fuck it* and reaches forward, stopping only for a moment before gingerly grabbing the arm that’s a copy of his own.

“I don’t know if you can hear me, you son of a bitch, but listen up anyway,” he starts, swallowing slightly before pressing on. “You winged assholes promised me something. My mom, remember? You promised me my mom. And instead, I ended up in Hell. Here. With you. And I can’t even go up to Heaven again to dream up my memories of her because this stupid fucking place won’t let me *die*. You don’t care. I *know* you don’t care. I honestly don’t get why you didn’t just start torturing me like Lucifer did to—to Sam.” The mention of his half-brother makes him look away, jaw clenching, before turning back to Michael’s still face.

“But you didn’t. You locked me away, instead. That was worse, honestly—the darkness. The emptiness. Knowing that I was alone. Then again, it’s nothing new, right?” Adam laughs, sharp and bitter. “You don’t care, Sam and Dean don’t care. The only person who ever cared about me was my mom, and—and I’m never gonna get to see her again.”

He sighs, feeling the hot anger seep out of him like sluggish blood from a deep wound. “You were right. I’m nothing. But you’re all I got down here, man. And I…” he pauses, swallowing. “Just...wake the fuck *up,* okay? Wake up. Please.”

There’s no response. Adam lets go of his arm, gets up, and leaves the room for the first time in a long time.

He doesn’t look back.

There’s a broom in the little closet. There’s no dust, but Adam sweeps anyway, carrying himself through the motions and wondering what he would’ve been thinking about if he were doing it on Earth. College, maybe? Or what he had planned for the day? Or maybe he’d internally complained about it, like he imagined normal teenagers probably did. He was too far outside of the realm of “normal teenager” by now. Actually, he was too far outside of the realms of “normal” *and* “teenager.” God only knew how old he was by now, and—

“What are you doing?”

The sudden voice makes him jump, startling him so badly that he drops the broom with a loud clatter. Adam whips around, taking a step back like he’s about to run (but, really, where would he even run to?) and finds—Michael. Michael, who’s leaning against the wall with his arms crossed like he’d never fell out of commission in the first place, looking at him with a sense of confused condescension that makes Adam sort of want to start bristling in retaliation, but he’s too busy being fucking shocked at the fact that Michael’s *awake.*

“Michael, you—are you okay?”

He’s not sure why *that* was the first thing that came out of his mouth—what he’d *wanted* to ask was *hey, what the actual fuck is going on?*

Michael tilts his head at him, brows furrowing in something that looks like even *more* confusion before nodding slightly in confirmation.

“Yes,” he says, and he makes a movement where he draws himself up, almost. It’s very slight, but it’s there, and it makes Adam stare at him suspiciously, suddenly noticing the way

that Michael looks a whole lot less condescending and a whole lot more *uncomfortable* than he did three seconds ago.

Porcupine, his brain reminds him.

He chooses not to comment on it, instead nodding in return and blowing out a breath. “Right—yeah, okay. So, uh,” Adam gestures around at the room with both hands. “What the fuck, man?”

Michael glances around, eyebrows raising upwards as he takes it all in. “We’re still in your mind,” he states, finally, and he says it so matter-of-factly that Adam gets the annoying feeling that Michael isn’t actually talking *to* him—he’s talking *over* him.

Stuck-up prick.

“Great. Okay, so, what’s up with the house? What happened with Lucifer? Why were you all knocked out?” Reaching down, he picks up the handle of the broom and leans it against the wall next to him as he waits for answers.

“Lucifer…” Michael falters, for a moment, and this is the second time he’s acted *weird* in the past two minutes and Adam’s genuinely worried that the fake coma might’ve knocked a screw or two loose. “When I’m in here, it leaves your body...*empty*, in a way. Lucifer took advantage of my inattention and began ripping apart your body in an attempt to reach me. When that didn’t work, he probed...deeper. Deep enough to reach us, as it turned out.”

Adam frowns. “And...what, you beat him back and brought us back here? And then just—passed out?”

“No,” Michael says, pulling a face at Adam that, once again, makes Adam want to snap at him. He suppresses the urge. “I—managed to throw him back, yes, but this—” he sweeps his hand around the room, “—was not my doing. It was yours.”

“...’Scuse me?”

“Souls are powerful, Adam,” Michael sighs. It’s the first time Michael’s ever said his name, and it makes him startle. It’s almost like he’s actually *acknowledging* him.

Then, a resentful shadow passes across his face, and it darkens it enough for Adam to be reminded that he’s standing in a fake room with an archangel who, for all intents and purposes, has all the power here. “It was *your* brother’s soul that managed to overcome *my* brother’s grace long enough to pull us all down here. In the same way, when Lucifer struck, your soul must have reacted. Judging by *this*—” he casts an uncaring eye around the room they’re in, and muted offense rises up in Adam on behalf of the house he barely remembers. “—I’d say it reacted to a desire for safety. Does this place hold meaning to you?”

Some part of Adam’s mind realizes, distantly, that this is probably the most amount of words that Michael’s ever spoken to him—at him?—since they came down here. He has to remember to hastily nod, floored by what he’s hearing.

“Uh, yeah. This was where I lived—me and my mom.”

“Then, there you go. After I bested my brother, it formed a stronger mental shield in the form of a place that once held meaning to you. Around the *both* of us,” Michael looks him in the eye, then, and it makes Adam feel like he’s being looked *through*—like Adam’s a puzzle that Michael can’t quite figure out, and he’s being disassembled and assembled over and over again with the impatience of someone who can’t get a definite answer.

Adam doesn’t like it, so he speaks up again. “Okay. Sure. But...why were you, y’know, *out?* I mean, I was, too, when we first ended up here, but why did I wake up before you?”

The look vanishes from Michael’s eyes, and instead he cocks an eyebrow at him. “I *said* that your soul created a mental shield, didn’t I? While it...formed around me, I assume it also registered me as a potential threat. Therefore, it knocked me down in a manner similar to what your brother did to Lucifer. I wasn't *out,* I was too distant to interact here—thanks to *you*.”

The annoyed scowl that’s beginning to form on his face does *not* look promising, but...it wasn’t like Adam had *meant* to do it. Still, an apology begins to form on his lips, if only because he feels a little bad that he’d accidentally managed to subdue Michael for no good reason.

“Oh. Well, uh, sorry about that. I didn’t mean to.” He sort of wants to tack on, *can you really blame me for seeing you as a threat, dude?* But he supposes that they both already know that.

When Michael seems like he’s about to start scrutinizing him again, Adam quickly moves on. “Anyways...are you going to be staying or leaving?”

The archangel stares at him for a moment, the silence between them so tangible that Adam could probably cut clean through it with a knife, and then—poof. Gone.

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

Funnily enough, when he’s not drowning in absolute darkness, the loneliness doesn’t kill him as badly as it did last time. Or, maybe, he’s just grown more used to it. Either way, he’s more grounded, more *solid* than he was the last go-around. He isn’t as desperate. Isn’t as numb.

It means that he’s changing, he realizes. And Adam doesn’t know whether to be relieved or terrified. At least going insane in solitude was something *human* about him. Now—he’s probably still insane, given the fact that he’s started *talking* to his goddamn hallucinations, but it doesn’t hit him like it did before.

He just...accepts it. And he moves on. And the long, steady grind of years becomes just that—time. It becomes nothing more than plain, simple fact, instead of something that drives him crazy. Even the concept of living for eternity down here is becoming more and more elementary by the day—it’s less daunting and scary and enough to break him and more straightforward, easy to accept and live with.

Adam's shuffling through his closet, right now, his mind conjuring up clothes that he probably never had in his actual life on Earth. None that he remembers, anyway.

"Really, I just don't think orange is my color," he chatters, absentmindedly flipping a neon orange coat back and forth on a hanger as he looks at it. It's the ugliest thing he's ever seen in his life. Honestly, it's probably torture of his own making just to force himself to look at it.

"It's your fault," another vision of his mother croaks, somewhere behind him, no doubt as torn to shreds as she's been the past few times. "If you'd never been born, I would still be alive."

"Yeah, you're right. Blue *would* be better," he says, breezily, giving the coat a little shake and watching as it transforms into a dark blue t-shirt.

"Who are you talking to?"

He forces himself not to jump, and, sure enough, when Adam turns around—there's Michael. He seems to like popping up behind people, for whatever reason. To be dramatic, no doubt.

"Hm?" Adam says, sparing him only a glance before turning back to the closet. "Oh, you're back. You haven't been gone that long, actually. Any news?"

In that moment, the amount of confusion he can feel radiating through the air is enough to make him smile. Michael probably knows he's doing it—as much as this is Adam's mind, he *is* an archangel, and he's most likely got nothing better to do than monitor Adam's every little action while he's in here—but Adam doesn't care. He'll take what he can get.

To put it shortly? He's over it. This. Everything. He's over everything. So what if he's insignificant? He's still got a fake magic house.

...Even his attempts at optimism are pathetic.

"Lucifer believes me to be insane," Michael remarks, finally, and he sounds so put-out by the mere notion that Adam can't help how he snorts. It makes him turn around, the t-shirt disappearing entirely from his hands.

"Insane? You?"

The archangel squints at him, like he can't tell whether Adam's mocking him or not. He hadn't been, but Michael can think what he likes. After a moment, he settles for a glare and a petulant crossing of his arms, his most preferred position aside from the patented *empty-eyed-soldier* look.

"Yes," he says, slowly, like he's explaining something to a child. "Me. And it would most likely be to my benefit that he continues to think so. He hasn't tried anything else, after the incident."

Adam considers that, for a moment. "So—what, are you two just sitting in opposite corners of the Cage and ignoring each other?"

“What else is there to do?” Michael mutters, but Adam can tell he’s talking *over* him again. There’s a distant pang of exasperation, but he can’t really find it in himself to care about Michael being his usual self-important self all that much anymore. It doesn’t matter.

“Well,” he shrugs, after a moment, “you could always stay here. Like you were before, but now it’s—” Adam makes a jazz-hands motion, but there’s so much sarcasm in it that even *he* can taste it. “—in *color.* ”

Something flickers across Michael’s expression, something that Adam can’t pinpoint, before his face hardens. “No. I can’t. Not permanently.”

“Why? You said it yourself, it’s not like there’s anything better to do. It’s not much,” he gestures to the little inconsistencies scattered around the room, “but I think that *in here* is better than, y’know, *up there*.”

But Michael shakes his head. “No. You wouldn’t understand. I *failed* my Father, I…” Something akin to a laugh tears its way out of the copy of his throat, but it’s not a laugh—it’s acidic, biting, too similar to Adam’s own insane cackling back in the times where he’d fallen completely into despair. “The Cage is my punishment. I must endure it.”

Adam contemplates the archangel in front of him for a moment, crossing his own arms as he stares at him. And then, he speaks. “Then why did you keep coming back here? Before, I mean.”

He's treading on dangerous territory with that question, he thinks; but, it doesn't really matter, does it? What's the worst that could happen? Nothing that Adam isn't already used to.

Michael, interestingly enough, doesn’t meet his eyes—*won’t* meet his eyes?—and he doesn’t immediately try to insult him and leave like he did the first time that question was asked, either.

Adam isn’t sure what to do with that information, so he doesn’t do anything at all.

“Look, Michael…” he sighs, unsure of his words but speaking them all the same, “Whether you’re in here or out there, you’re still... *trapped*, right? We both are. If you’re that dead-set on punishment, then—fine, I don’t know, just try and focus on that. Take it from me,” and his laugh mirrors Michael’s, the shake of his head even more so, “if you stay up there and *actually* go insane from how isolated you get—because Lucifer’s *shitty* company, and we both know it—you’re not gonna be able to focus on a damn thing, least of all your *‘punishment.’* ”

He catches Michael’s eye, finally, and holds his gaze with a bravery he didn’t think he still had. “Failed or not, a distraction wouldn’t kill you. And I think you know that, with how many times you’ve stayed.”

Then, Adam smiles again, but this time it's a flat, wretched little thing that he’s sure must make his eyes look as dull and blank as his hallucinations'. “But, then again, what do I know? I’m just a monkey, right?”

He even *feels* blank as he says it. If Michael were to start up the insults again, Adam doesn't even think he'd go silent any more. Maybe he'd just try to talk over him.

Hm. That'd be interesting. Try to talk over the being that could very easily make his life more of a nightmare than it was already.

God, he'd become so detached that it wasn't even funny anymore, hadn't he? He wonders what his mother would think of it.

Adam's careful not to bump into him on his way out, leaving Michael standing there as motionless as he came.

Surprisingly, Michael sticks around. He even talks some more, with some prodding from Adam. No more "Why?"s and endless staring—now, they're actually *getting* somewhere in both directions. Michael's still lofty and clinical but it's easier to deal with, now, because Adam's more or less accepted that he's an archangel and he's apparently always going to act like this. It's like the whole *eternally trapped* concept: simple fact.

Sometimes, Adam will ask for updates on the state of the Cage, once he's run out of things to talk about. Nothing ever changes, but they do have a roommate to keep an eye on.

"He's started throwing himself against the walls of the Cage," Michael informs him, expression reminiscent of a tired parent in a crowded restaurant with a screaming child, and it makes Adam chuckle.

"You know," he comments, fiddling with the hem of his jacket sleeve for lack of anything better to do, "you'd think he'd be better at sitting in here than us. Since he was in here before, right?" Adam glances up to Michael for confirmation, and looks back down when he receives a nod. "So, shouldn't he—I don't know, be more used to it, or something?"

"Presumably. But, Lucifer has always been…" The archangel trails off, and Adam raises his eyebrows, waiting for him to continue. When he doesn't, Adam sighs.

"Are you okay?"

Michael's eyes shoot upwards, and he glares at him. "What?"

"Listen, I'm no expert in all that *family* crap, but he's your brother, right? And you clearly love him—" Michael shifts, at that, sitting up straighter like he doesn't know whether to be prideful of or offended at what Adam's just said, "—even though he's the Devil. It can't be easy to look at him like this. If you want me to stop bringing him up, I can."

Michael is quiet, and Adam is already mentally preparing to begin another period of total silence. For a second, he doesn't even know if Michael's still paying attention to him, but then he's hit with that look of analysis again and he has to resist the urge to stand up and walk away. It wouldn't do any good.

"And you?"

Adam frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Do you still love your brothers? Even when they left you here?”

He stares, wide-eyed, at the archangel in front of him. “You—you think I *love* them? That I ever did? I knew them for *hours!* They threw the word ‘family’ in my face and then fucking ditched me the first chance they got!” Ugly, raw anger stirs within him, buried deep in a murky lake in his gut where he shoves a good majority of his rage. He normally tries to leave it alone, cover it up, but it still claws at the walls of his stomach and bays to be released with every false breath he takes.

Adam exhales slowly, vividly aware of Michael’s eyes tracking his every move. “No. I don’t love them. I never did. I never *will.* ”

Michael blinks. “They’re still your brothers. They share your blood, the same as your father.”

“If you think that I’m going to consider them my family just because we’re related, you got another thing coming.” Adam fleers. “I told them, and I’ll tell you—we may be *blood*, but we sure as Hell aren’t *family.* As far as I’m concerned, John Winchester was nothing but a sperm donor.”

The archangel studies him, but it’s not as intense as before—it’s more careful, more considering. “But you still care about them. Even if you don’t consider them family.”

Adam deflates like a balloon, and his glower can’t be held up in the face of his sudden weariness. “Sure, I guess. Because they’re people, and people deserve to be cared about. Maybe not by *archangels* like you, but...” He waves a hand about in an aimless gesture.

Michael looks down, face twisting like he’s deep in thought, and Adam rubs a hand over his eyes, briefly pinching the bridge of his nose before letting it fall back down into his lap.

“I wanted to kill him,” Michael says, just as Adam’s starting to lose himself in his thoughts, jerking him back into reality. “Lucifer...I was *supposed* to kill him as part of the Plan to bring my Father back. It was my destiny. And I...still love him. But I wanted to kill him. I still do.”

His face is shadowed, *old,* and it’s probably the first real insight into Michael that Adam’s ever gotten in the years that they’ve been stuck down here.

“So you love him,” Adam replies, softly, like he’s trying not to shatter whatever shred of understanding that they’ve come to, “but you don’t care about him.”

More silence, and then—

“No,” Michael utters, as if the idea had never occurred to him before. “No, I suppose I don’t. Not anymore.”

They sit there for some time, then, because really, what is Adam supposed to say to that? They’ve never done this, this— *openly talking* shit, and he has no doubt that Michael will collect himself soon enough and go back to lording himself over Adam’s head, but it’s grounding, somehow, to see him like this.

“I have an idea,” Adam speaks up, and Michael sends him a questioning glance. “We’re gonna be stuck down here forever, right? I doubt Sam and Dean are coming for me and you —” he remembers the brief exposure he had to Michael’s head, all that time ago, remembers the trail end of a sentence that he’d caught: *still have not come for me.* “Well, you don’t act like you’re planning on being rescued by your family, either.”

Michael’s expression darkens into a deep-set scowl, at that. “What’s your point?”

“My *point* is, we’re basically alone down here, right? It’s just *us* and, y’know, Lucifer.” he chuckles, a quiet, sad little thing. “So—why don’t we stick together? And just...not act like assholes to each other, anymore? I know I’m not... *important*, or anything, but it wouldn’t hurt, right? I mean, that way, neither of us have to worry about losing our minds, and...I don’t know, you don’t have to stare at Lucifer any longer than you have to?”

Michael contemplates him, for a minute. “You’re saying that we only have each other.”

Adam shrugs. “Sure, I guess.”

It doesn’t take as long as Adam would’ve expected for an answer.

“Very well.”

Chapter 4

“Okay, but...why not?”

“Because I don’t want to. Why are you on the floor?”

“Well, why are you *not* on the floor? And come *on*, it’s not like there’s anything better to do!”

Michael stands above him, leaning over him, eyes narrowed in thinly veiled annoyance as Adam stares up at him from where he’s laid out on the ground, legs crossed with his hands folded under his head. The standoff between them lasts about fifteen seconds before Michael finally speaks again.

“Why would *I* be on the floor?”

Adam rolls his eyes, propelling himself upwards in one fluid motion so that Michael’s not upside down and turning around to face him. “Look, just...explain *why* you won’t teach me your angel language? *Besides* the fact that you don’t want to?”

The archangel’s frown deepens. “No.”

Adam throws his hands up in defeat and scoots backwards until his back rests against the wall. “Okay, fine. Can I at least get the *name* of it?”

Michael stands there, stiff as always. He looks irked, but not intensely so, which means Adam’s in the clear. Michael’s taken to falling entirely silent instead of running back to the real world now that they’d reached an sort of...*agreement,* between them. Which is good, because, y’know, *company,* but bad when you’re generally trying to keep an even sort of peace between yourself and an archangel, because there’s absolutely no way to forget the source of your vexation when the source is *always around.*

Which meant that the silences were often tense and moody, when they did pop up.

“Enochian,” he says, at last. Adam gives a quick mental cheer, because *hey* —at least he got *something!*

“Enochian,” Adam repeats, to himself, testing the word out on his tongue. “Nice name.”

Michael pulls a perplexed face at him, something Adam ignores in favor of beginning to silently sound out what he remembered of the patterns from the true voices of the two archangels that used to assault his eardrums on a daily basis. It’s nothing much—just syllables—but it’s something to focus on, which is always nice.

And then it’s *not* just syllables, because something in his brain *clicks* like it did when he called Michael out on his lying bullshit, ages ago, and the syllables start...making sense. Sort of.

“*Am I...speaking...co...herent..ly?”* Oh. Well, that was a little off. What he had *meant* to say was *Am I making any sense?* but...maybe that didn’t translate right? The only experience he’d ever had with learning languages was high school Spanish. No, wait, high school French.

...One of the two.

Human memory was *so* annoying.

...The fact that he’d just referred to it as *human* memory instead of *his* memory was enough to make *some* alarm bell start ringing in the back of his mind, but he was thankfully distracted from it by Michael, who took a step towards him in surprise.

“You—?!” The naked bewilderment on his face is enough to make a little laugh bubble up in Adam’s throat, and he realizes with a jolt that it’s the first he’s really *laughed* since before he was eaten alive.

“I’m a quick study?” he tries, when Michael says nothing more. As if shaken from a great daze, Michael comes to, frowning quizzically.

Finally, he replies. “You’re bastardizing it,” he says, gruffly, like he’s trying to cover for the fact that he was taken off-guard. “You speak like a human.”

“Gee, I wonder why,” Adam deadpans. Michael looks vaguely irritated for all of two seconds at Adam’s tone before his face returns to something more neutral.

“How did you pick up on it?”

“When we first—met, down here, and your grace started taking shots at my mind...I don’t know, something passed over from you to me, I guess. All the shit you and Lucifer were screaming at each other made sense after that.”

“*Passed over?* Nothing should’ve *passed over.* You were able to briefly witness the inside of *my mind*—” his features twist like he’s bitten into something sour, but only for a moment. “—but the majority of it should’ve been incomprehensible to the human mind. *You* don’t have the mental capacity to withstand *my* power.”

“Well, I didn’t *withstand your power,* or whatever,” Adam says, leaning his head back against the wall. “But that doesn’t mean that I didn’t understand what I *could* deal with. It just..made sense. I don’t know what else to tell you, dude.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Alright, alright,” he holds his hands up in a placating manner before pushing himself up off the ground, choosing instead to lean up against the wall. “Y’know, if you *really* didn’t want me to, uh, *bastardize* Enochian? You could always teach me *how* not to.”

Michael makes an aborted gesture with his hands, then, something reminiscent of how Adam had thrown his hands up in the minutes prior before returning them to remain stiffly at his side. He was always stiff. Even when he walked, he had a way of seeming both arrogantly

relaxed and unyieldingly rigid at the same time. Adam thinks that it's because of the stick lodged firmly up his ass, but he digresses.

"If I teach you the basics," Michael grinds out, thoroughly irritated. "Will you *shut up* about it?"

Adam raises his eyebrows at him, another smile creeping its way onto his face. "Scout's honor."

Despite Michael's grumpiness about the whole situation, he's surprisingly good at explaining things. It doesn't take as long as Adam thought to begin actually sounding less like a *human* speaking it and more like—well, an *angel* speaking it. It's odd, the way that the syllables fall from his tongue, as if the language itself knows he's something that's not supposed to be speaking it. But it's not as odd as he *thought* it'd be, and he doesn't know how to take that; whether he should be a little scared of the change of whether he should suck it up and deal with it.

He doesn't mention it to Michael, though, because why would he? It isn't like Michael cares.

Speaking of Michael, he'd finally managed to persuade the archangel to stop standing around like a mannequin and sit down for the first time in ages, ever since he'd been sprawled out on that bed. They always sit across the room from each other—Adam on the couch and Michael on a chair, or vice versa—but it makes Michael seem a little less like a pompous *archangel* and more like a pompous *person*, which helps to quell what little aggravation Adam sometimes feels when he talks to him. It *was* funny to see him lower himself into a chair for the first time, though—stiff and awkwardly, like he had no idea what he was doing.

And he probably hadn't.

But he seems like he's losing some of that detachment in his eyes, sometimes. Adam can't always tell—because, as it turns out, he's not as good at reading archangel body language as he is at reading archangel *true form* body language—but he seems calmer, somehow, less exasperated and more forbearing as time goes on and he explains more and more concepts of Enochian to Adam.

He's still largely indifferent to Adam as a person—Adam *is* only human, after all, and what's a human to something as big as an archangel?—but he's less obvious about it.

Most of the time.

And for a while, things are going...okay. Not *well*, there is no *well* in Hell, but it's significantly less *bad* than it was before.

But nothing can go *okay* forever, and he knows this by now. Which is why he's disappointed, but not surprised, when his hallucinations go from *bearable* to *insufferable.*

Adam's attempting to relay a simple idea to Michael entirely in Enochian without stumbling over any of the words when his vision tunnels, making him gasp and choke on his words as

the world around him shifts and tilts. There's nothing in front of him—nothing he can *see*—but it's all he can do to brace himself to keep from falling backwards when he feels a pair of unnaturally strong, cold hands dig into his flesh; it makes him yelp, scrabbling backwards as much as he can and wrapping his arms around his stomach like a shitty makeshift shield. His eyes squeeze shut, desperate for some illusion of safety, but there comes none.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, he is *not* reliving this. He is *not* fucking reliving getting *eaten alive.*

Except he is.

"You're not real, you're not real, you're not real…" he hears himself muttering, but it's like the insanity has come full circle to take a crack at him once more—there's hysteria rushing through his blood, his mind, his *soul,* and all he can think is *How do you know? How do you know this isn't real? You're still there, you know. You're there in the darkness. You're there and no one's coming to save you. No one. No one. No one.*

Fingernails scratch at his legs, his stomach, his arms, tearing past his skin until they reach his bone, and the scrape of nails on it makes him clench his teeth and groan, curling tighter and tighter into a ball until—

Two fingers, pressing warm against his temple.

Adam sucks in a sharp breath as the ghostly fingers attacking him seem to vanish, dissipating as if they were never there at all. He's been gripping his arms to the point of pain, he realizes, but he can't bring himself to undo his fingers, tension keeping him wired and cautious. When he finally peels his eyes open and tentatively looks up, his tunnel vision is gone—instead, there's a pair of nonplussed blue eyes staring into his own, and the fingers slowly remove themselves from Adam's temple, falling down to hang at the side of their owner. Adam has the odd urge to reach for them, to chase what little he can get of *touch* down here.

He ignores it, shoves it down, pretends he never had it in the first place.

Instead, he blurts out—"Thank you," and then, after a beat passes by, "I'm sorry." And he feels mortification rise up in him, then, enough to make him press his lips together and turn his head away, unable to meet Michael's eyes. To his horror, he can feel the beginnings of tears starting to prickle at corners of his eyes, and it instantly makes him freeze, gripping his arms even tighter in an attempt to focus on the pain instead of the welling emotion in his throat. If he'd been in an actual, physical body, he thinks that he would've probably left bruises by now—the deep, dark kind, the ones that ached even when you only brushed the fabric of your clothes against them. As it is, it just hurts. A lot. And, thankfully, it's enough to keep him from crying in front of an archangel.

When Adam finally feels *somewhat* stable enough to look back up, Michael's still staring down at him. He's—if Adam didn't know better, he would say that Michael looked *concerned,* almost. Not a lot, but...there was *something* there.

But he does know better, and Michael doesn't care. He probably just helped because—well, who else is going to keep him company down here? And Adam can understand that. Makes himself understand that, because the alternative is giving himself hope that he *isn't* just

another person to be discarded by someone else, and hope is *dangerous*. All it does, all it will *ever* do, is let him down.

There's only so much he can take before his mind snaps again—completely and entirely, even worse than the previous time—and there will be no going back once it does that. He thinks that *that much* hope would be enough to push him over the edge, and to even consider the thought of allowing it to flood through his system once more...

It scares him.

Out of nowhere, Michael gives a short, sharp nod, turning on his heel and walking back over to his side of the room.

Adam twitches his hands, slowly extricating them from their iron grip on his upper arms, trying to ignore the slight tremble to them. If he were in his body, he's sure that he would be breathless and pale, his heart thudding wildly in his chest.

As it is, he just feels drained.

Drained and embarrassed and desperately in need of one of his mother's hugs, like when he was little and he'd fallen backwards after his friend's skateboard slipped out from under him, crying in the way that only a child can. She'd wrapped him up in her arms and kissed his cheek and reassured him that he was okay, and he had believed her because she was his mom and his mom was *never* wrong, and that had been that.

But those times were long gone, and so was she.

Adam clings onto the memories like a lifeline, shutting his eyes again as he strives to remember every little moment he can with her, even with his fading memory—the way she'd smile at him when he brought home a perfect report card, the way she'd tuck a strand of hair behind her left—no, her *right*—ear before doing anything, the way she would always tell him how *proud* she was of him, even when he screwed up a test at school.

He wants to cry again, but he doesn't. Instead, he starts humming—he's not sure what song it is, or even if it's a song at all, but if it was, he thinks it's something his mother would've liked.

Michael says nothing.

"What would you be doing if we weren't in here?"

"Ruling Heaven," Michael says, simply.

Adam frowns, considering him for a moment. "Is that it?"

"Well, yes. It's my duty."

"But what do you do for fun? Or—wait," he snorts, "do you even know what *fun* is?"

Mild annoyance seems to be a constant on Michael's face, at this point. Mild annoyance and detached confusion. "I am a soldier. I have no time for such things."

"*Had* no time for such things," Adam corrects. "But, you're down here, now. We've got nothing *but* time for...forever."

The archangel narrows his eyes. "What're you implying?"

"I'm not *implying* anything, I'm just saying. If you ever did anything for fun that could...also be done down here, you might as well do it. It's not like you have anything better to do. Might even get you to relax, a little"

At the word *relax*, Michael pulls a face like he's just said something stupid. It makes Adam raise his eyebrows in question.

"You're trying to tell me," Michael says, dryly, "to *relax*. In *here."*

"You know what? Yeah, yeah, I am. Because, I mean, look at you—" he gestures to him, a bit tersely.

"You constantly look like you're going to be attacked, twenty-four seven. You're as stiff as a goddamn board, Michael. I'm no expert on anything with, uh, *wings*, but there's just no way that that's good for anyone. Like, I get that Lucifer's down here too and he might start getting snappy again, but for fuck's sake, just...just chill out a little? Maybe?"

Adam rubs a hand over his face, unable to believe that he's trying to urge an archangel to loosen up, of all things. "Or don't, I don't know. I can't make you."

The archangel's face turns bemused, entirely puzzled. Adam distantly wonders when he stopped thinking of it as *his* face and started thinking of it as *Michael's* face—they just wore it too differently to be considered the same, he supposed.

"You…" Michael starts, after a moment, and the incomprehension in his tone is enough to make Adam's attention snap back to him. "You want me to relax...because you think it'll be *good* for me?" For a second, Michael seems to glance at him in a way that's almost pitying—like Adam is the most ignorant schmuck this side of Hell—and Adam suddenly remembers what he'd once thought, about how having the feeling of care thrown back in his face was better than feeling nothing at all.

Here we go, his mind grumbles.

And then Michael's face twists in even more confusion, and his head tilts to the side, and he scoffs out a, "You're concerned."

"Yep," Adam sighs, feeling the exasperation fall away in the face of his prostration.

"For *me.*"

"Seems that way."

Michael chuckles, but it’s deriding, and his eyes are turning sharp, all-consuming.

“I could snap you into pieces,” he spits out, a quiet rancor lacing his tone. “I have no need of your *pity*.” There is a sudden aura of power surrounding him, burning through the nonexistent air like it’s the fuel for a wildfire, and Adam—he pauses, takes a breath, and catches Michael’s eye, holding his gaze and *trying*, as hard as he can, to come across as entirely neutral.

They’ve been here before. Adam doesn’t want to make the same mistakes.

“I know,” Adam says, and he says it as matter-of-factly as he would *the sky is blue.* Michael is not his friend. They stick together begrudgingly, out of loneliness, no matter how either of them act.

That’s all there is to it.

“And, by the way, it’s not pity. It’s the fact that we’re in *here* with no chance of *ever* getting out—and, like *you* said, we *only have each other.* And sure, whatever, maybe *you* don’t care about me. Fine. I’m used to it, man, and not just from you,” he pauses, trying to keep his voice even, leaning his elbows on his legs and clasping his hands tightly together between his knees.

There’s a slight tremor of fear that stirs awake in the back of his chest that he rushes to bury. He can’t afford *fear.* He can’t.

The eye contact between them is held, and it’s like the fervor behind Michael’s scrutinizing look has increased tenfold, a hundredfold. It’s less like he’s being looked *at* and more like he’s being looked *through.* He keeps himself as unyielding as he can, anyway, refuses to break under the weight of the power that suffocates the room. It almost feels like Adam’s decided to stand directly over a blaze of hot flames and breathe in, the heat making its way all the way down into his lungs and settling there.

He’s not going to break. He *won’t.*

“But I’m not you. I’m not *like* you. Obviously.”

I’m only human, you asshole, is what he actually he wants to snipe, but it’s pointless. Michael’s made it well-known how he feels about humans, how he feels about *humanity.* Verbalizing that sort of thing at him would only serve to make him more condescending, more imperious.

There’s no point to this.

“What were you—” Adam stops and bites down on his words as his voice starts to raise itself without his permission, letting out a huff. He smiles, but it’s hollow, and when he speaks again it's so quiet that he'd doubt Michael would be able to hear him if he wasn't an archangel. “Were you expecting something different?”

He doesn’t wait for Michael to respond, instead getting up and walking away until he reaches his room, shutting the door behind him in a way that's not quite slamming but damn close. It’s a foolish gesture—Michael can just do his whole *mental teleportation* thing and appear in front of him—but he thinks he’s earned the right to act like the teenager he is, by this point.

Michael doesn’t follow him, anyway.

Eventually, there’s a knock on his door.

Adam, who had been resting on his bed for only a short amount of time—well, no, it had been a *while*, but when put in comparison to how long he was used to being alone...yeah, he supposed it’d been pretty short—raised his head a little, looking in the direction of the door with no small amount of suspicion.

Michael did not *knock.* He just *appeared*, wherever he wanted and *whenever* he wanted. Adam had been almost expecting him to materialize in his bedroom any day now, as surly and snobby as he'd always been. But when Adam swings his legs off the bed and makes his way to the door, lo and behold—there stands one slightly awkward-looking archangel who now looks like he’s attempting to hide his discomfort under the guise of arrogance.

It’d be funny if Adam wasn’t so floored by the whole thing.

“You know how to knock?” Adam says, eyeing Michael with a sense of amused astonishment that he pulled out of his ass in an attempt to cover his own surprise. Michael, to his credit, does not outwardly react.

“I looked through your memories,” he replies, and Adam may be used to sharing a body with someone who has no concept of privacy, but...the thought of his mind being invaded still makes his face twist in discomfort before he smooths it out and nods.

“Right. Yeah.”

They stand in silence for a few moments, staring uncomfortably at each other, and Adam’s about to make a shitty joke that Michael wouldn’t understand about the weather when Michael says, “What would you be doing, if...we weren’t in here?”

Adam blinks, taking a moment of two to properly register the realization of what this *is*—an olive branch. Or the closest thing to one that he’s going to get from someone as prideful as Michael. It’s more than he ever expected, honestly, and it makes his brain malfunction for all of two seconds before he leans against the door frame, crossing his arms and studying the being standing in front of him with a careful, cautious eye.

He’s not going to be an asshole about it, he decides—they’d had enough of that so far, and Michael, as much of a douchebag as he could be sometimes, already had to monitor Lucifer on a constant basis. He wasn’t kidding when he said that the dude could stand to relax every once in a while.

“I don’t know how much time’s passed, up there,” Adam begins, finally, “but maybe I still would’ve been in college. I don’t...remember much of it, anymore,” he chuckles, a bit, lowering his eyes to stare at Michael’s shoulder instead of his face, “so, I can’t say for sure. Maybe I’d be in med school by now? I wanted to be a doctor. To help people, I think. Like my mom did.”

And then he shakes his head and offers the archangel a rueful little smile. “Anyways, I’d probably just be living life like every other human, y’know? Doing taxes and going out with friends and stuff.”

Michael’s face seems to shift, then—from uncomfortable and mock-haughty to something a little more hesitant, a little more...curious. It’s a stark contrast from the last time Adam had seen him. He’s not sure what to think about it—but, then again, is he ever sure about anything when it comes to Michael?

“And what did you do for...fun?” The word *fun* sounds forced on his tongue, like he thinks the concept is ridiculous but he's forcing it out regardless. It's almost enough to make Adam want to laugh—*almost* being the key word.

“Well,” Adam pauses, pondering, “I remember...I used to play board games and card games with my mom. The rules and pieces and stuff are a little fuzzy, but I could probably put together a really bad copy of one or two.”

Michael nods once, drawing himself up straighter like he’s issuing commands to an army, arms crossed defensively in front of him. “Show me.”

Adam cocks an eyebrow at him, letting out a snort at the archangel’s clipped tone. “Are you asking me or are you ordering your lackeys?” Before Michael can answer, Adam pushes off the door frame and turns around to step back into the room, not looking back to see if he’s going to follow or not. “Yeah, sure, whatever. I’ll cook something up.”

Michael is, for the most part, uninterested in games.

This doesn’t surprise him. What *surprises* him is the fact that he’s willingly going along with it. He’s still a bit aloof, still a bit distant, still *extremely* stuck-up, but he’s not...*unkind.* It’s incredibly perturbing to Adam after so long of being lorded over. He was no doormat, but he’d certainly grown used to putting up with enough shit to make him feel like one—and that was to be expected, wasn’t it? When dealing with a snobby prince? *The* snobby prince, more like—he *was* Heaven’s ruler.

Or, well, he used to be.

...It was nice to be talked *to,* nowadays. Even if Michael still sort of acted like Adam’s brain was too small to process anything outside of the mundane.

He didn’t let himself grow used to it, though; the whole *everything’s going all right* schtick. He knew better than that.

They're both seated on opposite sides of the bed, playing a little card game that Adam had whipped up in an instant after years and years without any sort of creative outlet. Originally, he'd tried to put designs on the cards—like he'd remembered the ones on Earth had—but the designs always seemed *off*, never quite right but never quite *wrong*, either, and eventually Adam had just given in to his annoyance and slapped some simple numbers down onto them.

The good thing about playing games is that they help to pass the time. The bad thing about games is that Adam's never won a single one of them because Michael's mind is a strategic powerhouse and he keeps *kicking his ass* every time they play.

"Damn it!" Adam grouses, throwing the remainder of his cards by is feet in front of him on the bed as Michael lays down another winning card on the pile in front of them.

"I'm not sure why you insist on playing this game in particular, considering you lose every time," Michael comments, studying Adam with an idle sort of curiosity that makes him feel just a little bit like a high school science project. "Why persist?"

Adam sends him a flat look, scooping the cards from the bed up in his hands and beginning to reshuffle them. "Maybe because we have nothing better to do? And anyway, this game is more fun. I always lost to everyone I ever played against in board games, but cards? I could always do cards."

"You're still losing, though. You can't win."

"Well, who's saying that?"

Michael blinks. "Me. I was created for warfare, Adam," he says, like he's explaining it to a child, and Adam rolls his eyes. "You won't be able to win."

"*We shall see,*" Adam says, lightly, in Enochian, raising his eyebrows before dealing out another two hands and placing the rest of the deck on the soft surface next to him. It's the way that the cards don't dip and slide into the crevices of the bed that remind him that all of this is just a series of images conjured up by him and his soul, but he brushes the existential crisis aside in favor of the game.

Michael wins. Again and again and again. Adam is honestly surprised that he hasn't at least requested a different game, if not to stop entirely, but he's been quiet, mostly. He still questions *why* Adam is so persistent when it comes to this singular game, but Adam never answers, not really.

Truth be told, he's been watching Michael's moves. Michael automatically reacts whenever Adam lays down a card, laying down his own on top of it like his mind paves out the quickest path to victory the instant he catches sight of Adam's card. It almost definitely does, knowing him, but his strategies are getting repetitive—he's growing too confident in his assumption that Adam will never win and doling out some of the same moves, over and over.

They play and play until Michael lays down a card, waiting for Adam's next move, calm in the way he sits back and waits to win.

“You know,” Adam says, a smile beginning to grow on his face, and it makes Michael quirk a questioning eyebrow his way. “You should know better than to underestimate humans, by now. After all,” he lays down a winning card on top, “one of them *did* drag you down here. And another of them just beat you at a card game.”

Michael’s face shifts from looking calm and confident to looking genuinely, honest-to-God stunned, and it makes Adam fist pump and laugh in surprised delight. The archangel stares down at the winning card like he can’t believe it’s real, and then gazes at Adam’s grin like he’s just been tackled and he’s picking himself up off the grass.

He doesn’t say anything, but Adam swears he sees some sort of *shift* dance its way across his face—something that looks *at* him instead of *through* him—and it makes something akin to triumph flare in his stomach before he quickly shushes it, beats it back down so that Michael doesn’t feel it.

What the triumph is there for, he’s not sure.

It almost makes him think that he’s won something more than a card game.

Chapter 5

“—but He *left,* ” Adam insists, one day. This isn’t the first time that they’ve talked about family—of course not—but it’s the first time that Adam’s ever felt some sort of strange obligation to speak up about a glaring issue that Michael seems to want to wholly accept with nothing short of absolute willful ignorance. Adam doesn’t understand it, not a damn bit. But, then again, he’s never been good with *fathers.*

Michael’s body gets a little harder, a little more rigid. “That does not mean that He isn’t *right.* Above all else, I am His son—His firstborn, His *favorite*. He may have left, but He must have had His reasons. He was *meant* to return upon the completion of my battle with Lucifer and bring Paradise to Earth, but…” he scoffs, glancing around, but Adam doesn’t think he’s looking at the house. His eyes are too distant. “We are here, instead of following our *destinies.*”

Adam gets the distinct feeling that he's fighting a battle he's going to lose. It was too obvious—this was so *uphill* that it was practically vertical. It was like Michael was completely indoctrinated into the mindset of *God is all there is and all there ever will be,* and Adam had been to church a few times in his life but this was on a *whole* other level.

Then again, it *did* make sense, because of the whole *angel* thing, but...he was pretty sure that the one angel that had been wearing the trench coat—Cassiel? Castiel? Something like that—hadn’t been like this.

How did angels *work?*

Adam sighs and tries a different route. “Have you ever considered that maybe God...changed his mind?”

Michael frowns. “What?”

“Well, think about it. Your battle with Lucifer—it was gonna get pretty bad, right? It would’ve killed a lot of people. And God...loves humanity, doesn’t he? So maybe He decided...I don’t know, that all those people dying weren’t worth the cost of some Paradise? And now you’re down here, where it’s just—me. So no one else could be hurt up there, or something.”

“My Father would not have turned his back on His own Plan, Adam,” Michael chides, but his face is detached—confused, almost, like the words aren’t properly registering. “He would not abandon something as righteous as Paradise just to spare a few human lives. It was my *destiny* to fight Lucifer. *He* told me so. And if my Father commands something, it *must* be so.”

Adam doesn’t believe in fate, or destiny, or anything of the sort, *especially* not after all his time down here. All he knows is what he’s given. What’s presented to him, clear as day.

But Michael...apparently does, even now.

Adam doesn’t want to sugarcoat it for him, doesn’t want to make him feel *better* about the thick blindfold he seems to be wearing, but...he gets the feeling that the archangel’s going to hit a dead-end street when it comes to his logic—or lack thereof—sooner or later, and that he was probably going to go crashing hard into a wall when he did.

Adam may not... *like* him, but he doesn’t want to watch him fall, either.

“Listen, Michael,” he starts, speaking slowly, carefully, “I’m not trying to lay into your dad’s whole *Plan* thing, okay? That’s not what I’m trying to do. Just...if it was *actually* your destiny, then why are you *here*?”

Michael’s getting antsy, Adam notes, and he’s started walking slowly from wall to wall; a steady, ceaseless pacing. A look that’s a mixture of exasperated and agitated begins to form on his face, and he doesn’t *say* anything, but he *seems* enough like a caged animal that Adam sighs, quietly, and Michael’s gaze flashes towards him with a look that borders on challenging.

Adam wants to tell him that there’s no more *destiny.* He wants to tell him that Sam dragging them all down here was just a matter of him overcoming Lucifer and just launching them all down here like bottle rockets—and that’s *it*, nothing more to it. There’s no capital-P *Plan* happening down here. Nothing really matters when they’re trapped for the rest of time.

Instead, he takes one more look at Michael’s clear distress and rubs a hand over his eyes before finally conceding, letting his hand drop down into his lap with a *thump.*

“Okay. What was living in a big family like?”

Michael stops, glancing quizzically at him like he can’t believe what he’s hearing. “What are you—”

“I’m not trying to upset you on purpose, man. I just don’t think you should rule out other possibilities because you’re coming up short—” The archangel bristles, but Adam presses on. “—and it’s getting you nowhere. So, we’ll just sort of...agree to disagree, yeah? We can just drop it. Whatever. But you lived with a lot of angels up in Heaven, right? It was only ever me and my mom, so I don’t know what living with a bunch of people you’re related to is like.”

Michael turns to face him, narrowing his eyes skeptically. “Is this another one of your instances of *caring?* ” The word is laced with ice, but it’s not as venomous as it was before.

“It might be,” Adam spreads his hands out in a *what-can-you-do* gesture. Michael shakes his head, a motion that means *unbelievable* if Adam’s ever seen one.

“Hm,” The archangel grunts, finally. “You’re still wrong, you know.”

“Maybe I am,” Adam shoots back. “We’re in Hell. Does it matter?”

“Yes,” Michael insists, but he doesn’t sound convinced. Not to Adam, at least.

There’s a few minutes of silence, where Adam sits and waits patiently for Michael’s next move. Michael stares back at him, his face impassive but his eyes hard; inspecting. And then,

at long last, he begins to grudgingly talk; offering Adam his first story after so long of them both only hearing Adam’s.

It’s not much, really, but Adam’ll take what he can get.

Michael had been getting this *look,* lately—like he was uncomfortable. Pained, maybe. Adam, for the life of him, couldn't figure out *why.*

He only ever did it when he seemed to think that Adam wasn't paying attention, like he was constantly holding himself back, and Adam didn't want to pry but he *did* want to know what was happening—even though Michael would probably never tell him.

Adam doesn’t voice his internal dialogue, though. Instead, he just starts to hum.

He isn't sure how long he does it before Michael speaks, but that's just how it always is, isn't it? He never knows. He never knows *anything.*

“You’re interesting,” the archangel voices, when Adam’s in the middle of a vaguely familiar tune that his brain can’t quite put a name to.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“An observation.”

“Oh, great. Love *that.* Wanna elaborate?” Adam hopes Michael picks up on the sarcasm. He normally does, but sometimes it slips by him.

“You weren’t meant to be born,” Michael says, watching him with cool eyes.

“Uh...yeah? I was an accident. Those happen, y’know. With humans.”

“No,” he emphasizes, “you *weren’t meant* to be born. The Winchester bloodline was meant to end after *Sam* was born. There was never supposed to be a third son. Just Sam and Dean.”

A short bark of derisive laughter slips its way past Adam’s throat, dull and biting. “As far as I’m concerned, it *did* end after Sam. But, that’s beside the point. Whether or not I was meant to be born, I was, and...that's it. Whoop-de-doo, or whatever,” he shakes his head, biting the inside of his cheek before continuing on. “Anyway, as far as the *world’s* concerned, I barely even existed in the first place, so I don’t think it matters. I’m just the backup to your true vessel, remember?”

He’s gotten...well, he doesn’t want to say *nihilistic,* because he’d like to think that he’s moved on at least a *little* bit from the days where he sat as still and cold as a rock in the darkness of his own mind, but he certainly wouldn’t describe himself as bright-eyed or bushy-tailed by any means. He’s not even being self-deprecating—it’s just a fact. The sky is blue, he’s trapped in a cage with two archangels, and he was the backup vessel for an archangel to use to bring on the Apocalypse. That's all he was. It's all he'll ever be.

He wonders, again, what his mom would think of him now. He pushes the thought away a second later.

When Michael goes a little quiet, Adam takes the chance to ask a question. It'd been brewing in the back of his mind for a while, now, and it didn't seem like Michael was going anywhere. What did he have to lose?

“Hey,” he queries, “if I was just the bait to get to Dean, why didn’t you go after him? I mean,” he chuckles, a little darkly, “all you probably would’ve had to do was make Sam puke up some more blood and he would’ve handed you that *yes* on a silver platter. What happened?”

He waits for an answer, something along the lines of *you were more simple, you would say yes easier, Dean was too stubborn and I didn’t have the patience,* but instead Michael’s gaze drops to the floor, and it turns into a swirling mixture of *blank* and some other hidden emotion, something Adam can’t quite read.

“I don’t know,” he rumbles, at last, and now it’s so quiet that Adam almost has to strain to hear it.

“Oh,” Adam replies. It’s lame, but he doesn’t know how else to respond. “Huh.”

Michael isn’t that talkative, which isn’t surprising, but he shares more and more when Adam prods at him, nowadays. Adam wonders if the silence had finally gotten to him, too—true, Adam never shuts up, but there was a difference between listening and speaking. A big one. You could listen to someone else all you wanted, but the longer you went *unheard,* the more that loneliness would wrap around you like a vice. Or maybe that was just him, and the Cage was making him some sort of wannabe poet that didn’t know right from left.

He tells Adam about his lance, quietly describing the amount of detail that he’d put into the craftsmanship, and Adam listens with more rapt attention than he’d thought he’d ever have for someone who was talking about weaponry, his hands in his pockets and his eyes wide with honest curiosity.

“Wait, so why didn’t you bring it to the cemetery?”

Michael glowers at nothing in particular. “There was a band of rebellious angels, millennia ago. They ransacked the armory and attempted to flee to Hell in order to free my brother from the Cage. The majority of them were killed, and the weapons retrieved, but a garrison was foolish enough to let a few of them escape out of *sentiment.* They managed to get away with three weapons. My lance was one of them. I have not seen it since.”

Adam *ahh*s in understanding, and then knits his brows together as he finds a contradiction in Michael’s statement. “Wait, didn’t you tell me once that angels don’t have free will?”

The archangel quirks an eyebrow. “No one does. Especially not angels. We are God’s soldiers, first and foremost—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know that part, but...if angels don’t have free will, then how can there be rebellious angels?”

Michael throws his hands up, suddenly out-out. “Why must you always ask the strangest questions?”

He doesn’t sound *that* annoyed, so Adam allows himself to snicker. “Man, I was a biology major. It’s science. Asking strange questions is kind of what science *is.* ”

“I thought you were going to be a *doctor.* ” The human term sounds odd in his mouth. By the look on his face, he seems to think so, too.

“I was. But I was still a nerdy kid. I think I loved science fairs.”

Michael seems to let go of his annoyance for all of two seconds to peer at him. “You think?”

“I’ve told you before, Michael. My memory’s gone straight down the drain.”

Michael pulls a face like he’s considering what Adam’s said, and then he starts to walk across the room towards him, his hand beginning to raise and curl into the two fingers that he’d had before—when he’d erased whatever living nightmare his brain had conjured up—as he gets within a few feet of him. When Adam leans away, a little wary, Michael stops, tilting his head inquiringly.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Adam holds his hands out in front of him. “Wait a second. What’re you doing?”

“I may be able to repair some of your memories, if they are not entirely lost,” Michael says, like Adam should already know this.

“Um?” he responds, slowly lowering his hands. He’s still a bit wary. “Okay, I guess. Just—a little warning would be nice?” He’s not sure if Michael would actually listen to his request for permission, but he’d like for it to go down that he said it, regardless.

Then again, who’s keeping count?

Michael regards him, for a moment, and then stretches out his hand once more. Adam tries not to tense up when it connects with his forehead, and then—

He’s five, and he’s shrieking with laughter as Mom tickles him, breaking loose from her and running to jump on top of his bed. She stands where he left her, laughing right along with him with her hands on her hips, blonde hair messy. He's breathless, exhilarated, and he's grinning so widely it hurts as the bed groans under him.

He’s seven, and he doesn’t know how late it is but the night’s pitch black outside and his mind is screaming that there’s a monster in his closet, so he pulls his covers over his head and shakes there until morning, desperately wishing for Mom even though she isn’t there. He’s all alone in a big, empty house until eight o’clock—and, as the house settles, it sounds like the creaking of footsteps getting closer and closer to his door.

He's ten and he's running up to the door of the diner, Mom calling out from behind for him to slow down. Mr. Abbinanti and his wife are in there, too, and they smile and wave at him as he opens the door, to which he grins back and tells them hi, proudly showing off his missing front tooth for the world to see.

He's twelve and John Winchester is pulling out of their driveway, and he watches him go as the first seeds of resentment begin to plant themselves in his heart. He thinks of Mom and her slowly-graying hair and her tired eyes, and he regrets ever pestering her about meeting him. When he walks back inside, her smile is a little soft, a little sad.

He's thirteen, and Mom's favorite vase—the one that she'd gotten for her twentieth birthday from her grandma—is laying in pieces on the ground. He hadn't meant to slam so hard into the table it had been sitting on, but it had been two in the morning and he'd been tired and nervous because he'd felt like something was watching him and when he went to get a glass of water he hadn't watched where he was going and—he starts crying. He cleans it up with shaky hands so Mom won't accidentally step on it and sits on the living room couch for six hours until she gets home, promptly bursting into tears again and blubbering out what happened, apologizing over and over again. Mom looks over to where it had lay, sighing, and kisses the top of his head, telling him it's alright.

He's fifteen and it's his birthday, and Mom bakes him a cake and John buys him a beer. The beer's alright, but the cake's better, sweeter, and he jokingly tells his mother to send his compliments to the chef. She laughs and kisses his cheek, and he laughs with her. The house is warm.

He's seventeen, with a part-time job, and he uses a bit of the money from it to buy a t-shirt he liked for himself. He tries to give the rest of it to his mom and sighs when she refuses, saying that it's his. They're not as bad off as they were back when he was younger and she hadn't been entirely prepared to look after a child, but things have always been a little tight. He wants to help.

He's eighteen, turning nineteen soon, and he's being eaten ali—

Adam's hand shoots up to wrap around Michael's wrist, trying to pull away. Michael is an immovable object, of course, but the action gives him enough balance to jerk his head back without slamming it into the wall behind him, away from the archangel and his overwhelming memory magic.

He's reeling, his mind overloading, still in some wild state of disorientation from the hundreds of memories that had just been taken out, patched up, and thrust back into his head. Some things that he'd been grasping at straws for were finally *clear* after all this time, and other things remained as equally forgotten as before.

It's...odd.

Adam finally remembers that he's still latching onto Michael like a lifeline when he realizes that he's swaying in his seat, that the only reason he's still somewhat balanced being the vice grip of his fingers locked around a jacket sleeve.

His first thought is—*oh, he's warm.*

His second thought is—*oh, shit.*

He looks up, wide-eyed, to see Michael staring inscrutably down at where their bodies are linked before quickly pulling his hand away, tucking it awkwardly in his lap and covering it with his other one. Michael follows the action with his gaze before meeting Adam's, scrutinizing him in the same manner as he usually does.

"The more salvageable memories were mostly of your mother," he says, and Adam jolts slightly at the sudden noise. "The rest were faded beyond repair. There would be no point in attempting to rebuild them."

Adam makes a sound that seems like it could've been a laugh, at one point, but it comes across as more of a wheeze. "Well, she's more important, so...um," he pauses, feeling more than a little awkward. "Thanks. For, uh, that."

"I wasn't aware you were killed by ghouls."

Adam stills, taking a breath. *Ghouls?* That's what they were called? What a stupid name. "Uh, yeah. It doesn't exactly...make the best conversation?"

Michael studies him. He does that a lot, these days, because Adam is apparently *interesting*. Then, he nods, and it leaves Adam—once again—with a whole lot of questions and no answers.

Michael, as Adam had realized at some point during one of their many talks, wasn't actually all *that* bad. When he wasn't actively trying to act like a douche, that is. Mostly, he seemed like he was just rooted in old behaviors. It almost reminded him of Mr. McDavid, the old man who'd lived down the street from him and his mom—and *fuck,* it was so *nice* to be able to remember things, Adam *never* should've taken that for granted when he was alive.

Once all that bark was peeled away, though, Michael just seemed like someone who was too used to following plans and formulas and executing them with a disturbing amount of perfection—and who seemed a little lost, now that there was no specific plan to follow.

It wasn't obvious, at first, but now that he'd roped Michael into the habit of sharing stories about his own past, Adam could *hear* something behind it all. He could hear the *I don't know why He left* when Michael talked about Creation, the *What did I do wrong?* when he described how he'd led the angels in battle, eons ago, the *Why am I being punished?* when he spoke about the fall of Adam and Eve at Lucifer's hand.

He doesn't think that Michael intends for him to hear these things, but he does, regardless. And Adam still has that silly little desire to *comfort* him, as ridiculous as it sounds. He may not understand the feeling, but he treasures it—secretly. It's another sign that he's *real,* that he isn't...numb, anymore. Not completely.

Even still, there's got to be something a little crazy about wanting to reassure the winged dude you're sitting in Hell with; the guy who tried to arrange an apocalypse that would've killed millions, who would've done it with no remorse whatsoever in his pursuit of *Paradise* and who would probably do it again if he ever were to be freed. Emphasis on *probably,* though—he's not exactly as gung-ho about it as he was before, seeing as God hadn't returned.

Yet, Michael sometimes finds it in himself to insist, *My Father hasn't returned yet.*

Adam doesn't believe it, but every conversation with Michael involving God ends on the brink of disaster, so he decides to just let it be. And, besides—just because he was bled dry of hope a long time ago didn't mean he had to rip that same hope away from his only companion, who was hopelessly devoted to a dad who would never come back.

He still didn't understand it—but, then again, it wasn't like he had much experience in the dad department. Maybe this was a normal thing for families?

...Somehow, he doubted it.

Today—or whatever period of time they're in right now—isn't the best, if the voices murmuring in his ears are anything to go by. They're unintelligible whispers that wisp about at the back of his mind like annoying little shadows, and it almost feels like there's a fly buzzing around in his brain—extremely uncomfortable and impossible to get rid of. It almost makes him miss the way the hallucinations used to be; the blank-looking corpses that parroted mindless threats and words at him. At least he could tune *those* out. This...this was just *irritating.*

Currently, Adam was sitting on the bed with his feet kicked up, watching Michael as his face hardened over, as his eyes sharpened when he looked around, gazing upon an area that Adam wasn't privy to. Mainly because, unlike Michael, he couldn't flit in and out of this... *mind-space* thing at will. At least, not in a way he knew how to. He remembered the last time he'd really seen the Cage, when he managed to pull away, back from Michael and the forefront of his body. He wasn't quite sure how to replicate it, from in here—wasn't even sure if he wanted to.

But, anyway, Adam watches. He notices. He *sees,* observing the way that Michael's body almost seems to shut down as he retreats further outwards, eyes closing and form beginning to flicker as his attention gets diverted—he's less *in here* and more *out there,* more distant.

When he finally comes back, his form solidifying, Adam takes in the way that his shoulders slump—just a bit, but enough for it to be noticeable. He takes in the way that the lines around Michael's face soften, enough to look briefly *weary—pained,* again, and Adam doesn't know *why*—before it smooths out into something more insipid. His hands slip from their defensive, arms-crossed position in front of his chest to come down and land in the pockets of the jacket that's a copy of Adam's own, and...huh.

Maybe Michael listened more than he thought.

"You were a little longer this time," Adam says, sitting up. "Is everything okay?"

“Lucifer was abnormally close,” Michael replies, walking up to the edge of the bed to take a seat on it, his feet still on the floor. “I waited until he retreated before returning.”

“Oh, okay.”

The archangel glances down, then, taking one of his hands out of his pocket to run it over the top of the bed. It’s like he’s looking for something, almost. Adam isn’t sure what.

“What, is the color not up to your standards?” he tries, leaning down a little to try and catch Michael’s eyes, to figure out what’s got him so *interested* , all of a sudden, but Michael doesn’t take the bait. He doesn’t meet Adam’s eyes, either.

“You sang to me, here,” he murmurs, instead.

Adam’s entire thought process is brought to a halt, save for the voices that just *won’t shut up*. He frowns, raising his head back up, watching Michael cautiously. This isn’t an area he knows how to navigate.

“Yeah? I sing all the time, Michael. You know this, or do you *not* remember all the times you told me to shut up?”

Michael’s face almost seems *amused*, still staring at the bedspread. “I know. But you sang to *me*, here.”

Adam’s first response is *don’t flatter yourself,* which is promptly shoved down because, well—saying that would make him a liar, and there’s no point in lying to the celestial powerhouse that lives in his body. Not when he’s all Adam has.

Especially when he'd once called him out for lying, too. That would just make him seem like a hypocrite.

His second response is, “What’s your point?” because it’s neither outright acceptance nor outright denial. He may have somehow been able to tell Michael *fuck you, I’m gonna care about you for my own sake* once, but that didn’t mean he was equipped to deal with every emotional situation known to mankind.

And angelkind, apparently.

“I didn’t—uh, I didn’t think you could hear me, back then.”

“I could. I heard it. All of it.”

Adam doesn’t remember the specifics of what he’d said, but he’s fairly sure he called Michael a S.O.B. and he wonders if that’s what this is about. That doesn’t explain Michael’s fixation on the singing, though, or the placid expression he’d suddenly started wearing.

Right as he’s about to ask Michael to stop beating around the bush, Michael speaks. “I hadn’t meant to—I thought you would be better off, in your own mind. That, by giving you a replica of your body and keeping you away from the fighting, you would suffer less.”

The voices tickle Adam at the back of his mind. He thinks he hears one laugh. “Humans...we’re not meant to be alone, Michael,” he swallows, finally, clasping his hands together. “I don’t think anyone is.”

That makes Michael still, and Adam studies him, the way his shoulders tense in the fluorescent yellow light of the room, how his eyes seem to flicker with emotion for a moment before returning to that weary sort of calm once more.

“You were young, when I took you,” he sighs, and Adam's thoughts come to a dead stop, because they haven't talked about this before and he doesn't particularly *want* to, even now. “You only did as you were asked. You shouldn’t have been punished for that. But...you were. By my hand, no less, and for that—no.”

Finally, finally, Michael raises his head to look at him, and his gaze is intense, sincere, enough to drown in.

“For it *all*, I'm sorry.”

Oh, Jesus. When did Michael learn to *apologize?* Where did he even pick it up from? Because this *certainly* didn’t match up with the Michael who got annoyed at him for fucking *breathing,* no matter how much he’d calmed down as more and more time passed.

Why did he even feel the *need* to apologize? He was *big,* he’d made that explicitly clear during their time down here. Too big for human things. Too big for Adam, no matter how much he humored him. It didn’t make *sense.*

It *didn’t make sense.*

For it all, he’d said. For being the cause of his removal from Heaven. For the torture by Zachariah's hands. For taking his body, the entirety of his autonomy. For letting them be dragged into Hell. For leaving him alone, in the dark, for years and years and years.

Michael’s eyes are searching his, like he’s waiting for an answer, but Adam’s brain is fried, melted, thrown so violently out of the loop of things that he can’t think of anything but static. The whispers jeer at him, harsh tones and muffled words ringing in his ears like a cold substitute for the rushing of blood.

He doesn’t *understand.*

Adam swallows, again, and nods, mind racing to come up with anything, *anything* to say in return.

He finds something.

It’s not what he *thinks* he wants to say, but, in the end, it’s all that he has.

“Okay.”

“Do you wanna try to shuffle these cards?”

“Me. Shuffle cards.”

“Well, there’s no need for the caveman talk.”

Michael stares at him, unimpressed. Adam just smiles and maneuvers the stack of cards between his fingers, making a little show of it, before slapping them all into the palm of one hand and holding them out in Michael’s direction. It’s an offer, almost. An invitation.

Michael is a celestial being of epic proportions. He's powerful and temperamental and stubborn and volatile, and someone that Adam was only just *beginning* to actually understand; and, sometimes, he wondered if he ever actually *would.* He could snap his fingers and accomplish almost any task in the universe, just short of getting them the hell out of Hell. Here and now, all he needed to do was reach out his hand and the deck of cards would come floating over to him like their false impression of gravity didn’t exist.

Talk about an oxymoron.

But Michael doesn’t do that. Instead, something amused passes over his features—and it isn’t condescending, isn’t falsely sympathetic, isn’t detached. It’s just...amused. And then, he walks over and takes the cards from Adam’s hand, examining them under a contemplative eye and turning them over to see them from different angles before raising his eyebrows at him and perfectly mimicking Adam's usual shuffling technique, the cards making a flapping noise as they rapidly struck each other.

It makes Adam grin up at him. "Show-off."

Michael studies him for a moment, and—he doesn't *smile*, exactly, but his face...softens. Just enough to let Adam see it. It makes him look different. A little older, maybe, but a little kinder, too.

It doesn't look as out-of-place on him as Adam would've originally thought.

Chapter 6

“What’s wrong?”

Adam’s fiddling with the knobs on the sink, thinking about how odd it is to work a sink with no water, and Michael is sitting at the dining room table, eyes downcast. He glances at Michael, who doesn’t respond.

“I might not be able to fix it, but it’s just me in here. It’s not like I’m gonna tell anyone. I mean, you don’t *have* to, but, y’know,” he pauses, turning around. “I’m here.”

Michael has always had times where he goes quiet. Normally, Adam would just chatter on until he decides to reintegrate himself into the conversation, but..that was their *old* normal.

What’s *normal* down here has shifted, somewhat, ever since Michael’s apology. They’re a little more open, a little less...rough around the edges, with each other. Adam doesn’t know *why* —he’s still not even sure that the apology was *real* and not something his broken little mind cooked up—but they just...are.

He’s not *complaining,* he just—doesn’t fully understand. Then again, he doesn’t understand a lot of things, so it might be best to just roll with it. Like pretty much everything else, down here.

Adam leans against the kitchen counter and watches and waits, unsure about whether or not Michael even heard him speak. There’s only ever been a few times that Michael’s confided in him, and they were brief; when he’d seemed a little to the left of unsteady. He doesn’t look unsteady now, though—he just looks despondent. Mournful. Lost enough in his own thoughts that he’s showing emotion without realizing it, probably.

For once, he finds himself not jumping in surprise when Michael speaks out of the blue. “My brother—Raphael. He should be ruling over Heaven, now that I’m gone.”

“Are you worried for him?”

Michael shakes his head. “No. I haven’t *worried* about my brothers in...a very long time. I…” he sighs, pausing, and he looks *old* again. “The relationship between my brother and I was—strained, at best, but...I thought we had *some* loyalty to each other. I didn’t realize that he’d…”

“Leave you in Hell?” Adam sounds a little douche-y, he knows, but he doesn’t mean it unkindly. It’s just a fact. When Michael looks up at him, Adam offers a mirthless smile. Michael peers at him for a moment, like he isn’t sure if Adam’s being intentionally barbed on purpose, but whatever conclusion he comes to makes him relax once more.

“Yes.”

“Yeah. I get it. Maybe not on the same level as you,” Adam says, when Michael frowns at him, “but I do. Sam and Dean...I didn’t know them for very long, but they seemed like they weren’t kidding when they—when they called me their family. And I was starting to believe them, y’know? Especially when they came for me, back in that room. I thought…” The memory of the way he’d begged Dean to help flickers through his mind, unwanted, and Adam tries his best to forget it. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter. Look where we are now, right?”

Michael makes a noise that almost sounds like a snort, and it makes Adam’s eyes widen, the entirety of his attention immediately focusing on the archangel in front of him. “I suppose.”

Adam’s brain, the nuisance it is, has suddenly come up with something new to do. A goal. A *mission,* if you will: *Make Michael Laugh.*

If nothing else, it should help make a good portion of eternity pass by more quickly, right?

For now, though, he walks over and takes a seat at the opposite side of the table, folding his hands together on the tabletop. “I’m sorry your brother didn’t come for you.”

Adam hopes it doesn’t come off as pitying. That’s not how he means to sound. But Michael doesn’t seem to take it that way, instead glancing down to where Adam’s hands lay.

“Yeah, kid," he says, sighing. "Me too.”

A beat passes, and then, “Kid? I’m a kid, now?”

“Well, you’re very young.”

“What does that make you? An old man?”

The corner of Michael’s mouth twitches upwards into a smirk, but it’s not cold or cruel like all the smirks he’d ever given before. Instead, it’s a little sharp, a little...if Adam didn’t know better, he would say *playful.*

Whatever it is, Adam finds that he isn’t afraid of it.

“I am the Prince of Heaven. I have led countless angels into battle and emerged victorious. I am the Viceroy of Heaven, my Father’s *right hand*.”

“Maybe,” Adam says, leaning back in his chair, “but you’re still *old,* right? So, I’m not wrong.”

Michael tilts his head back, eyeing him with amusement flickering briefly in his eyes, and Adam sends him back the biggest, cheekiest grin he’s got.

A pro of regaining some of his previously-lost memories is that a lot of the inconsistencies around the house have disappeared. A few of the pictures in the picture frames have come back, the ones of him and his mother. There’s a singular photo of John that returns, too. Adam picks it up and watches it burn under his fingers the minute he notices it, the false impression

of smoke leaving no smell behind. Maybe it was a little unnecessary, he'll admit, but he's in Hell because he had the misfortune of being related to the man and he'll take whatever small pleasures he can get.

A con, on the other hand, is that he misses his mom more than ever.

It was easier to suppress his grief when she was just another of his hallucinations—when he *knew* that he loved her, but actually *feeling* that love had been something rare, as distant as his memories had been. But now? Now that he could remember her and her favorite jacket and the smell of the flowery shampoo that she'd always used?

It made Adam *ache,* the kind of ache that unraveled the entirety of his thought process and made him want to dive headfirst into the first metaphorical pit he could find just to try and escape it.

Nowadays, everywhere he looked in the house, all he could see was *her* —sometimes literally. He saw her sitting at the table, doing paperwork. He saw her laughing at the TV. He saw her opening and closing the door to her room, humming quietly under her breath as she walked.

It was all he could do to remind himself that the stabbing pain in his heart was better than nothing at all. That he could be so, so much worse off.

Michael notices, Adam can tell; can feel the inquisitive eyes that burn holes into the back of his head whenever he can't bring himself to look away from her; when his gaze lingers on something that isn't there for much, much too long. He almost wants to tell him about it. Almost. Michael had sent away the hallucinations before, after all—he could do it again. But Adam holds his tongue, keeps his silence, and he doesn't want to admit to the fact that it's because he doesn't think he could bear it if Michael began his jeering again. Not over something like this.

His mom had already been used against him once, on Earth. He doesn't know how he'd react if the same thing happened down here. So what if they'd started to get along better? Adam couldn't predict an archangel, didn't have any sort of goddamn guidebook that explained to him when they acted nice and when they were about to sink their claws into his weaknesses and tear him apart from the inside out.

He's smart enough to realize that he probably isn't thinking straight. He's lost enough to not know how to follow any other train of thought.

Michael says, "You're upset," and Adam looks away.

"I miss my mom," he replies, softly, and he swallows down the lump in his throat as best as he can, trying to pretend like he can't feel the ghostly memory of her hand holding his when he was little, crossing the street with him or leading him through a store. The last time he'd felt any sort of physical contact with anyone had been when he'd tried to move Michael's hand off of his head, and it makes his fingers twitch.

The house feels just a little more constricting.

“She’s in Heaven, Adam. She’s safe.”

“I know, I know, I just—I still *miss* her, and I still see her *everywhere*, and—” Adam freezes, clamping his mouth shut. If he had blood in here, it would’ve turned to ice.

Him and his stupid fucking mouth. What was it with him and his habit of handing people guns and then propping his own head up on a target?

“You...see her?” Michael asks, and Adam can hear the frown in his voice even without looking at him. He sighs, trying to loosen the unreasonable panic that had built up in his chest. It doesn’t help. Breathing, in here, is just an action. There’s no air. Everything stays the same, it *always* stays the same.

“Look, just—forget it, alright? It doesn’t matter.” His thoughts are running wild, too fast for him to process any of them. He *wants* Michael to use his weaknesses against him, no he doesn’t, yes he *does*, no he *doesn’t*, he...

Fuck. This would be so much easier if he could just fucking *think!*

He—

“It does.”

There’s agitation stirring in the pit of his stomach, his mind a whirlwind of disconcerted uneasiness that prickles uncomfortably under his skin until he feels the incessant need to dig his fingernails into his flesh until he reaches bone; just to make it *stop*. His teeth ache from how hard he’s clenching them together.

It’s only when he swears that his vision is beginning to tunnel like it'd done before, though, that he snaps out a, “Why?!”

His voice sounds grating to his own ears. Jesus.

“We only have each other, don’t we?” That makes Adam still, and suddenly the lassitude that’s gnawed at him ever since he’d accepted the concept of being trapped for eternity slams into him like a truck. The tightness in his torso is still there but it’s being overrun by weariness, too, and it’s odd to feel such different emotions clashing within him; like two stubborn knights on a shredded, empty battlefield. Adam’s disoriented and tense and *tired*. Not for the first time, he wishes he could just *sleep* in here. Just...ignore everything, for a while.

It’s a futile wish.

“Yeah,” Adam says, roughly, his voice barely even a whisper. “Yeah, we do.”

He turns around to finally look at Michael, and finds him barely even a foot from him, arm outstretched. He’s prepared for Michael to just *do*...whatever it is he wants to do, but the archangel stops, like he’s remembered something.

“...May I?”

Adam is stunned, entirely confounded, and it takes a moment for his brain to reboot enough to say, “Uh—yeah. Sure.”

Michael nods, and his fingers tap against the middle of Adam’s forehead.

Adam gasps—he feels like he’s been lifted off his feet and entirely disassembled, with his metaphysical body no longer in existence. Instead, he’s just... *there.* A single soul, floating in an empty ocean of *nothing*. He’s burning and freezing all at once, but it doesn’t *hurt*—they’re just feelings, just simple ways of existing that leave him with the quiet reminder that he’s still alive.

There’s something circling around him, keeping its distance but analyzing him all the same, and he realizes with a jolt that it’s *Michael.* More specifically, Michael's grace. He doesn’t *touch* him, but Adam can feel the familiar energy thrumming from him like a relentless tempest all the same.

Once upon a time, it would have inspired fear in him, as it *should.* He doesn’t understand why it doesn’t, now—why it just seems like they’re doing the same thing they always do, with Michael sitting across the room from him and listening to him ramble on in Enochian. It’s a level of *used to it* that he doesn’t know how to comprehend, so he just...doesn’t. Adam pushes the feeling off to the side, instead focusing on Michael. It’s just easier to let himself float in a dark abyss, the familiar presence like a distant fence around him.

It's...comforting, if he thinks about it for too long.

Adam pushes that off to the side, too.

And then he gets this *sense* that almost reminds him of something being pushed back into place—like a picture frame, hanging crookedly on the wall before someone rights it—right before he comes slamming back down into the false copy of his house, his “body” resurrected and good as new. He’s not in the living room anymore, though. Now, he’s lying back on the bed in his room, and Michael is watching him attentively, arms crossed as he leans on the wall next to the side of the bed that Adam’s laying on.

“When you were first exposed to my grace,” he murmurs, and he's more than a little distant as he says it—like he's talking more to himself than anything else, “your mind should’ve broken. It’s as I said before—you do not have the mental capacity to withstand my power. Or,” he raises his eyebrows, considering Adam carefully, “I thought you didn’t.”

Adam slowly sits up and draws his legs into a criss-cross position, taking the time to admire the fact that his mind is suddenly entirely silent for the first time in ages. He responds, though. Eventually. “What do you mean?”

“Your mind should’ve broken,” Michael repeats, “but it was only damaged.”

Adam presses his lips together in thought, pensive as he turns the words over and over in his mind. “Is it because I’m part of that whole Winchester bloodline thing?”

“Maybe. But human minds are still human minds, regardless of bloodlines.”

“And, that means...?”

“Your tenacity, it’s—” Michael pauses, his eyebrows raising like they belonged on a smile instead of the neutral line of his mouth. “It’s something, kid.”

He takes two seconds to think about that, realizes that he’s got two routes he can take with this conversation, and decides to take the lighthearted one.

“Was *that* a compliment, old man?”

Michael blinks, glances at the floor for a moment, and then looks back up with a sense of earnestness that stops Adam’s mind in its tracks. “Yes.”

Well, so much for the lightheartedness.

“So, when you fight Lucifer, are you...playing to *wing?*”

Silence.

“Or are you just *winging* it every time?”

No response.

Listen, Adam gets that the *original* point of him telling bad puns was to try and get Michael to laugh, but seeing as it’s not working he thinks he’s allowed to start snickering at the long-suffering look that Michael’s started to wear. He’s gazing forlornly in front of him like the universe has turned against him in every way, shape and form, and Adam starts full-on laughing when the archangel’s eyes finally fall on him, looking all but dead with the amount of *done* they are.

“Are you finished?”

“Me? Never. You should know this by now.”

Michael rolls his eyes, but there’s no indication of actual annoyance behind it. It only makes Adam grin wider. “Sadly.”

“Are my puns not up to your standards? What if I—wait, holy shit, what if I translated them into Enochian?” The raised eyebrows he gets in return to his question only makes him start laughing *again*, harder, this time.

For someone who’s trapped in Hell, Adam’s been in a fairly good mood, lately. Probably because he no longer has to see stupid images that his mind conjures up at every goddamn moment like shitty actors in a bad play. And because his thoughts have managed to get back in order. Somewhat, at least. It’s a work in progress.

The change of scenery probably helped, too. They’re no longer in the illusion of his house—instead, they’re at the park; the same park that Adam used to be taken to by his mother, on

her days off. There aren't any bad memories associated with this place—no getting eaten alive, no getting set on fire. It's nice. Peaceful. Quiet, but not stiflingly so. They've been here a long while, and Adam had never once lost his love for it.

Adam steps onto one of the swings, grabbing onto the bar above it and hoisting himself up, twisting until he's perched on top of it.

The archangel takes one look at him, tilts his head to the side, and, in the next instant, he's on top of the swing frame with him. Except he's standing, instead of sitting. Adam tries for an unimpressed look, but he doesn't think that he quite makes it. He's too exuberant.

"Cheater."

Michael smiles, then, and it's small—just a simple upwards twitching of his lips—but Adam is struck by how *different* it makes him look. He looks...softer. Kinder. Nothing like the cold prince he'd encountered during their first meetings, like the enraged soldier who'd held him against an invisible wall and called him a pathetic little worm. He just looks like *Michael*—amused and a little fond, and maybe it's not a *laugh* like he'd been going for but Adam wants to count it as a goddamn win.

"Am I?"

"I'm kidding. You wanna sit down?"

"Is there a difference?" He looks down at where Adam's sitting and then looks to his own feet, as if he's trying to analyze the benefits of sitting down versus standing up.

"Well," Adam says, the side of his mouth quirking up, "no, not really? You don't have any problems balancing, so...guess not."

After a moment, Michael sits down. Adam swears that he's never going to be able to figure him out.

There's a lull in their conversation, for a while, and then Adam asks, "How're you holding up?"

Michael pauses, for a moment, like he isn't sure what to say. "I have no purpose down here," he sighs, at last. "For so long, I followed my Father's Plan, and…now, there is no way for me to keep following it. Without a purpose, I...have no reason to be alive. I shouldn't be."

The words, spoken so simply, so matter-of-factly, leave a bad taste in Adam's mouth, and he's not even the one who uttered them. "I don't...It's not really a matter of *should* or *shouldn't be*, is it? You're alive, and that's just kind of—it. Maybe you had a *reason*, or whatever, to live, and that reason doesn't work anymore," he shrugs, shaking his head a little and turning to stare fully at Michael. "So couldn't you just...find another reason? Or, maybe, you don't need one."

"I was created to serve my Father, Adam," it's a string of words that Adam's heard so many times, *too* many times. "It has always been Him. It must always be Him."

“Just because you might’ve been created to serve someone doesn’t mean you can’t have reasons *other* than that to live your life, Michael. Maybe you can’t find a way to, uh, *serve* Him, right now, and I know we’re in Hell, but just because you can’t follow His orders doesn’t mean that your life is meaningless. If you were meant to be dead, you would’ve died by now, right?”

“I…”

“Look,” Adam says, swinging his legs a bit. “You tried your best to follow your dad’s orders, right? I mean, you even picked *me* over Dean just so you could get His show on the road.”

“I—” Michael starts, and it’s like he’s about to correct him, but then he stops. “I suppose, yes.”

“So, there you go. You tried your best, and it just...didn’t work out. And you can’t really do anything to fix that, can you? Not from here. But you’re still alive, even when you think you shouldn’t be. Maybe your old reason doesn’t work anymore. That doesn’t mean you can’t come up with a new one.”

Adam’s one to talk, considering *he* doesn’t even have a reason to stay alive, but Michael seems a little too confused, a little too lost, and Adam—wants to help. He just does.

Michael looks down, pondering it, and Adam stays quiet, lets him think.

“We’re in the Cage,” the archangel’s words are slow. Thoughtful. “I’m not sure what other reason I would...be able to find.”

“Well,” Adam chuckles, softly, “I’m not sure how much it helps, or...if it *means* anything, but my mom always told me to find beauty in the little things. It was probably because we didn’t have much, but it’s not like we have much here either, y’know?”

“Find...beauty. In Hell?” Michael asks, wryly, and it makes Adam snort.

“To be fair, it should be enough to eat away at our time. I mean, what’s there to look at that’s *beautiful,* down here? Lucifer trying to pry the bars open like a baby in a damn crib? I don’t think so.”

Michael laughs.

Michael laughs, and Adam almost falls off the top of the swing set, saved only by his hands, which grip the pole for dear life. It wouldn’t hurt if he hit the ground, he knows, but he’s been shot so far off-course in his own brain that it’s a miracle his hands reacted in the first place.

It isn’t loud—it’s breathy, soft, but if the surprised look on Michael’s face is anything to go by, it’s genuine. And it makes Adam start laughing in return, not entirely of his own accord.

Mission complete, he supposes.

“Why can’t I see your true form in here?”

Michael sends him a questioning frown, so Adam continues. “I mean, I could see Lucifer’s true form even when Sam was in control, at the cemetery. But you just look like a human in here. Do you do that on purpose?”

“I took this form because I assumed that humans preferred to interact with beings that looked similar to them,” Michael says. “You can’t see what I actually look like because this is just a manifestation of my consciousness, not my body.”

“Manifestation...so you can *manifest* pretty much anything in here, right?”

Michael raises his eyebrows. “Your mind works in odd ways.”

“Thanks. But am I right?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. I can manifest anything, and, as you’ve proven, so can you. However, it won’t be real.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know that. Anyways, what if we started, like, making things?” Already, Adam’s looking around, his mind racing with ideas. He glances at the ground, a sudden thought developing. *What if I...*

“Making things?”

“Well, we’ve been in three places: that whole black void thing, my house, and— *here,* ” he spreads his hands, turning to look at Michael. “Maybe we could, I don’t know, spice it up a little? I mean, what’s stopping us?”

The archangel gives him a bemused stare. “Show me?”

“Okay, here—” Adam stands up from the bench that he was sitting on, closing his eyes and imagining, *willing* his idea to come forward.

When he opens his eyes, there are flowers scattered around the park, flowers that weren’t there before. There were flowers growing *everywhere,* to be exact, even places where they shouldn’t be—roots embedded in the thick of the plastic slide on the playground and in the crevices of the metal chain links of the swings.

And the flowers, more specifically, were petunias.

Adam was no flower guy—anything he’d ever learned about flowers was what came out of his biology classes in school—but his mom had *loved* petunias, and she’d always take a camera and head outside to photograph them whenever they started to bloom. He was more familiar with them than probably any other plant in the world.

Adam takes a moment to peer around at it all, biting the inside of his cheek, before turning back around. He wonders if she'd like it. “Like this.”

Michael’s gazing around at the scene before him, his expression painted with a quiet color of astonishment. When his eyes land on Adam, they’re open, searching, and there’s something

else, too—something Adam can't make out. But that's been commonplace, lately—he can never quite figure out what's on the archangel's face when he's looking at him.

Honestly, it had been easier to read him back when they hated each other.

When Michael doesn't say anything, Adam clears his throat. "Right. So...d'you wanna give it a shot?"

Michael's eyes fall on the ground once more, and, in an instant, there are more petunias growing up around his feet, by the bench, in the mulch. They look the same as Adam's—bright pink, with white stripes extending inwards from the end of the petal like zebra lines.

It makes Adam grin. "Not much for variety, are you?"

Michael studies him, his brows furrowed with obvious curiosity. Adam reaches down, squatting, and takes one of the flowers between his pointer finger and thumb, twirling it absentmindedly. He doesn't pluck it, though.

"Here, let me just…" he closes his eyes again, and when he opens them, the petunias that he'd originally created are missing their zebra stripes, shifting from a bright pink to a fine white. Michael's still remain the same, and Adam releases his flower and sits back, triumphant.

"There. See? They're different."

"Is that...good?"

"Yeah, I think so," Adam says, twisting to look around at the bunches of white and pink petunias that now litter the place he once frequented when he was little. "Things get boring when they're always the same, don't they? This just...makes it fun. Y'know," he pauses, for a second, wondering if petunias were edible and despairing the fact that he'd never get to find out, "it adds to the flavor."

Adam snorts again at his own unintentional pun—but, seeing as he didn't he say it out loud, it makes Michael send him a strange look, which sort of makes Adam want to start laughing. Even still, Michael's face smooths out after a moment and he curls his hand as a flower appears in it, turning it over and over like he's never seen one before.

He did that with the deck of cards, too, Adam's brain reminds him, and he files it away for later. What he's going to do with that information, he's not sure. He keeps it anyway.

But, like he's been struck by lightning, Michael straightens, his back rigid; immobile. The petunia falls from his hands, fluttering down, down, down until it lands on the ground next to him.

Michael isn't angry. He isn't defensive. He looks— *scared.* No, he looks *terrified*, and that frightens the hell out of Adam more than anything ever has in his life.

"Michael?" he questions, standing up, and he can hear the worry seeping through his own voice. "What is it?"

“It—no, it can’t be. It *can’t* be!” Michael leaps to his feet, and his eyes are *wide,* wider than they’ve ever been. “ *She’s*—!”

Then he vanishes, to Adam’s shout of “Michael!”

Fear washes over him, after that, and Adam gasps from the intensity of it before he realizes that it’s *not all his.* He doesn’t know *how* he knows it, but he does.

It only makes his own fear turn up another notch, and he starts twisting and turning around to goggle at a suddenly-empty park, trying to keep his thoughts coherent as they threaten to consume him.

There’s something wrong. There’s something terribly, terribly wrong, because Michael’s *afraid* and Michael isn’t supposed to be afraid of *anything.* And this fear isn’t just fear—it’s horror. It’s *terror.* It’s dread and trepidation and something so deeply-rooted in Michael’s grace that it chills Adam to his core, and the iciness of the Cage has *nothing* on this.

Adam—stops. He closes his eyes. He clenches his fists and tries to block out Michael’s fear as best as he can and fucking *thinks,* for once in his life.

Michael was—*is*—absolutely fucking terrified. Something’s going on. Something that doesn’t involve Lucifer, if he’s going by how Michael said *she. She,* like it was a curse, like it was an *end.* But Michael’s never mentioned a *she,* never spoke about anyone except God and his brothers and the other angels, on occasion.

All Adam knows, *really* knows, is that Michael is scared. Michael is scared, Adam’s scared, and Michael’s *out there* and Adam’s *in here*.

So, he focuses. He strains. He feels the shield that his soul had built slowly melt away into nothing, until the ground beneath his feet isn’t ground at all. Adam wills himself to the forefront of his mind, feeling the colossal current of Michael’s grace growing closer and closer, his fear thicker and thicker.

He grabs onto every last drop of determination he’s ever felt in his life, every inch of willpower that he can manage, and he *pushes.*

When Adam opens his eyes, he sees the Cage, for the first time in a long time. He sees Lucifer, in all the glory of his true form, pressed up against the walls of the Cage like he’s trying to hide with his wings folded inward on himself, and all Adam can read from every bit of his body language is *panic, panic, panic*.

He hears something creaking and groaning like it’s being bent in places that shouldn’t bend, sees how sigils on the ceiling and the walls and the floor flare and peel and *burn.* It’s like a shockwave is hitting—a shockwave that’s powerful enough to make the two most powerful archangels there are want to run and hide like tiny animals in a storm. And Adam can feel it too, from in here—whatever this is, it’s *titanic.* Cosmic, on a level he’s never experienced before.

Whatever this is, it's…*horrible.* Adam doesn't have the goddamn vocabulary to describe it right now and *horrible*, in every sense of the word, is all he can come up with.

And then someone *screams,* an incomprehensible, gut-wrenching sound that leaves Adam shaken with the force of it.

Michael.

Chapter 7

Sometime between the anguished cry and the resounding silence that followed it, Adam was, once more, swept up into the chaos of Michael's mind.

The fervor of Michael's panic makes him feel like he's just been dropped in a sea of fear-filled flames, and he's suddenly reminded of his first encounter with Michael's mind and grace, all those years ago, when he'd been so overwhelmed that it had damaged his mind to the brink of insanity. But it's different, this time—this time, he's firmer, more grounded. Not as overwhelmed, which is odd, but Adam doesn't have time to question it. Michael is a fierce, endless maelstrom, and Adam buckles down and cements himself, holding as steady as he can amidst the violent disorientation.

—The Mark, how could it have—

—No, He wouldn't let this happen, surely He would have prevented—

—Where is He? Father—

Michael! Adam tries, *Listen to me!*

But it's like Michael can't hear him. Adam calls out a few more times—even in Enochian, for good measure—to no avail, growing more and more frustrated by the second. If Michael could stop being larger-than-life for *two seconds*, that would be *wonderful.*

Like a porcupine, his mind pipes up. *Remember?*

Oh. That's right.

He's freaked out. Make him...less freaked out.

Adam forces himself to let go of his frustration, his own panic. He allows himself a few moments of silence, and then he starts to talk.

He chatters. He repeats stories he'd already told a million times, going off on tangents and exploring topics that don't even make sense. He whispers about his mother and forces himself to laugh about the time he tripped and fell face-first on the ground getting out of her truck.

Adam keeps his voice calm, his soul steady, and he wills his voice to reach out to Michael. For Michael to *listen.*

At first, nothing happens. Michael is the same as before, still a whirling mass of high-strung terror and confusion that would be enough to knock Adam off his feet if he had them, in here. Then, Adam feels a change—it's subtle, just a general feeling that swirls murkily around him, but he *swears* that it's there, and it's enough to keep him talking, enough to keep himself afloat from the wave of fear that threatens to drown him the second he breaks concentration.

Michael, he thinks, doing his absolute best to project the thought towards the archangel. *Can you hear me? Do you...I don't know, recognize me? Come on. I know you're old, but your memory isn't* that *bad, is it?*

Adam almost wants to move forward and brush up against *more* of the hurricane of swirling grace around him, in some sort of comforting gesture, but he isn't sure if it'll be appreciated or not.

Michael, Adam says, softly, as gently as he can. *Please.*

Nothing. And then—a shift.

He can't quite put his finger on what's changed until he looks down at visible hands and realizes that he's taken on a human form again. He's still in the void, feet planted firmly on a vast expanse of nothing, and he has only a few moments to take it all in before Michael, in all his archangel fashion, abruptly appears across from him—arms tightly crossed, stiffly pacing, glancing at Adam fleetingly before his eyes return to zooming wildly all over the place, muttering something under his breath that Adam can't quite hear.

"Thanks," Adam tries, but again—it seems like Michael just doesn't hear him. He watches him pace back and forth, for a few minutes, before some part of him decides, like always, *fuck it.*

Slowly, like he's approaching a cornered animal (*and maybe he is,* some part of his brain thinks), Adam steps forward, step by step by step until Michael's a moving line in front of him, barely a foot away when he crosses Adam's path.

He reaches out, grasping Michael's upper arm with his right hand just as Michael's about to turn. The archangel's reaction is instantaneous, lightning-quick; he freezes, head shooting up to lock onto Adam's face, almost like he's about to pull away. His jaw is clenched, teeth obviously gritted, and Adam keeps his face as neutral and open as he can. He can still feel Michael's grace roiling around them, oozing distress, but he doesn't let it affect him—he tries hard not to, at least.

"Hey," Adam starts, keeping his hand on his arm. "You with me?"

For a few moments there's nothing but silence, a tense absence of sound that forces Adam to fight to keep the worry rising at the back of his throat down. He's always been brutally aware of the fact that Michael is something bigger, something *more,* but his preternatural nature suddenly hits Adam like a smack to the face, inexplicable in ways he can't even begin to touch in the here and now of it all. Michael looks around him, *through* him, his frightening stillness somehow making him seem elevated on a different sort of level, and Adam can almost feel the memory of what Michael actually looks like washing over him like a tidal wave.

He doesn't fear the look of Michael's true form—he doesn't think he's ever feared it—but something in his brain urges him to push the image down, to turn away from it; and, for the life of him, Adam can't figure out *why.*

Nonetheless, he dutifully diverts his attention away from it. A puzzle for another time.

Finally, Michael nods, and it makes Adam huff out a breath of relief. He doesn't let go of Michael's arm.

"Right. Okay," Adam nods back, short and sharp. "What's going on? Can you tell me?"

Michael's exhale is terse, and so is his voice. He sounds nowhere near as composed as he usually is. "The Darkness. She's—she's *back.*"

"And, she is...?" Adam questions.

"Before all that you know came to be—long before *I* came to be—there existed two beings: my Father, and the Darkness before Him. His sister."

"Wait, wait, wait—God has a *sister*?" Looks like the Bible could use some modifications.

"Yes," Michael says, without skipping a beat. "My Father and my brothers and I, we fought for *millennia* to seal her away. We barely managed it. If…" he starts to trail off, and Adam is suddenly struck by how young he sounds.

Michael has always seemed old, always in control of himself, even on the occasions where he seemed a bit lost. Now, though, he seemed...not small, maybe, but diminished. Unsure, on a level that Adam had never seen before.

"If He had *sensed* that someone was trying to break the Mark, then why wouldn't He stop them? And…" Michael pauses, and sheer disbelief stains his tone when he speaks again. "When the Cage felt the impact of the Darkness's release, it weakened. I could sense parts of the outside world. I…Raphael, he's—"

And Adam, acting on the orders of the sinking feeling in his stomach, lurches forward and hugs him.

Michael doesn't push him away, doesn't snap at him, doesn't make haste to teleport out of his grip. Adam can't tell if it helps at all, if Michael can even *feel* it—because he knows he's nothing but a speck of dust next to the vastness of Michael's true form—but he does it anyway. He doesn't squeeze him, but he's firm, unyielding, wanting to let Michael know that Adam's there. That he isn't alone.

Because this much, Adam understands. Knoes what it is to lose a family member, what it is to be left behind, what it is to be *alone.* So he gently runs his hand up and down the length of Michael's upper back, he closes his eyes, and he holds him. Adam opens up his heart, his soul, lets Michael feel the entirety of his understanding like his own little tidal wave.

It probably isn't much, to someone like him. Like before, he does it anyway.

Michael doesn't move. Doesn't even seem to twitch. But Adam can feel as his grace begins to settle—his mind slowly easing back into the world of calm even if it isn't back into the world of *okay.*

I don't understand you, Michael murmurs, later. Their false bodies have separated but their beings are still touching, Michael's grace brushing delicately against Adam's soul in a way that keeps them both grounded, connected. It's an odd thing, he thinks, to be hearing Michael's voice but not seeing his mouth move.

What do you mean? Adam asks.

I abandoned you in favor of battling my brother. I damaged your mind. You know these things, and yet...you feel no animosity towards me. It's still strange, to have Michael be able to openly read his every emotion. It's even stranger that Adam doesn't mind it as much as he thought he would. It's not like he has anything to hide, after all. Not anymore. *You treat me with kindness. I don't understand.*

Adam's quiet, for a second. *I hated you, at first. Back then. I really did. But you stayed, didn't you? After we made our little, uh, agreement. And even before that, sort of. Even if you acted like a douche.* A hint of amusement ripples across Michael's expression, but only a hint. He's still distraught, which isn't surprising. Adam would be more surprised if he wasn't.

Adam remembers Michael's old declarations, the ones about how God hadn't come back *yet,* and he sighs. *Plus, you fixed my mind when you found out about it. You've made up for it, haven't you? I forgive you, man. I have for a while. We only have each other, right?* he smiles, a little quirk of his lips, and he hopes it doesn't look sardonic.

Michael is staring at him, his eyes a little wide.

Besides, Adam chuckles, then, a little darkly, *it's not like I haven't screwed up, either. I mean, maybe if I'd actually been a more powerful vessel, we wouldn't have ended up—*

"No," Michael interrupts, out loud, and there's so much conviction behind it that it makes Adam fall silent. "No. That's not it."

He almost seems to struggle for words before clasping his hands together, resting his elbows on his knees from where he's sitting on the black expanse that acts as their ground next to Adam.

I used to think that as well. Back then. But I…I was wrong, he presses his lips together in a gesture that Adam's much, *much* too familiar with before his grace brushes a little more against his soul. Adam sucks in a breath at the depth of Michael's candor. *To have had you as a vessel...it has been my honor, Adam.*

Adam stares at him, wide-eyed. *You sound like you're saying goodbye, old man.*

Michael's face is stark and grim, his gaze just a little to the left of utterly hopeless. *The Darkness is free, and my Father is gone. She will, no doubt, seek to destroy all that He's created. So…* he sighs and utter defeat forms like a black hole on his face, marring his features, a sight that makes Adam's insides twinge in a painful little twist. *Maybe I am.*

Adam knows death. He's died twice now, after all, and he's fervently wished for it on more than one occasion. He isn't afraid of it. Not anymore. Something in him cries out at Michael's

words, though, something that wishes that he didn't have to die in *here,* in the dark and cold of Hell where nothing could ever reach them.

As if anything would try, his brain snarks. He ignores it in favor of extending a hand towards Michael, who watches the movement with open surprise.

"*If we are to die,*" he says, in Enochian, "*we shall not do it alone.*"

Adam watches a myriad of emotions too quick to catch unfold on Michael's face; feels the way his grace seems to tremble, just for a moment. He says nothing, waits for Michael to respond.

Michael, as slowly as if he were disarming a bomb, reaches back out in return, hesitantly resting his own hand in Adam's. Adam curls his fingers around it, watching the way the archangel's twitch in consideration before mirroring the gesture.

"*No,*" Michael murmurs. "*No, we shall not.*"

Lucifer has grown volatile, lashing out in random directions before growing still and silent for erratic periods of time. Both Michael and Adam have taken up residence of Adam's body, now, with Adam refusing to retreat backwards into his mind once more.

"I'm not leaving you," Adam had stated, and Michael hadn't argued. Instead, he'd nodded, and propelled them both upwards until the Cage was visible once more.

What's he doing? Adam asks, sending Michael the mental image of motioning to Lucifer. He gets the image of Michael shaking his head back, feeling ripples of confusion cascade across his grace.

I'm not sure, Michael says, and he sounds troubled. *I've never seen him so quiet before.*

There's a short silence, and then, Adam says, *Michael...you said you could sense parts of the outside world, right? Now that the Cage isn't as strong as before?*

I can.

Can you… Adam pauses, unconfident. *Do you know how long we've been down here?*

Michael's grace takes on a strained feel for a moment before returning to a neutral state, almost as if he'd been stretching. *Time works differently down here, kid. On Earth, it's been...five years, at least. Nearing six, I think.*

If Adam had been in control, he would've blown out a breath.

Five, six years. He would've been...what, twenty-three, twenty-four? Twenty-five, maybe? What would he have been doing, if he were still up there? It's something too distant to think about; something obscure and strange. He barely even remembers how people interacted up there—all he has now are the memories of himself and his mother, and the occasional memory without her.

And down here?

Roughly six hundred.

It sets him more at ease, he thinks, to hear the words *six hundred*. Maybe it's because it seems more real than just a simple *five* or *six*—counting by such short periods of time feels odd, for reasons he wants to shy away from. Days and weeks and months and years are just too small. Six hundred feels more natural. More material.

He feels the equivalent of nudge from Michael and snaps back to attention, freezing like something bad's about to happen. Michael's never nudged him like that before.

Hm? What's going on?

Nothing. Yet, Michael mutters, a little bitterly, before his voice evens out. *Are you alright?*

Huh? Oh—oh, yeah, I'm alright, halo, don't worry about it. Just thinking. The nickname slips out, unbidden, and Adam bites down on his metaphorical tongue. *Oops, sorry, I didn't mean —*

It's fine, Michael says, but he doesn't get the chance to say anything else, because Lucifer starts *talking,* for the first time since they'd come to the fore of Adam's body.

It's not even in Enochian, which strikes Adam as odd.

"Y'know, Michael," Lucifer says, and he starts taking steps—back and forth, back and forth, from one wall of the Cage to the other. Adam feels Michael's grace stiffen and harden, defensively, before he feels himself being pushed back. Not enough to land him back in his own mind, but enough that his attempts to peer at Lucifer reminds him of looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Michael's grace never leaves his soul, though, and for that Adam is grateful. "I expected *more* from you."

Slowly, slowly, his true form starts to shift—from a massive, corrupted being of unbridled energy to a man, blond, with a green jacket not unlike Adam's own. He looks smug. "I mean, look at you! Daddy's perfect little soldier, reduced down to—to *this.* Some half-assed vegetable, just rotting away in our own personal mini-fridge."

Lucifer spreads his hands, and a sneer plays across his features. His laugh is condescending in a way that makes Adam want to punch him. Not that it'd do any good. "Plus, I mean, look at what's happened! Our good ol' Auntie's decided to come pay the world a visit, and, uh, where's Dad? Oh. Oh, that's right," he leans in, his voice turning sing-song. "*Nowhere!* Probably holed up somewhere acting the same as you, honestly. But, you know what the sad thing is? The thing that really grinds my gears?"

He begins to step forward, and Adam can feel Michael's grace begin to morph into something fiercer, something more ready to attack. To defend, even.

Be careful, Adam whispers. He gets a quick flicker from Michael's grace in response—a motion to show that he's heard, Adam interprets.

“*You,*” Lucifer points a finger in Michael's direction, “still believe in Him, don’tcha? You’re probably hidden away in there, all hopeful and waiting for Dad to come riding in on some chariot,” he *tsks,* pityingly, and Adam can feel Michael’s temper start building up like a flame nearing the wick of a stick of dynamite.

“He’s not, just in case you were interested, but me?” the Devil laughs, sounding triumphant. “I’m about to take a free ride out on somebody *else’s* chariot. Not yet, not now, but, uh, soon. And you’re gonna be left here, aren’t you? All alone. No Dad, no me, just... *you.*”

Lucifer’s eyes hone in on Adam’s body like a hawk locking onto its prey, seemingly waiting for something to happen. *A reaction,* Adam realizes, and he leans forward, brushes up a little more against Michael, silently urges him to calm down, to not make any rash decisions.

And holy fuck, is Michael close to one.

But Michael doesn’t do anything. He fumes, but the only movement he makes is the way his grace thrashes wildly, an agitated motion that only Adam can see, deep in whatever mental link they've formed. The rest of him never leaves its steely defense, ready to lash out at a moment's notice.

Lucifer gives an exaggerated slump, like he’s disappointed, and then he steps back until he reaches the wall of the Cage with a *thump,* sliding down until he hits the floor. “Ugh. You’re no fun anymore, you know that? You’re just weak. It’s pathetic, really.”

With no reaction drawn once more, the Devil falls silent.

Finally.

‘Ride on somebody else’s chariot’? What’s he talking about?

I don’t know, Michael replies, *I don’t know.*

Do you wanna go back inside?

There’s no reply, but the view of the Cage abruptly disappears into the familiar copy of Adam’s house. Michael still looks angry, but Adam’s...*connected* to him, now. He knows better, can feel the perturbation that flows off of him in waves, the tendrils of emotion too raw to name that trickle past his control as a result of Lucifer's jabs.

“You’re not weak, y’know.”

Michael glances up at him, penetratingly analytical. “I know.”

“Do you?” Adam cocks an eyebrow at him, sitting down on one end of the couch and leaning his elbow on the armrest.

The archangel sends him a distasteful look for all of half a moment before sighing, slipping his hands into his pockets and walking over to take a seat at the other end.

“If I thought nothing made sense before...” Michael shakes his head. “It’s making even less sense now.”

“We’re gonna die, aren’t we?” Adam says, grinning, but it’s empty. “Who says things have to make sense?”

Michael frowns, opens his mouth, closes it, and then just sits there, apparently unsure of the meaning behind Adam’s words.

It’s fine. Adam isn’t sure either.

“I thought I was supposed to die in battle,” Michael says, in an undertone. “Not like this.”

“I used to think that I’d die old,” Adam offers. Nothing’s happened, yet. No wave of destruction coming to annihilate them all. Honestly, the anticipation is killing him. He’d much prefer to just get it over with. “With a house, I guess. A wife. Some kids.”

Michael turns to look at him. “Is that still what you want?” The words seem critical, but the archangel’s expression seems genuinely curious.

Adam laughs a little. “Nah, no way. I don’t think I’d ever be able to settle down like that, not anymore,” he looks back at him, an amused smile on his face. “Besides, you’re pioneering my body, aren’t you? So it isn’t like I’d be able to walk and talk, and stuff.”

Michael regards him for a moment. “I see.”

“What about you? If all of this—” Adam gestures around with his right hand, “—wasn’t happening, and we got out, somehow, would you still wanna burn down the world? Kick off the Apocalypse?”

The archangel glances down. “The battle with my brother was intended to bring my Father back,” he murmurs, finally. “Seeing as He hasn’t come back, even in the face of the Darkness’s return, I...suppose there wouldn’t be a reason for me to go through with it. Not anymore.”

Adam nods. “Okay, but that isn’t what I asked.” When Michael turns his gaze back on him in confusion, Adam clarifies. “Would you *want* to?”

Michael stares at him, taken aback, before his face adopts a *look*—similar to how he used to peer at him before they’d become...friends. It’s not as piercing, though. It’s more searching, like he can’t fathom why Adam’s asking him this question in particular.

“No,” he says, at last. “No. I wouldn’t.”

Adam smiles in spite of his own surprise, eyebrows raising as he turns to face Michael with his entire body. It makes Michael’s expression even out in return, the upward tugging at the corners of his lips on display for the world to see.

No, not the world. The world isn't down here, is it?

It's just Adam in here.

It's just for *Adam.*

“Well, uh…" Adam nods, trying to shake *that* suddenly-realized detail out of his brain. He sounds like a creep. "Here’s to things changing. Even if we’re gonna die.”

With that, Adam holds out a fist, which Michael looks down at with curious amusement before Adam remembers—*oh.*

Right.

Archangel.

“Oh! Oh, that’s right—you don’t know what a fist bump is, do you? Okay, so you just—” he mimes tapping his own fists together before extending one back out to Michael, who chuckles. It makes Adam join along, and Michael raises his fist and knocks it softly against Adam’s, his movements a little too stiff for Adam to pretend he didn't notice.

Hey, if the universe is ending, he might as well have his last laughs, right? Having them over fist bumps doesn’t seem all too bad.

Michael’s eyes trail upwards, then, landing on something just above Adam’s head. Adam tips his head backwards, trying to follow his gaze and frowning bemusedly at Michael when he comes up with nothing.

“What is it?”

The archangel doesn’t reply, instead reaching out with his hand and brushing it over Adam’s hair, like he’s smoothing something down. It makes heat prickle underneath his skin, and when Michael pulls his hand back, Adam gets the urge to chase it; to follow the warmth of physical contact and never let it go, reminding him of the same feeling he’d gotten all those years ago.

His skin—what‘s *considered* his skin, in here, anyway—tingles from the contact, eliciting a fierce appetency for *more, more, more* within him that trickles through him slowly, like molasses. Adam’s absolutely certain that every reaction of his is being read across their connection by Michael, but he couldn’t bring himself to care about that if he tried. It isn’t like he’s trying to hide—he has no *reason* to.

Adam hadn’t felt this when he’d hugged him, or when he’d held his hand—too focused, he’d been, on comforting his only friend—but this was different. Less of an act of comfort and more of...an act.

Just an act.

True to Adam’s prediction, Michael surveys him in an inquisitive manner, obviously not expecting Adam’s visceral response.

When Michael’s hand makes its way back up, slowly and deliberately, it rests lightly on the side of his head, his fingers hovering carefully on his hair—just above his scalp, like he’s hesitant to touch. Which doesn’t make sense, because it’s just him—just Adam.

Regardless, Adam hasn’t had the ability to truly indulge in the feeling of contact for centuries, and he has nothing to lose.

Absolutely nothing.

He shifts his eyes downwards, staring at the couch cushions, and softly presses his head into Michael’s hand.

The effect is instantaneous—he feels warmth blossom forth from the area where the hand lays until it spreads to the rest of his body, and it’s so blatantly *unfamiliar* that it almost seems like it’s burning him. Little flashes of lightning are sparking underneath the surface of his skin, and his eyes flutter shut as he inhales, suddenly feeling as if something delicate has burrowed its way from the point of contact down into the center of his chest, something that had the potential to snap at any given moment. He's a leaf on the edge of a cliff in the middle of a storm, about to be hurled away into the great unknown of the valley below whether he likes it or not.

Michael—to his credit—doesn’t move, instead allowing Adam to remain leaning against the palm of his hand, against the electric pads of his fingertips. Adam can feel his grace flicker, a bit, but he isn’t sure of the meaning behind it—whatever Michael’s feeling, he’s keeping it carefully contained, hidden away. Adam pries his eyes open reluctantly, looking up to meet the archangel's stare and finding him watching him with a mixture of muted surprise and profound focus that makes him want to close his eyes again.

He doesn't. Instead, he lets his gaze flicker off to the side, looking through one of the windows on his left. Incongruous white light stares right back at him, something akin to a sunbeam that filtered through the pseudo-glass and never quite seemed to fully enter the house. He *could* reshape it to form a neighborhood, if he wanted, but he thinks that it would be too out of place here. A neighborhood was an indication of human life, or even that human life once existed, in any particular area. There’s no human life here. Nobody except him, at least, and he hardly thinks that he’s the best example of it.

The distraction that the window provides is enough to shock him back into the reality of what, exactly, is happening right now, as if he’s suddenly found himself on the receiving end of a defibrillator.

Christ. What is he *doing?*

Adam clears his throat, figuring that he should say *something,* but all that comes out is, “Ah...sorry. I didn’t, uh, I wasn’t—” he starts to move away, despite everything within him screaming at him to stay, to savor the sensation of touch after so long without it.

He starts to move away—except he doesn’t.

Adam can't *bring* himself to move away when Michael's hand begins to trail down, leaving scorching imprints on his head as his fingers sink lower—imprints that seem to reach all the way down to his soul. If he were to touch the area himself, Adam knows with certainty that there would be nothing there, but he would swear with just as much certainty that they exist; can *feel* them, plain as day, tingling with an energy that's dipping just over the edge of red-hot. He sucks in a sharp breath, the caress enough to leave him feeling like he's swaying, the foreign burn piercing his skin in a way that's much too welcome for his own taste.

The archangel's hand doesn't travel far, stopping to curl at the base of his neck, his fingertips pressing lightly into the back of it with his thumb swiping softly along the skin under his ear. Adam's eyelids immediately fall shut once more, his head tipping shamelessly backwards to press into the touch like it's a drug and he's a man sick with withdrawal. He feels tears beginning to prick at his eyes but he keeps them shut, refuses to let them fall.

It really is so ridiculous that he can cry in a place that's literally constructed by his imagination. He'd like to think that his own mind would give him some goddamn leeway—in this area, if not the sanity area—but apparently not.

Some part of his brain wants to ask why Michael's doing this, why he's letting *Adam* do this. Maybe it's because it's the end of the world and Adam isn't the only one who's decided that he has nothing left to lose. Maybe it's because Michael feels bad for him. Maybe it's something else.

He doesn't speak his mind, though. No matter what it is, it's the first time in centuries that he feels something a little like peace. *Real* peace.

Pretty shitty timing, all things considered, but he'll take it.

Chapter 8

He’s there, and then he’s gone.

“Sam Winchester. My old roomie. Hug it out?”

Lucifer’s still in the Cage, both he and Michael can *feel* him, but he’s...somewhere else. Audible, but not *there.* Michael’s tense, on edge, and Adam feels shock ring through his own soul like a bell at the name.

Sam? Sam’s *back?*

Adam can’t hear it, but he assumes that there’s some sort of response, because Lucifer continues talking—and, from the sound of it, they’re speaking about the Darkness.

“Hmm. Oh, that leads me to my next question. Where’s the big burrito himself? Where’s God in all of this?”

He feels Michael’s grace twitch with an emotion just shy of anger and he nudges him, urging him to hang on, to focus. The grace settles after a moment or two, and Adam tunes back into the conversation, feeling Michael do the same.

It seems like they’re arguing, mostly. Adam isn’t sure of the specifics, but then Lucifer says — *”And, I need a ride out of here. I mean, I look swell in here and everything, but I’d be so much smoke topside,”* and Adam thinks, *the chariot.*

Michael, he says, the beginnings of anxiety beginning to prickle at the back of his mind, *Michael, this is what he was talking about. This is what he was doing.*

He’s been taking advantage of the damaged state of the Cage, Michael seethes. *He was reaching out to Sam the whole time.*

And he actually came back?! Adam snaps, but it’s not at Michael—it’s at the flicker of hope that’s beginning to spark in the bottom of his heart, hope that just won’t seem to die out no matter how much he pinches it.

Maybe they’d...remembered him? Maybe—

No, he shouts at himself, *stop being stupid! Stop it! You’re going to—*

But what if they did? another voice murmurs, soft, insistent. *What if they—*

“Sam, why do you think God sent you to me? To get my help, which I only now just offered. Sam, your visions were the Word of God. You can’t say no to that.”

There’s a moment of quiet that’s so loud it could’ve made Adam’s ears ring, and then—

The Word of God? Michael utters, voice so deadly quiet that it would make any sane person duck and run for cover, a roaring inferno beginning to swirl outwards from the heart of his grace. *He dares to try and pass himself off as the messenger of God's word?*

Adam immediately quells the battle that's started to clash within himself and reaches out, brushing up against more and more of Michael's grace until it feels like he's almost surrounded in the electric thrum of barely-restrained power. He can feel the sheer amount of *wrath* that envelops him like a thousand weighted blankets but it doesn't scare him, doesn't overwhelm him like it would've centuries ago.

Michael, he speaks, lowering his voice until it's just above a whisper, *take it easy. It's Lucifer, yeah? The Devil? You know how he is, what he does.*

Michael says nothing, but Adam feels the storm slowly begin to abate around him—from a thunderous tsunami to choppy waves. He sends a mental picture towards the archangel, beckoning him to come inside so Adam can look at him properly, and a moment later they've retreated into the familiar space of Adam's house—this time, with the conversation outside still echoing around them, like they'd never moved back at all. Michael's expression is dark, his jaw tight, appearing right next to him on the floorboards that never creak, and Adam wastes no time in laying a gentle hand on his shoulder, prompting the archangel to turn and look at him.

How Michael could *ever* get so angry on behalf of the dad who'd never come back from his celestial beer run is *beyond* him.

Adam searches his expression, deliberately keeping himself calm, letting the feeling transmit over from him to Michael; and Michael's expression begins to even out, his eyebrows unstitching themselves from their furrowed state to ease into something softer, more equable.

It's what they hear next, though, that makes Adam stiffen like a board.

"Together again. Hey, Sam Winchester, did you miss me? I bet you did. I have to say, you're extraordinarily calm given the circumstances."

"Well, it's pretty much exactly how God told me it was going to be. Guess I just have to go with it and play my hand."

The last time Adam had heard that voice, it had been pitched high in a scream as it was burned, flayed, brutally murdered a thousand times over. It makes a chill race up his spine to hear it again—the first *different* voice he's heard in *centuries* —as well as an abject feeling of horror that begins to slowly dawn on him as he realizes something.

"Sam's—he's back," his grip tightens slightly from where it had been resting on Michael's shoulder. "He's *in* the *Cage.* With *us.* Again—how the *fuck*—?"

"Whatever warding they had set up around him," Michael says, his tone low, "it must've failed."

Sam— *Jesus,* no matter how much Adam held it against him and Dean for forgetting him here, it wasn't as if Adam had wanted him back *in.* He'd *seen* how it went the first time around—when Lucifer broke away from his and Michael's fighting to dig into the older man with sadistic pleasure that had sickened Adam to his stomach, had made him want to turn *away,* but he hadn't known how to *do* it back then. The memories surface like bile in his throat and he shakes his head, a little, just to try and clear his mind.

Adam would warn him if he were down there, tell him *no, Sam, you weren't getting those visions from God! That wasn't God! Get out of here!* but he's helpless to sit back here and listen, and all he can do is hope that Sam doesn't say *yes.*

"So you see, he's not with you. He's never been with you. It was always...just...me. So I...I guess I am your only hope."

"It's never going to happen."

"It better not," Michael grunts, quietly. Adam can only swallow in response, finally lowering his hand.

Sam and Lucifer keep talking, and Adam can slowly feel his mind turning into a haze of anxious fretting. If Sam *does* say yes, what will that mean for the Earth?

Would that even matter, though? his mind takes a sudden turn for the dark, the cynical. *You'll still be down here. What happens up there won't affect you.*

You don't know that, another voice pipes up, eerily reminding him of his hallucinations. *Maybe they'll remember you, this time. Maybe—*

Shut up!

Michael's watching him, seeing the way Adam stills at Sam's next sentence—*"Yeah. You'll taunt me and you'll, ah, torture me, and I'll say no. And eventually, sooner than you think, my brother's gonna walk through that door and kick your ass."* —probably *feeling* the way that hot resentment briefly thrashes in the pit of his stomach; ugly with bitterness.

Must be nice, Adam thinks, to have such profound faith that someone else is going to save you. Meanwhile, he's still trying to suppress the hope that keeps rising up in his chest for all he's worth; like vomit during a bad flu.

"Dean? You're betting on Dean?"

"I always have."

He's not sure how he can be so embittered and so hopeful at the same time. He's really, really not. His heart aching for them to remember him even though his mind screams that they won't, and some odd form of desperation decides to join the mix; desperation for Sam and Dean to prove his mind wrong.

They'd come for him once before, right? So...maybe they'd just been busy all this time. Maybe—

Stop it!

“What d’you think’s gonna happen?” Adam mutters, eyes firmly on the ground. Out of his peripheral vision, he sees Michael shake his head.

“If your brother has an ounce of common sense, he’ll know not to let Lucifer in. No matter the cost,” Michael replies, but then his voice turns dark, scathing. “Of course, they’ve proven themselves to be idiots before.” He doesn’t need to say anything more. The *maybe they’ll be idiots again* is so clearly implied that Adam can taste it.

All he does is sigh.

There’s quiet, then—between all four inhabitants of the Cage. It’s tense, dampening, enough to leave both Michael and himself on edge. They don’t move, waiting for something, *anything*, but Adam eventually shifts until his shoulder brushes softly against Michael’s.

He’s scared.

Scared for the world, scared for Sam, scared of *dying.*

He'd once thought that death would bring him relief; that it would save him from the cold and the empty and the dark. But if the Darkness destroyed everything, then...what would happen when he died?

The thought of falling into another pit of blackness makes him twitch.

When speech from below reverberates around them once more, he perks up, latching onto the conversation with too-eager ears.

And then—

“Okay, you don't like me. I get it... I get it; sometimes I don't like me either. But Gabriel and Raphael are dead. God went out for a pack of smokes and never came back...and Michael... well, let's just say prison life hasn't really agreed with Michael. These days he's usually sitting in a corner singing show tunes and touching himself.”

There’s a single beat of the loudest stillness Adam had ever heard in his life, even overpowering the old days of isolation and darkness and insanity, and—

“*Excuse* me?” Michael’s voice is so indignant, so *offended,* that Adam can’t help the way that a snicker bursts from the back of his throat, the tight feeling in his chest easing the smallest of amounts as Michael rounds on him with a look just shy of utter betrayal, something that makes him begin to smile even wider as he chortles.

The insulted expression doesn’t last long, though. After a moment or two, it lessens, evens out, amusement sweeping lightly across his features like the stroke of an artist’s paintbrush. Adam watches as Michael’s eyes seem to rove over every inch of his face before finally flitting upwards to land on his own, turning from disgruntled to benign in a matter of seconds.

Adam thinks, not for the first time, that it’s a *damn* good look on him.

It suits him a thousand times better than any cold front he could ever put up in front of anyone—the slight crinkle at the corners of his eyes, the tiny quirk of his lips, the small creases that form on his forehead. Adam’s always been aware that Michael is *great,* in the sizable sense of the term, but it’s always moments like this that make him stumble; make him forget—for all of a split second—that the gap between a human and an archangel is vast and immeasurable, because it *feels* like they’re meeting each other in the middle. Like they’re walking across a tightrope from the opposite sides of some gaping canyon and joining hands when they meet at last, keeping each other steady as they balance precariously in the wind.

Like the gap isn't so big, after all.

...It's not exactly a thought process he thinks he should be having when he's in the middle of an emotional—and, y'know, *apocalyptic*, really—crisis, but what's one more puzzling addition to the mix? Might as well throw something else in there while he’s at it.

A yell breaks their staring contest apart, though, as a bellowed *“I can!”* from below has them both whipping their heads forward to listen.

They’ve started arguing. Sam, apparently, had the good sense to say *no* —good for the world, at least. For him, by the way things are looking...probably not so much.

“So, no. My answer is no. This isn't because of Dean, or the past, this is about me having faith in my friends, having faith in my family. We will find a way. I'm ready to die, and I'm ready to watch people I love die, but I'm not ready to be your bitch.”

Adam huffs out a breath. Some part of him wants to cheer for him—sticking it to Lucifer after all those years down here couldn’t have been easy—but the other part of him sneers at the mention of *family,* acrimony smoldering deep inside his heart.

The mental gymnastics were beginning to get annoying.

There’s a cry of pain that follows, and Adam winces, the earliest years of the Cage threatening to overtake him like a storm.

Then, there’s a name. And then, a voice.

"Dean...ah, the other one. Welcome to the party. Scared?"

"Not even a little."

Adam stiffens like a board, his own memories rushing towards the forefront of his mind as he struggles to keep them back.

“No! Dean! Help! It won’t open! Dean, help! Dean!”

He swallows again, but—as it turns out—it doesn’t take too much to distract him, because it isn’t even a second later that the tune of *Heaven Must Be Missing an Angel* starts blasting, accompanied by grunts and thuds.

On one hand, Adam kind of wants to laugh, because—holy shit, what the fuck? On the other hand... *ouch.*

That's some shitty music to get beat up to.

...The *real* problem, though, is that if they're *saying* anything, Adam can't fucking hear them over the music. Neither can Michael, apparently, by the steadily increasing amount of irritation that's building like water against a dam on his face.

Adam would strain his ears if he thought there'd be any point to it, but whatever they're saying is drowned out by the loud sounds of Tavares and the muffled grunts that accompany it. The noise continues on and on and on—there's a murmur or two underneath the struggling that Adam thinks he picks up, but nope. Nothing. Zip. Nada.

And then, it happens. It's so fast. Too fast.

There's silence. True silence, in the Cage. No more Sam, no more Dean, no more Castiel.

...No more Lucifer.

Adam is left reeling by the profundity of the stillness that settles between them, his brain struggling to make sense of that fact that *Lucifer* was *gone*.

It...didn't make sense. Lucifer had always been there, a malignant constant that was always on the edges of both their senses, somebody to make *sure* of, to keep the past from repeating itself. He couldn't just be...*gone.*

But he was.

And so were Sam and Dean.

The first human voices he's heard in centuries, the people who'd insisted that they were his *family,* and Adam had never even heard his name mentioned.

Not once.

The flickering light of hope that had built up within him suddenly becomes fragile, breakable, *disposable,* his mind sneering *I told you so, I told you so, I told you so* over and over, a maddening loop in his brain that just wouldn't quit. But when Adam pinches his hope into nothingness like a tiny flame between his fingers, he feels something else go, too; like someone's just pulled a rug out from under his feet. He's *nauseous,* he realizes, and that nausea floods straight from the pit of his stomach to the whites of his eyes, saltwater beginning to prickle uncomfortably at the edges of his vision.

Jesus. No. Oh, no, no, no, *no*—

When the tears begin to drip down his face, Adam bites the inside of his cheek and turns around. He tries to hurriedly wipe them away, to no avail, sniffing as he does so, and it isn't long before he stops trying entirely; instead, he crosses his arms tightly enough across his chest that it feels like he's squeezing the life out of himself and tries to keep his shoulders

from shaking with the sob that builds up in his throat. He doesn’t know how he can get hot flashes in his own mind, but the sheer amount of emotion roiling in his belly doesn’t seem to care.

"I don't understand," Adam grits out, teeth clenched as his voice cracks. "What did I do? What did I ever do to deserve this? I don't—"

He knows that he's talking to himself more than he is Michael, who Adam assumes is still standing behind him, but the crushing realization that he's going to be stuck in here for however long the universe holds out against the Darkness is suddenly hitting him like a freight train, and it's like everything he's ever told himself—that there was no point in getting upset over cold, hard facts; that he was just *stuck* and that was that—is crumbling before his very eyes, turning to ashes in the flames of sick realization.

Whatever fragile *thing* that had developed in his chest suddenly breaks, like a loud *crack* of a tree branch, and the sob he'd been trying to hold back tears its way out of his throat and makes itself known to the meager little world built around him. Tears begin to stream down the line of his nose from his bowed head, some landing on the sleeve of his jacket, and he doesn't know *why* but seeing the stains they leave only makes him start to cry harder.

"Kid," he hears, softly, from behind him, and Adam wants to freeze and apologize but he *can't,* he just can't, it's all he can do to keep standing as it *is,* and oh, Jesus, he's *actually* going to *die* here, and he *knows* that he wished for death for so long but it’s going to be *worse* this time because there won’t be any Heaven or Hell, there won’t be *anything,* it’ll all just be—

"Adam," Michael says, and his voice is closer this time. Adam feels a hand on his arm, slowly turning him back around, and he looks up to see the archangel gazing at him with such undeniable, unbearable *concern* that it makes him grit his teeth harder, grinding his molars together as he fails to choke back the emotion welling from his throat. "Come here."

There's a gentle tug from the archangel in question, bringing Adam stumbling in his direction, and he needs no further invitation to surge forward and wrap his arms around the other's torso, clutching onto him like a lifeline while his sobs bury themselves into the jacket that's a mirror of his own.

Despite Adam's vice grip, Michael holds him softly in return, if a little awkwardly—it’s obvious that he’s never done anything like this before, but it doesn’t matter. He’s solid and warm and *there*, and the feeling is so undeniably *foreign* to him that he begins to cry with a fiercer intensity, squeezing his eyes shut and trying his best to bite back the loudest of the strangled noises that keep leaving his throat so that they’re both only left with the sound of his quiet weeping.

Michael’s hand comes up to stroke at the back of his neck, shushing him in a near-inaudible tone that Adam wouldn’t have been able to hear had he not been pressed into the firmness of his shoulder. He wants to stop crying. He wants to swallow all his emotion down back into his stomach and let it fester and fall away from him in some way that *isn’t* him bawling like a baby into the arms of an archangel at the unfairness of life. He wants to do anything, *anything,* except this.

But he doesn’t want to let *go* of him.

And Michael had been the one to *invite* him to do this, hadn’t he? The delicate sweep of his thumb against the back of his neck, brushing softly against his hairline as his fingers, didn’t seem like someone who particularly *minded* the fact that Adam was shaking like a leaf in his arms.

There’s a tight ball of his own making swirling in the center of his chest, thick with the sludge of rotten emotions that ache to be released. The mounting pressure on his rib cage makes him feel like all the blood in his body has coagulated, seeping inwards and outwards until it converges on and squeezes his heart in a roaring message of *let go, let go, let go.*

And this, Adam *wants* to let go. He *wants* to unravel it like yarn until there’s no more weight in his chest, until he can finally feel some of that peace again—the peace that Michael had brought to him before, but...

When Michael’s ministrations send an involuntary shudder up his spine, that’s when something in his mind makes his decision for him. When it makes him lets go of his dwindling rope and just—*falls.*

For the first time in centuries, he *lets* himself cry.

He cries for his loss of freedom, for all the pain he’d endured at Lucifer’s hand, for years and years and *years* of silence and isolation and *darkness* . He cries for his lost friends, his normal life, the ability to sleep and eat and do *anything* without the knowledge that it was fake. He cries for his humanity, how it seemed to slip through his fingers like sand.

For the first time, Adam cries for his mom.

And, through it all, Michael never moves away.

His hand keeps up its smooth, steady motions, arm wrapped neatly around Adam’s shoulders in a way that’s still just a little too stiff, a bit too tense, but feather-light on his body all the same.

Eventually, the tears flow to a stop. They had to, right? Like everything else in his life. He's left with barely enough energy to keep himself standing, face still pressing into Michael's jacket, forehead resting limply against his shoulder.

Adam isn’t angry, isn’t upset, isn’t frustrated or sad or even afraid of dying, anymore. He’s just...exhausted. Empty. It’s hard to describe—he doesn’t feel *numb,* not like he used to be. He feels like he’s run one too many marathons, like a river run dry.

Tired. He’s so, so tired.

Michael shifts, then, and Adam’s senses slam back into him for all of a second as he realizes that this is still an *archangel* he’s latched onto—invitation or no—and this is *probably* not any sort of position that Michael wants to be in. He jerks his head up and quickly attempts to extricate himself, an apology already beginning to form on his tongue before he realizes that

Michael has transported them both into Adam's bedroom. The archangel lets him move back, though, pulling away with one hand still remaining on his shoulder, steadying him as he peers at Adam's face.

Adam can't even begin to try and think about how he probably looks by now—red-rimmed eyes and a dull, weary gaze, for starters—so he doesn't, instead choosing to stare at the inner rim of Michael's collar as he's being inspected. There's a small flicker of *something* that dashes across Michael's grace, but it's too quick for Adam to catch.

Then, there's another shift, and Adam finds himself standing right next to the bed.

"You should rest," Michael says, his voice low and even. Adam gives a wry little snort as he looks towards the bed and then back up at Michael.

"You know it's impossible for me to sleep in here, right? Eternal torture, and all that."

He shakes his head. "I didn't say sleep, kid, I said *rest,"* and with that, Michael gently pushes him down until Adam's sitting on top of the bed, hand still resting on his shoulder.

Adam looks up at him—confusion probably evident on his face—but Michael seems insistent, so he decides to humor him and maneuvers himself until he's laying back down against the pillows, raising his eyebrows up at him and folding his hands across his stomach.

Adam isn't sure what Michael expects to happen until he *feels* it—feels Michael's grace *surround* him. His *soul.* Not just their more recent arrangement where they constantly kept in lingering contact with each other, either; he can feel it at the core of his being as he's entirely cocooned in layers upon layers of archangel grace, and there has to be at *least* a thousand Enochian words flying through his mind that could describe this but the only thing he can think of in English is...*power.* It's power in its purest form, and he sucks in a breath at the feeling, eyes closing as he tries not to lose himself in it.

It feels like he's swimming, adrift in an endless ocean made of light. Like fire, without the sweltering heat.

It isn't long before he stops trying to find some sort of ground beneath his feet and lets himself be swept away, allowing the feeling of Michael's grace to replace whatever hollow void his tears had left behind. It's not sleep, but it's pretty damn close, almost reminding him of the time after Lucifer had attacked, when all he'd been doing was *existing* —and, really, that's all he's doing now. It's all he *wants* to do.

So he does.

Adam isn't sure how long he stays like that, basking in the sheer amount of *sensation*, but what he does know is that—like all other times down here—he gets...*lonely.* He's so used to the biting ache of the feeling that it's easy to pinpoint, scratching at the front of his mind like an unwanted animal, and he begins doing his best to *focus*—directing random thoughts towards Michael in an attempt to get his attention, wherever he is.

It works. There's a distinct difference between the rest of Michael's grace and his main point of his consciousness, and Adam can discern between the two when he feels a denser, brighter flow of energy come his way, surrounding him in tandem with the rest of it.

Stay? Adam finally manages, quiet Enochian flowing from whatever he *is* right now to the archangel above. There's a ringing, then, Michael's true voice echoing through every piece of him down to his very *atoms,* and Adam would smile at the silent ripple of affirmation he receives if he had a form.

Instead, he lets the beginnings of quiet relief start to wash over him as Michael curls himself around Adam's soul, a warmth carried with his arrival that differs from the outer banks of his grace.

Maybe it doesn't fix anything. Maybe they're still trapped down here, waiting for their demise. Maybe God never came back for Michael, and maybe the Winchesters completely forgot about him, but...they have each other, don't they?

They're here.

They're *together.*

His mind finally conjures up another word for...*this,* pulled from the recesses of his mind like some sort of long-lost childhood memory: *divine.*

Michael looks pained again.

Time had passed. Adam doesn’t want to ask how much. He doesn’t care anymore. It doesn’t matter. There was no point in trying to process something so out of his reach.

He does his best to fill the hole left inside of him—and, mostly, it’s been working. He sticks close to Michael and Michael to him, both gravitating towards each other even more now with the threat of Lucifer gone.

...As bad as the Devil had been, he had still established himself as another sign of life—a sign that they weren’t entirely alone. But now, they were. And if Adam let himself think about it too much and too hard, he could almost trick himself into believing that they were the only two people in existence, that all that had ever existed was them and the Cage and the cold.

He kept these thoughts hidden away from Michael, though—the archangel had started to...well, if Adam didn't know any better, he would say that Michael had started to *hover* after Adam’s little breakdown, his concern much more open than Adam had ever seen it before.

He doesn't mind. He's doing the same thing in return, after all.

The thing is, he doesn’t know *why* Sam and Dean’s abandonment hit him so hard. They’d already done it once before, right? He really shouldn’t have reacted so strongly.

Maybe...maybe it wasn’t so much their *action* that tipped him over the edge so much as it was that he’d needed a *reason* to go over the edge. He had to have been a ticking time bomb,

right? All that shit that he'd shoved down since he'd first fallen down here *had* to have come out sometime.

Adam remembers the tightness that had forced his way out of his chest and swallows, trying to chase the thought away.

Bitterness still manages to spring up within him at the thought of Sam and Dean, though, clawing deep scratches under the skin of his hands until he looks down and finds them balled tightly in two separate fists. He extricates his fingers from their uncomfortable hold, biting the inside of his cheek.

Regardless of his inner musings, Michael looks pained again. His brows are drawn together and his eyes are squinting the tiniest bit as they avert from Adam's face to the floor, and this time Adam doesn't want to let it slide. There had to be a *damn* good reason that something had been affecting Michael so badly that it had been physically showing up on him for centuries, and Adam *wants* to know what it is. Wants to help, if he can.

"Something's hurting you," he states, and Michael jerks his head up to look at him. When he says nothing, Adam prods him again.

"Is it…" he pauses, pressing his lips together as he grasps for straws on a subject he knows nothing about. "I don't know, being in here with me? Does it do something to you?"

He has no time to dwell on the idea of that before Michael is shaking his head, surprise flaring out over his face.

"No, that isn't it," a breath of a chuckle slips past his throat, like he's remembering something funny. "The opposite, actually."

When Adam cocks his head to the side, waiting for an answer, Michael sighs. He looks as tired as Adam feels all the time, and he *hates* it. Hates that *anything* could make Michael look like that.

"The Cage was designed to imprison and punish Lucifer," Michael mutters, his quiet voice suddenly laced with a rancorous timbre, but then it devitalizes so quickly that it gives Adam whiplash. "Since I'm an archangel as well, the effects of it are also felt by me. It's…" he sighs, again, and it makes Adam reach out for him on impulse, gently taking his hand and running his thumb across the tops of his knuckles in a manner he hopes is soothing.

Michael glances down at their joined limbs, the tenseness that had built up in his shoulders slowly seeping away. "I fought him for so long, out there, because I thought that...if I were to endure penance, to show my Father that I could—" he pauses, for a moment. "I thought that He would release us. That He would return."

"And He didn't," Adam mutters back.

Michael doesn't look back up. "I'm sure He must have had His reasons."

Yeah, right, Adam wants to snort, but instead he just hums in acknowledgement and leans down to rest his chin on his arm, nearly eye-level with the surface of the table. He keeps up the slow, rhythmic stroking of his thumb—a comforting action for them both, it seems.

He wishes he could do something to take away Michael's pain. It's hardly fair that Adam got to sit in here like this while Michael was constantly going through enough agony to make his composure come apart at the seams. It wasn't like he had it good, but for him to exist in relative peace while Michael suffered without end? It didn't sit right with him, made something roll over deep in his gut.

But...he'd said *the opposite, actually.*

Something clicks in his brain, then— *Michael's apology.* How it had come after he'd looked like he was in pain, when he'd seemed tired beyond belief. He grabs hold of the memory, turns it over and over in his mind, watches Michael's eyes, his face, his actions, his movements.

"I am...sorry." You're in pain. I am, too. I understand now. I didn't realize. I'm sorry.

He's not sure how he knows it, how it even makes *sense,* but when he thinks about it...he can *hear* it. He just *can.* Adam *sees* it in the way his head had dipped down, the way he'd gazed at him with such intense sincerity, the way his hand had traced the bed cover like it was something special, the way his body had seemed...slumped.

Tired.

And Adam *knew* tired.

It's...strange, but not. It's more strange that he's just realizing it *now,* honestly.

He sucks in a deep breath, prompting Michael's gaze to turn curious, questioning, and files his thoughts away for later analysis. For now, though, he steers the road back to regular conversation.

"Y'know," Adam says, idly, "we haven't died yet."

"We haven't."

"Maybe something happened. Maybe they found some way to beat the Darkness."

Michael's tone turns dry. "It took my Father and four archangels to beat her, the first time."

"Yeah," Adam replies, looking up to raise his eyebrows at him. "But we're still alive."

Michael seems to consider it, but he doesn't say anything in return. Instead, he slowly turns his hand over, still in Adam's hold, the tips of his fingers stretching to gently brush against the pulse-point of Adam's wrist.

There was probably a word for this type of action, back on Earth.

Adam doesn’t want to touch it with a ten-foot pole.

Chapter 9

Life goes on. It always does.

Life goes on and Adam manages to push the Winchesters to the back of his mind, into a box that he kicks under a bed and swears never to look at. He doesn’t want to. The Cage is as imposing, as stifling, as *cold* as ever; but he talks to Michael and Michael talks to him and Adam finds, to what once might’ve caused him muted horror, that it’s what he’s grown truly *comfortable* with.

The realization had crept up on him out of nowhere, but he supposes that it’s no surprise that it doesn’t shock him—the human ability to adapt, and all that. Only took him a few centuries of Michael’s company, in the end. The false impression of the house, of the playground, of the world he’d been forced out of—that’s all they were, anymore.

Just false impressions.

The thought of Earth was like the thought of some faraway childhood home that he would’ve lived in briefly when he was very young, a fading sunburn on the back of his neck that he’d long since stopped feeling; the sentiment that he and Michael might be the only two people left in the universe never escaped him, and he sometimes even wondered if it would matter if they were.

He wonders what Michael thinks about it, sometimes. Whether his mind tricks him into believing the same; if the beckoning maw of senseless thought and fatuous ideas threatens to snap him up at any given moment like it does Adam. Maybe, one day, Adam would ask.

It wasn’t like anything could be done about it, either way.

There is no point in despairing anymore over fact, or over the inevitable. So Adam finally accepts these realizations with some defeated, quiet sense that’s reminiscent of an *I told you so*, and he lets his life go on.

He doesn't know anything about monsters.

Adam ponders this from where he and Michael sit, splayed out over the bed with both their backs resting against the headboard. Michael has his hands in his lap, legs stretched out and crossed like he was never the archangel who looked stiff when he first sat down in a chair, and Adam leans against his shoulder with his own head tilted back against the wall.

If he was a little more vain, a little more self-indulgent, he'd almost consider asking Michael to do what he'd done before—with his hand, he means. The...gentle thing. By the window.

The thought of putting a name to it made him shy away, but it's not out of embarrassment. He just...can't put words to it. He can't. Not here. Not in Hell.

And he didn't want to...overstep anything, either. In the end, Michael had no obligation to him and Adam doubted he could make him feel *obligated* to do anything if he tried. Assuming he even *wanted* to try.

He isn't God, after all.

But it's like a switch has been flipped in his mind now that he'd experienced the sensation of *touch* once more, and he compromises with it via the warmth of Michael's shoulder pressed against his own through the sleeves of their jacket. Michael seems to welcome it, as per their new *normal,* just like he'd easily welcomed Adam in his embrace. It’s an ephemeral action, one that leaves the core of his being quaking, the ground under his feet solidifying from slick mud to hard rock.

It's...

Anyway, he doesn't know anything about monsters. Which isn't surprising, considering he'd grown up never knowing a single thing about the supernatural, but still.

He turns to Michael, who’s been staring at him this whole time.

“You said I was killed by a ghoul, right?”

Michael nods, expression turning curious. Adam nods back in return, more thoughtful than anything. Without the constant prickle of insanity seeping into his mind from the pit of his stomach, and with the experience itself long past, he finds that he can think about it without flinching away too badly.

It still makes his skin crawl, though, if he thinks about it for too long. Enough to make him twitch. Michael’s gaze locks onto his as he notices, a question clearly written out in the reflection of his eyes, and Adam pokes his tongue into the side of his cheek and takes a minute to direct his memories away from that day before nodding again; an affirmative, this time.

“So...what can they do? Other than, y’know, uh—eating people alive.”

The archangel studies him for a few more seconds, his grace curling lightly in Adam’s chest. “There isn’t much to say about them,” he says, finally. “They’re monsters. They take the form of those they eat.”

Such a simple description for something so abominable.

Wait. “Take the form of? As in, there’s some asshole ghoul walking around wearing my face?” *My mom’s face?!* his sudden anger wants to shout. He shushes it, tries to swallow it back down.

But Michael shakes his head. “Your brothers killed the two ghouls that ate you and your mother.”

Well, at least they’d done that much for him. Even if it was inadvertently. “How do you know?”

“Minds are easy to read,” Michael says, and it strikes Adam out of the blue how much detail Michael can put into so few little words. Or maybe Adam’s just reading a little too much into it. “I met Dean in 1978 and read his. The experience was in his memories. It’s how I…” he pauses, for a moment. “It’s how I got the idea to revive you in order to make Dean my vessel.”

Adam presses his lips together in thought, a little hum of acknowledgement slipping past his throat.

Wait. *Again.* “1978? I wasn’t even born then!”

There had to be some sort of weird magic thing going on with that, right? Adam hopes he doesn’t sound like an idiot.

Michael’s answering quirk of the lips quells the thought. It’s more amused than *are you stupid?* like Adam briefly thought it might be. “Time travel.”

Adam raises his eyebrows and looks down at his knees, nodding slightly. “Time travel. Right. Uh...forgot about that.”

The archangel chuckles, soft and breathy, and Adam glances back up at him, letting his own sheepish smile creep its way onto his lips.

“So, who’d you wear? Your other vessel, I mean,” Adam clarifies. “Couldn’t have been me, right? There wasn’t any time.”

“Your father,” Michael replies, and Adam’s nose instinctively wrinkles.

“Ugh. You wore John? That sounds gross,” Adam could barely even stand to *think* about the man, but having to be *inside* him?

Sounds like his worst nightmare and a half.

Before they fall down the tumultuous road of *family,* though, he quickly brings the subject back around to monsters. “Anyway, what other things exist out there? Hang on—do vampires exist? Like in the movies?” Images of Dracula come to mind, and he snickers at the thought of it.

“They do,” Michael confirms, and the *but I’m not sure who Dracula is* rings in Adam’s ears like a bell despite the lack of words uttered between them, mental or otherwise. He can read the words like the pages of a book in the way Michael’s head falls back just the slightest bit, the ways his brows knit together with a sort of distant, muted curiosity—the question is all *there,* but Adam isn’t certain whether Michael’s actually interested in Hollywood or whether the interest is being derived from somewhere else.

Nonetheless, the question is there, so Adam launches—a little sheepishly at first, but growing more animated as he went on—into detail about silly-looking vampires with pearly-white fangs and long, dramatic capes, who could turn into bats at the drop of a hat.

Truth be told, the only reason he knew so much about it was because he'd dressed up as a vampire every Halloween when he was a kid, but he certainly wasn't going to voice *that* aloud. If he was so curious, he could take a look through Adam's mind to find it.

Despite the odd topic, Adam can feel Michael's attention on him like the shock of a cattle prod. He wonders if Michael can feel the intensity of his own when he finally takes a turn speaking, spinning murmured tales of the Leviathans and the conquest to throw them into Purgatory. Adam isn't sure why he's so fascinated by it—history was never his best subject, he thinks he remembers—but he clings eagerly on to Michael's every word, fully enraptured by the stories of victorious battles and atavistic losses.

And if they'd somehow managed to press just a bit closer, Adam's leg resting gently against the archangel's as he fires question after question about the biological makeup of Leviathans, why they had so many teeth and how they moved if they were just sentient puddles of black goo, well—no one had to mention it.

Adam certainly wasn't going to.

This time, when Michael flinches out of nowhere, Adam reaches for him and places a delicate hand on his back, rubbing lightly.

It seems like the pain of the Cage had been getting to Michael more and more, lately—or, maybe, Michael was just letting him see the true extent of what it was doing to him.

Adam isn't sure what to do with that kind of trust.

Michael stills, face turning to search Adam's with something that he, for the life of him, couldn't decipher. He wonders what the soft stroke of his hand must feel like in comparison, if it's like running tenderhearted fingers across an area that's just been slammed into something hard at full speed—a sensation too gentle that clashes in an instant with the pain until it mixes into something else, something unrecognizable; or even if Michael feels the motion at all.

The archangel has his moments, sometimes, where his gaze will turn antediluvian, immemorial, the set of his shoulders and the squaring of his jaw so downright unearthly that Adam can't help but study it with barely-muted fascination. It makes his own feeble little gestures seem exactly that—feeble, too small to be felt. But then he remembers when Michael's grace had fluttered to a calm in his embrace, and he sees the way that the tension of Michael's form slowly begins to seep away under Adam's hand, now, and the gap between them lessens once more.

"How bad is it?" Adam tries, voice coming out softer than he'd been aiming for it to be. Michael blinks and cocks his head the smallest bit in thought.

"I'm not sure there's a way to explain it to you," he says, and it's not quite apologetic but it has a certain air about it that makes it seem that way. The *because you're human* is implied, but Adam doesn't take offense.

“*Enochian?”* he tries instead, but Michael shakes his head.

“Is it because it’s affecting you?” When Michael sends him a puzzled furrowing of his brows, Adam elucidates. “As in, *you* you. What you really look like.”

The archangel raises his eyebrows and nods in an motion of acknowledgement, and the expression looks so ridiculously natural on him that it’s as if the times where Michael’s demeanor takes a turn for the preternatural never happen.

“Yes.” And that—that makes sense. Because Adam didn’t have a basis for the knowledge of how pain was inflicted on an archangel; how it was received or how it burned or twisted or shredded in comparison to pain inflicted on a human.

Adam doesn’t have time to think before the words are tumbling out of his mouth. “Can I see?”

“What?” That appears to take Michael off-guard, and it’s almost enough to make Adam blow out a hasty *never mind* and change the subject. Almost.

It’s just...He wants to *see.* He wants to *understand* what Michael can’t explain, wants to take it into his mind and turn it over and over until his vision properly perceives what his ears fail to pick apart.

He can’t do the bare minimum to *help* if he doesn’t know what he’s dealing with.

“Your—true form,” Adam says, and he’s distantly aware of the fact that he’s tapping his index finger against the tip of his thumb. He didn’t know that he still had those kinds of habits. “Can I see it?”

Michael’s gaze rakes over him, and Adam can feel his grace thrum with questions that he doesn’t know if he wants to answer. But, to his surprise, their mindscape slowly begins to dissipate around them, and he almost thinks that he’s about to return to his formless state before he realizes that his hands, legs, head are all still there.

It’s Michael who’s shifting and changing, body turning formless and surging upwards until all Adam can see is white light, shining enthrallingly above him. He’s almost struck by how familiar this is, of the room and the door slamming shut and the first whispers of Michael’s true voice in his ear. The white light begins to bend and twist and flicker, then, in ways that the sun’s rays could never dream of doing, and Michael’s form comes dazzling into shape—and Adam is *transfixed.*

He understands, now, why the memory of Michael’s body made him always want to do the mental equivalent of looking away; because there is no memory of his that could *ever* measure up to the real thing. Michael is *endless,* an empyreal cascade of blinding sanctity that makes Adam think—*beautiful.*

If there was anything, *anything* beautiful to *ever* be found in these dark, ruthless depths of Hell, it was Michael in his rightful glory, coruscating brightly with ethereal wonder that's almost enough to knock Adam off his feet.

He forces himself to focus, to try his best to kick his brain back into gear and actually focus on *details*— and, sure enough, a simple sweep of his eyes over Michael's immense form and Adam can *see* it; the slight bend of his wings that screams *pain, pain, pain,* the way some of his many heads duck down almost imperceptibly and then straighten, roaring *pride, pride, pride*—if the archangel had been anyone, *anyone* lesser, Adam was sure that he would've curled in on himself by now.

But this was *Michael.* And he was practically the *embodiment* of pride.

Something sounds an alarm in the back of his mind, something that goes *Then why would he let you see this? He knows you can read his true form like a book. He lives in your mind, after all. So why?*

Adam doesn't respond, because he doesn't have an answer to give.

Instead, he races to think of something, *anything,* to say. What *is* there to say? *I understand?* Maybe he could say that, but it wouldn't make any sense. He'd been through a fair amount of torture, sure; getting eaten alive while some cruel version of his mom's face looked on, surviving Hell's piercing atmosphere when he'd first fallen down here, being isolated in darkness and silence for hundreds of years and all *that* endless fun. But he has no idea what it must feel like to Michael—what Hell must feel like to someone who was so distant from the very concept; to an *archangel,* of all people.

He doesn't want to sound pitying, either, because he's never pitied Michael and he certainly isn't about to start now.

But Adam wants to say *something,* and he squares his shoulders as his mind seems to suddenly clear itself, making room for three words out of nowhere that ring louder in his brain than they do his own false ears. He hopes they make sense.

"I see you."

The Enochian is soft as it passes his lips, human vocal chords vibrating with the lilt and thrum of the hallowed vernacular, and Adam thanks the fact that the distance between them doesn't matter in Adam's mind—*would it matter if they were on Earth?* he almost wants to start wondering—because he watches as *surprise, understanding, acceptance* ripples across thousands of Michael's features.

What are you understanding? his mind begs to know. *What do you accept?*

But he keeps the thoughts tucked away, trusting that Michael will not go looking for them. He's never shown any indication that he invaded Adam's privacy after he had requested for the archangel to ask first, and Adam trusts him.

He's not sure how long they stay like that, simply staring at each other, and it should feel like they're *forever* apart—Michael is astronomical, and Adam finds his eyes maundering over every inch, mile, *light-year*—but instead, it's just another talk when they're sitting across the room from each other. Just another companionable silence.

He doesn’t know how Michael can manage to look so much the *same* when his form is anything but human, yet he does.

Another piece of the jigsaw puzzle that he found himself pointedly avoiding, he supposes.

A rush of evanescent giddiness suddenly hits him—from where, Adam doesn't know. But it slams into him like a bus, and he's left with a racing mind of thoughts that vanish as soon as they come.

This is who you are, Adam thinks, and he gets the feeling that he'd be breathless if he had real lungs to be breathless with. Maybe he is, here, and he just doesn't realize it. *This is who you are and this is who I am and this is who we are. Here, together, now. Us.*

Not for the first time down here, curiosity sparks within him at the question of his thought process ever making sense again. He doubts it will, but that's alright.

The vertiginous feeling fades from him in the span of a single half-second and it makes something in his shoulders drop with a sudden respite, blinking silently up at the being above him. Neither of them have spoken.

Eventually, Michael slowly descends back downwards, making a movement that shifts himself towards Adam, one that folds and shrinks until it’s a human foot that hits the black ground barely two feet from him. His gaze is equal parts curious and appraising, and Adam nods; why, he doesn't know. He dimly wonders when his hands made their way into his pockets, and he flexes them lightly, almost like he can't believe they're real.

“I’d say that I wish you didn’t have to go through this,” Adam says, for lack of anything else to, “but I think it’s a little late for that, right?”

Something weary and wry skims across Michael’s body, from the set of his shoulders to the slope of his forehead, and he quirks an eyebrow in response. A huff of breath that could’ve perhaps once been a chuckle leaves his mouth, the emotion behind it a mere reflection made from the pool of his features. He says nothing, and Adam instantly realizes how *human* he must sound—how human he's always sounding, with all his little wishes and musings.

Even if he isn’t the best example of it anymore, it’s what he still *is*, right? Might as well live up to it.

“But I do,” he continues, purposefully observing the blond of Michael’s hairline instead of the blue of his eyes. “I wish you didn’t.”

Wishing is fruitless, here. Adam had learned that from the start, had entirely smothered the last of his hope after the Winchesters’ last visit. Wishes left nothing but hollow, jagged hurt that echoed through the corridors of his body like an empty hallway. Wishes were for the boy who came home from school to a mother who always had to leave for work soon after. They weren’t for *him.* Not anymore.

He thinks of Michael’s wings, though, and he thinks of the blackened feathers scattered throughout the tips and edges that stood out against the radiant, iridescent glimmer of the

others—a spattering of discoloration that hadn't been there when Adam had seen him in the white room—and he finds himself *wishing.*

Despite knowing that nothing would come of it, he *wishes.*

And he wonders what that says about him, to know with all his heart that what he wishes would never come to pass. That his old, half-hysterical pleas for freedom through song and snapped words were nothing but empty words to be swallowed up by the black of the past; that his new, fervent desire for Michael, of all people, to be free of the pain he was under would be lost to Hell's eternal landscape, invisibly etched in the bars of the Cage where ancient sigils used to make their home and then...forgotten.

Like them both, he supposes.

He wonders what it says about him, to know that he still finds it in himself to *make* those wishes.

Michael shifts, just the slightest bit, and Adam sees the tilt of his head and the indecipherable altering of his expression out of his peripheral vision; and yet, he still finds himself intensely focused on his hairline, on the loose strand of hair that sticks a little too much in the air, *anything* but the parts of his face that would, perhaps, give away everything Adam would ever need to know about his potential response. He doesn't try to read the myriad of emotions flooding across his grace, either, keeping his mind empty; blank.

Michael's given Adam his privacy, even with them connected at the seams. It's only fair that he gives him his, right?

That's not why, his brain chides. *That's not why and you know it.*

It's out of boredom that Adam summons a bag of chips into existence, sudden curiosity overtaking him as he eyes the packaging with interest. Almost every word on it is blurred out or nonsensical—it wasn't like he'd sat down and dutifully memorized each ingredient that went into sour cream and onion chips before he died—but he doesn't really pay much attention to it. Instead, he opens the bag, looking interestedly inside at the false food.

"What are you doing?" Michael questions, and Adam glances up.

"I just realized," he replies, reaching into the bag to pull out a chip. "I've never messed around with *food* in this place."

The chip is light, and he isn't sure if it's supposed to be as paper-thin as it is or if it's just a result of his faded memory. He squints, turning it from angle to angle, inspecting the look and the texture and the overall feeling of nostalgia it brings him—which, granted, isn't very much. And neither is the look of it—it seems obscured, like there was supposed to be a texture to it but his mind isn't sure what kind, which one. If he holds it under the light just right, it almost looks like it's covered in peach fuzz.

“Well,” Adam remarks to the archangel, who’s got the barest hints of amused bemusement beginning to shine across his expression. “Here goes nothing.”

He shrugs and tosses it into his mouth.

On some level, he’s aware that chips are supposed to have a crunch. It feels like his mind has overcompensated, on some level, and, well—it feels like he’s grinding his teeth against glass. Glass that has a *cardboard* feel to it. It tastes like there’s *supposed* to be flavor behind it, but there *isn’t* any and all that’s left is some weird... *thing*, resting on his tongue, that makes his *oh holy shit spit it out* reflex kick in like a horse.

He feels his face screw up as his mind quickly works to banish the accursed object from existence, disappearing from his mouth like it was never there at all. Hearing a chuckle, he fixes the archangel with a mock glare, nose still scrunched up in disgust as he feels the memory of the pseudo-food leave its imprint on his brain.

The last thing he’d ever eaten was a burger. He remembers enjoying it, and he dimly muses over what it had tasted like before he shakes the thought from his head. No point in crying over spilt milk—or, in this case, the mournful loss of the taste of a hamburger.

“Remind me to never do that again, would you?”

Michael’s wearing the slightest inkling of a grin, white teeth poking through only slightly past his crooked lips, and Adam can practically *feel* it as his next words are swept away in the current of the roaring river that his mind has taken the form of.

The fact that his language skills have slipped right through his fingers while the rest of his brain seems to have enough capacity to notice—in precise detail—the way that the impression of light catches Michael’s teeth enough to make them gleam makes Adam almost want to track God down himself and smack him for making humans so ridiculously unable to function.

Seriously. There was no *reason* for this.

“If you say so, kid,” and Adam can hear the light, teasing mirth that floats throughout Michael’s low intonation more clearly than he thinks he’s ever heard anything before. It’s enough to make his wandering mind come falling back down into his skull, though, which is probably better than nothing.

It dawns on him, then, that a nickname by any other person would've resulted in, most likely, irrational annoyance. He's always hated being called a nickname, he remembers—he’s hated it ever since elementary school, but he was never sure why. Maybe because his name was already four letters, and something like "Ad" or "Dam" or "Addy" would've been either embarrassing or stupid.

“Cool your jets, corky.”

It still left the rancid taste of iron in his mouth whenever he thought about it.

But when Michael called him *kid,* Adam...never minded. Never even blinked.

The implications of that beg to be analyzed, beg for him to even *acknowledge* their existence. Instead, Adam disappears the terrible excuse for food and winks into life a deck of cards, watching as Michael’s eyes grow sharp with interest.

They hadn’t played since Adam had beaten him, after all.

“We’re doing this again, are we?” he comments, pushing off from the wall he’d been leaning on to come closer and take a seat across from Adam at the kitchen table. Adam raises his eyebrows and begins to arrange the cards into their proper setup, drawing a hand for himself and for Michael.

“If you’re…” he says, pausing for effect and pressing his lips together to try and keep his own grin down. It doesn’t work. It hadn't worked at all, lately. “Game.”

The archangel’s suddenly-unimpressed face is enough to pull a few snickers from the base of Adam’s throat. It was a weak one, he’ll admit, but Michael’s face always makes it more than worth it.

Michael’s smile slowly returns, small and easygoing, and the quiet scintillation of his eyes suddenly reminds Adam of stars. In particular, the cluster of stars that were always neatly arranged in the sky above the window of his bedroom in Windom—the ones he'd look up at when he was little, sometimes, when he couldn't sleep and the house was achingly empty.

It's familiar. Comfortable. Reposeful, in a way that makes something warm blossom in the middle of his chest, sending a soft flutter up his spine from the pit of his stomach to the back of his throat.

It takes him a moment to notice for him that his palm is lingering too long over the card pile in the middle of the table, much too close to where Michael’s own hands lay.

He wants to close the distance, to reach forward and entwine his fingers with Michael's. He wants to feel the gentle sensation of skin on skin, and he knows in his blood that it would be welcome. But he remembers the earlier implications; pulls his hand back and folds it neatly around his own cards, as if that was what he'd meant to do the whole time.

Another time, he'll bridge the gap. Not now. He doesn't think *now* would be good for anyone.

They had a game to play, after all, and Adam intends to win.

Chapter 10

He’s fallen into a mood.

A sort of funk, if you will. He supposes it’s only natural—y’know, with Hell and all—but it sucks. And Adam almost wants to hate himself for it, because Michael’s in more pain than he’ll ever know and here he is—biting the inner skin of his lip because reality’s decided to slip through his fingers like sand. Again.

Adam wishes it wouldn’t. He’s got enough on his mind without his brain deciding that nothing and everything might be real all at once and the world could still go out like a light at any moment, that it’d get him nowhere to let his guard down because then he’d just end up tripping over his own two feet and vanishing down into some hole that he’d never, ever be able to come out of, and—

Hm.

Michael notices, because they’ve taken to noticing nearly everything about each other now. Even when they aren’t prying. Adam can always tell when Michael’s thinking about his brothers—can even tell which brother he’s thinking about, since he knows what to look for—but if Michael doesn’t want to open up about it, then Adam never pushes him. It goes both ways; Adam knows that Michael knows that he’s been acting off, but other than a bit of hovering Michael had never pried.

Adam appreciates it, as he always does.

But his mind feels like it’s twisting and turning until he's nearly choking on the current of thoughts swirling in his head, and he doesn’t realize that he’s suddenly standing up until he catches sight of blue eyes quizzically locked on him; just shy of concerned, really, but who's detailing?

Adam stares back for a few moments, feeling a little of the tension in his body bleed out at the familiar gaze, but it's not enough.

"I'm gonna, uh, go out for a sec," he blurts out, and he has just enough time to see Michael's expression shift to that mild sort of surprise he usually outwardly displays before he's surging upwards, towards the place he knows to be the center point of his body.

He could, if he wanted, assume control of it. There's no one piloting it right now—he could just hop in. Move his arms and his legs, twist his head, wiggle his toes and fingers. He wonders what it'd be like, what that would *feel* like, after so many centuries of being woefully discarnate.

He doesn't do it.

Instead, he hangs back just the slightest bit, just out of reach from everything that would let him make his body move and function once more, and peers out of his already-open eyes at

the Cage. It's the same as ever; reinforced metal surrounding him on all sides, remnants of destroyed sigils scattered across the floor, the walls, the ceiling.

No sign of Lucifer.

He isn't sure what he expected, but the sight of the Cage—it's a relief, almost. A sign that this *is* real, that he *is* in Hell, that the life he'd had on Earth wasn't just some assortment of fictional ideas made up by his patched-up little mind to give him a sense of self.

There's a wave, an oncoming storm, and then Michael is at the forefront with him, his grace abuzz with tangible concern as he settles lightly around Adam's soul.

Are you okay?

He pauses, sighing—well, he makes the sound of a sigh, at least—and keeps his view focused on the opposite wall.

I just… he struggles for words, considering the idea of just opening his entire sense of being up for Michael to look through and understand before he remembers the crinkled eyes of the archangel's smile and crosses it off the list. *It doesn't feel real, sometimes. Being here. Sometimes it feels like this is the only place I've ever been, y'know? I mean, I was what—eighteen, nineteen, when we first fell down here? And it's been...centuries.*

Michael is quiet as Adam lets words tumble from his side of the link, the concern ebbing away into a feeling of comfort that begins to trickle through his soul like a soothing balm.

I don't—I just wanted to see. This. All of it. I wanted to make sure.

Did you? Michael asks, and Adam's mind flits, once more, to the space that Lucifer would have taken up. There's nothing but empty; nothing but metal and symbols.

Regardless of how much his mind would ever be able to fuck itself up, Adam knows that there used to be another archangel here. Has felt the agony of his blows, the energy that dug into his flesh that had added to the initial torment of Hell until he'd pleaded with everything he could think of for death.

If only he'd known how much worse it could get.

But there's only two where there used to be three, and there were voices that had come to take that third person away, and—

I think so.

Lucifer's absence, the voices that had come to cause that absence—even the Cage, with its roughed-up edges from the release of the Darkness—they were all real.

Thinking of the Darkness makes him think of Michael's scream, though, and he'd shudder if he could. Instead, he feels Michael's energy slowly begin to sweep him back down into his mind, and he watches the sight of the Cage until it compresses into black and the image of the bedroom—*his* bedroom, he remembers, *his* bedroom—manifests around them once more.

Funnily enough, he finds himself standing directly on top of his bed. He doesn't think that the ceiling had been this tall before. He's pretty sure that his head would be halfway embedded in the ceiling, otherwise.

Huffing out a small laugh, he glances down at his feet and then up at Michael, who's standing on the ground next to the bed. "I think your landing was a little off."

Michael raises his eyebrows, and silent conviviality sparkles lightly across his cheeks, his eyes, his lips as he mirrors Adam's glances; down at his own feet and then up to meet his eyes once more. "Actually, my landing was fine. It's *yours* that's a little off."

Adam, following the ancient instincts of the child he's pretty sure he once was, sticks his tongue out at him and lets himself spring upwards, kicking his feet out so he lands on the bed with his ass instead. The mattress bounces under him, the memory of his mom telling him *cut it out, you're gonna break it!* igniting like a warm candle in his chest, and the long-lost sound of her voice brings the smallest of smiles to his face.

The rough edges of his mind are still buzzing with static, crackling like aluminum foil with the intensity that his thoughts hit him with, and Adam feels the question humming in tandem with everything else in the back of his brain, somewhere close to his throat—the question of *Will it always be like this? Am I going to be like this forever?*

He sees no reason why he wouldn't be. It makes him swallow, like he's trying to choke down the static with it, and pulls the corners of his mouth back down—old curtains coming to block out the faint light streaming through a dirty window.

There's a hand, suddenly, laying lightly on his shoulder.

Adam looks up, his own hand instinctively coming up to grasp it before he's even aware of what he's doing, and he feels it prickling through every inch of skin on his body when Michael's palm turns, coming away from his shoulder to fold his warm fingers around his; their linked appendages rest gently on his collarbone and it makes him wonder where it's been a second or a decade that's passed them by as he gazes blankly upwards.

When had Michael even walked over to stand at his side? Maybe he'd just teleported or something.

There's a distinct sensation of empathy radiating from the core of the archangel's grace—understanding, in its purest form—and it makes Adam sigh, eyes falling back down to his lap as he shifts his weight to lean his head against the proffered arm. Michael remains a steadfast, mellow warmth.

"Do you miss your dad?" he lets out without thinking, suddenly feeling more like an insignificant child than he had back in the days of eternal war and poisonous isolation. "Or just—Heaven? You had lots of brothers and sisters, right?"

"I do," Michael sighs in return, and he sounds tired again. "The angels—they were more soldiers, than anything. My army—my *Father's* army," he quickly amends, and Adam shushes the sardonic chuckle that threatens to come bursting from his throat.

It isn't His army if He isn't around, old man, he wants to say. He doesn't. Michael loves God too much for that.

"But my brothers—Raphael and Gabriel," the archangel huffs, bitterness staining his tone. "Lucifer. I loved them."

The mention of Lucifer is like a tender wound, even after all the years down here; soundless anguish that reverberates through the threads of his grace like footsteps down an empty hallway. Adam isn't sure which dimly-lit corner of his dusty mind it comes from, but he gets the abrupt notion that people—including archangels—are easier to love from a distance. He certainly hadn't felt this when Lucifer had been down here, when he and Michael were going to town in an effort to tear the other apart.

He wonders what makes love worse—distance, or closeness?

"So you love him, but you don't care about him."

"No. No, I suppose I don't. Not anymore."

Michael's love for Raphael and Gabriel is something long-lost, something distant and nostalgic. It's still tinged with bitterness, of course, but Adam thinks that it's almost entirely swallowed up in the love that burns dark—a savage, unyielding mixture of biting hurt and acidic fury—for Lucifer.

Adam doesn't understand it. He doubts he ever will; how someone could wish for nothing but to see the other ripped to shreds and call it *love* is beyond him. How someone could want to do the ripping with their own hands, even more so.

He isn't sure if it's an *archangel* thing or a *human* thing, and he isn't sure if he wants to know the answer.

Maybe it's both, in all the wrong ways.

"And my Father…" Michael continues, voice returning to its solemn state, "Of course I miss Him. He's my Father," he explains, like that says it all.

It doesn't, but Adam is tired, and he squeezes Michael's hand to show that he's heard.

"My mom and I," he offers, in lieu of a proper response. "We used to go out in the backyard to catch fireflies when I was little. It was only for...a month or two during the summer, I think? 'Cause Minnesota's cold and all. But we'd make a competition out of it. See who could catch the most, y'know?"

Michael hums in agreement. Adam can't remember whether he's told this before or not—he probably has, if he thinks about it—but even if he hadn't, Michael had probably already seen it when he'd filtered through his old memories to fix them. Even still, he doesn't say a word about it.

"I remember—she'd always get more than me, but she'd pretend like she wouldn't. So I'd feel better, right? 'Cause I was five or six. And I remember that I read somewhere about

trapping them in a jar, so they'd light up someone's room at night. And—" he chuckles. The smile hasn't returned, not really, but his face isn't exactly frowning, either. "I woke my mom up crying in the middle of the night on one of her days off because I had a nightmare about it. That I'd, uh, trapped all the fireflies. And they'd all died."

Then, he shakes his head, trying to clear it of the rapidly-spiraling thoughts. What he doesn't anticipate is becoming hyper-aware of the fact that Michael's thumb has started sweeping softly against his skin; a familiar gesture, if he's ever felt one.

When had Michael even started doing that? Adam hadn't even registered it. It had just been *there* —something normal, something natural.

Except now that he was aware of it, it was anything but.

"Sorry, that got...dark."

"We're in Hell."

Adam snorts, caught suddenly off-guard by the minimal trace of deadpan amusement in the archangel's voice, and turns his head back up to look at him.

"Fair enough. I take it back," he manages a microscopic grin. "D'you think that demons ever walk into walls 'cause everything's so dark?"

He hopes he stops trying to be funny in the future. It isn't working out for him.

Then again, what did it matter?

But Michael glances down, straight at their intertwined hands, and it's all Adam can do to kick his mental processes back into gear. Distantly, he notices the soothing pulse that the archangel keeps sending out—over and over again, until it almost reminds Adam of a flowing river—and he finally perceives the way that the sound of crumpling aluminum foil has grown quieter in his brain. It hasn't disappeared, but it's...softer. Less overwhelming.

"Well," he says. "Not everything."

Adam thinks he can be forgiven for the sudden aversion of his own eyes, the lowering of his chin, the way he rests his head against Michael's arm once more and tries pointedly—with *all* of his might—not to think too much into it.

After all, there was a lightbulb right above them.

Even if Michael was looking down.

"Kid—"

"No, no, wait, listen, I'm right, aren't I?"

Michael is giving him the most disbelieving stare he's ever seen, something equal parts wholly amused and weirded out that makes Adam's face split into a wide, cheeky grin. "I don't…"

"If Hell exists *everywhere,* and we fell into Hell through a portal in Kansas, then that means we may or may not still be in America, right? And since I'm still...uh, alive, that means that I'm still a citizen. Right? So, so, theoretically, I'm committing tax evasion. Well," he pauses, letting his expression turn into a mock frown, "I mean, I guess since I don't have a job, I don't have to pay—?"

He cuts himself off laughing when Michael's face begins to screw up in confusion, like he genuinely can't believe what he's hearing is real.

They're sitting on the couch again, Adam leaning with his back against the right armrest and his knees drawn up to his chest, wrapping his arms lazily around them as his body shakes with its little fit. Michael's leaning on the left armrest—feet on the floor, of course—peering at him like he's not sure whether to join him or check him for hallucinations again. But Adam's mind is clear, surprisingly, and even with the weariness that comes with the constant static plaguing his brain he'd somehow managed to work himself up into a lighthearted mood.

Which meant, of course, that he had to do his absolute best to mess with the resident archangel.

It definitely wasn't just because Michael was easy to mess with. To be fair, Adam was sort of pulling words out of his ass—even *he* hadn't been able to figure out what he was talking about a few times, throwing words around like he was—but it was still worth it to spout gibberish if it made Michael start shaking his head in even more bemusement than he already was.

His laughter eventually tapers down, but the smile remains firmly plastered on his face, matching the crooked one that's made its way onto Michael's. Another thought comes to his mind, one that threatens to send him into another round of hysterics, and Adam can tell that Michael's caught on to the second burst of amusement that he knows must be radiating from his soul when a single eyebrow of his raises in question.

"Okay, so—hear me out, here—is Jesus your half-brother? Because I gotta say, that seems like it'd be one hell of a family dinner. You sit down to eat and all your water turns into wine!"

Both of Michael's eyebrows shoot up, both unbelieving and indicative of the humor still flitting like a hummingbird across his features, and he doesn't get a chance to even try and respond before Adam's laughing again.

There are fiery bubbles that are beginning to soar within him at the sight of the archangel's face; he almost wants to internally plead with them for the briefest of moments— *don't ruin this for me, I'm just trying to enjoy what I can in Hell, come on, leave me alone* —but instead, they almost seem to add to his hilarity, rising from his chest to his throat and out of

his mouth in the form of jocund peals. It's almost enough to let himself sink down into the feeling, because—to his surprise—he *wants* to.

The idea is...inviting.

It isn't like they're doing any harm, right? They're just there. And as long as he doesn't pay them too much mind, as long as he manages to wrangle his own mind into some sort of working order, it should *stay* that way.

"You..." Michael says, and Adam feels his grin widen as the archangel shakes his head again, seeming completely and utterly at a loss for words. He seems to draw a blank, though, and simply settles for a look akin to one of overfond gaiety that Adam can practically *feel* etching itself permanently into the back of his eyelids.

It's just about control, he realizes. *Control.*

And, well—he'd held out long enough when it came to his hallucinations, didn't he? This should be a piece of cake in comparison.

He, with his shoulders still shaking with fits of giggles, settles into the sensation and lets the bubbles spread through his skin, following the pathways of his bloodstream in ways that send gentle flashes of warmth alight in his veins. It doesn't feel irrepressible, like he would've expected; instead, it's just...there, rushing into each nook and cranny of his body like water filling up a once-dried river. Like it's supposed to be there.

Intrinsic.

Michael's grace flutters with something equally warm, though; something a little mystified, a little mirthful, a little fond. It dances on Adam's soul like the beating of a hawk's wings instead of bubbles.

It's almost enough to make him wonder what kind of grave he's just dug for himself; if the flowers at his funeral will be colorful or rotted.

"Close your eyes."

"Hm?" Adam looks up from their board game, which he's losing at. Michael's figure isn't giving anything away, and neither is his grace.

"Close your eyes," Michael repeats, and Adam holds up the game piece in his hands.

"Now? Aren't we in the middle of something?"

A twinkle of Michael's eyes and the game is gone, game piece included. Adam's pointer finger and thumb hit each other as they try to grab on to something that isn't there. "I don't think so."

Adam sends him a wry grin, finally closing his eyes and dropping his arm back down to rest next to his other one on the table. "Alright, alright. What's this about, anyway?"

“You’ll see.”

He feels the familiar shift of his mind around him, blocked out by the backs of his eyelids. It’s always a little different when Michael does it—more precise, instead of the vague shapes and images that Adam somehow manages to piece together when he alternates between his house and the park. He doesn’t open his eyes.

“Oh, are we going somewhere new? Can I open my eyes, or are we gonna play twenty questions?” Curiosity is beginning to build in his chest, and he gets the feeling that he might have to cover his eyes with his palms if he wants to stop himself from cracking his eyes open to get a sneak peek.

He also doesn’t really like the feeling of staring at darkness, a swirling void painted on a black canvas, but—Michael wouldn’t do something like that to him. Make him uncomfortable for no reason, he means.

Adam trusts that he wouldn’t.

So he puts his hands together and waits, stroking the back of one of his thumbs with the other as he feels images continue to shape and warp around him.

“Not yet,” Michael replies, so Adam—naturally—takes that as an opportunity to play twenty questions. He could use the noise.

“‘Kay. Is whatever you’re making, uh...blue?”

“What?”

“Does it have the color blue in it?”

The archangel pauses for a moment, like he’s considering something, and then— “No.”

“Is it a place on Earth?”

“No.”

Interesting. “Is it in the solar system?”

“No,” Michael says, but this time his voice sounds closer, like he’s walking over. Then, Adam feels fingers against the crown of his head, running through his hair almost idly, and he latches on to the sensation like a lifeline as he automatically leans back into it, like a reflex. Which is stupid, since Michael’s only done this once before. It directs his attention away from his lack of vision, though, which he’s almost embarrassingly grateful for.

“Another—” he clears his throat, the little flashes of light cavorting in his head, down his spine, through his fingers preventing him from gathering his thoughts. “Is it in another galaxy, or—or ours?”

“Another one,” he hears, and then there’s a quieter, “You can open them now,” as his mind finally comes to a standstill.

Adam’s eyelids peel themselves open, immediately widening as they take in the sight.

It’s...a massive cloud. But not just any cloud—they’re...in space. Or Michael’s construction of space, anyway. Adam can tell it’s space, somehow, but there’s something off about it, and it isn’t until he looks around from all angles can he tell that it’s the lack of stars surrounding them. It's dark, all around them.

Empty.

He looks back at the dust cloud, dimly aware of Michael’s hand coming to rest softly at the base of his neck, and he gets the distinct feeling of something new, in a way he doesn't think he'll ever be able to explain. It ripples across the surface of the memory like the dripping of a faucet in a faraway pool, and Adam cocks his head as he considers the scene before him, the combination of what he’s seeing and the feelings he’s receiving.

Cognizance slams into him like a freight train.

“This is—” he turns to stare at Michael, hardly daring to believe it. “The first star?”

Michael nods. “I modified the memory so that it’d be easier to see from your perspective. It's nothing compared to the real thing, but..." he shrugs, words trailing into nothing.

Adam feels an incredulous laugh startled out of him as he turns back, watching as the cloud moves and circles and collapses in on itself at a speed that he *knows* has to be modified—he can *feel* the millions and millions of years compressed into minutes, and he's almost entirely sure that the only thing keeping him grounded is the easy swipe of Michael's fingers on his skin.

It's mesmerizing.

It isn't long before the tightly swirling ball of gas and dust is blown away by the sheer amount of pressure being emitted by the growing celestial body, and Adam can hear himself make a quiet "oh!" sound when brilliant light finally begins to protrude from behind the coverage of the dust, bright and radiant and a thousand times more spectacular than he'd ever thought possible.

The star begins to swell and grow until Adam doesn't think it'll ever stop, watching with his bottom lip clamped tight between his teeth. It's got nothing on Michael, of course, but it's a lot regardless.

"Michael, this is…" his own voice sounds breathy, hushed, almost like he hasn't used it in years. "I…"

Words fail him, language suddenly seeming like the most ludicrous thing in Hell as he struggles to wrap his head around what he'd just seen. What written word, *spoken* word, could ever capture the true essence of creation itself? What human or angel or *whatever* else there was out there could possibly describe the magnitude of...t*his,* without falling flat on their knees in defeat?

So, instead of trying to fumble for words, he hones in once more on Michael's touch, his grace, his being, and allows his own self to fall open; to showcase his amazement, his wonder, his effusiveness, his veneration for what he'd just witnessed on full display, with nothing to hide.

Adam turns to meet his eyes, to take in the way that the dazzling starlight glitters iridescently across the lines of his face, catching and holding his eyes like the bright blue of the sky at dawn. He feels some inadvertent *want* build up in him then; to reach out and trace the lines with his fingers, to lean in until he could see nothing but the billions of years reflected back at him through the warmth depths of the archangel's gaze, to share a quiet laugh, to hold on and never let go.

Control. Stop it.

Instead, he takes Michael in and smiles. He's not sure if his expression reflects his sincerity—he *hopes* it does—but he doesn't care. His soul will do that for him.

"Thank you."

The zephyr of grace that encases him is a perfect match to the hand that runs back through his hair—calm and serene and kind.

This time, there is no underlying fear when Adam closes his eyes.

Chapter 11

After the star, it's like another switch has been flipped, and suddenly they're going *everywhere*. Adam sees the formation of galaxies, the collisions of asteroids, rocky planets here and there that make Adam smile when he kneels down and feels the surface of each and every one of them, when he looks up at the stars so different from the ones on Earth.

It's nothing compared to the real thing, like Michael said before. But it's something new, something incredible, and he can't seem to stop himself from grinning and laughing every time the archangel whisks them off to location after location, weaving the soft fabric of the false realities around them with the power of his infallible memory.

Michael always watches him when they go somewhere new, grace threading warmly around his soul as Adam spins to take in all the sights. Sometimes, when Adam sits down to properly take in the scenery after the initial excitement has passed, Michael will sit down next to him too; they'll sit there together, shoulder pressing against shoulder, seated with their legs dangling on expanses of black or white or gray—or stars, even. And sometimes, when Adam least expects it, he can feel a certain sense of wonder—different, but much like his own—trickling softly from Michael over to him.

"Your dad had a hell of an imagination," Adam murmurs, staring down from their bird's-eye view at the the sparkling stars that form an elliptical galaxy beneath them. *If nothing else,* bounces around at the base of his tongue, but he doesn't release them.

Michael's lips curl into a smile, huffing out a small laugh, and Adam turns to him to watch his eyes grow distant with old memories. He looks ancient again, eyebrows pulling down at the sides to make his face a little more open, a little more soft. Weary, but time-honored all the same.

Somehow, it doesn't make the gap between them widen. Michael doesn't feel distant. He's just *there,* timeless and existing only in this moment at the same time. And Adam understands —he is too, in his own little human way.

Is it even that anymore? Adam's mind speaks up. *Do you count? You were a bad example before, but what about now? Does the word even have meaning? You weren't even human enough for Sam and Dean to save—*

Stop. That isn't it. Stop it.

"He did," Michael replies, and just like that, Adam senses the waters they're about to dip their feet in and immediately goes for a change of subject.

"What did you think about Earth?" he asks, and the archangel's gaze meets his. "When it was made?"

Michael hums, his eyes falling in thought, and Adam brings his legs back up to hug to his chest.

“I didn’t think anything, at first,” he says at last. “It was just another planet of my Father’s. It’s when he began to add the detail to it that I began to see it for its beauty. Eden was…” he chuckles again, a barely-there sound, and Adam leans his cheek on his knee as he watches; as he listens. “It was beautiful. And so was the rest of it.”

Adam smiles, humored and a little tired. “And then humanity came along, right?”

Michael raises an eyebrow and tips his head in a little *well, you’re not wrong* motion, his own mouth pulling up, and it makes Adam chuckle.

“Fair enough. Not like we’re the best things ever created.”

“My Father certainly seemed to think so.”

He snorts. “If that’s what He wants to think, then sure, whatever. But a lot of us are assholes. I mean, not all of us—” he amends, thinking of his mom with a pang that shoots through his heart, “—but there are definitely some real dicks in the apple barrel.”

Adam’s fairly sure that’s not how the saying goes.

“But that’s pretty much just every species, right? We’ve all got our douchebags.” he taps his fingers on the side of his leg. There was a time where the fabric of his jeans had feeling, but now that feeling is gone—it’s just a part of him, at this point. He’d stopped trying to change clothes a long time ago; there was no point if his brain couldn’t come up with rational designs for t-shirts anymore. Nowadays, if he tries, something always goes wrong. The memories from his childhood hardly help—those clothes were, of course, too small.

He wasn’t sure why he’d started thinking about clothes. Maybe it’s because Michael’s suddenly staring at him with curious eyes and Adam doesn’t know if the fluttering in his stomach would be able to handle that with any sort of finesse.

“I’m sure you know all about that, though,” Adam says, suddenly, tacking on a cheeky smile for effect.

Control.

Michael’s eyes narrow in thinly-veiled playfulness as he detects the mock-insult, an incredulous smirk blooming to fruition on his face faster than Adam can blink.

It’s more distracting than it has any right being.

“Do I?”

“Well, you didn’t spend thousands of years ruling a bunch of them for nothing.”

Adam, with all of his heart, *cannot* help it—with every second that passes by of Michael peering at him like he’s about to kick his ass, it becomes more and more difficult to restrain the laughter that threatens to burst past his teeth at any given moment. He presses his lips together, shoulder shaking from the effort, but when the archangel finally lets his own smile

take control of his expression like the brilliance of a sun breaking past the clouds after a gloomy day, Adam—

Well, he fucking loses it. To put it lightly.

He laughs and laughs until Michael's smirk comes back, and Adam doesn't even get a warning before the invisible platform he'd been sitting on gives way beneath him, dropping him straight down into the galaxy they'd been previously watching.

Adam laughs the whole way down, feeling the good-natured nudge of Michael's grace against his soul all the while.

He probably should be scared; what with the whole *falling straight down* thing and all. But he has no reason to be, does he?

It's *Michael.*

The center of the galaxy opens up under him, a pinprick of another place and time awaiting him at the end of the line, and Adam feels an exuberant fondness crash into him like a tidal wave—whether it's his or Michael's, though, is a question that he has no answer to.

Maybe it's both of theirs, mixing and twining together until it joins at the seams of the space where their beings connect; another winding rope that serves to strengthen... them. Strengthens the here and now and the godforsaken eternity they have to spend in this rotting little corner of the world.

The hole swallows him up, and Adam laughs a little more when he sees what's at the end of it, twisting his body so he lands on his back against the cushions of the couch. He bounces lightly, the slightest amount—like he hadn't dropped millions of miles through the nonexistent air—and beams brightly when the archangel's face materializes above him, leaning over him as Adam splays haphazardly across the poor piece of furniture.

"Fancy meeting you here, halo," he teases.

"I'm sure," Michael responds, deadpan and amused all at once. Adam's still grinning when he pulls himself up, making room that the archangel immediately claims as per their usual arrangement.

A few moments of companionable silence pass between them—time that Adam uses to bring his ridiculous amounts of smiling down to a minimum—and then he blows out a breath of air and leans against Michael's shoulder again.

"You holding up alright?"

The softness of his own voice surprises him, a stark contrast from the lighthearted air from the moments prior, but he has to ask. He has to know.

"Yeah," Michael says, equally as quiet. "It's...not unbearable." Not enough to let it show, at least.

Adam reaches out for Michael in his chest, then, doing his best to push against the endless ocean of his grace with the miniscule scape of his own soul with as much gentle comfort as he could manage.

He wishes he could do more.

Don't, Michael's voice whispers in his mind, and Adam blinks in surprise as he realizes that he'd made that thought public. *Kid, there's nothing you can do.*

I know, Adam responds. *But still.*

He carefully opens up another part of himself, then, the part that wants—more than *anything* —to help, to take the pain of his only friend away; lets it flood over from himself to Michael in tandem with the silent solace that he does his best to maintain.

The archangel shifts, then, and Adam raises up from his shoulder only slightly as he watches it go up and around, resting against the back of the couch with open eyes adorning the face it's attached to like an invitation, and—oh.

His mind comes entirely to a stop. His body, however, has other plans, shifting forwards like it's second nature to curl into the body next to him as Michael drapes his arm entirely around his own shoulders, a comforting weight that feels like it belongs there, of all things.

If he weren't so preoccupied with quelling the racing butterflies under his skin and rebooting his mind back into working order, Adam would wonder which of his memories Michael had drawn this action from; he doubts that this was any sort of movement an archangel would do. It wasn't like their true forms were built for it. As it is, he takes a deep breath, exhaling long and slow through his nose as he sinks into it, lets himself relax.

It's just a feeling. It won't do anything. Control it.

When he, at last, manages to string coherent lines of thought once more, he becomes aware of Michael soothing his arm with his thumb, which is—all sorts of things he doesn't want to think about.

Michael seems to have sunken deep into thought. He latches onto that observation like a lifeline. It's easier to focus on, less likely to send him spiraling over the edge of some unknown abyss.

Penny for your thoughts? Adam tentatively sends over, hoping to everything in the known universe that that's *all* he sent over. He doesn't trust himself to speak, as silly as it sounds; he knows that his vocal cords aren't real, but the idea that they'll fail him still creeps up on him all the same.

He wonders, idly, where that points to on the *human-to-???* scale. If such a scale were to exist. Which it doesn't, because he doubts that there's ever been any record of a human having their body piloted by an archangel and then left down in Hell to rot for centuries.

Here's to being new, Adam supposes.

It just occurred to me, Michael muses, *that I should probably be writhing in pain right now. I hardly think* this *is what my Father intended when He created the Cage.*

Adam snorts, taken off-guard by the blatant confession. *Is that good or bad?*

...Good, I think.

He swallows, pressing a little closer, uncertain of the answer he's about to receive even if he isn't afraid of it. *Even if it's not what He intended?*

Michael is silent for a long, long time, his thumb still gently stroking against his upper arm. Adam can remember a time where his answer would've been something different, something immediate, and it makes him remember a time where Michael had clung so fiercely to the certainty of God's return, when the release of the Darkness had set that hope ablaze like the flames they'd gone up in at Stull.

He isn't here, Michael comes up with, in the end, and Adam takes another deep breath and closes his eyes.

Maybe he isn't an archangel, but he knows the erosion of identity when he sees it.

If nothing else, he could make sure that Michael wouldn't have to be alone if—or *when,* depending on how eternity passes them by—he stopped long enough one day to notice that his carefully-constructed castle of sand had been enveloped entirely by the waves of the greatest ocean of all: *time.*

He could do that much.

Adam's sitting on the couch again. This time, though, his feet are kicked up over the back, his head dangling off the cushions with his arms stretched back to touch the ground. He's in the middle of his sixth rendition of some song that he's pretty sure used to be rock'n'roll—he's not certain that whatever's he made it to be down here falls under that category anymore.

His mom used to like it, he remembers that much. Those songs are really the only ones he remembers.

"Kid, why are you upside-down?"

Michael's seated on the floor in front of him, watching him. Adam pauses, tucking his chin to his neck to look up and grin at the archangel. "Don't know. Why aren't you?"

The archangel's eyebrows climb to his hairline, tipping his head in brief consideration, and in a flash he's seated next to adam on the couch—hands folded loosely across his stomach, legs draped over the back, head tilted back against the edge of the cushion. Adam lets delighted surprise come to the forefront of his expression as Michael twists his face into a thoughtful frown.

"Can't figure out the point, can you?"

“No,” Michael admits, sounding a bit wry. “But there...isn’t a point, is there?”

“Bingo.”

He shakes his head, the corners of his eyes crinkled in a way that Adam finds himself drawn to, studying the creases and lines of his face with an audacious sense of idleness.

“It’s strange,” Michael says, and Adam tunes in to the sound of his voice to listen. “I haven’t done things for my own enjoyment since before I ruled Heaven.”

He trails off, then, biting the inside of his cheek, and the origins of the mundane action are not lost on Adam. Michael doesn’t even seem to notice that he’s doing it; or, if he does, it’s not registering through the connection of their tangled beings.

“And now you’re sitting upside-down on a fake couch with a human in Hell, of all places?” he finishes for him, a jaded tint overcoming his mind for all of a second before it vanishes, lost to sea.

Michael smiles, seemingly more to himself than anything. His eyes flicker upwards—to the ground—before landing back on Adam’s own. “Yes.”

Adam reaches for him, then, and Michael’s response is immediate, their hands joining together to rest gently in the space where the couch cushions separated between them. Their fingers interlace, a few gentle sparks racing up his arm that sends warmth piercing straight through his heart, comfortable and earth-shattering all at once, and he fleetingly wonders how an oasis could so easily disguise itself as a storm; how the line between peace and chaos had become so broadened and so blurred all at once. He’s walking down that same line now, with everything so mixed up that it bleeds into him like he’s an empty canvas waiting patiently for color to make him come to life.

It shouldn’t make sense, all the intangible fabrics of serenity in his chest and all the bedlam that makes up the very threads of it—a quilt, almost, draping itself without a sound over the both of them. A quilt of quietude born of the tattered clothes of battle, created for rest but *never* letting them forget their tempestuous minds, their worn beings.

It shouldn’t make sense, and it doesn’t. Or maybe it does, and he’s just reaching out and grasping the wrong pieces of cloth at the wrong time.

Make up your mind, he scolds the sparks, tapping his finger against Michael’s hand absentmindedly as he tries to gather his thoughts in the wake of their prolonged eye contact.

“For what it’s worth,” Adam says, struggling between the desire to look away and the even stronger desire to dig his feet into the sands of time and never let this moment go. “You’re good at remembering how it works.”

Michael’s grace pulses with enough kindliness that it almost aches. If only he’d known, all those centuries ago, that care *did* still exist; that it wasn’t just a long-lost memory of his mom’s smile, that wasn’t just his own desperate attempts to feel human. It was real, in the here and in the now, and his days of coveting for it were long gone.

He can’t resist tacking on an “...Even if you’re old,” though. He does have a sense of normalcy to keep up.

Michael laughs.

“*Copulation.”*

“...”

“*The rear of a donkey.”*

“...”

“*Hole of the*—okay, really. Why doesn’t Enochian have any curse words?”

“Maybe because we’ve never had them? The closest we have are words in reference to my brother. Or Hell,” Michael’s expression takes on a disdainful air for a moment before relaxing again.

“*The wicked one,”* Adam sounds out, the words stringing together from the vocabulary that had been fortuitously passed over to him all those years ago.

Michael nods, and even now, Adam can feel smallest shift of his grace at the epithet—so astronomically tiny, in fact, that if the archangel hadn’t literally been on top of his soul he doubts he would’ve ever felt it. He chooses not to comment on it.

“Enochian never changed with the times, huh,” he ponders out loud, holding his fist in his hand from where he’s leaning his elbow on the table.

“It wouldn’t have,” the archangel sniffs, and Adam raises an eyebrow and lets a crooked grin push its way onto his teeth at the note of pride that enters Michael’s voice. “I kept Heaven running just the same as it did when my Father was there.”

Then he pauses, and the pride seems to float away, dissipating from the set of his shoulders like smoke in the wind. “And even that landed me here.”

Was it all even worth it? Everything, for nothing? Is what Adam hears, a silent question that flits around in Michael’s mind like a hummingbird that attempts to forcefully bury itself as soon as it comes.

But Adam still hears it; still understands how rocky the territory they’ve just landed themselves in is.

He takes a breath, letting the smile on his own face even out into something more gentle. “Look, Michael—you couldn’t have known that you’d end up in Hell. Even if we’re stuck down here...I mean, I've said it before; you tried your best to do what He said up there, right? That’s pretty much all anyone can ever do. Ever. It didn’t work out, yeah, but that’s just...life, isn’t it? It might’ve been a first for you, with you being—” he gestures aimlessly at Michael,

who's staring wide-eyed at him, "—*you,* but...that's life, too. Maybe things don't have to be worth anything. Just take what you got and keep going, yeah? Or something like that."

He tries to pour as much sincerity as he feels in his words, gesturing with his hands and tilting his own head and hoping that Michael understands, that he can feel the depths of it.

Michael blinks, and he doesn't speak. Instead, his eyes lower, his arms slipping down from the crossed position they'd found themselves in to fold quietly in his lap. Adam can sense his grace racing with thoughts, but he turns a blind eye—a blind ear? Blind mind?—to them, keeping himself from prying. He doesn't move to touch him, either. Some things required focus, and some focus required as much space as they felt they could give each other in a world where everything of theirs was shared.

And this was delicate business, too, a place where the silly little wings of butterflies did not belong. This was a seed, planted in a garden that needed trust instead of sunlight and honesty instead of water. There was no room for the swarm of buzzing bees that erupted in Adam's brain when Michael so much as grinned in his direction.

He was glad he could shove them aside when he needed to. Mostly.

"If," Michael says, and the entirety of Adam's attention suddenly snaps to him. "If I were to...keep going, how would I do that?"

The archangel's voice is level, even, giving nothing away, but Adam is floored by the question regardless—his mind jumps to Michael's real form once more before it shies away from it in the same way as before.

"Just do the same way you've been doing up until now," he hears himself murmur a second later, almost shocked by the fact that he can get his lips to work. "Remembering isn't the only thing you're good at."

Michael meets his eyes at that, gaze deep and searching, and Adam bares as much of his soul as he can afford to without giving away the unnecessary, irrelevant softness he had in his heart when the other being so much as blinked, lets him look straight through him with no qualms about it at all.

It could be moments that pass them by. It could be years. Adam hardly knows the difference anymore; it was better to just let things coalesce, after so long. They all felt the same.

But, however long it had been, he feels something that had wound itself tightly in the expanse of Michael's grace begin to come loose—taking the pressure of a tight coil off of a rope with already-frayed edges—and Adam nods.

He isn't sure why he nods. Maybe it's supposed to be encouraging, or empathetic, or something else that he can't keep up with right now—his present state of mind is more colors than rational thought, really.

He nods, though, and Michael offers him a little half-smile in return, and Adam suddenly wonders what it would look like under different circumstances; if it would look less pained if

it were silhouetted against the blue of the afternoon sky than it would the too-familiar backdrop of his fake house, his true form still scorching and burning with every second they sat in the Cage.

The mess of cards on the floor has them both stumped.

“D’you think we might’ve been playing different games?” Adam asks, wondering how he’d managed to end up with an entire hand of checkered, red-squared cards that mocked him from where he'd laid them out on the floor, trying to take the chance to properly look at them. He’s gotten so used to just summoning cards and launching into new games that he might’ve forgotten to focus on which game they were playing, which would’ve...changed the cards in his hands.

“I’d think so,” he gets in return, as Michael stared down at his own cards on the wooden boards. Numbered cards.

Adam snorts. “Alright, so do we mark that down as a tie, or do we pretend it never happened?”

Michael spares a quick glance for Adam’s pile, and then sends him a mischievous smirk. “Seeing as you have...the hand that you have,” he says, and grins when Adam sends him a mock-dirty look. “I think we can forget it ever happened.”

“Yeah, yeah. For the record, I don’t know how this happened either,” he sweeps his hand accusingly down at the cards.

“I’m sure.”

“I wasn’t paying attention! Actually,” Adam stops, a thought suddenly occurring to him. “Why didn’t *you* notice?”

The archangel’s smile is reticent. “I wasn’t paying attention,” he parrots, turning Adam’s words against him, and he thinks that Michael’s gotten *way* too good at joking around. He can’t even tell whether he’s kidding or not on the surface. He'd look deeper to check, but looking deeper during a game would be cheating. Obviously.

And thinking about the potential of Michael not kidding and being distracted during the game presented the question of what he was being distracted *by*—which Adam's mind begged to latch on to and puzzle out, since Michael had shifted back over into a fairly decent state of mind after his short little crisis and there was a very, very limited amount of things in here that could've diverted *his* attention.

The pain scale had been on the lower side in more recent times, too, so that probably hadn't been it.

...Maybe it was—

Nope. Knock it off, Milligan. You're too old to be acting like a teenager, the rational part of his brain suddenly cuts in. Thankfully.

Adam should probably start using it more often.

"Hm," he settles for, and moves his attention back to the cards, trying to make sure they were all the same this time. In an attempt to get his spazzing mind back under the realm of control, he shoots a question into the air.

"Anything going on out there?" Though check-ups on the outside world haven't really been a thing since the days of Lucifer and the release of the Darkness, it's a good excuse as any. He doesn't particularly want to move to go check for himself, either. Michael's mental X-ray vision comes in handy like that.

Michael shrugs and tilts his head up the smallest bit, eyes turning distant as he looks beyond the veil of their imaginary world, and suddenly Adam knows something's wrong.

He can *feel* something wrong, vibrating through every blood vessel of the body he's all but lost connection to, and the discomfiting sense of wrongness is emanating directyl from Michael, who's turned stiff as a goddamn board.

Eyes still distant, his head still tipped back, Michael still looks as unearthly as ever—and yet, when he forces out a strangled "Adam—" that leaves Adam on high alert, his voice is anything but.

"What is it?" he replies, hearing his own voice turn sharp with worry. "Michael—"

"The Cage," Michael says, almost chokes out, and Adam's mind runs through a billion and a half different apocalyptic scenarios before the archangel's eyes are *here* again and Adam feels wholly compressed under the intensity of his gaze, dreading his next words with an unyielding fervor, icy chills jolting down his spine.

And then Michael opens his mouth, and everything stops.

"It's *open.*"

Chapter 12

"...What?"

"*Open,* kid, it's—" Michael cuts himself off with a frown, eyes distant. "Why didn't I sense anything? I should've been able to—"

His voice fades into white noise as Adam feels the world tilt around him—reality isn't changing shape, but he thinks his brain might be.

He must've heard wrong. He *had* to have heard wrong. The Cage doesn't—The Cage doesn't *open.* The Cage is four walls and a floor and a *ceiling,* darkness and metal and eternal confinement. It hadn't even opened when Lucifer had been freed. It hadn't—it *couldn't* have —

"That can't be right," Adam hears himself say, like he's listening from a great distance. He feels like he is. He's not even sure what he sounds like. "I mean...no, there's—there's no way. Why would it just be—?"

He's shaking his head, he realizes, arms coming up to cross defensively over his chest as he struggles to wrap his head around the words *Cage* and *open* and—it can't be real. It can't.

Would Michael lie? his mind whispers.

No, he answers, *no, but—*

The archangel in question is suddenly in front of him, face a handful of inches from his own. He can pick out every little detail of his eyes, every little blue fleck, and even now it leaves him more captivated than he'd care to admit.

"Adam," Michael's voice is low but it's the clearest Adam's ever heard it, piercing holes in his flimsy shield of static that strikes him straight through the heart. "Do you trust me?"

His gaze is imploring, ardent, the set of his body wired as if to spring at a moment's notice; he shifts, though, and Adam glances down to see where he's raised his hand, palm-up and ready and *waiting,* waiting just for *him.*

This isn't a lie, Adam thinks, through thick fog and loss of direction. *Oh, fuck, he's not lying. It's real, it's real, it's real, it's real—*

Somewhere at the base of his throat, hope that he'd thought he'd squashed rises like bile—foul, wretched bile that his body so desperately wishes to expel out of him; by now, the emotion is so foreign that it's almost downright *unnatural.* And yet, it is that same hope that drives him to slowly uncross his arms, hand trembling slightly as he rests it softly in Michael's—softly, like he hasn't done in centuries. He feels brittle, *frail,* like the slightest gust of wind could send him shattering into a million little pieces and fling him, screaming, against the walls of the Cage.

The instant their hands curl together, Michael nods once at him, short and reassuring, and that's when Adam feels the archangel pulling them both out of the comfort of the mindscape —reality falling away for real, this time, as vision from Adam's eyes draws nearer and nearer.

This is it, his thoughts sound half-hysterical to his mind. *Is it? Is this it? What if—*

Grace encases him tighter in return, soothing and buzzing with anticipation all at once, and Adam clings to it more than he'd ever clung to it in the last several centuries. The hope has grown tangible within him, as thick as the ash from a volcano—Michael had treated him to a few explosions, too, much to his delight—and he doesn't know whether to choke on it or let it consume him from the inside out.

Michael doesn't hang around in the back with him, this time; instead, Adam feels him surge forward the slightest bit more than usual, still pressing close to him as Michael takes up the reins of his body for the first time in hundreds of years.

It's *weird.*

Adam can feel the sensations from his body like he could before, but it's clear from the disconcerted ripple that briefly rushes through Michael that he's just as perturbed as Adam is —the awkward heaviness of a real, physical tongue, the brush of fingertips against the coarse jacket they were wearing, the creaking of bones as Michael moved to stand from the floor of the Cage. It was barely even a moment before Michael was moving with just as much precision as he'd done in their shared mind, but Adam…

It was just weird, that was all.

And then Michael turns his—*their?*—eyes upwards, towards the ceiling, and Adam doesn't think he could replicate the choked-off noise he made later if he tried.

The top of the Cage, the ceiling, was…

Open, he realizes, the truth crashing down on him with more unbearable pressure than a tsunami. *It's open, it's open, it's actually* open—

Yeah, Michael sends back, sounding a little stunned himself.

Some odd form of pseudo-lightning flashes above them, dark clouds swirling and gnashing and twisting until they seem to take on an eldritch form of their own, and that's when Adam realizes that there's something... *off* about them.

The clouds are agitated. The claps of roaring thunder would be enough to burst his eardrums if he didn't have an archangel taking the lead, and Adam finds himself unconsciously pressing in closer to Michael, the steady *thrum* of his being setting him at a little more at ease —a boulder jutting out of the choppy ocean of *new, new, new* he'd found himself in; something to cling to, to hold on and never quite let go because the ocean was too vast, too murky, too unknown.

Those clouds, he speaks up, almost a little afraid to hear the answer. *What are they?*

Human souls, the archangel replies, and he doesn't sound melancholic so much as he sounds...cautious, almost.

Is that caution meant for Adam? His reaction to the revelation?

...What he could've been, had he and Michael not come to their agreement?

The thought is disorienting.

The remnants of them, anyway. They're not always turned to demons. Some of them are thrown down here. It's another barrier for the Cage—one of its protections, like the sigils.

Once upon a time, Adam thinks that he would've been disgusted—horrified, even—at the thought of so many people cast aside, discarded and left to fade away until there was nothing left that even began to resemble humanity. Now, though, all he feels is a sickly sweet sense of empathy that gnaws at his rib cage, blunt and cold.

An idea strikes him, then, to ask Michael if it would be possible for him to reach out to one of the thousands that writhe around them, to reassure them that they were not alone in their suffering, but he knows that it would be cruel.

To offer the damned a taste of light, of hope, of *peace*, only to yank it away when they took their leave...there was nothing more evil Adam could imagine.

Instead, he lets a memory of Michael surface to the forefront of his mind and does his best to stay inside its realm, this time—unwilling to stray outside of its borders to the morbid thoughts lying in wait, the desolate void ready to snap him up at a moment's notice.

'Souls are powerful,' he quotes from it, and he thinks he'd almost be attempting a grin if he had a mouth to do it with.

Almost.

He settles for a nudge instead, feeling amusement spark through him when Michael nudges him back. *Is that where all that lightning is coming from? All that buildup of power?*

Yes.

But he's stalling and he knows it. He steels himself, turns his attention back to their current predicament.

Michael...what opened the Cage? Do you think it's a trap?

I don't know. There aren't any broken seals. It's just…

Adam takes in the outside world, the realization that they can just *go* smacking him in the back of the head like an oncoming train. He's caught between two currents— *We need to leave! We need to get the hell out of Hell!* and *No, we can't leave,* I *can't leave, I don't know anywhere else, how am I supposed to—?*

Against the screaming in his own mind, the murky disbelief that wars with the overwhelming comprehension, the sweet, spiky edges of *hope* that cling to the inside of his throat like a burr, he realizes something else—this is *Michael's* way out, too.

His mind is scrambled, and he'll forgive himself later for not thinking about it sooner, but it's what spurs him to finally poke Michael's grace and say *Michael, this might be our only chance. What if it shuts? What if—whatever. We need to leave.*

And before Adam can even say anything, before he can even cast another glance around their formerly-eternal prison, he feels something *open* in his chest, straining from the skin of his back, and he would've gasped if he'd been in possession of anything remotely human-shaped.

Power rushes through him from Michael's side of their connection, an ethereal sensation that threatens to sweep Adam down, down, down into oblivion—but the comforting oblivion of being wholly encased by the archangel's grace, not the everlasting darkness.

He watches with breathless awe as Michael's wings spread, rising upwards until they reach past the confines of the Cage into Hell's true air, and he's suddenly hit with a sense of relief so profound that it would have been enough to bring him to tears. Michael's grace is practically singing with freedom, the sudden reduction of pain leaving him warmer than Adam's ever felt him, and—

Are you ready? he hears. Adam manages to tear his eyes away from the singed, darkened, *beautiful* wings for all of a moment to take one last searching glance around the familiar space.

It's the same as it always is.

No, he answers, letting the cold nervousness that sparks bright within him filter over to Michael without inhibition, blatantly honest and exposed and *raw* in a way that hits him like it did when he'd fallen apart in his arms—perhaps even more so. *Are you?*

And for all of Michael's respite, for all of the bright, toe-curling exhilaration that raced through his being quicker than the surrounding flashes of sempiternal lightning, Adam feels something pierce through; a single black dot in sea of light that makes him ache with understanding.

No, Michael responds, just as nervous, the lines and stripes of the fabric of his spirit still stained by liquid fear—just like Adam's. He does his best to send a wave of comfort in return.

Then what are we waiting for? Let's, uh, blow this taco stand. Or whatever.

The archangel laughs, the tensing of wings and feathers that hadn't been used in centuries the only warning Adam receives before the floor of the Cage leaves their feet and they're—*soaring.*

Let's get you out of here, kid, Michael's thought drifts over to him, absent-minded and focused all at once, and he doesn't even think that Michael meant for him to hear them. They perforate his heart all the same, and he's quick to hide his stuttering thoughts from the other's mind.

Me?

Flying is like nothing Adam's ever experienced before.

Granted, he'd never flown in the first place—since the last time they'd been on Earth, he'd mainly been asleep until the rude awakening of *fire*—but this is...something else.

He can feel every flap of Michael's wings, every twitch and tuck and narrowing as he navigates Hell's brutal skies. It's like they're just another extension of him, as natural as his arms or legs, and they sing at being put to use for the first time in a *long* time in tandem with the effervescent melody that's ringing through each and every molecule in his body.

Michael is *joyous.* With each and every thunderous beat, taking them higher and higher, his grace radiates felicity on a level that Adam has never, *ever* felt before—a sensation so fervid that he feels his own body vibrating with it, white-hot flames licking enthusiastically through the lines of his capillaries that ache within him like the pang of meeting a long-lost friend. He sinks down into it without delay, rippling and flowing and basking in a pure sea of glee that chases any and all of his misgivings, his uncertainties, his *fears* away as if they had never been there at all.

The entirety of Hell has been ripped open, the archangel notes, with some surprise, and Adam has to stop and think and come back to himself for a moment or two before he realizes what Michael's said.

Should we...uh, be concerned about that? he tries, unsure of what it meant for the state of the Earth if their one-way ticket out was also the reason for its demise. *Is there another Apocalypse going on or something?*

Not that I can tell, Michael says, turning sharply without warning in order to avoid something or other, and Adam almost wants to laugh along with the bright, keen thrill that it sends through the archangel as they race past layers and layers of Hell's atmosphere. From the corners of his—*their*—eyes, Adam spots chains and hooks and racks, suspended in midair and defying the concept of *gravity* in every possible way, but it doesn't *matter* because they're all gone faster than he can think.

Ahead of them, a blazing, brilliant light shines, and Adam can *see* souls and demons alike racing towards it, through it, pouring out like their lives—or non-lives, for that matter—depend on it.

Another beat of Michael's wings and they're zipping forward at an even faster rate than before, rocketing closer and closer until the archangel dips, rolls, and shoots upwards into the light.

And suddenly, all Adam can discern is *pain.*

Vivid, deep, *astronomical* pain—like the agony of Lucifer's blows. It hits his vision so hard Adam thinks he might be ripping apart at the seams, and he tears himself away from the fore of his body with a cry, propelling himself back into the darkness of his own mind without any hesitation; no facsimiles, no small comforts, just the dark void that had haunted him for so long before.

It wasn't...preferable. Adam could feel the twinges of distress begin to nip at his heels the second he'd torn himself away from the outside world, away from *Michael,* and he hated the soul-sucking, deathless night that enveloped him at every turn. He finds himself shrinking into a ball reminiscent of what he'd done centuries ago, whatever he has left of his vision still pulsating with colors and patterns and the dazzling fulguration of before. The black around him is a poison and a friend all at once, slimy and reassuring in all the ways that it shouldn't be. Fear of the unknown prickles at him like the points of a cactus, scraping over his imaginary skin until he bleeds. It wasn't preferable, but...it was *better.* Better than whatever blinding nightmare awaited him in the outside world, no matter how much he wanted to see it.

At least in here, he knew what to expect.

It occurs to him, then, that he hasn't been this alone in a long, *long* time, but he doesn't have time to think about it before Michael's grace is surrounding him again, concern pouring over from each and every speck of his being but not hovering near enough to touch, which is ridiculous—it wasn't *his* fault that the world was so goddamn irradiant.

Adam?

Adam slowly uncurls, just the tiniest bit, from whatever little soul-ball he's tucked himself into and he reaches out, a wordless invitation for Michael to come closer that the archangel instantly accepts, his grace immediately winding around his soul and connecting them again in a way that puts him a little more at ease; Michael's light has always been bright but Adam's eyes have always been accustomed to it, maybe not born for it but still shaped for it regardless. It has never been harsh.

Yeah. Sorry, I just… he projects the memory of pain Michael's way, unable to find the words to describe it. *I didn't expect it to hurt so badly. Or at all, really.*

Your mind and soul grew used to Hell instead of Earth, Michael explains, confirming the nagging suspicion that had popped up at the back of his mind. *I should've warned you.*

Don't worry about it, Adam sighs, and then abruptly remembers that they *aren't in the Cage any more.*

Right.

At least you got to stretch your wings some, anyway, he remarks, successfully diverting the topic when Michael's grace scintillates with the reminder.

I still am, he replies. *We're flying now.*

...Do me a favor and don't crash us, alright? When Michael chuckles, a sound that makes him unravel all the way just to soak it in, Adam sends a little pulse of amusement back his way before asking. *Where are we, anyway?*

Do you want to come out and see? Adam pauses, not wanting a repeat of the earlier incident, and Michael continues on when he senses the hesitation. *We're not on Earth. We're in space. It's darker here.*

He takes a moment, steadies himself, looks around at the dark swamp past the cocoon of archangel grace he's swathed in. Sharp, red-hot needles begin to poke him from the inside out, the etchings of *This is where you belong, now. Stay here,* and *You've been sitting here for so long. What makes you think you can leave?* and *You have no place out there anymore. You never will again,* all attempting to carve their characters into the underside of his consciousness, but all he does is shush them and press a little more into the gentle, welcoming flow of Michael's emotions; his concern, his kindliness, his placidity, all coming together to form a warm shield in the shape of an eddy.

…'Kay. Let's give it another go, Adam concedes, and keeps himself from automatically shrinking away when Michael slowly sweeps them back towards the surface.

When the universe comes into view, starlight glittering everywhere Adam looks, he deciphers two things:

One, Michael's got his wings—made invisible—wrapped around their body like a cover, and gratefulness grabs Adam and shakes him like a rag doll with how hard it strikes him. Michael nudges him once back, a silent *no problem* that Adam understands like he understands the cadence of Enochian. The view is a little muted, like he's looking at them through lightly-translucent glass, but it's still there all the same.

Two...there was no memory, no imitation, no false copy that would *ever* be able to match up to the real thing, muted or not.

Adam clings on to Michael with all he's got, then, and Michael holds on equally as tight.

We're...really here.

"Yes," Michael talks aloud, this time, and Adam feels the vibrations of their vocal cords as if he were the one speaking.

This is real.

The archangel goes quiet, for all of a moment, before he speaks again. His voice is soft. Breathy.

Gentle.

"Yeah, kid. It is."

Eventually, Adam's vision readjusts to properly take in the darkness of space, instead of the darkness of the Cage. He thinks Michael might be helping speed along the process, his grace flowing through his system and rebooting everything that needs a little extra kick in the ass, but he doesn't mind. He's grown twitchy, a thousand fire ants crawling under his skin, both eager and afraid to see Earth after so long.

How long has it been? he asks, while Michael settles them on some planet that neither of them have ever seen before. It's refreshing; new, in a daunting way.

"On Earth?"

Yeah.

"Roughly ten years. It's 2019."

Adam stills, thoughts going a mile a minute. *And...for us?*

"...Over a thousand."

Adam would've nodded, if he could, something quick enough to convey how carefully blank he was trying to keep his mind. *Alright. When are we gonna head back?*

Michael sends a soothing flicker his way. "Are you ready to?"

Yeah. Yeah, let's do it.

And, with that, they're off. They're not as far away from Earth as Adam thought—or maybe Michael just flies really fast and using another dimension like Hell for comparison isn't something he wants to do if he's looking for accurate data.

In seconds, they're breaching the atmosphere, and Adam's once again wincing at how *bright* it is. Already, their ears are picking up sound from *everywhere,* and he catches snippets of conversation from the land below them mixing and intermingling until it's all a rush of meaningless sound—too much like his old hallucinations for his liking. He retreats a little, just enough for everything to become muffled without truly disengaging from the world like every other part of him is suggesting he do.

Michael is steady; focused and comforting all at once. Every flap of his wings sends a flurry of guileless contentment stirring about in his grace, an uninhibited feeling that never fails to start a barrel's worth of hummingbirds fluttering in a domino effect against the edges of his soul, begging to be released. Every loop and dive the archangel makes threatens to make the barrel burst, overflowing to the brim and beyond, and half the time all Adam wants to do is stick his head in the stupid container and tell the birds to stop flapping, or else.

He gets the feeling they wouldn't listen. They're part of him, after all.

They land in a forest, somewhere, Michael's wings coming up to form a cover like he did before. It gives the trees a bit of a glassy look to them that Adam chuckles at, but it keeps the bright greens and browns and yellows from straining his eyes too much. He can hear birdsong and the chirping of crickets, feels the wind brush a strand of hair across their

forehead in a way that he'd never thought he'd feel again, and thick emotion swells deep in his center, so thick that he can't quite make out what it is.

It's not like the sludge he's used to, though. It's...he's....

It's beautiful, he thinks, a feverish hush accentuating his words. *It's beautiful.*

He doesn't even notice the archangel studying him, nor when the same archangel quietly kicks his adaptability levels into higher speeds again and lowers his wings so that Adam isn't looking at the world around him through a pellucid screen. He does notice, however, when Michael slowly draws away from the anterior and gently pushes him towards it instead.

Michael, what—?

Kid. Go outside.

The thought is...intimidating.

I think you've faced worse, comes Michael's voice again, and...he has a point.

Before he can begin to second-guess himself any longer, he surges out, vision growing clearer and clearer and sounds growing louder and louder until something *clicks.*

And he's *there.*

His body seems to have its own priorities, his lungs drawing in a breath of air—air!—and then another, and another, uncaring of the fact that a celestial being was hanging out in the back of his body and that he technically had no need to breathe. His body was heavy, too—how had he forgotten how heavy it was? He'd grown used to feeling so light in the mindscape, and he turns his palms up to gaze at them, flexing his fingers and turning them over and over until he's made aware of something else—*smell.*

Adam breathes in; on purpose, this time. He catches whiffs of things sweet and clean and earthy, and it makes a soft laugh burst past the confines of his lips as he cranes his head to try and peer in every direction at once, taking in the way that the sunlight dappled across the leaves and onto the forest floor until he forgets how to work heavier feet and the ground rises up to meet his face—

He's stopped, though, by an arm; warm and solid and grabbing him around his middle just as he's about to faceplant onto a particularly jagged-looking tree root. When he looks up, surprised, he's met with amused eyes and an even more amused smile.

"Careful," Michael says, but he doesn't even have time to try and help Adam up like he looks like he's about to do before Adam is all but tackling him in a hug, torn between pressing his face down into his shoulder and continuing to stare at the eye-straining wonder around him—because his eyes really are starting to twinge a bit, and he isn't sure if the tears that are beginning to fill them are from the irritation or the sheer amount of happiness flooding his system.

He keeps gazing up around them, arms locked around Michael’s shoulders and neck from their awkward half-squatting position on the forest floor with Adam nearly on top of him, knees bent and straining from exertion—*exertion!*—and Michael’s arms still wrapped around his middle. The contact makes something flip-flop in his chest, adding to the already-spirited mess that runs through him like a shiver.

“We’re really here,” Adam finally manages, voice dipping soft and raspy with tears, nose burning with congestion that makes him sniffle with some amazement. He’d forgotten that noses did that.

The archangel sighs a wordless agreement into his neck, his breath and smile tickling the sensitive skin there as Adam’s knees threaten to give out under him, and he finally acquiesces to the uncomfortable position and fully kneels in the grass, dragging Michael down with him.

Michael lets him.

Adam’s still holding on to him with one arm when he shifts and reaches down, gliding his fingers over the dirt and weeds in artless wonder. The ground is firm, the blades of grass alighting against his fingers, and he takes one and twirls it between his pointer finger and thumb.

It's real.He can't stop thinking it. This is all *real*, the surrounding trees and the dirt and the roots and the birds and *them.*

They sit like that, surrounded by the sounds of Earth and nature and *life* until Adam speaks up, overjoyed tears flowing down his face like two faucets that just won’t stop running no matter how hard he tries to turn them off.

“Y’know,” he starts, and he has to stop to laugh at how watery his voice sounds, how cold the wind feels as it hits the back of his throat when he opens his mouth. “Probably for the best that you didn’t land us in a city.”

Michael grins, and Adam marvels at the distinct lack of weight to it. There's no pain shadowing the corners of his expression, and he feels like he's staring straight into the sun with the brightness of it. “I thought it’d be too loud there.”

That, and the fact that Adam may have been a little out of sorts with the human race but he was fairly sure that breaking down into happy tears in the middle of the road—or sidewalk, or whatever—was pretty likely to get him shouted at by pedestrians.

“Yeah,” he laughs again, unable to help himself, and instead helplessly works to try and scrub the tears away. They don’t stop falling, and he’s just reaching down to wipe his hands on his jeans—they’re coarse, rough, but easy to walk in; so *that’s* what they felt like—when there’s suddenly a thumb under one eye, the hand it’s attached to coming to frame his face as it delicately swipes away the tears underneath. The other hand reaches to do the same on the other side, and Michael’s eyes are warm, his movements so light that Adam can feel it past his skin, in his soul.

And, in the end, he can’t even bring himself to do anything but smile about it—his face *hurts* from it, it aches *so much* and he loves it with everything he has—and the way the archangel mirrors it echoes louder than anything else ever could.

“What do you want to do?”

Adam shrugs, eyes widening in thought as he watches a squirrel jump from tree to tree. “I don’t know.”

And then he stops, a memory playing out in his mind that’s so distant that he almost thinks that he’s gone and made it up.

Reaching into the pockets of his gray jacket, he can’t help the way that his eyebrows climb to the top of his head in astonishment when his fingers brush against the exact item he was looking for, and the curiosity that radiates off of Michael is practically tangible.

Adam knows *exactly* what he wants to do.

“You ever been to a diner, halo?”

Chapter 13

“Does this work?” Michael says, once they’ve landed in front of a corner store. The lettering on the red overhang reads *Jaci’s Red Wagon,* with the long-faded wagon in question etched into the wall besides the simple little place.

They’re in a large town of some sort, Adam notes—not a city, but the sudden deluge on his senses is enough to make him suck in a quick breath regardless. He exhales, steeling himself, and the grumbling of cars and blaring of horns and the endless chatter and movement of *people, people, people* slowly simmers down to manageable levels.

“Yeah,” Adam replies, and nods once, willing his legs to start moving until he’s standing directly outside the door, and he’s a little too proud of the fact that he only hesitated for a moment before swinging it open and walking inside.

And that’s when he realizes he’s more than a little bit out of his depth.

He hasn’t properly lived on Earth in ten years—a *thousand,* really, but maybe he should get used to calling it ten?—and he’s hit with the realization that all he has is a few tattered memories of how diner etiquette worked. Was he supposed to just find a table and sit down? Was he supposed to just stand and wait until he was...called on?

Somewhere, deep in his mind, he’s sure that whoever he’d been in the past is laughing at his misfortune.

As if she’d been summoned, however, Adam finds himself blinking in surprise as a waitress materializes in front of his eyes—he hadn’t even noticed her walk up.

“Hey, hon,” she greets, and Adam feels a small smile quirk up at the corner of his lips without his permission, facial muscles tugging upwards as the realization hits him that this is the first human he’s talked to in *years.* “Just the one?”

“Tw—” he says, almost automatically, and his mind sends a quick shushing noise Michael’s way when he feels his grace pulse with mirth. “Uh, one. Yes.”

The waitress raises her eyebrows a little, but there’s a smile still plastered to her face. “Sounds good. Take a seat somewhere and I’ll get you a menu, alright?”

Adam nods, eyes locking onto the first empty booth he sees and making his way over, settling down into the seat and pretending like the room doesn’t seem so...*tiny.*

He can’t help it. After everything—the intensity of Hell, the freezing confinement of the Cage, the freedom that flying brought—it seemed so *small* . So *wondrous.* There are other people in here, too, chatting quietly and milling about, and the soft hum of life here is different than the roar of existence outside. It’s more like the forest, here; the atmosphere was friendly, pacific in a way that sets him a little more at ease. He can’t help staring around at it, craning his neck to peer at each and every little detail.

People, he thinks, content and wonderstruck all at once. *These are people.*

Another part of him marvels at the lack of inconsistencies, the *clarity* which which the most insignificant of details jump out at him—the smooth texture of the table, accentuated by its glossy sheen, the way that the light streaming through the window added to the light of the room instead of simply being there for nostalgic decoration. The little knick-knacks scattered throughout the room—the toy cars lined up along the wall to his left, the tacky picture frames hanging on the walls, the lights hanging from a line on the ceiling—were detailed and *real,* not a single blurry or hastily-formed part about them.

Even the tinny music, filling each and every corner of the room, was delightful to hear. He couldn't quite remember what the genre was called, but it makes him smile regardless.

Michael appears in the seat across from him, eyeing the room with a sense of half-interest that makes Adam snicker, bringing the archangel's attention back to him. He has to fight the rising fluttering in his stomach when Michael's eyes turn a little brighter, a little softer; he swallows it down like he always does and takes another breath of sweet, sweet air.

"Not up to your usual standards?"

Michael's eyebrows raise along with the curve of his lips as he gives the room another sweeping look, and Adam feels something flicker in his grace that's too fast for him to catch before his gaze is met again.

"It'll do," he says, mockingly haughty in a quiet, softened sort of way that contrasts with the wave of mirth that crashes into Adam, and he grins to match it.

The waitress suddenly appears at his side again, and Adam jumps a little—how can he notice everything and nothing all at once?—but she simply hands him a menu and smiles.

"When you're ready, you just let me know, alright?"

Adam nods, and then stops as something pings in the back of his brain. "Um—ma'am?"

When she raises her eyebrows, he hesitantly keeps on. "Do you have a...uh, newspaper, or anything like that?"

If the request is odd—though Adam isn't sure why it would be; newspapers were still a thing, right?—she doesn't mention it. Instead, she points behind her, where he looks and spots a small tray with the aforementioned papers hiding within. "Sure do. Right over there."

Adam finds himself absentmindedly bending the laminated corners of the menu, and nods again, plastering what he *hopes* is a polite smile on his face. "Great! Great, um—thanks."

She nods, and walks away to tend to and elderly-looking man that he finds himself marvelling at—so old to everyone in this diner, and yet so young to him. The memory of the birth of the first star flashes behind his eyelids when he blinks, lingering stardust flitting about when he opens them, and he wonders if he'll ever be able to see anything else again when he interacts with the... *human* world.

He knew he was a bad example.

Vertigo scratches its way up his spine, claws digging into the middle of his back and forcing his muscles to tense with jittery giddiness as he stands up, walks over, grabs a newspaper, sits down.

Fuck. This is…

A pulse around his soul grabs his attention, and his eyes flick upwards from where they'd been gazing at the paper, his gaze sliding around the spaces between the words, refusing to intake the information that he wasn't sure if he craved or not. Concern meets him when he looks up, concern that he rushes to soothe, flowing from him to the archangel in a series of rushed emotions that he wouldn't be able to articulate for the life of him.

It's gonna take some getting used to, he sends over, finally. Michael does that crooked little smile of his again, and it takes everything he has to tear his eyes away from it, to force himself to stare at the menu instead.

"For you and I both," Michael admits, and Adam watches from his peripheral as he shifts, his hands moving to rest in his lap, before actually intaking the words in front of him and falling on the entry for *burgers*— hamburgers, cheeseburgers, some deluxe combination of the two that's almost enough to leave Adam's mind reeling with the ever-present reminder that this is *real.*

He wonders how many times he's going to think that before the end of the day.

Impulsiveness kicking in before he can stop himself, he raises his hand and his eyebrows in tandem to the waitress passing by, waiting until she walks over before quietly placing his order, paying upfront just to get it over with.

He hopes—he *hopes* —that he's coming across as human; nothing more, nothing less. There has to be something a little odd about feeling guilt over parting with money that's been with him for a thousand years, right? But that doesn't mean he has to show it.

Outwardly, at least.

"Y'know," he voices, staring down at the newspaper a little wryly, this time. "I just remembered that I don't know anything *about* anything. Not sure why I picked this up."

Michael raises his eyebrows at it, and then does a little half-shoulder shrug that has Adam's mouth curling. "Better to have it than not, isn't it?."

Adam snorts, tipping his head slightly as he acquiesces. "I guess. I don't think I'm gonna be all that interested in—" he skims over a headline, "—*senators*, though."

He doesn't even think he remembers what senators *do.*

Michael chuckles, but Adam's attention has already snapped to the waitress, who's carrying a plate that he *knows* to have his order on it. She sets it down in front of him before walking

away to assist somebody else, and he grabs it, taking only a moment to gaze at it—*real, real, real*—before throwing all inhibition to the wind and biting down.

It doesn't taste like blood. There's no iron that rushes to fill his senses, no memories of the *room* that threaten to overtake him; instead, taste *floods* his tongue, as intense as the light had been when they'd breached the surface of Hell. The softness of the bun, the tang of the ketchup and pickles and tomato, the mouth-watering juiciness of the hamburger itself— *fuck.* A slight, unbidden moan escapes his throat as he chews, closing his eyes to relish the sheer potency of the flavors exploding on his tongue.

"Y'know that stuff will kill you, right?" he hears, and he sends a look Michael's way, barely able to keep himself from grinning around the food in his mouth.

As if he wouldn't happily be set on fire again if it meant he got to finish the rest of this.

"Worth it. Michael, I haven't seen a burger in—" *a thousand years.* "Ten years."

The archangel's mirth sends a tingle from his soul all the way out along the line of skin, allowing goosebumps to join the full experience as he set the burger back down. He wanted to take his *time* with it, wanted to be able to savor each and every bite until it burned it way into his brain. At the same time, Michael reaches over, plucking a fry from his plate and inspecting it. His smile is infectious enough that Adam can feel the ghost of it on his own lips for all of a second, warmth bleeding into him from head to toe, and the distinct memory of the inspection of the deck of cards lights up in his mind before Michael is looking at him, instead.

"Go for it, kid."

His voice is as warmhearted as it usually is, soft in all the ways that Adam's come to expect, but it still somehow catches him off-guard—unlike all the other times, there's a *feeling* that washes over his body, underwhelming compared to the burger and yet all he can focus on at the same time.

It takes him less than a split-second to realize that it's the racing of his own heart.

Oh. So *that's* what that feels like.

"Y'know—" Adam manages, trying to swallow in an attempt to carry on the conversation before Michael notices—that is, if he hasn't already. "I know I don't *need* to eat."

He picks up a fry of his own, shaking his head for dramatic effect. "It just tastes so damn good."

With that, he bites into the fry, letting his head droop as a *new* taste floods his mouth. The satisfaction of a crunch, the piquancy of the salt—there was just so *much* to it.

"I wouldn't know," Michael says, and his eyes may as well be arrows for the rush of affection that suddenly pierces his heart. "I don't know much—about any of this."

Then he smiles, open and wide, and Adam feels the same sense of fluttering excitement that he had when they'd flown out. "You'll be my guide."

Guide? What was *that* supposed to mean? Adam could barely *guide* himself around a goddamn *diner.*

For some reason, it hits his nose first—the aromatic smell permeating his nostrils and drawing his immediate attention back to the waitress, pushing his other plate to the side to make room for the pizza she puts down.

Immensely grateful, incandescently moved, he looks up and *wills* his expression to reflect his emotions. "Thank you."

The waitress smiles, moving away. "You got it."

He has to dip down one more time, just to catch a *whiff* of the delightful scent, before he turns and grabs a bottle of *something* on his left. He's not even sure what it is; all he knows is that he'll do *anything* for a little more flavor, a little more *reality.*

Speaking of reality…

The thought is unwanted, unwelcome, but arrives in his mind all the same. The words don't come out as choked-off as he thinks they could be; he strives to keep their talk simple as he begins to dump the condiment all over his pizza, to keep things light and easy now that they were free from the endless burden of the Cage. They had already been through enough heavy conversation. "So, what about you? You gonna go back to Heaven?"

Adam doesn't *want* to be separated. He doesn't *want* to say goodbye—frankly, even the thought of it makes him uneasy, something deep in his gut crying out in desperate denial that he shields from Michael's range.

But Michael, unlike himself, *has* a home. He *has* somewhere to go back to, a place that might need him. Adam doesn't think he'd be able to keep him if he tried, and it isn't even because he's just some sad scrap of *human* that can't measure up to something like an *archangel*— if Michael wanted to go, to be *free,* he wouldn't blame him. Wouldn't have the heart to try and stop him, even for a moment. After all those years of being caged...well.

Adam understood it.

"Uh...I don't know," the archangel replies, and he looks up, a little surprised. "My brothers are dead, my father never returned…" And Michael's grace is wistful, subdued, radiating a slightly-mournful ache that Adam brushes up against, tries his best to calm. "In so many ways, I'm alone."

And...Adam understands *that,* too.

"Yeah, same here," he meets Michael's eyes, his own pungent bitterness seeping out before he can stop himself. "It's not like I have family waiting to see me."

Michael's gaze turns searching, penetrating in a way that makes Adam stiffen. With anything else, he doesn't think he would mind the curiosity at all; but this? *Family?*

No.

"You have the Winchesters," he says, and Adam feels as a sneer begins to build on his face, an icy coldness wrapping its way around his heart that reminded him too much of the Cage. "Your brothers."

Fuck no.

He takes his time answering, grabbing a napkin and using it to wipe his face as he thinks. It's not like he doesn't understand what Michael is doing—the opposite, actually. Just because he didn't know heads from tails on Earth anymore didn't mean that he didn't know an *out* when he was given one.

It still hurt to hear, though. He wonders if the hurt would ever go away.

"I met them once. And they let me rot in Hell."

Michael's grace gently pokes at him, a blanket of *understanding* being wrapped around him that helps wash away some of the initial anger. Empathy infuses his tone as he speaks, a soft word of three syllables that carried so, *so* much behind it.

This wasn't the way he'd planned on the conversation going. Then again, when had things ever gone the way he'd planned?

"Family."

Adam pauses, mind racing with all the spiteful, venom-laced replies lurking at the space between his teeth, clamoring to fight their way out and make known *exactly* which pit the idea of *family* could go throw itself in.

He shushes them. There's no point.

"Family sucks," he says, for lack of a better alternative. It's simplistic, the weight behind it being heard even by his own ears, and he swallows the rest of his thought and says no more —instead, he leans forward and puts his mouth to better use.

The food isn't going to eat itself, after all.

Things are a little quieter, after that. Michael's grace winds peaceably through his chest, a comforting sensation that helps to assuage the harsher parts of his vexation, alleviating some of the stinging betrayal that still lingers in his gut.

Then, as he's polishing off the last of his burger, something occurs to him.

"Hang on, didn't you say that all of Hell got torn open?" At Michael's nod, Adam cocks his head. "Should we be...concerned about that?"

The archangel shakes his head, casting another look around the diner. “No. Whatever tore it open must’ve closed it back up.”

Adam swallows down a piece of the pizza he’d picked up, taking another bite and chewing thoughtfully. “Sounds like we got out just in time.”

The thought of missing an opportunity to escape makes him more uneasy than the thought of never escaping at all, the horrified realization from the hypothetical situation almost tangible enough to elicit a shudder from his frame. Michael hums in assent, seeming more at peace than Adam is—which shouldn’t be as surprising to him as it is. All things considered, Earth should be Adam’s turf, not Michael’s, and yet...here they are.

He laughs, just a little, popping the last of his fries in his mouth and glancing at Michael when the *ping* of curiosity ricochets through his bones.

“It’s nothing, I just—” he grins, unable to contain it, fiddling with the crust of his pizza as he feels the last of the tension he’d held ease out of his shoulders. “We’re just…” *Free. Free, free, free, free—*

Michael gives no answer, but Adam feels his burst of happiness at the words flicker to life like a lightbulb, and it only serves to make his grin widen, stuffing the pizza into his more with even more vigor than before.

Eventually, the waitress brings out the last of his order—a piece of cake—and Adam’s surprised to feel the effects of the food finally kick in; he’s *full.* It’s such an odd feeling, to have a full belly, and it makes another knot in his chest unravel, the anxious desire to seem *human* from earlier slowly slipping through his fingers like sand as he leans back against the cushions of the seat, eyeing the diner with a sense of... *something.*

He isn’t sure what it is. The people here still seem... *small,* the muted hustle and bustle finding itself to be placating to his ears but knelling softly in the back of his mind. It’s an odd clash, one that he seems too detached from for his own liking, and he—acting on a whim, watching the waitress with a sense of lazy curiosity—decides to voice the half-formed idea swirling tentatively at the base of his throat.

“Maybe I should pick up some kind of...little job.”

The archangel’s voice rings out in return, an amused sense of confusion painting the inside of Adam’s ribs. “A *little job?”*

The more Adam thinks about it, the more feasible it seems. They can do anything now, right? And Michael wanted him to be his...*guide,* right?

What better way to do it than immersion?

“Yeah,” he says, the jigsaw puzzle in his mind adding more and more pieces by the second, racing faster and faster with the amount of possibilities. “Yeah, I mean—these are the same clothes we went to Hell in. We’re gonna have expenses, right? And whatever change I had, I

spent on food, so it's not like I can go back to college, not with an," he laughs a little at the thought of it, " *archangel* inside of me."

Michael isn't looking at him.

In the split second it takes Adam to notice this, a hand—an unfamiliar, gut-wrenching, *tainted* hand—lands on his shoulder, rubbing idly down at his collarbone in a way that makes him tense, feeling the smile drop from his face instantly as he turns to stare at its owner.

It's a woman—young, blonde, wearing a...what was it called? A beret?—but that's not the part Adam is focused on; instead, all he can feel is the *darkness*, the same vile atmosphere of Hell that clings to her in a thick, congealed sort of way. He doesn't think he has the words to explain it, but he doesn't think he needs to.

"Hello, Michael."

And Michael is *swamping* him, tearing control from his grasp and pushing him down until the only perception Adam has of the outside world is a distant murmur of sound. He's gentle about it—Adam's swaddled in more layers of archangel grace than he thinks he's ever been before—but it still leaves him disoriented for all of a split second before he does the metaphysical equivalent of shaking himself off like a wet dog and tunes back in to the outside world.

"—dead."

"Was. Now...I'm *back*, baby! And I've been sent to fetch you."

Michael's voice rumbles inside and out, crystal clear and dim all at once. "I'm not accustomed to being fetched. Who sent you?"

Adam manages to catch one of Michael's flitfire thoughts enough to grab a name— *Lilith.*

He's pretty sure he's heard that name before.

It hits him, then—*Lucifer's fall.* The story that Michael had once told him—he'd said it so quietly, voice nearly monotone save for the edge to it that was cold and raw all at once—resurfaces, floating in his mind like a dead fish, and he looks at the blonde woman across from them with a larger sense of grimness overtaking him.

The first demon.

"You have to ask?" A pause, and then— "Your daddy?"

The iciness that sweeps through the archangel, mingled with confusion, is nearly enough to make Adam shiver without a body. The grace he's enfolded in immediately reacts in turn, sending quick little bursts of solace that match the heartbeat of the erratic thoughts that have begun to pop like firecrackers in Michael's mind.

" *God?* Yeah, he'd like a word."

And at the same time that Adam thinks, *bullshit,* he hears Michael speak. “You’re lying.”

“Really not.”

Then, Lilith steals a part of his cake. He doesn’t think he should be as affronted as he is, but come *on.* He was *gonna* eat that!

“And why would he send you? A *demon*, a speck of infernal *bile.”*

Infernal bile? That’s a new one.

“One, *ouch.* Two, maybe because we worked together before. Remember? Setting off the apocalypse?”

“To try and bring God back.”

A sense of calmness replaces the coldness, almost like it had never been there in the first place, and Adam reaches out; silent, but sending his own little waves of reassurance all the same.

“ *Right* . Didn't work then, but then he came back on his own. So, win?”

She sounds mockingly sweet, a tone that has his hackles raising, but…

What if she isn’t lying?

...He hadn’t meant to let that one pass through, but he can tell Michael heard it all the same.

He doesn’t need to *feel* it to *know* it.

Lilith’s face inches closer, and Adam is abruptly reminded of the days when Michael and Lucifer used to fight, when his body would move so quickly out of his control that it almost felt like some fever-induced, pain-filled dream.

But he’s been dreaming for so long, now. The real world is waiting.

“*If* that’s true—*if*—He can come talk to me himself.”

Her face grows annoyed, rolling her eyes before turning to something fiercer, something...different. It’s nothing compared to Lucifer, but he doesn’t like it all the same. “Yeah. *Except,* I'm not supposed to leave without you.”

“*Get out.”*

Grace is bubbling, hardening, a little detaching from Adam to make the same shield he’d made so long ago, against Lucifer; ready to attack, ready to defend, *ready.* And Lilith is no Lucifer—Adam isn’t anxious about Michael being able to take her as much as he is the message she’d brought.

God? Coming back? *Now?*

“Michael,” The demon says, and Adam finds himself flinching back the tiniest bit when she reaches out to grab him— *them.* It’s still just as unnerving as before. “I can’t fail him.”

And that—*that* is when he feels it; Michael’s... *unease.* The *If he’s back, why didn’t he—?* and the *I failed—* that echoes like a gong in an empty room, Adam as the only audience.

He reaches for him again, connecting just as the archangel’s grace surges outwards, the spitting image of the heavenly warrior that battled the Devil for centuries in Hell.

Adam is...*captivated.*

Michael is all fire and starlight and terrifyingly accurate precision, and he can *sense* when the archangel finds Lilith’s blackened, twisted core, snuffing it out with a simple flicker of power, a concentrated inferno that lights up the room and burns her from the inside out. It’s enough to leave him metaphorically breathless, watching in wonder as Michael moves without moving at all; he’s still hidden in a corner of gentle tides as light as blankets, wrapped in benign intent, and the disparity pierces his dazed thoughts without hesitation.

How could he have forgotten the vastness of an archangel’s consciousness? How could he have gone for even a second without marvelling at the way the universe seemed to bend and shiver at his presence? How—

He has no time to finish that thought, though, because the light is fading and there’s nothing to show for it except a pile of ash and...a room full of gawking people.

The silence is tense.

Oh. Huh, Adam hears, but he can’t tell whether it’s him or Michael who thinks it.

Distantly, as if it were a voice yelling from times long past, he wonders if that should concern him.

It doesn’t. Not really.

Well, shit, he tries, a little softly, and the thought is echoed dully back at him before Michael lifts his hand, unconcerned.

“Remember nothing.”

And they don’t.

Michael pushes away the cake, matching disgust emanating from both their souls at the thought of ingesting sulfur-stained food; Adam tentatively unwraps himself from the protective cocoon of grace and floats a little closer to the forefront, the murmur of sound increasing until the clarity of the world nearly takes him aback.

Michael is…

Michael?

Grace swirls; an acknowledgement, but not an answer. Until—

We need to leave.

Okay, Adam thinks back, before the diner vanishes in a blur of light and they're rocketing somewhere else.

The archangel's thoughts feel like the trickle of a faucet against fingers and the tumultuous peril of a beaten raft in a stormy ocean all at once; he wonders if Michael might be hearing the same things Adam heard, all those years ago. If voices have found a way to cling to him, too, if questions whisper in the back of his mind like a black hole that he's not letting Adam hear, if they have a destination, if something bad's going to happen, if, if, *if.*…

Michael, he tries, again; softer, this time. *What's going on?*

Just because he expects the answer doesn't mean it's any easier to hear. *I don't know.*

They're bouncing.

No, really. They are. If the mood were any lighter, Adam would be laughing at the way Michael's feet landed on the ground, almost planting firmly enough to crack it under the soles of their shoes, only for them to surge back up a split second later and swoop down to the next random location. He catches blurred images as they go—snow here, sand there, forests and waterfalls and mountains coalescing until he really isn't sure what's *what* anymore.

Michael's train of thought shoots by faster than Adam thinks it ever has before, even challenging the howling storm that the Darkness's release had left behind.

They're bouncing around to throw others off their tail, to keep themselves from being tracked, but…

Maybe we should stop, Adam attempts, *I mean...I think we've flown ourselves around enough, right? We should be fine.*

Not anyone alive, at least. Except God, if Lilith wasn't lying.

Nothing like a demon to kill the mood.

The archangel says nothing, and Adam can feel the lips on his face purse together in thought. He wonders what would happen if he tried to move them. Was that a thing? Could they move in a shared body at the same time?

...Adam urges his brain to shut up. This isn't the time for experimenting.

Finally, Michael stops. They're...somewhere.

Where are we?

Cairo, Michael responds, and Adam's about to ask him to elaborate before he sees the pyramids below.

They're not on the ground, where tourists swarm in crowds and the noise levels were borderline unbearable. Instead, they're floating—*I've shielded us,* Michael adds on—miles above the land below, and Adam pushes to the front a bit more in order to better see the gigantic landmarks.

Compared to Hell, they're nothing.

He's got the feeling that he's going to be thinking that a lot as time goes on.

For now, though, what little memory of the past he still has encourages him to marvel at the structures, the way they stuck out of the earth so naturally and *unnaturally* all at once.

What's the purpose of these? Michael asks, out of nowhere, and Adam is...not prepared for that question.

Uh, I don't...remember, the answer spills out before he can even think about it, and he's caught between laughing at himself and wincing at his utter lack of knowledge. It wasn't like he could remember his high school history classes.

Thankfully, he receives nothing in return but a spark of amusement, and then he feels Michael's grace reach out once more. Before he has time to ask what Michael's doing, the archangel speaks

They were built as tombs. He must've been reading people's minds, then.

Triangle graves, Adam says, after a moment, snickering at the sudden confusion that dances in the back of his throat.

Throwing random words at an archangel to get him to calm down after blowing up a demon hadn't exactly been what he was expecting from today, but it wasn't like he minded. They were free again, after all. What else could ruin it?

...In hindsight, he spoke too soon.

Figures.

Michael, Adam hears, without warning, and their body stiffens at the voice, but Adam can't figure out *why* until Michael projects an image of an angel, of a *"Hey, assbutt!"* and of fire, of *pain, pain, pain,* and then he understands.

Michael. This is Castiel. We didn't know each other very well, and our last meeting was unpleasant— Well, that's *one* way to put it, Adam supposes— *but I know you have been through a terrible ordeal for many years. You've been beyond the reach of heaven. Been beyond the reach of Earth. Much has changed with both. Heaven is not what it was*— Adam feels curiosity flare bright, and he knows it's not all Michael's; it's his own, as well. What happened to Heaven?— *and your father, your father is certainly not who you knew.*

Michael's mind grows still, silent; calm waters hiding a raging current that threatens to pull them both into the trenches of anger. Adam digs his metaphorical feet in and sends a flicker Michael's way, a message of *wait, hold on, just give it a minute* that the archangel surprisingly gives in to.

Michael, there's a battle raging, and you are a warrior, but you must know the nature of this fight. I'm not your enemy anymore.

Now we all have the same enemy: God Himself.

A pregnant pause descends onto them like air pressure on a rainy day, pyramids forgotten as an image flashes through their minds without warning. It's not somewhere that Adam knows; and, judging by Michael's hesitation, it's not somewhere that he knows either.

The underlying message was clear.

No, Michael instantly declares, vehemence lacing his tone. Adam makes a noise that would be roughly equivalent to a snort and finds himself wanting to agree, but…

Halo, he starts, mulling over his own words even as he says them, *this is the second person who's brought this up to us, and...I mean, they're probably not connected, right?*

I wouldn't put it past them, the archangel mutters.

Even still, maybe we should...hear them out?

Michael's disbelief echoes through his body like glass shattering in an empty chamber, and, truthfully, Adam knows why—after everything, after *everything,* he's encouraging them both to visit the people who'd damned them, who'd lifted the Devil but didn't even think to ask about their own brother, but that isn't what's *important* right now.

Something was up. Hell had been torn open, and now two different people had come forward with the claim that God...wasn't acting right?

It couldn't be a coincidence, right?

Look, I don't want *to visit them, but maybe it wouldn't hurt to figure out what's going on? Maybe they know why the Cage was opened, at the very least. And you could always just, uh, fly out of there if they start getting…*

Michael's voice is as dry as the sand on the ground below. *Insufferable?*

Adam laughs, and at the same time he feels the shift in his chest as Michael concedes, as begrudgingly as it was. *Yeah, something like that.*

"Michael?"

They touch the ground, and Adam can already feel himself being nudged back a little more, to hide behind the veil of Michael's grace. He doesn't object. It isn't like he really *wants* to be

here.

Castiel looks...weary. Defeated. Nothing like the angel Adam remembers in that old man's house. More than that, his *wings,* they're—

Holy shit, Adam thinks, and the parts of Michael that aren't on guard twist in agreement.

They're *ruined.*

"Thank you. Thank you for coming," Castiel says, and his brief smile looks more like a grimace than anything else. Then, he pauses, glancing at them inquisitively. "Do you remember me?"

...Did he seriously think that we wouldn't?

Michael crackles in agreement. "You called me assbutt and set me on fire!"

"I did."

Injured pride—for the archangel's former station, for his loyalty to his God, on God's *behalf*—swirls in their stomach as if Adam was sticking his arm in a murky river and sloshing it around with choppy, irregular strokes. Outside, Michael nods, and bitterness begins to froth on top of the water. "And now what? You've come to tell me that God, my Father, Creator of all things, is my *enemy?"*

His grace lashes like a whip, crackling with acidic intent but hardly moving from its shielded stance. Adam can feel the wings at his back trembling with barely-restrained fury as if they were his own, waves of magma under the earth kept from erupting by sheer willpower.

"Or, maybe you just came to beg *forgiveness."*

And then—"Oh, I didn't come to *beg."*

A sound, one that vaguely registers in Adam's mind as being *familiar* but not familiar enough to remember from what little he had of Earth in his past life.

They look down.

Castiel was holding...

Michael—!

It's too late.

The lighter drops.

Fire, fire, fire. Is he screaming? Is that archangel inside him—Michael, Zachariah said his name was—screaming? Are they both screaming? Oh God, it hurts. It hurts. Please make it stop. Please! Please, just—!

Mom!

The blackness comes for him. He's never been so happy to die.

Except there's no pain this time. The fire doesn't even touch him; it doesn't touch *either* of them, but Adam can feel Michael's fear as much as Michael can feel his own. He doesn't even notice the archangel's movements over the mounting terror in his chest, hitting him like a suckerpunch to the gut.

They're going to lock us away again, he thinks, and he doesn't *mean* to broadcast it but he's hardly in any state of mind to have his barriers up and it's not like Michael isn't reflecting the same horrifying idea back at him.

A rustle to the side. Michael turns their head, and—

It's them.

They're...not as intimidating as Adam remembers. Right now, at least. They're just *there,* walking in from the curtains like a couple of fucking *drama queens,* and Adam has enough time for a vague sense of annoyance to bloom at the unneccessary flair before Dean pulls out a set of handcuffs and relief smothers the flames of his— *their* —panic.

They weren't trying to lock them away. At least, not yet. They had time. They could get out.

When the anger starts burning bright again, he can't tell which of them it's coming from. He doesn't really care.

"Castiel," he hears Michael growl, over the pounding in his ears, *"what have you done?"*

The handcuffs are, apparently, supposed to suppress angelic powers. Or, at least, that's how Dean explained it when he put them on; when Michael was on the verge of snapping with every brush of his unfamiliar fingers against their skin as he locked them up.

The car ride was...interesting.

Y'know, Adam whispers, more amusement lacing his tone than he really feels in the tense, dark atmosphere of the Impala, *I don't really remember cars being this cramped.*

Had it been so limiting when he was twelve, or thirteen, or fourteen, sitting awkwardly in the back seat while John drove him to a game he didn't even want to go to? He doesn't remember, and he doesn't care enough to try.

Maybe, Michael says back, staring at the back of Dean's head like he was trying to burn a hole in it, *it's because there weren't three* vermin *in the car with you, the last time.*

Probably, Adam agrees, and feels himself flinch a little at the mess they'd gotten themselves into. *I'm sorry. We shouldn't have come. I didn't know they'd…*

The rumble of the car is almost enough to make him sick. He'd drifted back more, but peers forward again when he feels Michael clasp their hands together. It's...comforting, almost. For a moment, the world falls away again, and it's just the two of them; nothing more, nothing less.

*I can still get us out if the need arises. These...*handcuffs*—they aren't as effective as they think they are,* the archangel says, softly, and a strand of comfort winds around Adam's soul like a length of rope. He holds on tight. *And...we still don't know how the Cage was opened. Might as well get something out of this, right?*

Adam huffs a half-hearted laugh, and Michael's grace nudges him at the sound; warm and playful, even now. *Yeah, I guess.*

The car stops. They're ushered inside—well, *ushered* isn't exactly the right word, but the three of them hover anxiously around Michael like they're expecting him to start combusting on the spot as they walk down the steps of whatever place they've found themselves in.

It's kind of funny. It's mostly annoying. Adam *really* wants to leave.

There's a moment, then, where nobody says anything. The tension is like a drug, seeping through everyone's skin until they're immobilized; immovable.

Michael is the first to break it. "Even for you, *especially* for you, this is stupid."

"Good to see you too, *Mike,"* the nickname is patronizing, brimming with arrogance, and Adam is the first to think— *Who gave you the fucking right, Mr. High and Mighty?* before Michael throws one right back at them.

" *Sam.* You look well. Last time I saw you in the Cage…"

Adam tries not to wince. Again.

"Yeah, it doesn't matter. We need your help. God…"

"I've heard," Michael interrupts, grace lashing in defense once more. "Repeatedly."

Castiel speaks up, and Adam's getting *really* tired of instinctively wanting to move away every time one of them opens their mouths.

The *fire…*

"So then, you're aware—"

"I'm not *aware* of anything," the archangel retorts, and there's a dark fury, then; one that threatens to knock Adam off his metaphorical feet. It's *monstrous,* as all-consuming as he imagines the Biblical flood must've been, and he doesn't know *how* Michael's keeping it together, or even where this was *coming* from—this felt even uglier than the sickly-sweet poison that dripped from the space in Michael's mind where pure love for Lucifer once resided. "You're asking me to trust you! *You,* who *doomed* me! *You,* who let *Lucifer* walk free while your *own brother* sat in *Hell."*

He’s never felt this from Michael before.

It’s…for *him?*

Sam’s voice jerks him out of his revelation. He’s not sure who he should thank for the sudden miracle. “Doing what we do, we’ve had to get used to losing people. Probably...too used to it. With Adam...we said goodbye because we thought we had to.”

Adam tries to shove down the pang of hurt that threatens to make him shrink away from the surface. He doesn’t want to be here. He doesn’t want—

“We were wrong,” he nods, like that makes up for years and years of carrying around a mind so fragile it had threatened to shatter at a moments’ notice.

Michael’s ire is gargantuan. He’s in the eye of a hurricane; the only safe home in a land of ruins. “Well, don’t tell me.”

The world shifts.

What are you—?

“Tell *him.”*

Michael, hang on a second—!

The world sharpens.

For a second, he doesn’t know what to do. No, scratch that—he hasn’t known what to do this entire *time.* But, well…

Fuck it, right? It isn’t like any of this matters, not when there might be an out-of-control God to handle.

He stows his shit. He can’t afford to break down. Not now.

Instead of edging away, instead of giving in and putting as much fucking distance as he can between himself and *them*— he did *not* survive a thousand years in Hell just to chicken out *now* —Adam tries for a smile, trying to taper the nervousness from the edge of it like he’s sanding down a brittle piece of wood.

“Hey, Sam,” he forces out, watching the confusion that plays out over their faces. Somehow, that makes it a little easier. “Dean.”

Sam looks like he thinks he might be speaking to a madman. Adam doesn’t blame him. He might as well be one, at this point.

Michael’s grace gives him a chiding pulse for that. Oops. He hadn’t meant to let that one out.

“Adam?”

Shit. Okay. How about…

Adam brings his hands up, trying to force himself into some state of relaxation as he grins. “*Ha!” Gotcha, motherfuckers!*

He needs to calm down. They’re just people.

...They’re just people.

They can’t do anything.

Dean’s the one talking now. “Wait, Mich—Michael lets you talk? I mean, he lets you... *be?”*

There’s no time to ponder on the strangeness of that question, but Adam nods. Judging by the looks on their faces, he hasn’t mastered the art of schooling his own expressions all the way. “Uh... *yeah.* In the Cage, we—came to an agreement. We only had…each other.”

The concern that’s starting to burn inside his chest, courtesy of Michael, is enough to start concerning *him.* Maybe he doesn’t sound as composed as he thinks he does.

His oldest half-brother steps forward, and Adam feels like he’s practically strangling the urge to lean away as the archangel inside of him starts to bristle. “Adam, look...I know we bailed on you, okay, and there is nothing we can say to fix that.”

And that...shouldn’t have hurt him as much as it did. But as the sudden ache races through his chest, enclosing around his heart in a vice grip and refusing to let go, it solidifies him—the familiar weariness of the Cage joins it, and it’s enough to do away with any fear that remained of the ones who left him to suffer.

He sighs. “How about, uh…” he pauses, forcing himself to look up. He can’t back down; not from this. “I’m sorry?”

Nobody says anything.

Right. That’s…that’s fine. He’s been through worse, after all. Right?

And then Michael is wresting control, pushing Adam back in the same way he did earlier and surrounding him in warmth, in peace, in *safety* that he sinks into with only the barest amount of hesitation. Another eye, another hurricane.

“*Enough,”* Adam hears from the outside world; a growl, barely encompassing the vastness of Michael’s rage. “Why am I here?”

“Michael—” Castiel’s voice, this time. “—we needed to speak with you because God is back. You didn’t think the Cage just opened on its own, did you?”

God? After all this time?

“If my Father is back, he will usher in Paradise,” Michael says, and the utter *belief* he has—even after *everything* —could almost be enough to sway Adam, if he hadn’t lived through so

many years of a nightmarish existence.

The statement should make him exasperated. If Sam and Dean and Castiel were telling the truth, then the world could very well be on its last legs. There was no time for belief in a Father that had never even bothered to lift him from the Cage, right?

Instead, he just watches. Waits. It's nothing he hasn't heard before.

"No, he won't," Dean says. "Because Paradise is boring. And *your* dad? He's just looking to be entertained."

The sea churns, frothing with the promise of death, of righteous anger, but Adam's still beneath the surface—he can feel the creeping doubt, stirred up like silt from the bottom with each push of the waves.

"Which means we're his puppets. *All* of us. *Especially* you."

He only faintly registers Michael standing, but the world shifts again. He knows what Michael's doing.

He lets him. It isn't like he doesn't know the feeling of wanting to hide away.

"I won't hear this," the archangel hisses. The seabed quakes before it comes to a forceful stop, doubt settling before it has the chance to rise. "You're lying. I don't know what your *agenda* is, but you're *lying.*"

"Michael—"

But the world sharpens again, and Adam steps forward willingly. The anxiousness returns, but it's dulled by the heaviness of his resolve.

If the archangel needs a moment, he's going to goddamn well give it to him. He can handle this.

"Hey!" he tries, looking around. They don't seem to understand the change, so he tries again, wheezing out what he hopes is a lighthearted chuckle. "It's Adam."

Comprehension seems to dawn on them. Barely. Maybe an explanation, then?

"I'd give it a rest. He's not...listening," he says, and if it comes out a little more fond than he means for it to, well...they seem like they have enough on their plates that they won't notice.

They're going to have to do this one way or another.

Adam bites his lip in thought, trying to push away the feeling of Michael's quiet fuming in the back of his head.

Sam and Dean...they'd left him in Hell. They'd even scooped Lucifer up without a single thought to spare for him. He wants to condemn them. He *does.* He wants to leave and never

look back, fate of the universe be damned.

But…

Back in the day, they'd...they'd tried to stop the apocalypse, hadn't they? They had tried to warn him about what the angels would do to the world if they were granted a one-way path to success. They'd tried to keep him from becoming Michael's vessel, from...being trapped in his own mind.

Adam rubs a hand across his face, brief and a little rougher than he normally would, silently cursing the awkwardness with which he does it because of the cuffs.

Christ. This was too much.

What would Mom have thought of you? his mind says to him. It isn't cold, isn't cruel, it's just —blank. It almost scares him. *What would she have thought about millions of people dying just so you could get her back?*

He freezes, and then sighs.

Get it together.

Lucifer—he'd been talking about stopping the Darkness, right? And Sam and Dean wouldn't have let him out if they hadn't thought he couldn't do it. Adam wasn't useful in that regard. He could barely even manage a conversation with Michael, so...maybe it made sense that they hadn't thought of him.

If there were bigger fish to fry, did empty promises and abandoned half-brothers even matter?

...No.

Besides, would they *really* have gone through the trouble of trapping himself and Michael and piling everything up like this if they didn't mean what they said?

He takes a breath; lets it out. This isn't going to be easy. This was going to be different than the arguments about God in the Cage. This was... *more.* If the Winchesters weren't lying—and Adam, for all he wanted to think differently, didn't believe that they were—then there was much, much more riding on this than words thrown around out of a lack of conversation topics.

"So, I've been thinking," he says, striding towards Michael, towards the wooden chair. "Maybe, they're... *not* lying." At Michael's noise of indignation, Adam rushes to explain.

"H—hear me out. Sam and Dean try to be on the right side of things. They actually do. They tried to talk me out of taking *you* on for example—out of all of this."

Incredulity cuts a Michael-shaped hole into the inside of his ribs. "So you forgive them?"

"Oh, *hell* no," Adam shoots back, offense rising before he can think to suppress it. Did Michael really think that he would throw a thousand years' worth of misery away like that?

Did he truly think so... *little* of him? “No! But that’s not what this is about, it’s—”

Frustration begins to form like a headache behind his eyes. He doesn’t *want* to be frustrated, but he can’t help it; he wants to get *out* of this place and he gets the nagging feeling that the trio insisting on keeping them here will just try to track them down if they fly away here and now.

He just wants peace. Was that really so much to ask?

“Look. If they tell you something’s off with God, it’s because they believe it’s true. And, if they *believe* it...it probably is true.”

Michael looks down, and Adam can feel the frustration coming from him, too. “You and I...have been together for *years.* My father and I have been together for *eternity!”*

Here we go.

“I exist because He *willed* it!”

“So he’s having a mid-eternity crisis! Or—*or,”* Adam interjects, before Michael can rebuke the half-assed insult, “*maybe* you don’t know your dad as well as you think you do.”

They’re both reaching the ends of their ropes. If Adam couldn’t feel it in the threads of the archangel’s grace, he would know it by the way Michael points a finger at him, ready to snap but turning away at the last second. He’s getting that *look* again, the one that reminds Adam of a cornered animal, and if this were any other situation he would’ve stopped pushing and dropped the issue at this point.

This isn't any other situation, though. They’re not in the Cage anymore.

Hello, reality.

“The point is...parents keep secrets, *right?* Does it hurt to ask the question?”

“Yes!”

Adam sighs, a puff of air through his mouth that complements the way his eyes glance down, only for a moment. It isn’t that the fight deflates out of him like a popped balloon, because it doesn’t. He won’t budge; not for this. But, for a moment, he forces himself to just— *stop.*

He listens, instead. He feels. He tries to *understand.*

The silt on the seabed is being stirred up again, and…

“It would! It would mean that I *doubt* Him. The good son, the favorite, *doubts* his Father!”

Adam watches him, watches the fierceness with which Michael holds himself, lets his eyes flicker across the desperation that ferocity struggles to hide.

He wonders where the sudden reserves of affection had come bursting forth from, where the sharp edges of frustration had gone. This wasn't the time for it, and yet...he couldn't stop it.

Hide it, though—now that, he could do.

"You still care about that? After He *left* you in the Cage?"

The churning of the sea stills violently, as if it were never swirling at all.

If it were any other day, any other time, the hurt that echoes through the archangel's grace would be enough to have an apology instantly embedded in the lines of his soul, winding soothingly around him in an effort to mollify, to calm, to lull.

Now, though, Michael's grace retracts—not enough to separate them completely, but enough that the intensity of his emotions dulls and fades, like Adam had never felt them at all. He doesn't move, doesn't protest, holds his tongue even as he aches with the emptiness of the space between them.

After a moment, Michael turns away. Memories of the times where he'd purposefully go silent after one of Michael's old insults rise, unbidden, and Adam would offer a wan smile if he thought it would do any good.

Things really *were* so much simpler in the Cage.

Michael's taken up the reins.

Adam had grown weary of sitting there in the bunker, staring at nothing, and had finally moved to the backseat without a thought. Michael had taken up the mantle immediately after, so their body wouldn't be left undefended. They hadn't spoken a word since their debate, but they'd reconnected in increments, as if drawn together by something neither of them understood.

Are you sure? another part of him whispered; aiming to draw blood. He silences it.

He's on the verge of retreating back into the mindscape and simply idling around for a while when the door opens to their right, the slight shuffle of feet announcing a presence.

"Adam?"

Michael turns his head, and there's a distinct coldness about him that makes Adam want to grimace. If they were anywhere else…

"Not this time. I'll spare you the effort—I'm not gonna betray my Father and everything I've believed in."

"Why not?"

Adam snorts.

“You know, he betrayed you.”

Though they weren’t as close as they normally were, Michael’s sudden thought was loud enough that Adam heard it; venom and all. *Were you not the one who betrayed Heaven and all it stood for when you set me on fire?*

“You know, Michael, I never really liked you,” and Adam snorts again, despite everything. “Even when I was just another angel, I thought you were too...haughty, too—” Castiel seems almost amused, for a second, and it makes Adam wonder what he’s thinking before he doesn’t have to wonder at all. “To paraphrase a friend, you had an entire oak tree shoved up your ass.”

The amount of focus Adam has to maintain to keep from laughing until the world ends is rather large, actually. But, really. Only one oak tree? Michael was a whole lot bigger than *that.*

...Maybe the walls were closing in on him a little too much.

“But now? I’m looking at you and I—I just pity you,” and any trace of humor that Adam had felt scatters like dandelion seeds in the wind. “Because you were *never* God’s favorite.”

Michael’s still. Too still.

Michael, he murmurs, distance be damned. He knows Michael can still hear him. *You know what he’s trying to do.*

The archangel twitches in acknowledgement, but says nothing in return. Adam sighs, for what feels like the twentieth time today, and sits back. Better to just let these things play out, he supposes.

“You were just a little part of his story, a *tiny* part of his story. You weren’t even a star.”

The seabed quakes.

“At least *Lucifer* knew that God can’t be trusted.”

Adam straightens at that, bristling on Michael’s behalf even though he knew damn well that Michael didn’t need it. He couldn’t help it—to be compared to *Lucifer,* of all people? That was enough to make anyone vexed.

“But I guess he was always the smart one.”

A pause. He doesn’t need to be connected to the archangel to know what he’s feeling—the intense umbrage is the same as his own, after all.

And then Michael launches Castiel over the fucking table.

Relocated to the floor, the metal link wrapped tight around the lesser angel’s neck like a noose, it’s all Adam can do to sit back and watch it happen. He *knows* Michael isn’t aiming to kill; he’s seen him strike too many times before, and this certainly isn’t anything lethal.

Besides, after bringing up Lucifer? He kind of had it coming.

But then Castiel's hands are coming to frame the sides of their head and he's croaking out a "See the truth for yourself!" and—

Pain.

"I'm a writer. Lying's kinda what we do."

Father?

"Of all the Sams and Deans in all the multiverses, you're my favorite show!"

The memories force themselves in, uninvited, ripping at the corners of their minds and unraveling seams Adam didn't even know *existed.*

A gun, pointed at the head of a blonde boy. "And you were right—I am a monster."

Who—?

Nephilim, comes Michael's distant hiss, but it's wracked with strain. If he's in half as much pain as Adam is—

"Oh, you're enjoying this."

"Shh."

There's a woman, tearing into the man—no, into *God,* and he can feel as Michael thrashes against the intrusion harder, desperately attempting to defend the Father he loves all while everything crumbles to dust around him.

When had they reconnected again? Adam hadn't felt it. All he can feel is the weight of someone else's mind pressing down on him like it's about to pierce his very soul, and—

"This isn't how the—the story's supposed to end!"

"The story? Wait, what are you saying?"

"He's saying he's been playing us. This whole time. Everything. This is all you because you wrote it all, right? Because we're your favorite show? Because we're part of your story?!"

Horror. From him or from Michael, he couldn't tell. From both, maybe. It's violent, seizing him and shaking him and refusing to let him go.

It burns.

"The apocalypse, with Lucifer and Michael, you knew everything that was going on."

A man appears, and Adam shrinks away from the sight. The weight of Castiel's mind is insisting that it's Michael, but...it *can't* be.

It *can't* be, because Michael isn't *twisted.* This archangel's true form— *whoever* he is— was...bright. Too bright. Dazzling in a way that *blinded,* sadistic intent dripping from the set of his wings, the gleam of his body, even in the way he walked. Adam cringed away, barely aware of how Michael wrapped himself around him like they always did as if to protect him from the cascade, but there was no point. They wouldn't go away, they just kept coming and coming and *coming—*

"Why don't you just snap your fingers and end it?!"

Snap. The blond boy—what had Michael called him?—fizzles out of existence, light pouring from his mouth, his eyes.

"Fine! That's the way you want it?! Story's over. Welcome to the end."

Release. Sweet, sweet release, and Adam can't tell if it's him or the archangel that's steering anymore but it doesn't *matter* because he could cry at the lack of weight of someone else's mind forcing itself in, bearing down on his own until he's well and truly splintering, the foundation he'd built on top of after all his time in the Cage cracking and cracking until there is no more. He—

"—chael?" A voice. Hesitant, wary, until he feels his mouth moving and his vocal cords vibrating and the voice is replaced with a gruffer one; dark and pained and taut with rage.

" *Leave."*

"I know it's a lot to take in, but—"

" *Leave!* Get *out!* I want you *dead!"*

As Adam staggers back into awareness, he hears the sound of footsteps fading away as they grow more and more distant.

Castiel. It had been Castiel. Right. He thinks he can be forgiven for forgetting.

Everything comes slamming back down fast; too fast, but it's nothing compared to the sheer agony that Michael's grace is practically trembling with. They're still on the floor, slumped over in some half-kneeling position that he's sure would be uncomfortable if anyone but an archangel was in it.

Michael's agony is loud, but it isn't the swirling maelstrom of grace that had formed when the Darkness was released; no, he's just... *shaking.* He makes no sound, utters no words, doesn't even *scream.*

Just...nothing.

It scares him.

Michael? he thinks, trying not to pay attention to the strain, the muddled effect left by the efforts of his mind scrambling and unscrambling in an effort to make room for memories, thoughts, *feelings* that were not his own.

When he gets no response, a chill shivers through the core of his being that could rival the gelid atmosphere of the Cage. Acting more on instinct than anything else, he reaches out, grabbing hold of the archangel with everything he has an urging him back into their mindscape, back to a place that had *some* semblance of fucking *safety.*

Michael follows him without resistance, both of them materializing in the black space as if on instinct. And it was, at this point.

The archangel looked...if Adam didn't know any better, if he didn't feel the way his grace still thrummed with life inside him, he would say that Michael looked *catatonic.* His eyes were distant, glazed, trapped in a state of fervid distress that seemed to stare straight through him, as if he was barely aware that Adam was even there. His body was ramrod straight, shoulders squinching in, hands stiff by his side. It made him look small in a way that Michael should *never* look, but Adam couldn't find it in himself to burn with fury; not now, of all times. There was no place for it.

He knows he won't get an answer if he tries to talk. Instead, he steps forward, swallowing down his rattled mind, his worries, his fear, and wraps his arms around his only friend.

Michael doesn't react. Adam didn't expect him to. He stays there, anyway, closing his eyes as he rests his chin on the other's shoulder and sighs, opening his soul up completely as if the depth of his emotion would bring Michael back somehow.

Butterflies be damned; control be damned. It wasn't as if he would ever act on it, so it didn't matter if Michael saw it, right?

If he was even paying attention, that is. Adam wouldn't blame him if he didn't.

"Hey, halo," he says, voice as soft as he can manage without dipping fully into a whisper. He swallows again, trying to mask the tremble. "You in there?"

Nothing, except the ever-present shaking of Michael's grace. He's reeling in a way that Adam has no idea how to deal with; nothing has ever come close to this level of devastation before.

In the end, he does what he does best.

He talks.

He tells Michael stories that they've both already heard a thousand times over. He describes the wonder he felt at seeing the stars again, the initial pain of leaving Hell, points out all the little things that threw him off in the diner. He even starts talking about the Cage, strange thought it was to even bring it up.

Some things were just too familiar to let go.

It's when he's in the middle of explaining how odd it was to come back to Earth and find no inconsistencies like there were in the broken little palace of his mind that he feels something in Michael's grace shift; slowly, slowly, like the rotation of stars on a slow-spinning planet. It makes him stumble over his words only for a moment, but he presses on.

Then, as slowly as the grace, arms reach up to rest softly around his back, and he lets his words die out until there's nothing but them and the silence, the void.

But that's how it's always been for them, isn't it?

It isn't until a head dips down to rest in the crook of his neck, until Michael's grip tightens and the heartache within them both expands to the point of pain and Adam feels one tear, and then two, paint his skin after seeping through the thin layers of clothing, that Adam lets his own grip tighten; he holds Michael with all the human strength he can muster and does not let him go, *refuses* to let him go, not for *anyone.*

There are no more tears that follow. Adam gently traces his fingers along the expanse of the space between Michael's shoulder blades and—waits. For what, he's not certain.

His answer comes in the form of Michael's voice, quieter than he's ever heard it. It's streaked with blue in a way that Adam can't explain; desolation chipping away at it until colors bleed through. "I am old."

Adam hums assent, still standing with his soul bared for Michael to see, to feel. Somehow, he doesn't mind at all.

"I've lived for *eons,"* Michael insists, further, and Adam answers the question brimming in his grace before the archangel can choke it out.

"Nobody knew that he didn't care," he murmurs, as plainly as he can. It would do no good to soften the words. "He played the same role everywhere, apparently, so...everyone got fooled. Youngest or oldest."

"Lucifer knew," Michael mutters, and his voice isn't *sullen* so much as it is *defeated.* It hurts to hear, a pang in his heart that almost seems to make Michael shift against him, the slightest twitch to show he'd felt it

"That doesn't mean he was right about everything else," he counters. "You know that."

The emphatic bitterness in the noise that Michael makes, something that could've once been a laugh, is unmistakable. "If I didn't know that my Father viewed us— *all* of us—as his playthings, who's to say that I know anything at all?"

You know lots of things, is his first rebuttal, but he pushes it to the side, knowing Michael will hear it nonetheless.

"Playthings or no, we're still *alive,* right? So…" Where he was going with this, he didn't know. He never did. "Of course you know things. We're out of the Cage, for one thing. We're standing here, for another. And you know about the first star, and all the things you and your brothers did at the Beginning, and…" he sighs, drawing back enough to look Michael in the eyes. Michael lets him; there's a surprising amount of reluctance in his hold that Adam can't dwell on. He can't. "This—this is real. *I* know that much."

The archangel’s gaze traps him, holds him steady amidst the swell of some emotion or another rising in his chest. He doesn’t know what it is; it’s not what he’s used to. It’s something deeper. More.

“He wouldn’t have made a bunch of people who didn’t know anything, either. Dean said he thought that type of stuff was boring, so…” he clamps his mouth shut before he talks too much for too long. Michael’s grief is still sharper than a knife, distraught still visible on his face. He doesn’t need Adam rambling like an idiot—like a *human*— on top of that.

“Look...we both have the memories now, right? We know how He is,” he studies Michael, the bleakness of his eyes, the downwards curve of his lips, the pull of his eyebrows—his slumped form. “Are you going to do anything about it?”

At this point, they’re fucked no matter *how* they look at it. If they walk out of here without helping, God destroys the world. If they walk out of here after helping, God could still very well destroy the world. It’s a lose-lose situation. They could leave now and Adam doesn’t think he could find it in himself to care.

There’s a tear track darkening the skin under Michael’s eye, just enough to glisten in the non-existent lighting. Before Adam knows what he’s doing, he reaches out to wipe it away, thumb gently gliding over smooth skin.

It’s funny, almost, how they keep studying each other. Adam’s only Adam—he has no answers to give, no plan to follow, no basis for how to handle a God-gone-rogue. He doesn’t even have enough money for a hamburger anymore.

His hand is still cradling Michael’s face, and he can almost see the light of his true form ablaze under his palm, light-years’ worth of an archangel compressed into a single human form. He looks ancient and young all at once, mesmerizingly so, and the intensity with which Adam is being stared at is almost enough to make him drop his hand and move back out of sheer embarrassment. It's wide-eyed, all-encompassing, pinning him to the spot and holding him there, and he feels like Michael's drinking him in just as much as he's doing the same. He watches as Michael's eyes rake from his chin to his forehead, lingering here and there as if he's afraid Adam will vanish on the spot.

His thumb caresses the skin again, out of a need to *touch* more than anything else, and if he didn't feel light-headed before—well, he does now.

“I—” he comes out with, before he can stop himself, and the movement of grace stops as the other waits for his words. They don’t want to come out, and Adam doesn’t even know why.

He thinks them, instead. *I know you’re my friend.*

Somehow, he doesn’t think that’s what he meant to say.

Michael blinks, at that, and his grace shifts once more before settling into a thought. A single thought. When he sends it over to Adam, with more hesitancy than Adam would’ve thought he had, Adam smiles. He hopes it’s encouraging. It’s probably just tired.

“Is that what we’re going to do?”

The steeling of blue eyes, the sky sharpening into twin blades, tells him all he needs to know.

When Dean and Castiel come racing into the room, seemingly prepared for a fight, Adam sighs and looks away.

Michael had scooted them back so they were leaning back against something instead of laying haphazardly on the ground.

“God lied to me,” he says, like he’s tasting the words on their tongue. Adam sends a pulse towards him, a mental shoulder-squeeze. An *I’m here* that isn’t lost on either of them. “I gave everything for him. I loved him. Why?”

Why. That’s what everything all came back to, right? *Why?* Why had God lied? Why had Sam and Dean left him in the Cage?

Why couldn’t life just be fair, for *once?*

But Michael steels himself once more, donning a shadow of his old composure as he stands. Adam watches it all with a sense of pride that he wonders if he’s allowed to feel.

“So, yes. I will help you. What was done to the Darkness can be done to God, if he’s as weak as you say. And I know how.”

A simple twist of magic, and paper appears in their pocket. Michael takes it out, slides it over to them, unwilling to make contact with them even for a moment.

“That’s the spell.”

“And the ingredients?” Castiel asks.

“Myrrh. Cassia. Rockrose—”

“We’ve got that,” Dean interjects, something akin to relief in his voice.

Adam feels a spike of complacent acerbity pass between them, a silent challenge; retribution. “*And,* to bind the spell together, the nectar from a Leviathan blossom.”

That seems to throw them off. “A Leviathan blossom? What is that, like, a flower?”

“A flower that only grows in one place,” and Adam smirks as realization plays out across their faces. He may be willing to work with them, but after the last few hours—had it truly only been a few hours—he was...a bit more open to the idea of them getting maimed. Not enough to kill, but enough to make them *feel* it.

His mind is still fragile from taking the brunt of the memories. If he has to deal with it, so do they.

They’re helping, after all.

“Purgatory.”

And, with that, Michael raises his hand; Adam watches with a sense of disjointed calm as a door appears, washing the room in golden light. For the entrance to a world where the endless cycle of death weaves the thread of existence, it’s rather beautiful.

“That’s the door. It’ll remain open for twelve hours. Now,” the archangel says, voice turning mockingly polite, “if you’ll *please.”*

The handcuffs come off, and Michael flexes their wrists, inspecting the skin around them as though he’s searching for any signs of damage.

Are you alright? Adam hears, and he nudges Michael once; a shadow of the way they normally did, the playfulness nearly gone but still festering like embers in a dying fire.

Yeah. The answer is obvious to both of them, he knows, but they’re both fraying like two pieces of worn cloth. What’s a little reassurance?

“You coming with us?” Dean asks, and Adam would frown if he had the face for it. As it is, Michael is the one who frowns.

“No.”

Finally, *finally,* they begin to take their leave. Adam’s on the verge of asking Michael to just fly out here before he hears—

“Before you go…” And *now* what? What more could they possibly ask? Hadn’t they given— “Can I talk to him?”

...*Do you want to?* Michael prods, the roughness banished from his tone in favor of something more equable. Adam sighs in wordless agreement. Might as well, right?

He turns around, cautious, unsure. “Yeah?”

Dean steps forward, and...he seems as unsure as Adam is. “Adam, I want you to know...we *are* sorry.”

It takes him off-guard, the world seeming to slow around him as the entirety of his attention falls on this; the space between them, the quiet hanging in the air.

He didn’t expect them to actually…*apologize,* no matter how nice it would be.

“What happened to you—you’re a good man,” he continues, and Adam has to hold back a flinch at the words, hitting him right where he’d thought he’d put up his guard. He—how could he be good? Weren’t good things supposed to be saved?

“You didn’t deserve that.”

“I don’t understand. What did I do? What did I ever do to deserve this? I don’t—”

His own words come flooding back to him, a lump growing in his throat even as Michael swathes him with...lo—care. With care.

Adam smiles, then, at the futility of it all, breaking eye contact for a moment to try and compose himself. It’s hard. It’s hard, because his own grief is beginning to mix with Michael’s, and it’s too much, too impassioned, too *real.*

He can’t even deal with his own emotions right. Maybe he *did* deserve it.

What did it matter?

He looks back up, smiling, feeling his eyes burn with the effort of holding the tears beginning to prickle at the corners of his vision. “Since when do we get what we deserve?”

Inexplicably, despite it all, his thoughts flicker to the boy in those memories, Castiel’s grief as the life was burned out of existence. He didn’t know who he was, or even what his *name* was, but the undercurrent of sheer *love* that Adam hadn’t picked up on at first is radiating from those images now; bright and fierce and *intense* in a way that only a parent could be.

He wonders if his mother had ever felt that for him—if he saw her again, after all this time, would she still love him the same?

Would he still be her son?

But he knows the angel’s pain, even if he was on the opposite end of it all. He knows it as well as he knows the inside of the Cage.

Adam nods. Castiel looks away.

That’s okay.

He tries for another smile, but it’s wobbling at the corners and he knows it. “Good luck.”

In some way, walking away tears him apart worse than the flight out of Hell. He barely sees the halls, the rooms, the lights; he takes the stairs two at a time, yanking open the door and tumbling out into the brightness of morning. He thinks it’s morning, anyway, but he isn’t sure—the only thing he knows now is the hot trails of water seeping from his eyes, the guttural sobs that rise from somewhere deep within him, Michael’s pain and his own mixing until he can’t tell who’s who anymore.

He cries for them both, fingers digging into his arms in a way that he differs from the way he’d done it in the Cage—this time, there’s going to be bruises.

Michael curls around him, as silent as the breeze rustling through his hair.

It’s enough.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm sorry."

Adam startles, gaze snapping upwards from the stick he'd been playing with, rolling it between his fingers and snapping it into little pieces. "For what?"

Michael's been...quiet. Constantly lost in thought, constantly gazing off at something that isn't there, constantly...gone. It's like something in him has been killed and left for the dogs, a carcass where there was once life, and Adam doesn't know what to do about it. It's the first time Michael's offered more than a word in response or a non-committal grunt in days, maybe even weeks. He's lost track of time; they've been bouncing around too much, the threat of God on their asses enough to keep them both wary. It almost reminds him of keeping an eye out for Lucifer, in the Cage—like father, like son, he guesses.

He keeps *that* thought far away from Michael's senses.

"For not listening to you," the archangel mutters, and even now he sounds hollow, like if Adam were to knock on him like wood there wouldn't be anything inside. "You were right."

The last few words have a bitter taste to them now, sharp and biting and strangled. It makes Adam lower his eyes back down to the stick, balancing it precariously in one of the holes that litter the metal picnic table they're sitting at. The wood still feels odd against his fingers, unused to earthly sensations as they are—it's dry and coarse and all the things he'd forgotten how to feel, and something about it sets him on edge as much as the thought of God destroying everything does.

Yeah, well, look where being right got us, he wants to say, but doesn't. He bites it back like he does everything else, all the parts of him that want to scream at himself for being so nervous in front of Sam and Dean, for thinking that they should go there in the first place, for—

Anyway.

He sighs, twirling the stick between his thumb and middle finger, and nods. "It's fine. You don't have to apologize."

Michael says nothing more, simply goes back to his far-off staring, and Adam starts to stick his fingers in-between the holes in lieu of snapping the stick into tiny pieces. If he starts, he doesn't think he'll be able to stop. Instead, he focuses on the coolness of the metal, the warmth of the sun on his neck, the distant sounds of rushing cars from a highway somewhere, the rustle of leaves in the wind.

He hates himself for thinking it, but he almost— *almost* —misses the Cage.

It’s a sickening thought, to want to go back to something that had nearly driven him out of his mind, that had caused Michael so much agony for so many years, but he finds that he really and truly can’t help it—at least back there, back *then,* Michael wasn’t so lifeless. At least back then, he could reach across and take Michael’s hand without feeling so much hesitancy, so much goddamn *tension.* It had been easier, back then. He knew how things worked in the Cage. He knew the ins and outs of *them,* in the Cage.

Now? Michael is distant, even if Adam can still feel his grace curled around him like a scarf. Earth feels new and good and *wrong* at the same time. He’s still excited for it but he finds that it still scares him a little, too, and he wonders how much of that is knowing that God might wreck it at any moment and how much of that is his own uneasiness with the new environment around him.

He wants to explore and hide all at once. He still wants to scream. More than anything, though, he wants to reach out across the table and take Michael’s hand in his, to bridge the gap between them like they’d done so many times before. He wants to see the curve of Michael’s smile as if they were still hanging upside-down on their imaginary couch. He wants them to be safe. For once, for *once,* he wants them to be happy.

Instead, he digs his hand into the table, flexes his hand and watches the bones ripple and shift under his skin. They look so small, so fragile, like he’d thought the people in the diner must be.

God probably sees them the same way.

Adam holds his tongue, and turns away.

He’s standing with his feet in salty water, dusk painting the sky in swirls of orange and gold, the clouds wafting about in wisps and lines. It’s enough to steal his breath away; he doesn’t need to breathe, but if he did, he thinks he would’ve turned blue by now.

Right. Turning blue. That’s something he’d forgotten about, too, until he’d opened a book for the first time in centuries and started reading, fascinated enough by the words written on paper that he’d never gotten to see in the Cage that it hadn’t even mattered what he was reading about. And humans could turn blue, if they didn’t breathe. He remembers that.

Vaguely.

At least, he *thinks* there was a point where he once knew it.

God still hasn’t destroyed everything. Adam isn’t quite sure what to do with that, but the sky is beautiful, and Michael is here, so he’ll do with that what he can.

Speaking of Michael…

This is your first time seeing the ocean, the archangel muses, and the voice shocks him so badly he would jump if he wasn’t so used to it. The statement itself is nothing the both of them didn’t already know, but it’s the first thing said between them in a while that isn’t

Adam's tentative prods for even the smallest bit of conversation, so he'll take it. It hadn't been *that* long, not when he compared it to the eternity of the Cage, but the silence between them was unsettling. He wasn't used to it.

"Yeah," Adam says, trying not to let the overpowering relief he feels in the core of his chest trickle into his voice, mind, or anything otherwise. "Yeah, uh—it's. It's something else, huh? I mean, it's no *star,* but…"

Way to go, Milligan.

But Michael only hums his agreement and lets his apparition take shape beside him, and Adam tears his eyes away from the setting sun to stare at him.

The light doesn't reflect off of the archangel's seemingly-corporeal body, he realizes. It should be more off-putting than it is—Michael's body looks out of place, almost, against the tangerine hue of the beach. It isn't, though.

Instead, Adam just reaches slightly for his hand.

Despite Michael's grace flickering endlessly around his heart, despite the thrum of power that weaves around his ribcage, he's almost expecting him to pull away, to retreat. It's been a rough few…however long it's been, and Michael's unresponsiveness only worsened as it went on.

But Adam's knuckles brush against the archangel's, gently, a silent question of *is this okay?* passing between them; instead of answering, Michael only glances down at it for a moment before tangling their fingers together himself. Something about it makes something in his chest stutter, if only for a moment. It's a bit of a stupid reaction, he thinks.

He's not going to ask if Michael *himself* is okay. He obviously isn't. But—

"You hanging in there, halo?"

Michael's answering huff would be derisive if Adam didn't know him any better. But he does, and so it isn't. Instead, it's just there—not one way or the other.

"There's nothing that can be done," Michael says, after a minute, and Adam is quiet even as he feels something stir within his own chest, an emotion brimming under the surface that he doesn't quite think he manages to keep under wraps, if Michael's glance towards him is any indicator.

"Probably not," Adam agrees, glancing back out at the sky once more before returning his gaze to the archangel. It's dimmer than it was a few moments ago, and something about it takes him aback. Even now, the evidence of the passage of time startled him. "You gave them the spell. If that's all you can do, then that's it."

Michael sighs, meeting his eyes. "So there's no point in moping around any longer."

Adam snorts, and tries for a smile that he doesn't think quite fits on his face. "That's one way to put it, but…" he fumbles, then, trying and failing to think of what to say, and Michael only

waits for him to sort it out instead of saying anything else. Adam sends a twinge of appreciation his way in return as he takes a breath and lets it out, tasting salt on his tongue and relishing in the sensation.

“He’s still your dad, and he was still—y’know, an ass. You can be upset about it.”

Michael chuckles then, but the humor behind it is rough, and it almost sounds more like a grunt. “Oh, I am. But if the Winchesters and that blasted Castiel fail, then my f—God will just end up bringing the universe to its knees regardless.”

Adam can’t really argue with that.

“And I still want you to be my guide.”

That again. That *guide* thing again. What was that even supposed to mean? Adam hadn’t even ever been to a beach before now, and he’d lived longer in the Cage than he ever had on Earth —what kind of *guide* was he supposed to be, if he couldn’t even be a good one?

“You’re better than you think,” Michael says, and Adam hadn’t realized that he was broadcasting those thoughts until he hears it.

He looks away, instead letting his eyes rove over the few stars that have already appeared on the horizon. It only makes him think of *the* star, the one he’d seen come to life, and something about *that* makes his eyes flutter down to the water below him instead.

“I haven’t even done anything,” he mutters, because really—he *hadn’t.* All he’d done lately was try to talk to Michael with less-than-stellar results and tried new things wherever they bounced around to when he was sure it wouldn’t overwhelm him, like reading or watching an episode of reality TV that had been quietly broadcasting in another diner they’d stopped in. He’d finally managed to make small talk with a man at some bus stop in New Jersey—which had been all kinds of stilted and awkward, but he *did it* —but other than that, he’d only been readjusting to things as best as he could. Not much guiding involved *there,* he thinks.

“Well,” Adam sees Michael look pointedly down at their respective pairs of feet before looking back up at him. “I can definitely say that I’ve never stood in the ocean before, and now I have. Not a bad start.”

“...You sure cheered up fast,” Adam grumbles, even though he knows for a fact that Michael is not, in fact, cheered up whatsoever.

“I realized that I’m wasting my time,” Michael replies, and it’s so simple that Adam has to look back up at him. “There’s better things I could be doing.”

“Like watching me screw up my order three times in a row?” Yes, it had happened. Adam was bound and determined never to set foot in that particular fast food joint ever again. He’s pretty sure the guy in line behind him had been snickering at him, and honestly, he couldn’t blame him.

Michael’s mouth quirks at the edges. “Among other things.”

“The hell is *that* supposed to—oh, sure, yeah, I bet my suffering is so funny to you,” Adam gives a mock-sigh of annoyance as the archangel lets out a very quiet, very undignified-sounding laugh; he does his best to quell the sudden jolt of feeling under his skin that that noise had brought about, and stretches his toes out a little to feel the sand under them. His shoes are heavy and light all at once in his right hand. “Is there anything you want to do? Before the world goes kaput?”

Michael lifts a shoulder in an *eh* sort of way. “It’s up to you. I know we’ve been flying pretty much nonstop—” and, at that, his grace nudges at him, a muted apology ringing clear against Adam’s mind. Adam shakes his head, waving it off. He didn’t mind, not after the mess that was their meeting with the Winchesters. “Is there anything *you* want to do?”

And Adam thinks about it. *Really* thinks about it, because Michael is asking and the world’s going to end and they still, at the end of it all, only have each other.

“Can you,” he starts, and fumbles *again.* He takes another breath and lets it out, the motion odd and soothing at the same time. “Can you take me to my old house?”

There’s quiet between them, for all of a second, only punctuated by the gentle rush of waves around their feet. The archangel’s eyes draw him in like a moth to a flame, grace sparking and twisting and alighting with something Adam can’t quite put a name to. Is absolutely *sure* he can’t put a name to, because there’s something within his own self that vibrates on the same frequency, and it feels greater than words; greater than his body, greater than *Michael’s* body, greater than anything he’s ever felt. He can’t put a name to it, because there’s no name to *give* it, and it’s become habit to bite his mental tongue every time he tries.

So he doesn’t. Because the world is going to end and he’ll have no time to deal with it, because maybe the world *isn’t* going to end and he’ll have all the time in the world to say it, because—

“Yeah, kid,” Michael says, voice as warm as his grace, buzzing with all the things that Adam can’t say. “Are you ready?”

One more breath. The sky’s gone dark, even more stars dotting its twilight canvas, and the wind ruffles his hair as if to say, *welcome back.*

“Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading! my tumblr is @adammilligan if you'd like to stop by and say hello! :)

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